

THE OPEN
INDEPENDENCE OF
THE SEAS

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Loyd L. Fueston, Jr.

Published by Loyd L. Fueston, Jr.

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Substantially finished by mid-1990s when proposals were sent out to dozens of large and small publishers. Some rejected it and some didn't bother to reply. I'm now publishing it on the Internet with some minor changes.

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The poem *The Anecdote of the Jar* is by Wallace Stevens and not by Dylan Shagari.

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Parnell Lopez watched as his wife Marie pulled up her line to reveal a squirming, two-pound mass of bullhead, white-belly shining in the sun. A fine meal would it make, but Marie's squeals anticipated something other than gastronomic pleasure. More likely was it fear that made her hold the pole at arm's length keeping danger at least six feet away. Having a fine son in the vicinity, Parnell chose to sit quietly as Jimmy, a little man at ten, strutted over to rescue his mother. Four year-old Alicia stared in horrified wonder as her brother grabbed the line with his left hand and then put his right hand towards the monster so capable of inflicting pain. The confident lad expertly placed his fingers around the bases of the stinging appendages. With his hand so close to the creature as to be beyond the reach of its weapons, Jimmy held on tightly and worked the hook out of the bullhead's mouth

As the excitement dissipated into the breeze, Parnell laid back to stare at the clouds passing by. The winds were strong up high. The clouds were moving and shifting about rapidly. It took not many heartbeats for two pillow-shaped formations to collide and become one. Only forty-three times did his eyes blink before a wispy collection of icy water vapor disappeared completely. Not a feather had it been, but far less, for such a miragy thing could not have supported the most ghostly of sparrows. For all the damage they could cause, there was little more density to thunder-boomers than to the most harried of scuds. For all their grandeur did clouds come in and out of the world so quickly and so easily.

Not much were clouds like constellations, though both, to be sure, put on quite a show in the sky. The constellations marched so stately, allowing the Earth to spin beneath them but declining to participate in the constant change of lesser things. Except, of course, that many of their points were active nuclear furnaces burning up immense quantities of matter and

shooting radiation and gases all over Creation. Other constellation points were galaxies lying longfar agoway. Still others were strange objects which might have come to be shortly after the Universe cooled down enough that particles and electromagnetic energy could separate one from the other. So far as anyone could tell, many of those objects had passed out of existence, or perhaps had become other objects, after occupying slender slices of space-time.

Parnell never forgot – however romantic it might have been with Marie under the Zodiac, that those points of the constellations were all moving so rapidly. Even the closest stars were moving many tens of thousands of miles an hour through space. As were the galaxies which contained them. And the clusters which contained the galaxies. The expansive movement of the entire Universe was still a relative mystery. One thing was sure though – some of those objects so longfar agoway appeared to be traveling away from the Earth at respectable percentages of the speed of light.

Still, there was enough of an appearance of stability to allow Parnell to think of constellations as representing well-structured things while the clouds seemed to be of flimsier and more contingent stuff.

As absurd as the effort seemed, even to Parnell...

Sought he patterns in the most ephemeral of processes, in the shortest-lived collections of elementary particles.

A foible it was, but Parnell knew and accepted even the most rational components of his personality. He was not sure what other choices he had, and, besides, he considered himself likable enough if often absentmindedly absorbed in one thing or another which might have caught his attention. Well enough did he understand the ways in which he perceived the world and painfully did he know the differences between his ways and those of most men. Abstract were his ways of thought. Biased was he to see structure even in the messy stuff of life. Tended he to stand quietly and search for patterns even in the midst of bloody mayhem.

He could not deny it, had no reason to deny it: He was self-consciously autistic in the other way if not in the first and most concrete way. Watched he did as his mind worked the bullhead incident into the complex web of memories ever being restructured by the environmental and neuronal events of the perceived present. By such a process of re-membering had he made some sense of a world in which he had seen so much and lost so many. Not fully did the world or his life make sense. The decisions of other men, the brutally factual contingencies of the physical world, and sheer unexplained

fuzz acted to turn the most carefully constructed narrative into an extended joke which never reached the punch-line.

Hard had he worked to make sense of his life and of his context. Some of the people most important in his life had not been easy to fit into a coherent narrative. People seemed to be like that. They resisted all attempts to treat them even as categorized creatures let alone as objects.

The most important of people?

Marie, Jimmy, and Alicia occupied many a node in the web of his memories. Presumably, he in theirs.

What of the dead? His parents and grandparents. He had never met either of his father's parents, and he had never met his grandmother Morgan Llewellyn, the well-known neurobiologist who had a reputation as being a nervy biologist when she was morally aroused. Clearly a dominating figure when alive, she merely passed by at the edge of Parnell's most imaginative re-creations of the past.

James Llewellyn, sometimes a missionary or a slayer of man-eating leopards and sometimes a designer of systems to launch missiles and anti-missile missiles and etc. was a giant in Parnell's memory. He was the grandpa who had sat Parnell down when he was but eight and taught him about the renormalization of the bare electrical charge necessitated by the flood of virtual particles surrounding the electron. Infinite could be the calculated probabilities without the proper techniques! For just a second, Parnell was lost in wonder at such a thing. Infinite probabilities! Wise had been the grandfather for those renormalization techniques had proved useful in solving a wide range of physical problems involving that impossible division by zero in one stage of one process if not another. Nevertheless, those techniques had not been at all well justified. Clearly the techniques of men were not adequate to the task of solving the most simple and best formed of problems. So why did those adhoc methods work so well?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

There had also been the wise killer and poor little Donnie who had watched from inside his own head as the doggies were being tortured. Parnell had met the killer and he had watched as Donnie was released by a furry mammal which had evolved rapidly as it had moved through a gigantic computer network.

Not to be forgotten was the wise killer's master – the 400 pound Overlord-General who sat wherever he damned well pleased. And that seemed to have been mostly on someone's face.

There had also been a 400 pound gorilla, Alpha Draco, who had been a friend of the poet. In all likelihood, he would have been able to sit pretty much where he wanted most of the time, but, from all reports, he had been too gentle to realize his power. Anyway, the jungle had been swarming with men with little in the way of fungible paper but plenty of rifles. Those men had been after the hides or tusks of many a living creature, hoping to gain the money which would allow them to buy more rifles if not necessarily more food.

The Dracos, a nice family from all reports – if a bit infested with fleas, had been named by their friend, the poet.

The poet.

The damned poet.

The damned, beloved poet.

Most of all, the poet dominated the unbirthed narrative of Parnell's life, though he had never met that cousin of his mother.

Half-Nigerian had been the poet.

A bit more than half-Welsh as well.

The pretty neurobiologist, student of Morgan Llewellyn, had provided the link between the poet and the 400 pound man. She had been a simpler person, being 100% French despite her Vietnamese father. Nevertheless, she had managed to turn herself into an even greater mystery than the poet, for she had left behind little documentation on her person. No books of poetry, though she had produced a tenurous number of small technical articles on the results of destroying one section of a rat's brain, or sometimes two sections at once. She had edited the papers from a conference on the overlapping of regions controlling movement and those controlling language production. An amazing gathering, that. It seemed to Parnell that they had concluded that brain events take place sort of everywhere except that they do not take place any specific when-where identifiable in the brain. Years ago, he had joked to his grandfather that the neurobiologists should maybe start looking for brain events in the liver, but his grandfather had not laughed. He had merely snorted and suggested most of the researchers would do better looking up their assholes.

Parnell's grandfather had not usually been so dismissive of serious scientists, but he had not often held his tongue when he was in a bad mood.

Still...

The poet would have never tolerated life if he had been so easily categorized as was the neurobiologist who was 100% French, though nearly 50%

of her genes were from Vietnam.

Often flaunting his nonconformist ways, Dylan Shagari had considered it a blessing that he was made of parts which spoke all the languages of men with a French accent and he was joyful that, having never been to Ohio, he had visited Wales for three days. Joy had filled his heart that he was half-Nigerian and struck dumb with wonder he was at being more than half-Welsh. It was that trickster, the dark-skinned young man with mischievous eyes who walked lightly through the shadows of Parnell's half-formed narrative. Drawing from his shallow knowledge of many a great work of modern science, in order to spew forth gibberish, the poet had sought to bring a useful brand of obscurity into a world falsely Enlightened.

Even as the clouds continued to move across the sky, even as a breeze arose nearer the surface, even then, though many another time as well, came to Parnell a voice high-pitched yet calm.

Tooda-layda-loo with an underlying thumpity-thumpity-thump.

Sing-song, sing, and once more again.

Tropics.

And to be sure, which Parnell was in this case, Dylan Shagari's skin was dark no matter the millenia which separated his mother's Welsh people from their African forebears.

Was it the dark skin that drove the rhythms towards Nigerian patterns?

Or maybe it was his Nigerian upbringing?

Prior to his school days in Switzerland, to be sure.

But none of those biographical facts would have explained the French accent.

It was as if he had been somewhat imprisoned by his context. But, that also answered few questions to Parnell's satisfaction. Why had the young man's face turned so somber? What were the incantations he was chanting, though long dead? Parnell closed his eyes that he might better hear the words.

The words of someone who knew how much the world needed a poet, if not seventy-seven poets.

Be singular be the concentrated man.

Deeply pulls the time about himself.

<K., an ally, on a photo focused
reality,|Platonically etched – a circle.>

Conscious be he be of daily tasks,
 obliviously waves he waves a collapsing front.
 Not to worry, not to fear.
 All things implode into a single rod.

No, not a worry not had he not.
 The galaxy was his oyster-bed.
 <A joyful struggle to find a pearl|
 a dying man much deeply blue.>

Neutrinos not be passing not into his liver,
 nor even the ancient, Dopplered rays of X.
 Be silly be the thought said he said it,
 “Pan be the best of glossy moms.”

Be savant-like be he be he be,
 though echoing la-la not at all.
 Thinks not of gases passing lung to blood,
 though ironic proteins knows he well.

Yea! Be singular be he be.

The poet, the damned poet, though probably not for all eternity. After all, it was the women who had used him. He had decided upon a celibate life until he had been enticed into that Swiss forest by a pretty heiress from Brazil. By all accounts, she had been a world-class gymnast.

Having once published the prayer, “Oh God, give me continence, but I’d prefer to wait even later in life than St Augustine,” the poet had cast doubts upon his own claims of pristine motives. Then again his journal contained an entry marked July 18, 2002.

Better to speak Latin than to be a wise-wise man.

There did not, in fact, seem to be any short set of axioms, however elegant, which could be deployed to consistently and coherently interpret the poet’s few recorded words or even those dreams which had passed to Parnell by way of James Llewellyn or through the pages of the poet’s journals.

Parnell could make no sense of Dylan Shagari’s protestations of relative innocence in the midst of his debaucheries. Certainly, no matter how pure

the motives behind the poet's lustful behavior, there had been no easing of the sadness and the pain of such a death as he had suffered.

The beloved poet. From Nigeria had he come, though he had entered the world from the womb of a Welsh woman. Spoke, had he, all languages of men with a French accent. That argued not against the theory that the poet, like all members of his species, deeply thought the language of man with the well-timed spitter-spatter of electrochemical processes.

Yet, claims for his uniqueness remained standing as no laboratory scientist had ever sliced and diced the poet's brain to verify what many had suspected. Such an investigation, though it would have ended the poet's career pretty abruptly, would have settled many an open question. Though it was the stuff of tabloid headlines, there had been rumors that the poet's brain was overflowing with various chemicals, many of them resembling morphine or even cocaine in their structures and effects. Some of those rumors were still being spread by men also claiming the poet's genome had contained random bits of trash from various species, some of them no more than primordially related to the human race. Most men of good sense evaluated such claims for the scientific truths that they were, but some damage was done to the poet's reputation by the implications of interspecies promiscuity on the part of viruses which had been associated with his ancestors.

Truly was his the bad luck to be born into a time when society so desperately needed the skills of a poet semi-literate in science. He would have been luckier to have been born into a time when he could have been accepted as a normal member of a society of men either blissfully ignorant or else able to make sense of the flood of frickled facts and frackled theories which had issued forth from the modern world's finest newspapers and monthly journals. James Llewellyn had told Parnell that other forms of mass communication had recruited random pieces of scientific thought to the task of better describing the efforts of vampires from Arcturus to impregnate innocent earthwomen with the sperm of long-dead rock-and-roll stars. Parnell assumed his grandfather had been in a bad mood when he had said such a silly and nasty thing.

Seemingly had Dylan Shagari tried to avoid such pessimism.

The poet had made a good-faith effort to reach people who thought the average middle-class scientist would cover up a verified UFO landing when there were movie and book contracts to be had. Not the greatest success had he achieved in his noble crusade, which, to be sure, had been his entire

career – as an impregnator of words and not as an impregnator of women, for that was merely a replicator’s hobby.

Somewhat disappointed by his lack of public acceptance, the poet had returned to Africa at one point-time. With another of his many uncles, a fellow ceremonially a chief but mostly a wildlife biologist, Dylan Shagari had returned to a refuge in the Central African Republic. As one might have guessed, the poet failed miserably in his quest to find a single gorilla who could re-member being abducted by a band of alien surgeons. Nothing had been gained by hypnotism and endless hours of recovery movements and other attempts to ease constipation. With an enwebbed and enfaxed computer on his lap, he had sat in a clearing in the jungle. To the great amusement of the noble pygmy hunters, Dylan Shagari had dispatched a plea for sanity to the superstitious world over the seas. It was to no avail. No newspaper had dared to print his editorial in which he had suggested that either gorillas had more common sense than men most wise-wise or else outer-space critters were reluctant to mess with primates that had 60 inch chests and 25 inch biceps. Years later, he suggested in his journal that the tiny penis and low sex drive of the gorilla may have played a part in the greatest ape’s lack of desire to be rendered powerless and taken into a chrome room to be strapped down and. . .

Possessing yet a modicum of moral sense, Dylan Shagari had stopped at that point and claimed he had not the stomach to discuss the relationships sought by beings with bug-eyes, three fingers per hand, and sexual organs beyond the imagination of a mere faloodler of words.

There was little doubt that the poet had suffered while living amongst men wise-wise. Likely that was why he chose to spend most of his time with either members of a small circle of friends or else with women he had undressed for the first time only that evening. There had also been the Dracos, but a man was not always in the mood to sit around the African jungle having fleas picked off his back.

At times, Parnell thought the poet would have been luckier if he had stayed in the Central African Republic. Or Nigeria. Or Switzerland. Or Bharat. Or someplace on the planet, and a nice planet it was. Not at all like Jupiter with its thick smog of hydrogen and poisonous gases.

No matter.

It was of far greater importance that the poet had been cousin to Parnell’s mother. From Wales by way of Ohio had he come. Sort of. Actually, never had the cousin been in the American state of his mother’s birth.

History recorded that he had passed through Wales, visiting a castle and impregnating a loose lady of noble morals before flying on to his favorite whorehouse in Dublin.

A poet from Nigeria who spoke all languages with a French accent and a cousin who, having never been to Ohio, had visited Wales for three days.

“A bra dots a ket, and a breast is for real.”

The poet had said that, among many other things. Convinced had he been that the basic concepts of modern science had come from new ways of viewing the world of ordinary sensations. Said the poet, did he said, “Dirac’s punctuation means more to me than all the commas in Shakespeare. But only because Dirac found his punctuation far from the strange world of things which were quite uncertain even though they were tinier than the least of jotty things.”

Perhaps he had been right. Perhaps Parnell should proceed by the paths laid out by Dirac in his *Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, one of the most important and most elegantly written books of modern times. Parnell was well-acquainted with that work, as surely were all highly educated men of a scientific age.

Well . . .

Maybe some men could follow the poet’s lead and get all they needed to know from the prefaces and introductory chapters of that classic of scientific literature.

Maybe some failed to do that much.

No matter.

More important were the possibilities laid out by that book. New ways of organizing perceptions while including the middle in a world of quantized observations arising from a substrate perhaps purely continuous. Parnell had heard of so many books popularizing the most difficult concepts of quantum mechanics that he was quite convinced that all well-educated men understood the work of Heisenberg and Dirac.

So,

a bra:

<A poet from Nigeria who spoke all languages with a French
accent|

and a ket:

|a cousin who, having never been to Ohio, had visited Wales for
three days.>

Which had been the imaginary part of Dylan Shagari's life, orthogonal to physical reality, however incomplete? Which was the real? Though well-versed in the writings of Dirac, Parnell Lopez wondered if he had confused which was the bra and which the ket. This much was known with some probability: Dirac said, did he?, well, at least the poet said, "The imaginary parts and the real parts of a man's life are equally as necessary to his actualization." Did that seem at all possible? Or had the poet misread the human source of Dirac's interpretation of quantum formalism? Certainly the poet had a bad habit of confusing actualization and observation.

Oh, fiddly-diddly-do-do-dum.

In the spirit of things? Parnell thought so. After all, "Rhythm, " said had said the young man in the beat-beat of tropical Africa, "is but one of the forms of discipline reality places upon the imagination."

Less to the point, (but nothing but-but \emptyset has less than a point, does it?):

Put it all together and what? you got,

a bra:

<A poet from Nigeria who spoke all languages with a French
accent|

and a ket:

|a cousin who, having never been to Ohio, had visited Wales for
three days.>

Dot them together, stir a while, and a fully bracketed something really for real really can be seen.

<"Really!" said an unidentified cortical region. "Would I kid you? How could such be possible?"|

|"Really?" asked a region other than that. "When have you not tried to fool the rest of us?">

Though the clouds were still passing overhead, Parnell knew not which region was orthogonal to the other.

<The self-fooling self| or |the reasonably skeptical self perhaps fooling the self just as much>?

"Not necessarily either one was fully orthogonal to the other!" replied some strange part of the brain which was clearly itching for a fight. "Each of us is composed of parts parallel to reality and other parts orthogonal to everything decent."

Confused more deeply was Parnell as another region of his brain, equally feisty and more obnoxious, asked “Where is the self if each of us is non-locatably here, there, nor any when-where?”

But partly at fully noninteracting right angles must they have been or not the smallest piece of actualized reality would they have described. Clearly was that true to the young man trying to make sense of so many lives already lived. For years had he been contemplating the nature of man and his interaction with the world from which he could not be separated. Certain was he that without orthogonal bases and without a dotting procedure, billion-dimensional perceptions and zillion-dimensional thoughts could not be actualized as images and models of three-dimensional reality twisting itself up with time.

A splashing sound distracted Parnell, and he looked towards the lake to see Jimmy jumping off a low branch and into the waters. The doting father had checked the water beneath the branch. Six feet deep was it. No boulders or tree trunks did it contain. Yet, he lifted himself up on his elbows and watched Jimmy’s first few dives. Satisfied that his son was in no more danger than any living creature, Parnell laid back down and asked many a varied region of his brain, “How did the poet manage to speak the punctuation of Dirac? Know I well how to inflect a question, but how does a tongue curl to indicate a bra or a ket or even a fully bracketed observation?”

(And, so, it was legitimate to proceed with the argument, for there seemed to be no other way to proceed.)

A man – <a poet from Nigeria who spoke all languages with a French accent| and |a cousin who, having never been to Ohio, had visited Wales for three days.>

It would take a damned creative act of dotting to make a sensible life of that. No doubt about it. The poet was right.

Human beings arose from the most complex of linear processes multiplying and exponentiating and recursively combining in crazy-quilt patterns quite beyond the formalisms of mathematics and the bio-logic of reductionists. The poet had addressed such concerns in one of his wordiest poems, *The Whole Ball of Wax Ain’t Really Very Much*.

Formalistically reduce we part the way,
 the candle into a slender wick but mostly wax.
 And one day, the damned thing is lit,
 to reveal a flame, some ash, and discombobulated wax.
 And yet remains the vision of something muchly pure,
 as hovers in the fevered mind, the holy ball of wax
 into which some simulated thinker had rolled
 all other balls of wax, and yet trouble came
 as bad-boy Bertrand asked so flat of voice,
 "If all balls of wax have been rolled into this ball of wax,
 has this ball of wax been rolled into itself?"
 The unanswerable tabulates its own taboos
 and never to be heard or seen or spoken,
 and yet an argument is scratched on pale-green Formica,
 however ungrammatical it's wrote.
 Longfar a land, a time agoway,
 in eerie tones that shan't be heard,
 a laugh taboos Omega thrice.
 And if a set? be such, who? dares speak of God.

Still, Parnell saw no choice but to proceed as best he could in a world quite confusing. After all, it was his lot in life to struggle to find patterns in the contingent flow of things factually random, though certainly not random in a measurable way.

<Such an unlikely conjugation of states was a human being,|
 dot-de-do-de-dot
 |such a nearly impossible set of events was his life.>

The product was an observable person, body and relationships. Fuzzy were the boundaries and slightly green were the photos, analyzed as well as synthesized.

Said he said the poet said, and chimed in the Nigerian and the cousin, "Dirac's punctuation is certainly inadequate even for the task for which it was selected. Yet, it says something about reality left quite unsaid by the silliness of non-commutative causes and extricable effects."

One man had they? been they had. Half Nigerian had he been he had, but not greatly much more than half-Welsh as well.

Quite sneaky were those mothers, using their own RNA to co-opt the defenseless cell fertilized by the sperm of a man fooled into believing the child would be half his. Parnell looked down towards the water to see that Marie was wading in, hand-in-hand with Alicia. Such lovely creatures were they. He smiled, pleased with the world about him, happy that Marie was his wife, Jimmy and Alicia his children. So happy was he that he could forgive Marie for the tricks she had played on him when she had conceived children morely hers than his. He could only pray that some day Alicia would meet a man tender in either ignorance or understanding.

Uncurled Parnell's spine as loosened some muscles and tightened others. Closed the eyes. Relaxed he in the midst of a narrative so complex and so complicated as to beyond the grasp of his mind, more than the capacity of his memory.

Dylan Shagari the poet was and he had been, and he had needed ten years. A book describing the development of highly talented people had claimed that even Mozart had needed ten years. Starting at five, he had composed and composed, practiced and sweated and troubled and toiled and boiled for ten years before producing works of interest in their own right rather than being symptoms of a child autistic in one way if not that other way more concrete. One happy day, the poet had told his uncle, and that uncle, being a grandfather in other contexts, had eventually passed the news on to Parnell, that the countdown had reached three months and five days. Two days later, no less than three months and three days from his maturity as a poet, Dylan Shagari had been brutally killed.

Singular the poet had been, but he had not had the chance to pull time about himself. No skin frozen dynamically had he yet built about himself when his short life had been ended.

Ten years. Anywhere from 3,652 days to 3,653 days, unless the ten years included a year evenly divisible by 400. Then, the total might drop as low as 3,651 days.

The poet had never mentioned such a complication. Parnell knew that his grandfather, usually known as James Llewellyn, had put in ten years, or more, learning the skills of his trade – communication systems design. Parnell himself had put nearly a decade and a half into the part-time study of general relativity before being able to find new solutions to Einstein's general field equation. Knew he well the limitations of a finite, discursively stepping brain.

A lot of work with little reward by most standards had it taken to be

singular. Of a certain had Parnell been driven to find interesting problems, to labor many hours acquiring techniques and knowledge, to labor further at learning how to apply his skills.

Sad and lonely the lot of the driven man.

Still more sad was it when the long nights and anti-social mornings went for naught. The poet, Dylan Shagari, had almost put in his ten years when he had been beaten to death. Vision had the poet had, based upon his wide but shallow knowledge of human culture, but not had he perfected his skills. On his way, he had not been there when he had been tossed into the furnace. Yet, he had had much to say, even a few things of substance. Babbling much of the time, the poet sometimes had spouted out triply meaningful gibberish. More often, he had not had the slightest idea what he was talking about.

Parnell sympathized with such a state, and fancied it had been caused by the poet's efforts to destroy the language and the concepts which prevented an entire civilization from creating coherent narratives which might re-integrate it into something, hopefully the Universe. Never before, as Parnell understood matters, had men glorified isolation from the Universe, from the divine, and even from men long dead. Lonely were those generations of wise-wise men, and it was not because they lived on an insignificant speck of dust floating in a damned big Universe.

The flow of Parnell's thoughts sidestepped towards a poem entitled *Ode to Dogmatism*.

More Darwinist than thou be I.

Many a person had been merely confused by such concise and clear pieces of the poet's work. Not Parnell. Though there were always ambiguities when one man tried to communicate with another, he could understand much of the poet's gibberish for he knew to expand the poems out into the context of the modern adventures of the human mind and spirit. When Dylan Shagari chanted uncertainly of things being so different when B came before A, Parnell understood the reference to Heisenberg. Muchly could he map a group of rhythmic lines back to a song of Weyl, an intuitively brilliant argument by Zel'dovich. Yes, indeedy, could he even expand a poem to thousands of pages of formulas and experiments and images of the strangest of objects to inhabit the Universe ten billion years ago.

Parnell's grandparents, James Llewellyn and his wife Morgan, had helped the poet enter many a distinguished house of learning. They should not have bothered. Dylan Shagari had chosen to educate himself. He had ended his life well-acquainted with the names of Gödel and Simpson and Chandrasekhar. The poet had waded in the surf of many a deep lake and even an ocean or two. He had explored the shores and left it to others to spend lifetimes diving into specifically deep regions.

"Be singular be the concentrated man," had chanted the poet. Though he could see himself fuzzily in the dark interior of that poem, Parnell thought it was likely that Dylan Shagari had been speaking mostly of James Llewellyn. And perhaps a few men he neither loved nor respected as much as he had loved and respected that man who had built hospitals and churches in Africa and missile launching systems in North America.

2

Hugging Alicia's wet body close to his own, Parnell walked up the path towards the ranch-house located near Walla-walla for no particular reason discovered by Parnell in all his years of being irritated by such a curiosity. The astrophysics textbooks he had read as a young boy had not said a thing about such matters, though one might have thought there to be a reason why the house was not somewhere else in a Universe so big as to dwarf the Earth as a whole, let alone the region about Walla-walla.

Still . . .

Up ahead of his father, Jimmy reached the driveway, and he began to shout for all the world to hear, or at least that part of the world containing his Uncle Raul and Auntie Lee and his Uncle Donnie.

"I caught three bullies and two perch."

Parnell thought it likely that Alicia had been equally pleased at catching a single perch and a passel of puny panfish. Maybe he would be able to take them fishing in the lake near his grandfather's house in northern Idaho. After nearly ten years of sorting out the legal messes created during the years of rule by the Overlords, the Republic of the West had offered to return that house and the house near Alexandria to Parnell. He was the closest living relative of James Llewellyn. The Republic, to be sure, was as much a military dictatorship as it was a representative government, but Colonel Kaufman, the very fellow who had organized the plot to kill the last of the Overlords, was trying to re-establish law and order. And honest man, even a dictator of integrity, he had admitted to Parnell that he was mostly interested in increasing tax revenues. After all, North America was not the only superpower in the world, and the Koreans and Indians could not be expected to direct their attention exclusively towards each other.

Still . . .

It was to that house in northern Idaho that his grandfather and his

mother had taken him as the first of the Great Nuclear Wars was imminent. Just before Parnell and his mother had headed towards Idaho, his father had left to join his reserve unit and had never returned. In Alexandria had Parnell learned much of quantum mechanics, more of general relativity, and not much at all about Dylan Shagari. A few biographical facts to be sure, a few lines of poetry, but it was in northern Idaho that he first confronted the portrait of a tired young man with a scarred face. Up until that time, the poet had been no more than a smooth-faced young man smiling from a frame sitting on the desk in his grandfather's study. To be sure, there had been a few bawdy stories overheard when the men had gathered in that study. Much laughter had there been as James Llewellyn had told, and re-told, the tale of the unorthodox Hindu sect in Bharat and its well-trained priestesses. Hiding behind the door, Parnell had heard sighs and vaguely altered breath patterns as one or the other spoke of those women ensconced in those penthouse suites in Hong Kong. Not all the women had been quite that exotic. There had been a woman in Denver who had written country-western lyrics as a way of killing time. A busty chemistry professor from Sweden had been a short flight away from a lusty diva in Milan, despite the likely difference in skin and hair coloring. Truly had those men done much to keep alive memories of Dylan Shagari and his struggle against superstition.

The poet had been a man of many accomplishments, a man not afraid to leave the beaten track. Many realized the beaten track led to death, but the poet verified that, at least in one uncontrolled experiment, it had not been possible to do much better by tramping through the wild edges of human civilization.

Yet . . .

Donnie, ever happy to please, opened the gate for Parnell. A childish smile was set into the wrinkled face. The simple old man, pixiesh if any human being had ever been, peered into Alicia's face as if making certain her dreams were peaceful. Satisfied that the little girl was safe, he raised his head and smiled at Parnell. Putting his hands upon the beret set so rakishly to the right, he said, "I'm wearing the red one today. It's a sunny day."

Nodding his head in agreement with such a clearly logical decision, Parnell walked up the sidewalk. Halfway up, he turned to see Donnie still standing at the gate, and he said, "Come on. Aren't you going to join the fish fry?"

The boyishly old man, no longer wise and no longer a killer, clapped his hands and followed Parnell towards the house, running ahead to open the door.

3

The entire family was gathered around the piano as Marie played a jazzy version of *Pachabel's Canon*. Soon enough would they switch to...

There they went already. With nary a pause, Marie had gone over to *Softly and Tenderly*. She was true to her upbringing and more inclined to such ancient pieces of music as the *Salva Regina*, but Donnie loved many of the songs he remembered from longfar agoway. Both of his parents had been Methodist ministers but not at all opposed to music not written by the Wesleys.

Parnell watched as tears came to the eyes of the gentle old man whose head was full of memories of dogs being cut to pieces in experiments to find the best ways of using a knife. Not even an experiment had been the murder of such as that minister and his family, even the eight month-old baby. That had been a rather brutal act of practical politics. The fellow had been at the head of a group in strong opposition to the centralization of power in what used to be the United States. Men dedicated to their concept of the public good had decided the loud-mouthed minister needed to be eliminated, and, so, they had called on a wise killer. He, of course, had known how to do, though he had never been certain as to the whyish aspects of his actions.

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame.

...

Donnie was rocking back and forth along with Alicia and Jimmy. He was still crying. Parnell assumed Donnie had suffered in silent horror all those years when he had not been able to so much as command an eye to shed a tear, a mouth to voice a prayer pleading for mercy.

Quietly, Parnell rose and slipped his way into the kitchen to make some coffee for the adults and some hot chocolate for the children. After setting up the coffee-maker and putting the milk on the burner, he walked out on the back porch to fetch an armload of firewood. There was a veritable menagerie in the sky. Two lions, a bobcat, a couple of bears, and even a dragon.

No gorillas.

The poet would have been disappointed.

The poet.

The damned poet.

Always did he arise to confuse all possible interpretations of reality with that godawful faloodling.

If ever he was to make sense of the events which had formed the fabric of his life, Parnell needed to understand the poet, but not just him. The sexy and beautiful neurobiologist was important. It could not be denied that Aimélie had been a woman of substance, a tragic figure who had played a role central to all those events.

Odd.

How could those dead people have been so important to Parnell's life? They had died before he was born, and they had not contributed any genes to the fertilized cell which had once been him.

More than merely odd it was. Dylan Shagari had been dead a few years when Parnell had been born. Officially, his murder had remained unsolved. But coming on top of what had happened to Aimélie, there was little doubt who had done it. And the records at the James Llewellyn Symbiosis Research Center and those kept by the wise killer had filled in the details. And . . .

That horrible picture of Aimlie lying in a puddle of blood with a gun in her hand.

With a last smile at the dragon, Parnell turned back into the house. When he had made the hot chocolate and poured the coffee, he returned to the living room with a loaded tray. One look at the fading fire reminded Parnell of his forgotten mission. Funny it seemed to him. It was so easy to forget such simple things even though he still could search for references in the footnotes of some of his grandmother's books on the human neurological systems. In his head they were. Yes, even could Parnell recite the entire texts of several of John Wheeler's books on gravitational theory. But he could not remember to fetch wood when standing on a deck facing a

woodpile nearly 50 feet long.

After serving everyone with drinks, he went back to the deck even as they were starting to sing *Whispering Hope* a Capella with sipping voices occasionally fading out.

The dragon was still near the horizon. Parnell's grandfather had told him that Alpha Draco had been a true Rock of Marshmallow, a real softy if ever one had knuckled the earth. A father who had become a grandfather before his time.

It was the poet, or at least one of his Nigerian uncles, who had introduced James Llewellyn to the Dracos.

The damned, beloved poet.

"How am I to understand a man of so many parts? A man with so many rich experiences? So many friends and relatives who had such powerful influence over his development and his attitudes towards life? I could not ever hope to reach any true understanding unless I were to see his entire life replayed for me. And perhaps that would not be enough. Perhaps I would need to be in his skin that I be embedded himwise in his context."

The stars did not deign to offer Parnell any assistance. A light wind whispered through the trees, but Parnell heard nothing that would help him to understand the poet.

Indisputable it was. Dylan Shagari was a great mystery to those few who had read his poetry and heard his dream-songs, a somewhat lesser mystery to those who knew no more of him than the tales told by James Llewellyn, not much of a mystery at'all to those who had read the misleadingly accurate biographies printed in many a *Who's Whom* and a few praise-filled obituaries.

A poem, not from the pen of Dylan Shagari, but rather one written by an insurance company claims attorney came to Parnell's mind.

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall, and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

That was part of it.

Like nothing else in Tennessee, Dylan Shagari's poems had not given of a bush, and nary a bird.

What had he brought to be?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

He was pretty sure the poet had not had the slightest idea what meant most of the stuff coming from his mouth.

This much could be said in Dylan Shagari's favor – a poet and a lover of women, he had never sunk to the level of writing love poems.

Parnell was damned if he knew how to evaluate the poet's work. It seemed impossible that he could ever understand the man by way of his work, no, not even his most vicey verse. Sure he could expand most of the poems into their formal contexts, but compared to the task of understanding the thrust of Dylan Shagari's work, it was not much a task to list the proper steps in slicing and dicing rat's brains that had been infiltrated by radioactive neurotransmitters or to prove mathematics to be a project not completable even in theory. At least not for any mind embedded in any thing less than triply tabooed Omega. Not that Omega was a thing, but. . .

No, it was damned hard to understand the mind of a man who could pass lightly through so many centers of learning on his way to the whorehouses. Not that Dylan Shagari had often refused to make an offer to an enthusiastic amateur. Or to accept a different offer. After all, though never had he been to Ohio, he had visited Wales for three days, about 71 hours, 58 minutes, and 43 seconds longer than was necessary to impregnate that loose lady of noble morals.

Still. . .

Parnell was not at all close to understanding the poet. The ability to annotate a man's works did not imply any deep empathy with the man nor even with the context in which those works were properly embedded.

The poet stood beyond Parnell's ability to reconstruct the past in a meaningful way.

That – despite his sharing of an expected one-eighth of his cousin's DNA.

However. . .

Dead and burned beyond a crisp, the poet seemed to loom far ahead.

He stood skewingly and grinningly alimber.

Though parts of the globe still glowed brightly. Though there were lands which a man was wise to avoid if he ever wished to father a child capable of living more than a month or so after conception.

Yet, the human race, alone amongst all surviving hominid groups, stood once more. And. . .

Dead and burned beyond a crisp, the poet seemed to loom far ahead.

He stood skewingly and grinningly alimber.

What more than that could Parnell say about such a man.

To be sure. . .

Not he disinterested at all, not much a gutted altruist, Dylan Shagari had a personal stake in the entire situation for he had left some poems, however few, and he wished to know what the hell they meant. Struggling late at night to eke out a line or two while he sat, exhausted and emptied, at the side of one sleeping and satisfied whore, or perhaps another, the man at least half-Welsh and at most half-Nigerian had babbled meaningless, wide-open words gangly-tied to an ill-formed syntax, and he had gone to his grave wondering if anyone would supply meaning and structure.

To the credit of the poet, in his most profound discussion of elementary particles, he had spoken only of an exclusively peculiar electron circling a particular chlorine atom falling from his salt shaker towards the medium-rare steak sitting beside a rather concrete, in fact quite tasty, baked potato. That the circling was multitudinously Feynman-like and did not correspond well to Copernican styles of epi-circular imagery seemed almost beside the point. At least Dylan Shagari seemed to claim as much, albeit in forty-nine words admitting a number of interpretations. To be sure, there were weaknesses in such metaphorical discussions. Critics had never been able to determine if Dylan Shagari had used steak sauce, and there was only circumstantial evidence that he had piled sour cream upon his baked potato in that unrenormalized incident underlying the prize-winning poem, *From an Infinity, But one tASTE*.

Ah! but not all had not been conquests and jokes. There had been sex, occasionally other forms of human relationship as well. Over all, Dylan Shagari's life had confirmed his prior prejudices. He had dreamed and he had come to know concrete friends and lovers of the most peculiar sort. What came his way was not always what he would have desired, though it

was often what he needed. The aspiring craftsman of words had suspired and gotten on with his life's work.

Rumored to have laughed occasionally despite all the pains and sufferings of his sexually-wispered life, he had played the role of a linguistic prankster.

He knew damned well that elegant essays were so many plush drapes hanging in the desert and separating the sandscape into well-structured polities.

Novels explored the inner lives of the 19th century bourgeoisie.

Most modern poems concerned themselves with flowers of a species not known to God nor butterfly.

Those plastic and visual arts striving for the radical statement merely conformed to the abominable.

A self-conscious creator of new societies, though he knew not any of the buildings nor not the gutters, the poet never sank to the level of political statements.

A poet had barely enough time in one life to cantilate nonsense of a sort which might well make great and glorious sense in a context not yet formed. And, so, Dylan Shagari had faloodled words which meant nothing, but might mean many things. Even had he doodled tiny, precise mosaics wondering what figures might come out of the background when the light came from just the right angle, perhaps when the moon peeked over the shoulder of a man standing just 17 feet away.

Or perhaps, just maybe, as ridiculous as it might seem, mayhaps, and perbe, the poems would tame the wilderness and take dominion somewhere, though undoubtedly not anywhere.

The metaphors were ever mixed, the metonymies generated from groupings quite odd. It was no wonder that Dylan Shagari had copulated often and had written few poems. Any poet of sense and integrity would have done the same.

4

The trail led to the most bunny-filled parcel of land in that part of the Universe. Towards the eastern shore of the lake did it direct the feet of men and beasts. Towards the gentle bunnies, defenseless though capable of fleeing rapidly. There, amidst the abundant and succulent vegetation dwelled the furry critters, but they had not a monopoly in that spacetime-bound region of the biosphere. Beavers plied their trade along the shore and in the waters. Grasshoppers, sparrows, and earthworms were plentiful. Parnell knew from personal experience that the bass and perch were even fatter and more reproductively successful than they were near the swimming area. Not that the fishing was as good as it was in. . .

Alicia pulled her hand from his and went skipping at full speed away from the road and down the trail. Parnell picked up his pace to keep her within 25 feet or so. There were not many animals in the area which would bother humans much, but there was a chance of surprising a snake or even a cougar. The little girl, as blond and frizzy-haired as her mother stopped of a sudden and squealed. She pointed to her right, into the meadow that lay at the side of the lake. When he sprinted ahead to reach her side, he turned his head just in time to see the butt-end of an elk entering the woods. A big-racked buck could be seen peering out from the shadows between a grove of pine trees and a stand of birches. It was rutting season and undoubtedly his protective instincts were aroused. Else, he would have been long gone.

Parnell just stood at his daughter's side and watched as the big fellow departed after no more than a few heartbeats, actually five, but Parnell was trying not to keep track all the time. Marie had told him it was a bad habit to be constantly counting how many times your heart had beat since breakfast. She was wise in ways that were well beyond Parnell, and when she gave him such advice, he followed it as best he could.

Disturbed from his reveries was Parnell, and that without a doubt, as

Alicia, little girl that she was, jerked on his hand. Smiled the young father at realizing that he, like the poet, was pulled this way and that by the females of the species. His daughter had dragged him no more than 50 feet into the meadow when she looked up at him and said, "Bunnies is waiting."

He smiled at such an ingenious statement, such an exhibition of a nearly superhuman ability to speak form into the world by way of the most arbitrary of sounds, the most abstract of concepts. What had led her to believe that 'bunnies' was the categorical designation for those fuzzy little mammals? Parnell had not taught her such. True, he had shown her pictures of bunnies in books, but what had those pictures to do with the hoppity animals in the field by the lake? How had she acquired the strange and ingenious idea that bunnies formed a group, a species even? From whence had such a profound insight come? Parnell had not sat down with his daughter to pore over a textbook on systematic biology as his grandfather had once sat down with him to study a textbook on phase transitions between states of matter. Not that there had been an explicit reason to learn about such a topic. It was just that Parnell at the age of eight had a mysterious organ of concentration that led to many a short night's sleep when something had interested him. And that organ had seemed to choose subject matter in a somewhat arbitrary manner, though mostly had it been guided by books. The books in his grandfather's library, for the most part.

The books at school had not been particularly interesting. Years and years it took to go through addition and subtraction. In that time, Parnell could have memorized all possible combinations up through four or maybe five digits. Still more years to pass through multiplication and division. And that silly obsession with the alphabet. Parnell had known the letters, Roman and Greek and Hebrew, well enough to be start studying the tensor calculus and Riemannian geometry at five. Two years later, he still had trouble with the order of the last five letters in the Roman alphabet, and his teachers were beginning to suggest to his parents that he needed special education. True enough, his grandfather had said a similar thing, but Parnell thought Grandpa had intended a different sort of special education. The principals and teachers had never agreed to the idea and the Lopezes had gone with their advice against that of his grandfather.

Still. . .

Wherever his grandfather had set up residence, there was sure to be a plentiful supply of books on physics and astronomy and biology and the other things of interest to a young boy.

The ripening grass was nearly eighteen inches high this far from the lake, and Parnell made a mental note to check himself and his daughter for ticks. The Dracos would have gladly helped in such a socially constructive search, but neither that clan nor any other gorillas lived near Walla-walla, of all places. It made sense. An unlikely possibility would it have been. Gorillas near Walla-walla? The very idea. After all, Walla-walla was such a small region on a mere speck of dust circling a star so average among billions and so forth. The odds were quite small that gorillas would be found near Walla-walla. Of course, the odds were also against gorillas being found in Africa.

No matter.

Various organisms ranging from filoviruses to sperm whales had been expanding their ranges since the nuclear wars had reduced the ability of men to control the Earth's surface, but he thought the great apes had not reached the state of Washington.

The explorers emerged from the taller grass and Alicia surveyed her surroundings, finally pointing towards a grassy spot underneath a small oak tree. A moment later, they had settled down and were hard at work looking for signs of bunnies and beavers.

Oaks and beavers as well as bunnies. Such a wonderful world it was, and so utterly amazing that a mere child of four had such a strong grasp on the most important ways to categorize these things as to separate them from those things. Not that Alicia was easily learning the various subspecies of bunnies, but quickly and long ago had she realized that bouncy legs and big, floppy ears were far more useful than fur or number of eyes in distinguishing that type of furry mammal from another. Such a genius was his daughter, and the world was filled with many such ingenious daughters of men.

Not so easily had Parnell learned the species of stars in the heaven. Seven had he been when he set out to explore the wonders of the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram, but his eighth birthday had been two weeks past before he was able to explain to his grandfather why fast-burning giants had produced nearly all the heavy elements existing naturally in the Universe. Perhaps it told even more about his limitations that he was nearly eleven before he could pronounce 'Hertzsprung' correctly.

A confusion of events not connected one to another had been those early years of Parnell's life. Not much had happened. He had grown up. He had played a lot of games, being partial to basketball at which he stunk and also tennis at which he was mediocre. There were family picnics and Christmas

parties at the church. Not much else. Except, one event sort of stood out, it did, and Parnell. . .

Four he had been. Not yet able to speak many words, not knowing much about algebra or calculus or even the simplest of geometries – such things were a year or so in the future, nearly 10 million million meters away in spacetime. Parnell had been busy accumulating the vast store of schematics and charts and diagrams that remained with him yet. Not that he could pull them up as easily as when he was young. And certainly, they rarely bothered him by coming up and drawing away his attention at the most inconvenient times.

He had been a happy lad. Not hard to please, Parnell would go quietly into another room if an adult had been smart enough to give him so much as a collection of simple circuitry schematics. At times, even the operating manual of the simplest of desktop computers would suffice.

That day. . . That day, there had been more than that. He planned to climb upon the chair from his grandfather's desk. From there he would conquer a five-drawer file cabinet. Only one more shelf would he climb, and he would reach his grandfather's special collection of books. Not had he understood so much as the name of the forbidden subject, no, not the little lad that was he. "People-mangling engineering," had his grandfather said with a sneer. And more than once! Such mysteries were meant to be explored.

All went according to plan. The heights had been reached, his eyes were at the very level of the book, but a problem presented itself. His plans had been quite inadequate. A detail had he forgotten to consider. How was he to get such a book down to the floor where it could be safely studied? Parnell looked down at the bluish Persian rug a long ways away.

A predicament it was. Ordinarily, Parnell would have simply screamed. His mother or his father or his grandfather would have quickly arrived to rescue him. A real possibility it was, but the book was the sort of oversized, well-bound book that often contained wondrous schematics of the most complicated sorts of devices. Likely was it a true treasure, the book. Not readily would Parnell surrender it to an adult.

Still. . .

There he was, standing on the edge of one shelf, one hand holding tightly to the trim of the bookcase, the other hand holding on to the book half his height as it stuck out from its usual place in the well-ordered library.

It was still a predicament and delaying the decision had not helped

matters muchly. Parnell looked to the path of his ascent. If he could somehow toss the book on top of the file cabinet and then climb down, he could then work his way down to the chair. From there he would have little trouble reaching the carpeted floor. Squiggling a bit to his left, Parnell pulled on the book with his right hand. The maneuver started out just as planned. The book moved out several more inches. He was just about to direct its fall over to the file cabinet when the book began moving back and forth on its own.

Not much learned in theories of gravity at such an early age, Parnell nevertheless knew something bad was about to come down upon him. The book was over the edge of the shelf and teetering, teetering. . .

“Uh-oh. Book a’comin’ down on Parnell.”

He was almost wrong. The book nearly missed him as it fell. Only a little pain did Parnell feel as the corner of the book scraped his forehead, but that was enough to distract him. Mighty had been that little boy’s powers of concentration, but. . . It was hard for him to concentrate on much of anything but the giddy feeling when he was free-floating through space. Wonderful was the short-lived feeling of freedom. Abrupt the ending of that feeling as he flopped, backwards, into the padded seat of the desk-chair.

A few seconds were sufficient for Parnell to regain his bearings, and he squirmed around and kind of softly ker-plunked headfirst onto the carpet. Raising himself up on his hands and knees, he saw the treasure open to an amazingly complicated schematic. Skedaddle bookwards he did. Joy did he feel as he looked down in wonder at the drawing labeled *Fire Control System for Aft Guns of USS New Jersey*. Not only complicated in itself, the connections went off the page and it seemed to Parnell of some little experience that other pages would supply the schematics of those attached devices. Amazing must be such a schematic when tied together as one piece. It would be the biggest thing he had yet put into the white space in his head.

Confident that he understood the fascinating nature and the enticing magnitude of the task ahead of him, Parnell was about to set to work when a drop of red appeared near the transformer which reduced the voltage for the sensitive electronics. Another drop appeared. And another. And still three more.

Not knowing what was up, Parnell sat back and scrunched up his face as he stared at the mysterious spots of red.

The world was such an interesting but puzzling place.

Now...

Something was wrong with that world. With such an interesting book in reach, Parnell was having trouble even bringing the page into focus, let alone the squiggles that told him if something was a power supply or a logical device or...

His head was hurting. Wondering why, he reached his hand up. Something gooey was all over his forehead. He had not had time to figure the situation out when the door opened and he heard his mother say, "Parnell, are you in..."

Amazing as it was to the little boy, his mother screamed and then shouted out. "Carlos, come here!" to be exact. Twice, though Parnell was sure his father would have heard the first time.

It was a mystery for sure. Red spots on the page of the fascinating book. Goo on his forehead. And the world was spinning as if he had just played the merry-go-round game with his father.

Before he had much time to think the situation through, his mother was kneeling beside him, peering intently at his gooey forehead. She had not had much time to worry before Parnell's father came running in the door and kneeled on his other side. His mother had been to his right, his father to his left. Parnell was sure of that. His grandfather had been at the door.

Parnell's father said, "Calm down, Grace, it's just a skin wound. Head wounds always bleed like that." Up and to the side had gone his father's head. "Dad, can you go start the car. He'll need some stitches."

Parnell had smiled at his grandfather. Confused had likely been the smile because confused had been the little boy. His grandfather had winked at him before turning to carry out his appointed mission.

The little boy, so fascinated by the world in which he lived, was in the car belted in between his mother and his father...

"Daddy, look!"

Parnell's eyes followed the trajectory implied by Alicia's finger. A small tree, no more than ten feet in from the shore, was moving in the oddest manner. A few seconds later, it's erratic motions came into resonance, and it fell towards the lake.

A marvelous Universe it was when the same force brought little boys and books down to carpeted floors, trees into a beaver-filled lake, and masses of hydrogen into a self-forming fusion reactor.

The doctors had hurt Parnell more than the book. The pain had been

just that of small pinches, but the book had not even hurt him that much.

Why?

Had a boy of four been able to deeply draw time about himself? Why had the events of his life worked to take away that cornerstone of genius?

A squeal of delight brought Parnell's attention to the beavers busily stripping branches from the tree. Soon enough they would chew it into manageable lengths and take the pieces over to their lodge. An edible lodge would it be when the snows came and the lake froze over. Tree-bark did not appeal as much to Parnell as would gingerbread, but who was he to push sugary foods on creatures with diets so healthy and filled with fiber?

He re-remembered a time when his mind worked in ways that seemed to amuse or even upset other people. Even his grandfather seemed unable to understand why in the world he, though merely and humbly Parnell, would wish to study such as that marvelous book. Why had they been so blind to the fascination of such well-ordered drawings set so crisply in black upon a white page? Truly had it been worth the effort, the risk, and even the blood he poured out upon that page. It was later that he found his instincts had been sound, when his grandfather had moved the book to a bottom shelf. The book of wonders had a fitting title: *Fire Control Systems for Post-World War II Battleships*. So well-designed was the book that even the cover had a fragment of a schematic. The interesting connections had disappeared off the picture, and there was little doubt that the piece remaining was incomprehensible to anyone not already acquainted with the complete design, but it hinted at what lay inside. And, as promised, the book had been filled with complete and understandable schematics of devices that adjusted the gun's elevation and azimuth for pitch and yaw and many another movement not often found outside of ballistics textbooks.

Pondered Parnell the puzzle. Could such an incident say much about a being as complex as a *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*? How?

Looked he down at Alicia sitting in the grass no more than four inches high. Green it was, though already fading and setting its seeds.

A little girl, she inhabited a complex world. Carrying a hodgepodge of the genes of many a person, some Welsh and some Spanish, some Mayan and some French, she had come into the world and not even been given a rest before her neurons grew into a rainy-forest mess. Many connections, even entire groups of brain-cells had died. Others were reinforced by her early experiences and seemed destined to survive into her adulthood.

The social connections. . .

Boy oh boy. Anyone who had ever seen a mother with a baby, let alone a room full of aunts and grandmothers and even many ladies of little genetic relationship. . .

Nearly everyone had such a complex and rich environment. Not just his Alicia, though she was certainly unique. In her own special way that is. Not was she unique in the same way as any other daughter of Adam.

Still. . .

Was that why a narrative of a simple incident could tell so much? Did everyone expand tales in their minds the way that Parnell expanded upon Dylan Shagari's poetic hints of transfinite sets and the electromagnetically active membrane of a black hole? If such existed, yet. . . Existential questions about black holes and even the related questions about superstrings seemed to be of little relevance to the current meditations.

Movement.

Narratives needed movement as much as did any child. Was that because of the close association between sensory-motor regions and those which controlled language? Shifted back and forth they did, sharing neurons not fully committed to a specialized task. It was even possible they shared a common evolutionary heritage. Language might have been a sidestepping adjustment to the communications needs of socialized hunters and gatherers. In any case. . .

Alicia was tugging on Parnell's left hand. "Daddy!" admonished she in a firm voice which brought a smile to the face of a father. "We need to walk 'round the lake."

Nodding his head at the wisdom buried not so deeply in such a complex statement, Parnell stood up and hoisted Alicia into the air – up and up and still further up did she go maximizing the amount of time she spent moving out from and back towards the Earth's center of gravity. She squealed and did a partial flip before coming down headfirst into her father's arms. As soon as he had a secure grip on her, Parnell set off in a gallop along the grassy bank rising a few feet above the shore of a lake so green and ripply.

"Horsie, Daddy. Horsie!"

He stopped and laughed at the serious face of a young lady who did not know what to do with a daddy who had forgotten so many of the rules of proper play. Hoisting her onto his shoulders, he said, "You'll have to do with a two-legged horsie today."

Soon enough did they reach the swimming area to find Lee on a blanket watching as Raul took his daily exercise. Parnell set Alicia down. She

immediately began to undress, determined to join her Uncle Raul in the water. Parnell just looked at Lee and shrugged his shoulders. When Raul saw her coming towards the water, he came into the shallows and waved to Parnell.

Sat he down again, this time at the side of Lee, a sturdy woman with laughing eyes and as good a head on her shoulders as Aunt Teresa would have demanded in a daughter-in-law.

Still, the problem remained. No, it was intensifying as the date neared when Parnell would be able to re-occupy the house in northern Idaho. That was where. . .

One summer evening, Parnell's grandfather and father had argued as a team against Uncle Hernando who was actually a cousin to Carlos Lopez. Parnell had not understood a word of the argument, but he had not minded the feeling of being one of the guys. He was fourteen and was often willing to leave his books on quantum electrodynamics, yea!, would he even abandon his encyclopedias of quasars and neutron stars and all the other things of his childhood.

He was one of the guys that night. And the guys watched two versions of Shakespeare's Henry V while three of them drank beer and one of them drank unfermented cider. The first movie rolled across the screen, starting as a slapstick comedy, though there were sad parts. The second started as a serious exploration of the nature of "emerging nationalistic feelings" – Uncle Hernando's words. Not really was Parnell all that interested in their discussion after the finish of the second movie, so differently similar to the first. Instead, he chose to wander over to the bookcases on the far side of the room. He picked up a massive book containing all the plays of Shakespeare and read Henry V through once, confused at the way a challenge to a tennis match had started a war. He took the book out on the back deck and sat at the picnic table and nearly under the bug-light. He had not made it past the chorus before the sky caught his attention.

Out there was Mars. It was just one year away, 2023, that men from the western hemisphere countries would be heading out there to build a colony. First would go the construction engineers and the planetologists. A few shelters would be built. Power plants and communications systems would be set up. Parnell looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly midnight and no one had suggested he should go to bed. Nearly every night someone would do so. Parnell would often try to stay up reading a book. Or more.

The sky was interesting, but this was an opportunity. He was in the

middle of three books. He was puzzling his way through a book of poems which had been written by his mother's cousin Dylan Shagari, a mysterious fellow who seemed to raise strong feelings in other people though he had been murdered nearly 17 years ago. Easier to understand was the book on the theory of integration based mostly on Lebesgue measure; even easier was the book on the mathematics of black holes written by a fellow named Chandrasekhar.

Parnell checked his watch again. It was a few minutes after midnight and still no one had come out to disturb him. On an impulse, Parnell rose and went up to his bedroom to fetch his encyclopedia of space exploration. It was two years old and included only a few paragraphs called the Mission Statement of the Mars Colonization Project. No plans. No schematics, though there was a footnote promising a future edition would contain the designs for the life-support systems, including the hydroponics plant, and also the nuclear fusion power plants – there were to be three of them.

Disappointed, Parnell started paging through and backed up to the section on the Gwydyon class of interstellar unmanned explorers. Interstellar was a bit more grandiose than they really were. The first satellite had been sent out to explore the nursery of comets, the second was sent to measure dust and gas levels no more than a billion miles or so outside of the solar system. The third and fourth had never been sent because of budgetary problems. Parnell's grandfather had told him that the air defense systems he was designing were eating up huge amounts of money. The Mars colonization project had survived only because some people were silly enough to consider it to be some sort of latter-day Noah's Ark.

Such things had never meant much to Parnell. With so many interesting problems to solve, so many good books to read, so many experiments to perform, so many worlds to explore, Parnell did not understand the effort expended to kill other human beings.

With a sigh, the young man set the encyclopedia, still open, to the side of his desk. Wishing to return to more important matters, Parnell told himself that a boy merely and humbly Parnell could not have much influence in the world. He walked over to the large table which held his drawing supplies and then returned to his desk with a large pad and several drawing pencils. It was a game he was playing. Once before he had briefly seen the designs for an almost but not quite workable ion propulsion system, but that was nearly five years ago when he had been but a lad of nine. From his memories and the sketchy descriptions in the encyclopedia, Parnell set

out to reconstruct a likely design for the ion propulsion drive which had powered the Gwydyon class of interstellar, sort of, explorers.

By such means did Parnell manage to forget about the death of space exploration projects and even about the two different Shakespearean plays that were the same play, but not really. By 4:00 he had the basic design but had realized there was a problem finding reflective materials which would not be easily pitted by the constant barrage of ions and perhaps miscellaneous junk flying about in space. Though he had not solved the materials engineering problem, his mother came in just a few minutes after the rays of the dawning sun. Smiling sadly and shaking her head gently, she made Parnell stand and leave his desk where he was keeping alive the dreams of exploring space. After she had put him to bed, she drew the shades and left. Parnell lay in bed wondering once again how the same words could be seen as serious or slapstick. More sure than ever was he that not all the world was as easy to understand as would be the design specs for nuclear fusion power plants for the Mars colony.

Yet...

2023 would be a marvelous year. Many missions had been canceled as the air defense systems grew and grew, but the Mars colonization efforts were on schedule. Truly would it be a wonderful time to be a fifteen year-old boy interested in space exploration.

It was not to be...

The first party of construction engineers were called back when they were no more than ten million miles past the moon. Parnell remembered well the moment he first heard that disastrous news. He had been in the cellar with his father building a picnic table and a couple of Bermuda lounge-chairs. Lots of wood had been cut to size. Holes had been drilled for the bolts. Edges had been rounded and surfaces sanded. Parnell was stirring the cans of waterproofing stain. There was no need to make a trial assembly of the furniture. They had used the same plans a few years ago, and Carlos Lopez was as careful as any man at putting together jigs and making his cuts. He had once told Parnell, "No sensible man would measure twice when it is nearly as easy to measure three times." Parnell did not argue against such wisdom. In fact, he had no reason to look for arguments against such a position well-founded on the best of common-sense.

Parnell had barely poured the first half can into the paint-bucket when his mother called down the stairs, "Carlos, Parnell! Come quickly."

After letting his father go first, Parnell had sprinted up the stairs and

into the kitchen just in time to hear the talking head say, “The White House is not confirming that the Mars colonization team has been called back, but confidential sources at Mission Control have told us that the ship is making a wide turn that will take it by the moon which will then sling it back into Earth orbit. Analysts say the President is afraid the men would be stranded on Mars if war breaks out.”

Parnell re-remembered as a strong arm went about his shoulder to comfort him. . .

And he looked up into Raul’s smiling face. Dripping wet, the young doctor knelt beside him laughing. “You missed it, Cousin.”

“Missed what, Raul?”

“Your daughter.” Raul wiped his face and shoulders with a towel before adding, “As we were coming up here, she said, ‘Daddy’s spacing again,’ and sure enough you were lost in one of your worlds.”

Parnell rose as he said, “I’m creating the family narrative.”

Raul laughed again and said, “That ought to be a good one. You gonna put in all the juicy tales about Dylan Shagari and the whores from all the countries of the world.”

“Raul!” Lee was looking up at her husband with a reprimand showing in her blue eyes. “There’s a little girl present.”

Alicia just shrugged. She had heard it all before, and it did not interest her much one way or the nother.

5

Marie looked out the windshield and up into the sky as if to verify the Earth was still falling towards the sun. Whatever her motives had been, Parnell quickly checked to see that all was still well in solar-terrestrial relationships. It was. The Earth was yet falling towards the sun. At least, as best he could tell.

It was a sunny day. Donnie had predicted as much by wearing his red beret. He had not hedged by bringing his red beret in one pocket and the black beret in the other. The day was upon them and Donnie's powers of prediction were confirmed once more.

The old man who was but a boy in many ways had told Parnell he feared this journey, for he had been with the wise killer on a trip past the St Joe National Forest. That man with one highly developed talent had been searching for Parnell and his mother. Like a crocodile hearing someone floundering in the river, the wise killer had been aroused and had entered the waters looking for prey.

Parnell tried to shrug off such things. The judge had finally signed off on the bureaucrats's plans for restoring as much private property as possible to its appropriate owners. His grandfather's lodge in northern Idaho was being returned to him. Sure, there would be tax bills in forthcoming years, but Parnell knew where the gold bars and the diamonds had been hidden. Even his mother had not known that. She had thought she was doing well by carrying off the two small bags of gold and jewelry. Little had she suspected her father had seen trouble coming for a long time and had been stockpiling various sorts of valuables that were relatively resistant to the corrosions of time.

And the treasure was buried well. Ten feet under packed soil. Nothing but a backhoe or a hungry grizzly would be able to dig down to that treasure pile in any reasonable amount of time. Traveling up Route 95,

Parnell remembered how much he had enjoyed flying into this land on his grandfather's helicopter. He smiled in memory of the old man. The family's problems had been largely his fault, but their great successes had been largely his doing as well. Even Uncle Hernando and Aunt Teresa had owed him much. It was James Llewellyn who had recommended their import-export bank to many an industrialist from Africa and Asia. And Aunt Teresa had made good on the opportunity while Uncle Hernando had done what he did best. He had schmoozed with the clients on his 50 foot sailboat, complete with built-in barbecue grill and two bars – one topside and one below deck.

Quite a character had been Uncle Hernando. Proud of things other men hid in shame. It was not that Uncle Hernando had spoken of his girl-friends in front of any of the women in the family. Certainly not Aunt Teresa. Quite a character. . .

Crouched behind a massive mahogany desk had Parnell once listened, barely breathing, as Uncle Hernando, striving to protect his own reputation, had protested that he had seen only books of poetry, had heard of dreams second-hand, had seen a few pictures of a youth. He objected to this idea, that such ephemeral and flimsy things could add up to a man of flesh-and-blood, but especially a man of such blood as to sample the gifts and talents of a huge response of women in many a land. James Llewellyn had merely laughed at Hernando Gueverra's display of damaged pride.

Good spirits had there been but also tension at a level higher than desired by the most warlike of men. The systems built by James Llewellyn had been on red alert for weeks, and men, women as well, were more open and honest with their natures. Uncle Hernando had, in fact, come to borrow money from James Llewellyn – “too many girl friends and too high a sperm count,” had he admitted, not being one to hide his faults behind a facade of pride. Aunt Teresa, as tolerant as she had been over the years, had said no more money could come from the family's businesses to support Hernando's personal crusade against birth control. For herself, Aunt Teresa had stopped at three children, and she was quite sure everybody could lead their lives in a manner rational and well-planned. She had her doubts about her husband's power over his own organ – three children constituted a weak tourist season for Hernando Gueverra. Nevertheless, if he had tried harder, he could have been the masculine embodiment of well-behaved female sexuality. Aunt Teresa had been sure of that.

James Llewellyn had once joked that Uncle Hernando's genes were not

programmed for a noble self-sacrifice in the interests of higher ecological goals, or at least in the interests of other genes with their own selfish motives.

The poet had been somewhat different, but not by that much. And the grandfather himself. . .

The entire situation, that is – his life set into the context of the racial history, especially this business of men impregnating women they would never again see or that other business of women using a poet for his genes was quite a mystery to Parnell. The young man often had supernova catalogs and blueprints of space satellites on his mind, and few people seemed to be aware that such things even existed. Fewer still had anything sensible to say about the gyro-stabilizers in satellites designed to remain in geo-synchronous orbits. This whole business of pregnant girl-friends and nubile African princesses did seem to hold a young man’s interest as much as things mechanical and electronic, but Parnell knew of such matters only second-hand, if not third or fourth.

Blueprints and textbooks on quantum mechanics were things he could touch, unlike those more ethereal things like. . .

Marie stirred. She had never been able to understand how Parnell could find 15 minute naps refreshing, but let her have a quiet or boring hour and she would sink in so deeply that he often could not awaken her without jerking her about in a gently violent manner.

She had mixed feelings about occupying the house in northern Idaho. There was not enough room for two growing families in that house located near Walla-walla, yet, she knew that the bigger house had bad memories and good, none of which she shared with her husband. It was there that Parnell had waited for his father to never return. It was there that he last saw his grandfather as the soldiers escorted him down the driveway. It was there that his mother last had some peace and some personal happiness. And it was there that they had fled as China was being invaded as she had been in the early 1930s.

That was the part he never had been able to understand. . .

Parnell’s mother had forced a smile that autumn day back in 2023. He had seen little to smile about, being still upset by the recall of the first two ships of construction engineers. No more than ten million miles past the moon on their way to Mars. Even worse than that, his father had been called back to active duty amidst rumors that war was about to start.

“We’re moving to grandpa’s summer home, Sweetheart.”

Parnell looked slightly down at his mother and shrugged. Nearly every summer of his fifteen years, at least those he could remember, had been spent in that immense cedar and redwood house. He did not bother to ask once more if his father would be back soon. No one knew and Parnell could tell they were fearing he might never return. Or at least not for years.

All because of the collapse of China. The fifteen year-old had tried to avoid watching the news on television or on the video screens in downtown Alexandria and Washington. Yet, he had picked up that the current problem was the collapse of China. For reasons beyond his understanding, the complete breakdown in discipline in the Chinese army had made the Indians and the Koreans angry. At least he assumed that anger was driving their invasions. The Indians were rampaging through southeast Asia and the Koreans through Manchuria and Japan, and he, no more than Parnell, had never willfully invaded the territory of anyone else but in anger. Like that time Billy had hit him with an ice-ball.

But...

China?

Why did that mean his father had to go off to war? Why did that lead his grandfather to fear that all those systems he had designed were about to be used to destroy much of the world? That was not the end to his questions. No, not at all. How could such Asian events have brought an end to the efforts of the western hemisphere countries to colonize Mars? That was still not the end of his querulous querying. What did wars in Asia have to do with life in Alexandria? Or northern Idaho?

Nevertheless, Parnell had packed three trunks with drawing supplies and books of schematics, and a few astrophysics textbooks especially dear to him. There was little need to pack many books on general relativity or quantum mechanics. His grandfather's extensive library had been largely moved to that house in northern Idaho. There was even less need to pack any books on the neurosciences, for his grandmother's library had been moved there as well, and she, though Parnell had never met her, had been a well-known neurobiologist, though sometimes she had also been known as a nervy biologist. That was mostly when men agitated the air with the sounds of ill-founded prejudice and modern superstition.

"Maybe," Parnell had suggested to his mother, "the world needs grandma right now. Maybe she would tell everybody how stupid they're being."

His mother had merely smiled sadly and gone on packing. The Budakian's were already waiting outside in their limo. Minutes later, Parnell

and his mother had left in the company of that elderly Armenian-American couple who owned a lodge no more than four miles from his grandfather's place. The trip was uneventful. . .

"Much like this trip in that regard," said Parnell in a soft voice.

"What was that, Honey?"

He was startled by the response, having thought that Marie was as sound asleep as the children in the back-seat.

He shot out a "Nothing," before thinking. After a short pause, he softened his expression and smiled apologetically at Marie. "Sorry. I was just thinking this trip is as boring as the last time I journeyed to this house."

"And that brought back bad memories."

"It brought back memories, both good and bad."

Not acting as if she had taken insult, even before his apology, Marie put her seat-back down a few notches and closed her eyes.

Parnell's thoughts returned to the house and all the memories it was re-forming.

For three days, the fifteen year-old boy had wandered somewhat sluggishly about the house. He checked the library. The magnificent collection of books – everything from poetry chapbooks to massive volumes of product specs for one manufacturer or another. The huge mahogany desk was still in place along with the wooden chair which stood behind it. Parnell smiled when he sat in that chair. With his butt, he felt the lack of padding. So unlike the desk chair in Alexandria which had once cushioned his fall.

Continuing his inspection, Parnell found the pool drained and covered. The tennis court needed a light resurfacing, but was otherwise in pretty good condition. With all his years of visiting here, it had never occurred to Parnell, not consciously at least, that the place took something of a beating from the weather and from the people. It seemed logical that repairs would be made, and it was now clear that much of the painting and patching were done in the spring. He turned and headed down towards the lake, passing the outdoor furniture stacked near the cellar doors. The boat dock would need a few planks replaced, a bit of painting. The boats were gone. Over near the tree-line they were. On trailers and covered with large tarps. Too bad. A trip around the lake would have cleared his head.

Why was his head clouded?

Suddenly he was agitated rather than fuzzy-minded. Asking the question of himself had changed the state of his feelings. "Quite Bohrish, that," had he told himself in an effort to lighten the mood. The joke fell flat, and

he still felt as if something were about to burst out of him. Shaking, Parnell turned towards the grassy hill lying next to the house, the very same hill which led down to the boat dock. Disdaining all thoughts of man-made assistance, he sprinted up the hill, trying to purge his mind of fears for his father and grandfather. He did not stop running until he was about three miles down the road. He did not know if he would have ever stopped on his own; it was just that the Budakian's Rolls Royce came along and stopped just in front of him. Rather than their regular chauffeur, Mr Alvarez was driving. It was the sight of the unexpected driver which had brought Parnell's feet to a halt. He knew that Mr. Alvarez worked for the Budakians as well as his grandfather, but... Driving their Rolls? That was Charlie's job.

Truly had the world turned upside down.

Mrs. Budakian rolled down her window and gestured for Parnell to come over. When he did, she asked, "Is something the matter? Were you running for help?"

The question puzzled Parnell. No locatable disaster had occurred on this side of the Pacific. He could not figure out why she might have thought he was running for help. It was away rather than for that he had been running. After he managed to shake his head, she made an obscure motion with her hand and said, "Why don't you come around and sit beside Mr. Alvarez." Parnell froze for a minute. For the life of him, he could not understand why a sentence phrased as a question could seem so much like a command. It was his grandfather's fault. He had been sad lately, maybe because of all this war business, and he had been reading Dylan Shagari's poetry a lot. Sometimes he read it out loud to Parnell. Sometimes he even re-told the dreams of the dead poet, young he had been when writing his poems, young even when he had died.

Parnell was sitting on the grass down near the lake before long. Calm the water, though storm-clouds were gathering. Green the water and just a bit ripply.

His insides had grown much more quiet when he heard his mother calling. Rising, he had trotted up towards the house, using the steps this time. They met halfway. His mother looked both happy and worried. She reached out her hands and Parnell raised his to let her grasp them.

"Your grandfather is on the way out here."

Parnell smiled, but then...

"What about Daddy?"

She shook her head and said, "He's in Denver awaiting transport to San Diego. We won't see him for a while, maybe a month or two."

If he could have believed that, Parnell would have been happy. He had been apart from his father for as long as a month a number of times. When his father had gone on hunting and fishing trips and Parnell had been too young. The time he accompanied his grandfather to Australia when he was helping to link radio telescopes around the world so that they could function as one giant scope without needing special communications hook-ups for individual projects. When his father's reserve unit had gone on extended maneuvers a couple of years ago. This time felt different from those, but at least his grandfather would soon be with them.

The sun was setting when Parnell took a seat on the front porch of the house, and it was only about fifteen minutes later that Mr. Alvarez's truck came up the road and turned in to come around the circular driveway. Shiny and red it was. Contained a grandfather it did. The man with the odd stoop in his posture, hugged his grandson for a good number of seconds before releasing him and turning back towards the truck. Against the protests of the caretaker, James Llewellyn, doing his best to stand straight and tall, walked up the sidewalk, carrying two of the five bags he had brought.

Once there had been a time that three of the bags would have been loaded with gifts. This did not strike Parnell as one of those times.

6

That evening, the Alvarez's and Budakian's had joined them. A large dinner had it been. Delicious as well. A roast loin of pork, potatoes – mashed and covered with gravy, corn on the cob, fresh-baked bread from Mr. Budakian's oven. Mrs. Budakian had made the rich chocolate cake and had supplied the ice cream. It was just the sort of meal craved by a growing 15 year-old boy who had been depressed and not eating a lot for the previous few days.

Satiated he had been. Slouched down on the well-stuffed leather couch he did only to find himself staring at a dead fireplace. That seemed not quite right, and he rose and headed for the large wood-box on the back-deck. Longing for the warmth of a fire, seeking to draw a family about himself, he piled the wood high in the canvas carrying bag. Barely able to lift it off the ground, he struggled towards the fireplace. When Parnell had begun to stack the wood in the metal rack standing next to the hearth, his grandfather had walked up behind him and said, "Why don't you go get another load, smaller this time? I'll get the fire started."

Parnell returned just in time to see his grandfather put the match-flame to the paper. Up it softly roared, tickling the slats of wood leaning one against the other like the frame of a tepee. A moment later, that wood caught and the flames leaped out to brush against the somewhat larger shards of logs in the next layer. As Parnell watched, the flames leaped this way and that, his grandfather dared to put small but respectable pieces of split wood upon that tiniest and most confined of conflagrations. The tepee collapsed, the flame withered, failure was imminent, but the engineer came logically to the fore and softly blew air upon the fading fire. It caught once more. Out the corner of his eyes, Parnell saw his mother walk in carrying a tray loaded with mugs, a plate of sesame crackers, another of crumbly cheddar cheese, and a small bowl of grapes. He returned his gaze fireward to see that he had missed the best part of the show. The fire had completed

its come-back and the small logs were ablaze.

A moment later, Parnell was sitting against a pile of pillows on the floor. His mother had positioned her pillows a few feet to his right, though both of them were pretty much directly in front of the large fireplace.

The grandfather sat dignified and straight in his leather armchair. Eyes looked not upon things about him. Maybe he saw the things of a world longfar agoway. His mind was perhaps occupied by memories of a wife and a nephew, both long dead. With the world on the brink of racial suicide, it was likely the nephew who came more to the forefront. True, it might have been the wife, often enough a nery biologist, who would have known how to avoid the disaster, but it was the nephew who would have known how to sing a new world into being. That, at least, was what he had tried to do.

Parnell had heard his grandfather sing the dreams, had read the poems out of the starkly black and white death in which they were stored, had seen the pictures of a mixed-race youth who had accompanied his mighty uncle, James Llewellyn, on Cape Buffalo safaris as well as a desperate hunt for that most devious of predators – a man-eating leopard. As he felt the onset of a re-told dream, Parnell was not able to even imagine the god-like poet who had carried the burden of such pleasures and such responsibilities. And he had been a man so young. As odd as it might have seemed for a fellow from Nigeria, that particular Dylan Shagari in the hunting pictures looked a bit like a dusky-skinned, curly-haired James Llewellyn.

James Llewellyn, himself and in the flesh looked as if he could do with a good safari, or at least a night of trading tales with a nephew long dead. Empty of hope was the face of a man who had never lost hope. Staccato the voice, though a resonant baritone. Simply staccato. Singy-song staccato to be sure, but...

“It is best that a poet create an outlandish biography for himself unless so blessed as to be born into a context discordant enough to make a game of the very act of seeing.

“Best he be born but an embryonic thing. Better yet than that, he should be so open to the possibilities of the real world as to form relationships on a haphazard basis. From here he should put out a line of communication to there. Many heres, nearly as many theres. And when some work not as well or as often as desired, when some veil what is real, or present what is not, should he strive to destroy those that a line not run from falsely here to virtually there. Oh, truly, from such a process could a genius be created to speak a language different from that in his head.

“A poet would crawl forth into the world to begin to explore. Objects would be brought mouthward in an extravaganza of empirical research quite beyond that of the greatest scientist. He would piss on himself and perhaps spread his own feces even upon the walls of his house. Laugh he would, but often at the silliest things. Babble for sure, when the time came. First, mere sounds would he utter in an effort to create a verbal alphabet. String them together he would into. . .

“Words!

“Words of discovery and wonder. Adam fresh upon the Earth. Still fallen and still innocently stupid in all matters where he is not a towering genius.

“When a multitude of words had come from his mouth, when far more scrambled this way and that lay in pieces in his head, then would come phrases and sentences. Yes, strings of sounds to speak of a new world, one never seen before by any man for the stars would have moved. The sun would have burned up more of his precious fuel. The continents would have drifted farther apart – if not closer together. Species would have disappeared and still others arisen.

“Then should a poet strike out to tell others of his discoveries. Then should a poet fear the mass of men who would tell him that there was no objective reality outside of the dogmas preferred by men, and, therefore, he could not have his own view of what did not exist. To no avail would he protest that a meteorite on the head killed all men quite dead. He would complain into a vacuum of intelligence that the solar system had moved millions of miles since the days of his father’s youth.

“Such a man would clearly be impossible. Zero would be the probability that such a creature could be born into this Universe. A man is made of trillions of biochemical factories, most highly specialized, and all linked into the most improbable of organisms, except for all the others. No! Such a creature could never come to be. Not man nor poet. No greater would be the chance that he would develop in such a manner beyond the control of his society and his parents, though bound would he be by the limits he shares with them.

“And, so, I foresee that such men will arise only from the strangest of unions. Such men will grow into their poetic role only by the most impossible of lives.

“What could be more unlikely than the union of the son of a younger son of a Nigerian chieftain and a woman, even my very own twin sister

Genevieve, who was from the most ordinary suburb of a most ordinary American state. Could such have ever come to be? What would be the odds? Be there a computer powerful enough to have projected such an event from the simple stew which boiled out of a singularity to form our Universe 10 billion years ago? Or more. If not less.

“Yet, more to the point, if there is one. . .

“How could such a man and such a woman have ever met, let alone at the University of Paris?

“And how could the only produce of that union have been such a being as Dylan Shagari was?

“A young man who had attended and flunked-out of some of the world’s most distinguished centers of learning, a mischievous fellow wishing to be a poet but unable to figure out why the modern world might need such an exotic luxury in a day when insight and entertainment could both be found with a mere flick of the wrist, or perhaps the pitter-patter of fingers across a keyboard.

“Such cheap paths of Enlightenment did not draw the poet any more than did lecture halls or exam rooms. Rather had he acquainted himself with the Zurich coffee-houses frequented by Einstein during class and laboratory hours. A connoisseur of professional ladies, he felt life to be too short for much precious time to be spent in the brick buildings of Oxford, already being broken down by the acidic emissions of the ivy. Not many millenia would they last. Better off was the poet to seek eternity, and, so, he flew to Dublin to search out the healthy and thick-bodied whores praised by James Joyce. Rather would he be like Joyce than study annotated versions of Joycean near-misses.

“They did not tolerate such irresponsibility. They could not allow such disrespect. Yet, they could not lay hand nor tongue upon the poet. The ax hovered longly because he was never at Oxford to be summoned by the proper authorities. Fresh from Dublin, he had picked up a fresh supply of ink and blank notebooks in London, for he disposed of a hundred pages for every bloody, sweatsoaked word. Barely stopping in Oxford to change his underwear, he had flown off to Paris that he might compare the charms of the native women against those of tourists of many lands.

“Dylan Shagari had preferred to make babies when he copulated, and he had lusted deeply after the women he had used. He was most accurately regarded as a saint of the second-best virtues. Or perhaps not. Himself, the poet had thought descriptions to be worthless except for misleading a

superstitious people.

“Hormonally driven, the poet had been neither a sensualist nor a utilitarian.

“Was that true? No, but thus distorted, the truth collapsed into a state of profitable confusion. Dylan Shagari had possessed the insight to realize that gibberish was muchly useful in exploring reality. From such babblistic falsehoods would come tomorrow’s truths. Or lies. But tomorrow’s, in any case.

“He was open to many possibilities though quite aware of the dangers. Some ways of seeing a reality founded on blood and dirt might orthogonate many things and more than a few concepts, taking them beyond the vision of all but a future poet and those wise enough to be born after him. In the end, a concrete world would have its own way, and only some words, far fewer concepts, would be selected. Such was the curse of Man: To be set in a world not plastic enough for a rich imagination. Not that such was true.

“But...

“Poets be blind, like their mighty father of yore. How canst such a man see anything outside of the images created by his own brain? Canst those hallucinations be foisted upon a concrete reality?

“Well, maybe if it is an illusion corresponding to some actuate of blood or dirt.”

It was that night that Parnell came to conceive of the possibility of a narrative making sense of the intertwined lives of Dylan Shagari and James Llewellyn and Grace Llewellyn Lopez and... So many others. Himself Parnell? Though not the poetic type, Parnell saw one or two scenes through the eyes of Dylan Shagari, and, thus, he realized it be necessary to see, importantly to note, of the essence to honestly speak the great truth, yes! of a certainty would it be obvious, it was already obvious, that neither teenaged literary philosopher nor dead-to-ashes poet was cursed, as was the 400 pound male gorilla, by faithful females and a vanishingly small penis. In fact, the teenager was not cursed with no females at all, but...

No matter.

Parnell, to be sure, had been reading books by biologists convinced that the path to understanding the possibilities of human moral and social interactions lay in the study of primate penises and the practice of fellatio amongst the pygmy chimpanzees. Knew he well that a grandmother, often labeled Professor Morgan Llewellyn, had gained her reputation as a somewhat nervy biologist by unleashing her full arsenal of scientific knowledge

and moral outrage upon those who spoke the grosser forms of stupidities.

Yet, he had read the books, and he felt somewhat obligated to do something with the knowledge he had gained.

What could he do with such knowledge, such frickled facts and frackled theories? That such knowledge was based upon data did not impress the teenager any more than it would have impressed his grandmother. In the preface to a collection of articles on the history of science, she had written, "The history of a superstitious race indicates that data is rarely used to build coherent theories or meaningful facts."

Still. . .

Pygmy chimpanzees blowing one another in the middle of the African jungle while teams of scientists stood nearby recording details of the techniques?

Even the poet had not mentioned such things, though he knew gorillas better than he knew chimps, and the big boys were a bit limited in their sexual options by those vanishingly small penises. Something must have been wrong with the female gorillas as well – Dylan Shagari had not mentioned any complaints on the part of Xidra. It was as if she were unaware of her right to deep sexual satisfaction.

Silliness it was for sure, and Parnell laughed out loud for the first time in several days. The grandfather, still sad and fearing the worst for the world, looked down at the sound of disrespect. Hoped he for hope, he did. Parnell just smiled sheepishly and turned to stare into the fire.

As he drew into his own mind, Parnell remembered reading some of the diaries, hidden, and not very well at that, behind some bound engineering journals in his grandfather's library. The poet had spoken proudly of his greatest intellectual achievement. And truly was it a near impossibility that an amateur scholar could have made such an important discovery. Dylan Shagari had made his way through certain books buried deeply in the least-frequented stacks of the great libraries of Europe.

He had ever been a great one for sniffing out useful information which was ignored by men less opportunistic. More than that, he had never been afraid of hard work, so long as it was not required for a course.

After months of research, supplemented by meals with and on the liberated women of Munich and Stockholm, the man dedicated to saying the unsayable had boarded a plane for New Delhi. Within days, he had found temples staffed by Hindu priestesses practicing a quite unorthodox version of that ancient faith. Two months later, at an average of 1.508 words per

day, he had completed a powerful tribute to the women of Bharat. That poem, like his tributes to women Chinese and Italian, could not possibly be regarded as a love poem by any sanely disembodied person of the Enlightenment. There was lust, there were promises of children, and there were no false problems of a love eternal though unconsummated.

Lust had arrived, children had not, and the love quite consummated had faded with the shortest of distances in spacetime.

To be honest...

Parnell was more entranced with Dylan Shagari's journal entries during his month in Hong Kong. Impressed greatly was he with the talented and experienced call-girls in their whitely carpeted, whitely furnished penthouse suites. Why had all those call-girls preferred all-white habitats? Had there been some sort of city ordinance that all call-girls had to see a doctor once a month and buy white shag carpeting from the mayor's brother-in-law? Had Dylan Shagari taken poetic liberties with data too messy and too complicated to provide a proper backdrop for his faloodling?

Parnell went to bed early. His mind was running on two tracks. A clean, pure part of him ran through a catalog of quasars, trying to make sense of the distance measurements, still contradictory one to the many after decades of work by an astrophysicist or two, an astronomer or seven. Yet, shocking as it seemed to the teenaged boy, there was another part of him, more willing to descend into the pornography of primate research.

It didn't matter.

After all, most things didn't.

Years prior, his father had sat him down and told him that soon he would be having many a fantasy. In a fatherly manner had he told Parnell the facts of life, complete with a few theories of moral behavior and a short recitation of raw data. The serious father, determined to keep his son on the straight and narrow, spoke of normal intercourse, the begetting of a child, or rarely – two. Puzzled Parnell it did. A strange thing to do with his yang-yang. Stick it into a girl's yin-yin? It was not that Carlos Lopez spoke Chinese. In fact, he had used the most precise of scientifically acceptable terms. Penis and vagina and fallopian tubes and many a hormone.

Parnell's friend Andy had once asked him, "How do you make a hormone?"

As he had drifted away from Andy, concentrating on the details of setting up a lab and mixing the chemicals in the most complicated of ways, Parnell had heard Andy laugh about something in the distance. Unsure why

someone would find so much humor in biochemistry, Parnell had risen and returned home to continue working on an open project, one remembered fondly. Before his grandfather's next visit, Parnell had a charged-coupled device half-built and was starting to write the software to drive a search for variable stars. Not that interested in Cepheids, Parnell had been entranced by the task of assembling the device to search for them.

Still. . .

That memory had not helped Parnell to understand why his father was telling him so many things he already knew, along with those few weird facts about penises and vaginas. He was a smart ten year-old, and he already knew the details by which the brain controlled the female reproductive cycle by the interplay of brain chemicals, pituitary gland, thalamus, ovaries, and all those hormones which had seemed so funny to Andy. It was this business of sticking his yang-yang in a girl's yin-yin that boggled his brain. As soon as his father had released him, Parnell had run out the front door and to the Chu's house next door. When Mrs. Chu had fetched Michel-Marie, Parnell had dragged him out the front door. To the tree-house had they both been drawn without the one needing to lead the other. It was Michel-Marie who had first let Parnell in on the secret of yang-yangs and yin-yins, and it was appropriate he be told first that there was a solution to the open questions which had so bothered the boys. The yang-yang fit inside the yin-yin.

Michel-Marie shuddered with a horror pleasurable to a ten year-old boy and then they climbed down and went in search of Professor Chu, ever willing to lecture on his latest theory. It had occurred to the highly honored philosopher that there were good reasons why quasars argued against the Big Bang – if they were as distant as some measurements indicated. Unfortunately, that theory had not proven successful in turning mountains of data into a few well-structured mounds of facts.

Oh well. It had been worth a try. Even an interesting try had it been, Parnell still remembered those lectures fondly.

Lying in bed, he continued to review that most interesting of all his collections of astrophysical data – the catalogs of quasars tabulated by distance and by location in the sky. Those tabulations, so beautiful despite being so data-like, rolled past images of gorillas trying to stick tiny yang-yangs up a gorilla yin-yin. In the shadows of the jungle, pygmy chimpanzees watched, pointed, and laughed. More tolerant of physical shortcomings, khaki-dressed scientists smiled sadly and sympathetically as they recorded data.

Data.

Lots of data there was in the world.

Why were there so few good theories and good facts?

Perhaps it did not matter, proposed the teenaged boy to himself and, so, not sure why quasars were so intertwined with those darkly mysterious yin-yins, Parnell decided to redirect his mind towards more fruitful lines of re-call and dream. Anything but dreams of missing fathers would be okay, and...

Well...

That did it.

Just like asking yourself if you breath while raising the basketball or while releasing it. And then telling yourself not to think about it. It seemed to Parnell that the conscious application of the scientific method was not always the best way to approach the world.

Parnell was still trying to put thoughts of his father away that he might sleep in peace when he heard a long, low moan as of a man in torment. Jumping out of bed, he noticed the clock was showing but 12:01. He put on his slippers and ran into the hall. The television was on in the sitting-room outside his grandfather's bedroom. Parnell walked in, afraid what he might find, but all he saw was a somber-faced man on the screen.

His grandfather was crying.

Parnell had never seen him cry.

Moaning and sobbing.

With his face buried in his hands!

Parnell's mother was leaning over her father, with her arm around his shoulders.

The sleepy lad had no chance to ask what was the matter before the television screen showed pictures of missiles leaving their silos in the grassy plains, leaving their launching pads on a destroyer, coming out of the sea as if a race of dolphins were taking revenge on tuna fishermen.

His grandfather interrupted his moaning to say, "I built the damned systems for them." A few seconds later, he lifted his head to look his daughter in the eye and ask, "Why the hell did I do it? I made more money building factories and I sure as hell never enjoyed dinner parties with the likes of politicians and diplomats. Was it just for pride, for damned Satanic pride? For damned..." His voice broke up once more and Parnell returned his eyes to the television screen.

In a voice deep and dripping with well-controlled sadness, the head

so wisely gray spoke. “No hits have yet been confirmed. Many missiles were launched in batches at 11:45 and many more just a few moments ago at midnight. The White House has issued a statement that the war was instigated by the entry of the Indian army into Hanoi within minutes of the landing of the Korean invasion force on the shores of the Gulf of Chihli. Reports indicate that artillery is being set up in support of the attacks of the Korean air force on the cities of Tianjin and Beijing. No one yet knows if the invading force will actually pass through Tianjin or if the Korea leaders intend to leapfrog up to Beijing.”

Parnell’s head was spinning as he turned in confusion to return to bed. Little could he do to stop the missiles in mid-air. Many had likely already exploded efficiently one distance or another above the ground. Knew the arguments well, he did, and that was certain. It was a purely technical problem. Why waste explosive power digging out an impressive crater. Let the thing explode a few hundred feet high and it would knock over more buildings, burn more people to a crisp.

Sleep came but not for long. Dawn came. Light penetrated Parnell’s bedroom, and he rose. He showered quickly, hoping that would wake him up. Adults always claimed it worked for them, but Parnell emerged dripping wet but still half-asleep. He dressed and walked down the hallway, dreading what he might find. His grandfather was asleep in the chair as the television droned on.

Compliments were coming in bunches, led by “No other countries have the defense systems to compare with ours. Yes, many an American has reason to be thankful tonight that James Llewellyn was on our side to design and build the air defenses and missile launching systems for the North American Defense Organization.”

Details of the prior night’s events were coming in rapidly to the studio as Parnell took the seat next to his slumbering grandfather. New Delhi had been turned to glowing dust; and not much was left of Delhi itself. Damascus, Aleppo, Tehran, Tabriz, Shiraz, Baghdad, Mosul, Riyadh, Jidda, Mecca, Tel Aviv, Haifa had all been returned to the desert, though certainly an eerie sort which would not have been recognized by Abraham or Mohamed. Many stretches of the birthplace of human civilization were likely no more than lumpy sheets of the oddest sort of glassy material. Egyptian cities had apparently survived, along with Jerusalem and most of the smaller cities of Israel. The commentators seemed surprised that Europe had survived nearly intact. As Parnell watched, befuddled by the

political and diplomatic practices of his fellow-men, one wise head speculated, "Perhaps the Europeans have had their fill of genocide and bloody warfare. Not Russians nor Frenchmen nor Germans tried to destroy one another."

The maps, so pretty with all the starbursts marking the successful detonations of nuclear devices, showed the Chinese had suffered worst of all. It was the Chinese military, still in control of their bases who had sent off the first missiles, against the Indians invading southeast Asia and the Koreans already holding much of northern China. Those missiles had been launched at 11:45 at the same time that the United States had put several space launching devices into orbit and had also mounted pre-emptive strikes against Iraq and Libya and Serbia.

In retrospect, the aggression by the Chinese seemed to have been a bad idea. Within a half-hour, they had paid for their attacks on India with the loss of many an industrial center and the death of many millions of people. The Koreans, apparently not afraid to scatter their efforts had diverted part of their invasion fleet to sit off the coast of Japan. Perhaps it was a warning, perhaps a preparation for a later invasion.

Deciding his grandfather would not have been pleased by the many compliments he had received, Parnell let him sleep on.

Old.

So terribly old did he look.

The lines on his face had deepened in but a single night.

Near mid-morning, James Llewellyn stirred, took a shower, and moved downstairs to sit in front of the television set in the family-room in the basement. Parnell took a break to fry up an egg and cheese sandwich and then joined his grandfather down in the basement. A tray was sitting beside the rapidly aging man. He had a coffee mug in hand but had not touched the ham and cheese sandwich. Parnell grabbed a handful of grapes as he passed and then lay on the floor in front of the TV set, propping his head up on his hand which was supported by his wrist and forearm in turn. The entire substructure of Parnell rested on his elbow. All things considered, he thought it was an amazing arrangement. Not likely that such an elbowed creature had come to be, perhaps less likely the creature would find himself in northern Idaho watching television as the death and destruction from a nuclear war was being tallied.

The map of the world was covered by the starbursts. A chart next to the map was recording the reported or estimated deaths. A note on the

chart promised hourly updates, and James Llewellyn seemed determined to sit and watch as the numbers climbed. He had helped to deliver the fires of Hell to much of the world, and he would see those fires burn. Parnell thought it likely the engineer was wishing he had remained a builder of hospitals and mission schools in Africa.

Though. . .

The numbers were fascinating.

That they were.

Missing the more profound magic of astronomical numbers or the constants of physics, they were yet. . .

Damned big numbers.

Parnell wondered how it was that someone at the network's improvised studios in Syracuse knew that 2,346,731 people had died in Chengdu as of seven that morning. Eastern standard time did they use in broadcasting from Syracuse – New York City was apparently no more. That bothered Parnell greatly; he had fond memories of the pigeons in Liberty Park and the rocky elevator ride up the Empire State Building. It had been a windy day for sure.

Not long did Parnell have to worry about Manhattan being scraped to its bedrock and lying beneath several fathoms of steaming water. The numbers kept coming on the television screen. He thought it funny that television networks were still broadcasting even as the commentators were speaking of the end of civilization. His grandfather must have been thinking along the same lines for he spoke his first words since the missiles went off.

“This will be our legacy to the Universe. Our last messages broadcast into space will be the mounting death total and the growing list of great cities that are no more, all interspersed with Bugs Bunny cartoons to amuse the children not able to play outside because the bombs are falling.”

Parnell could see his grandfather was upset, but he knew there were good reasons for all men of good conscience to feel like shit. It was not that Parnell was used to speaking or thinking vulgar words, but this seemed a time when the worst obscenities could be justified. A blasphemy might even be understandable, but Parnell did not know enough theology to be able to respectfully insult God. At a few minutes before one o'clock, Parnell's mother came in carrying a tray of sandwiches. Mr. and Mrs. Budakian followed, carrying pitchers of iced tea and a pot of coffee. By the time they had settled in, Wily Coyote was falling down a cliff once more. The plates were passed around, and each person, in turn, grabbed a sandwich

– even James Llewellyn, and the cartoon ended. The camera panned the tally board. The estimate of deaths in China had climbed to 37,782,001.

Everyone froze, sandwiches in mid-air. Parnell panned the room and saw that his companions were all looking sick to their stomachs. Other than him, they were looking at the ground, at the ceiling, at the picture of Geronimo on the wall to the right of the television. Wondering if there was something wrong with him, he decided to avoid everybody's eyes as well. He sneaked a few bites over that immense time when everyone sat quietly in front of the television, watching as the number of Chinese dead soared to 53,127,542 million by 4:00. Parnell left a few minutes later and went for a short ride in a canoe not yet stored for the off-season.

As a falcon swooped down near shore, missing a brownish rodent by a fraction of an inch, Parnell shook his head and said, "It might be an awfully long off-season this time."

7

Once more swooped a falcon down near the lake, but this time Parnell watched from a deck covered with a couple inches of composted and fresh leaves. The wings flapped, driving the predator up, up, above the treetops. Leveling off, he headed off with his feast. Not just a rat or a field-mouse, it was a nice plump rabbit. A lesser bird could not have made it into the air with such a meal in its clutch. Even that big fellow barely made it without crashing into the leafy mass of the woods.

Parnell walked to the side of the house and down the stairs. Marie was at the side of the house. She and Donnie had opened the cellar door. There was a sound of scurrying, though likely no more than a few creatures. The cobwebs hung like gossamer stalactites. Husks of dead insects were embedded in some webs of a different sort. Little creatures could still be seen running from this strange environment of light forced upon them by an opened door.

Marie turned with a grimace on her face. Smiling broadly, Parnell pointed out the picnic benches piled just to the right of the door, the tennis rackets against the far wall – right next to the fishing poles and croquet set. Many things remained unseen. Parnell knew there were screen tents, canopies, boating equipment, baseball equipment, and various grills.

In a voice quite enthusiastic, he offered comforting words. “It’ll be a lot of work, but this place can be as nice as it ever was in just a few months.” Marie looked around the yard. Parnell’s eyes followed to see the trees were changing colors or dropping leaves. It would be a lot of work before winter to be sure, but it was a beautiful house, even when covered with mildew and cobwebs. He walked over to his wife and put his hands on her shoulders. When she looked at him, he kissed her straight on her lips. She forced a smile as his face retreated, and he said, “You’ll see. We’ll clean up a couple of rooms downstairs and we’ll have a kitchen and a couple of rooms to sleep

in.”

Parnell led Marie up to the tennis court just in time to see Raul drive up. Lee disembarked and looked with open mouth at the magnificent hunting lodge which had the air of Moscow abandoned and about to burn the ass of a retreating Napoleon.

So close was this to the region where Parnell had first discovered the true depths of the poet. . .

Smiled he.

Nearly overcome with joy was he.

He could feel his smile widen to an out-and-out grin.

Donnie came up to him in time to see. The lighthearted old man joined him in his joy. Marie turned to Parnell with a question on her face. Raul came up to join her in silently asking him, “Why the sudden joy?”

Parnell responded, “The attic,” and walked away rapidly towards the open front door of the house. As he was about to turn the corner of the house, he could hear Marie giggle. As he was around the corner, he thought he could hear her say, “The portrait of Dylan Shagari.”

He entered the house and went up the stairs three at a time. As he was walking down the second-floor hallway, he noticed the house was in amazingly good shape considering it had not been occupied for nearly twelve years. Mr. Alvarez had died four years ago, and he had been doing some upkeep on it, but still. . .

He brought himself up short at the entrance to the master bedroom suite. Opening the door, the first thing he saw was the television set, though it was pushed against the far wall, between a gun cabinet which should have been down in the den and the case packed densely with old-fashioned compact discs. Shostakovitch and Beethoven. Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark. Some Bach and Mozart choral music sung by Emma Kirkby of the voice non-reverberating, yes, a boyish soprano had she with such bell-like tones. He did not even have to walk over there to see the titles. He had spent many evenings listening with his grandfather, often in silence, sometimes talking about the shared interests of a young boy and an old man – the collapse of stars into a single neutron, the Bose-Einstein state of matter, baseball sluggers, and pretty young women.

Life would have been perfect with a good astrophysical simulation program, a few good books in mathematical physics, the revival of professional baseball, and. . .

No. Parnell sighed, remembering he already had a good woman, and,

anyway, he had never been much of a playboy. He had left that to his dead cousin and to his grandfather with his memories of. . .

James Llewellyn had eventually migrated back up to the sitting room in the master bedroom suite. For several days, his daughter or Mrs. Alvarez or sometimes even Mr. Budakian had brought him food and drink. Parnell had sat at his side for long stretches of time, but he was not able to see the point. The entire war seemed dumb and watching the mounting country by country totals of casualties did not make things much better.

Not just the whole thing, but also the details of the reporting annoyed Parnell. Why did the networks and the guest analysts consider 53,127,542 dead Chinese to be so much more interesting than the 17,533,097 dead North Americans. The numbers climbed from one unimaginable level to another. If he had not realized the importance of keeping his grandfather company, Parnell would have left and found a good book on transfinite set theory or maybe applied differential geometry. Infinities, of any type, seemed so much cleaner and purer than 9,764,221 dead Japanese people.

People?

You could not see them, legs nor even dying eyes, as the curve began to form. Almost inevitably, the laws which limited finite things began to appear as a second inflection point in the growth of Chinese deaths. Suddenly interested, though it was not the most profound of mathematical problems, Parnell projected the curve would flatten out in 23 hours or so. Soon enough, the 'S' would complete itself. Parnell was almost happy, especially for those still alive in China. He imagined their joy as they saw the curve was about to flatten. Likely it was that crowds of cheering people had gathered. At least where the fires and rioting had stopped. And where there were no invading troops. And where. . .

Parnell had not been happy for the people for long when another underlying process began, and the 147,971,231 dead exploded upwards again with the next hourly report. Infections and communicable diseases had entered the picture along with radiation sickness. Chastised himself silently, he did. He should have remembered his grandfather's warning that the prettiest of mathematical models would rarely correspond too well with the brute facts of a contingent world. Until you recused and took account of the brute facts arising from the first attempts to theorize, little accuracy would be possible. Or at least likely.

And here was the proof – a new and still greater 'S' was forming. Parnell's mind plotted the new numbers for 47 hourly updates until the curve

began leveling at 481,727,314 dead. Near there anyway, though Parnell suspected such precise pretensions at accuracy. More importantly, he felt sorry for all those poor Chinese people.

Still...

Such bloody silliness meant little to Parnell.

It was peaceful in northern Idaho, and the mystery of Dylan Shagari was far more interesting than those unimaginable numbers. Those numbers had nothing to do with the patterned elegance of mathematics and several of the physical sciences; it was as if his brain had been barraged with number after number just as data-like and just as meaningless as those few constants necessary to bridge the gap between the formulas of mathematical physics and the uncompromising Universe. Those embryonically factual things needed to be few and highly leveraged for order to be perceived on a human scale. Such order did not emerge from the chaos of war.

Wandering away from his grandfather who seemed still obsessed with the onslaught of numbers without purpose and wishing to penetrate more deeply into the mysteries of the man with the soul of a poet, Parnell rambled and divagated about the house, picking up little mementos and substantially lightweight books of poetry. Like a scientist delving into human nature, he piled up books and pictures and even a hat, all of which seemed meaningless and yet presumably said something about the man who once wrote or posed or wore. Once he had gathered a plenitude of data, Parnell sat on the couch in his grandfather's office surrounded by pictures of and books written by a young man half-Welsh and half-Nigerian. The hat hung on the coat-rack across the room.

Odd, that. A hat on a coat-rack? Seemed that proper? No, but not muchly of a matter was that.

With everyone else so distracted by the hourly updates on the number of deaths and the devastation to cities, factories, and highway systems, Parnell had plenty of peace and quiet to ponder the mystery of a man half-Nigerian though not much more than half-Welsh. A day passed in a flood of rhythms and journalized dreams. Several hours were spent in contemplations as Parnell stared at the picture of a dark-skinned young man with a mischievous smile. Dressed in khakis in the most pleasing of the photographs, Dylan Shagari carried a rifle, though he had not been the one with the good shot at the man-eating leopard. His uncle, who was a grandfather in other contexts, looked so strong and carefree in a world with only ferocious cats and no exploding bombs.

Having stared at the image of a dead cousin for hours, having thought so much longer about the puzzle of a particular man's being, the questions had become meaningless. In frustration, Parnell thumbed through a book of verse and wondered what the hell the fuss was all about. Dylan Shagari had pasted adjectives onto nouns to which they did not apply; he had strung together images and actions which had not a thing to do with one another; he had faloodled sentences which would not parse, others which seemed to parse but were deeply incoherent.

Nothing would fit together. Dylan Shagari was a bundle of contradictions, his poems mere babble. Parnell noted that the poems were filled with references to matters quite quantum or neurological. Brute fact battled its Siamese twin randomness. The harsh realities of numbers complex beyond the reach of discursive thought overwhelmed the beloved and elegant structures of Galois. Selection and purpose faced off in bloody conflicts upon which human reality was staked. Empirical man cried that evolution disproved God while Dylan Shagari's alter ego replied that God had the freedom to do as He pleased with a world quite contingent. But...

Was not structure an illusion and, in any case, self-originated?

The poet had screamed in frustration and had dared to ask, "What was the self which grounded the self-birtherd self?"

The more clearheaded of the biologists had spoiled much of the fun by pointing out they talked mostly of natural selection and only secondarily of evolution, and then – only – in an etymologically distorted sense.

The poet had smiled and had joked, "Now get we somewhere, though it be nowhere described in any song written by Enlightened man."

Parnell was fascinated. This was not structure supplied in a neat, black-and-white schematic. This was not stuff to be mounted on charts or dissected to be placed under microscopes. This was stuff more of the nature of a rain-forest designed by a god drunk with his creative powers, a demiourge who could not make up his mind what to do, and, so, he did far too many things.

It seemed to the young man that relationships could overwhelm the substrates of those things which no longer had independent existence.

With all that flood of insightful observations, Dylan Shagari remained a mystery greater than those of quantum mechanics. Before a poet actualized in one spot, did he exist at all points which could be described rhythmically? Did the question even make sense? Was the poet a man stuck in the realm of the possible by his deep affinity with words and concepts still unbirtherd?

Did he hover about, pained by the sight of other men being able to actualize quite readily, sad that he could sample from an infinity of viewpoints? Did the questions even make sense? After all, usually observation and not quite actualization was at issue when certain collapses occurred. Though, to be sure, it was a distinction nearly metaphysical. Different words were needed, but the faloodling man was gone.

Parnell speculated that, as the numbers cardinal and ordinal were but reflections of that which was possible in absolute infinity, a man was but a reflection of one minuscule thought possible to God. He knew quite well that no matter how far you traveled, absolute infinity remained still at an absolutely infinite distance, the whole ball of wax or not. What did that say about men and God? Parnell wondered if Dylan Shagari could have said something clever about such an issue. Other than that one reference to Russell's Paradox, he had not really delved into the mysteries of transfinite set theory in his poetry. Such a shame that. On the other hand, maybe he thought neither God nor divine thoughts were mathematical objects, however undefinable.

More than a week after the missiles were first launched, Parnell was sitting on the guardrail around the back-deck when he heard shuffling footsteps coming up the stairs. Thinking of the poet's adventures was he. Disturbed from sad-happy dreams, he turned to see his grandfather had finally emerged from the domain of man-centered horror. Grimacing he was as the sun's light struck his skin. Parnell wished he were capable of cheering up the old man, so sad and wrinkled of cheek. It was not possible. The young man had himself fallen into a state of melancholia. He felt so empty, for he had not felt the tongue of a Hong Kong call-girl torture its way down his belly and he had not been allowed to impregnate the fifteen year-old daughter of a great and noble Bantu chieftain. He had fallen into a state of desire. Longed he did, yes, though it was stronger than a longing. Yet, it was the object of desire that was important, was it not?, and not the act of desiring. Or was it? Parnell knew not, and that deepened his sadness.

Carefully pulling his grandson from the perch nearly 50 feet above an outcropping of rock, James Llewellyn had sat with his arm around the young man. Parnell was so humbly unacquainted with exotic women from here and there, and, yet, it seemed to him that he had ever saddened and pleased a grandfather of wide experience with the world. The grandfather had known the poet and had even known call-girls from some of the world's

greatest cities. He had to drop several girl-friends and mistresses when he had married the neurobiologist with a will of steel. And, so, the two men, one in his 80s and the other not yet 20, sat together crying while people died many miles away, while noble and ancient civilizations were crushed under the heels of men favoring leather and chrome in their attire. In one of his more noble, less political, and thoroughly irresponsible works, Dylan Shagari had conjectured the insides of such men were as dead as the things they wore.

Like nothing else in Tennessee, the poet gave of neither well-structured, hierarchies nor the messy stuff of the world. . .

The attic door was jammed tight. Parnell pulled with all his might. The door-knob came off, Parnell went flying into the wall on the other side of the hallway, and, within seconds, he could hear people running up the stairs. Parnell's rear-end and pride were both bruised. Otherwise he was all right. Red of face, he turned to see that Donnie had reached the top of the stairs. Without a word, the boyish man with wise hair ran down the hallway and stooped to put his hand on Parnell's shoulder. Sympathy did he offer, though Parnell was forced to admit, "I'm okay. But that door may never come open unless we break it apart." Donnie looked happy to hear that.

Marie arrived, nearly choking on the dust. Jimmy and Alicia followed their mother. In turn, they were followed by the voice of their Auntie Lee who was calling, "Come back down here. You might get hurt."

Parnell thought that unlikely as they were not as clumsy as he. Nevertheless, he turned a stern face towards them and said, "You should obey when an adult tells you something."

Alicia stopped, thought for just a second, and turned around to go back down the stairs. She was met halfway down by Raul who called up, "Is everybody all right?"

Parnell nodded his head, though his pride still stung. And his butt. Marie called out, "He's okay. He just fell trying to open the door."

Raul laughed and emerged from the stairway with Alicia hoisted up on his shoulder and Lee right behind. Donnie disappeared down the stairs, and by the time Parnell had risen and dusted himself off, an ax was coming up the stairs in elfish hands. Not one to miss a good time, Donnie motioned everybody away from the door. Marie sheltered Alicia behind her body; Jimmy provided a short wall for his father.

The first blow went through and the ax continued downward a foot or

so. Quite a gash that was, and Donnie spun halfway around to collect his compliments. Not one to leave a fellow human being disappointed, Raul said, "Good blow, Donnie. One more like that and you'll be in the downstairs dining room."

Donnie thought about that for just a few seconds, long enough for Marie and Lee to head for the stairs with Alicia. Before disappearing, Marie shouted back, "Parnell, watch Jimmy. We'll try to clean the kitchen, but I think we might have to cook outside tonight." Alicia squealed in joy at that, and then the females were gone.

"Certainly," said Parnell softly, "would no male leave a sight of such potential destruction."

Raul and Donnie ignored the comment, being used to Parnell – often spacey though in a humble sort of way. Jimmy looked up at his father and said, "Daddy, you're talking weird again."

"I'm drawing near the portrait of the poet." After a pause, a "Ptuuie" sound drew everyone's attention to Donnie. He had spit on his hands. Properly revved up, Donnie lifted the ax above his head and brought it down in a steady motion. It occurred to Parnell that Donnie would have been a good golfer with such a smooth motion, but he was not sure if there were many golf courses left. The weeds spread so fast.

With a cracking sound, the door split in half for two-thirds of its height. Parnell moved forward to pull the pieces of the door out, but Donnie waved him back and removed half the door by wedging the ax-head behind it and pulling. He turned and said, in an apologetic voice, "Slivers."

In response, could Parnell do less than smile? No, certainly not, and he did. Moving forward again, he said, "I hope the portrait is still up there."

The stairway did not really seem any dustier than it had been when Parnell was a teenager. The attic definitely was not, though there seemed to be more spiders.

The portrait sat still against the wall and facing the sofa. Parnell walked over and pulled the sheet from the couch to reveal almost as much dust underneath the sheet as on top.

No matter.

He sat down and faced the portrait. A bit obscured by these twelve years. He was sure the Alvarez's would not have come up here to clean up.

Parnell brushed the dust from Dylan Shagari's face using his hand.

Still so tired for such a young man.

He bore yet the scars upon his face.

He was still the poet on the verge of a maturity he was not destined to reach. . .

The poet had been, in fact, almost constantly on Parnell's mind in those weeks after the nuclear bombs devastated the cities of man. Yet, Parnell did not let that distract him much. He boated. He played tennis against the backboard. He took a camera and a pair of binoculars and went searching for elk and grizzly bears. Mostly, he got bored, not being much in the mood to study even the most interesting theories of quantum gravity. In fact, after what had happened to the Mars colonization mission, he wondered if man's greatest crusade was at an end, if the efforts to settle on one pretty good theory of a few things perceptible by men would be abandoned forever.

Bored, he wandered around the house. His grandfather and the other adults were sitting around and talking about the recently fought war. Again! The television channels were still interrupting all shows with regular updates of the death totals. Boring! He did not feel like drawing, not even the plans for an ion drive. Especially not the plans for an ion-drive after what had happened. Not even sure how he had gotten there, Parnell found himself in the attic rummaging through boxes of pictures, more boxes of the astrophysics texts and scientific journals he had read when he was a boy. Thirteen boxes were opened without finding anything that could hold his interest for long. Walking away from the things of his childhood, he saw a dark corner in the attic which he did not remember exploring. Not ever!

Odd, that.

Why had he never explored that corner? He was as curious as the typical teenager. When he was young, he had been more curious than most of his playmates. Even Professor Chu's son had not been overly interested in so much as the formation of black holes. He had sat with Parnell and listened to his father's talks on the Big Bang and quasars, but only until he grew interested in dance. Even his own parents had not seen him much after he started his ballet lessons.

Puzzled Parnell was that two boys could grow up to have such different interests. After all, he and Michel-Marie had practically been Siamese twins when young. As he grew closer, he remembered that he had been over in this part of the attic, back when he was only seven or so. Paintings. That was what was over here. Such had not been of great interest to a young boy. If the paintings had been of horses or elephants or something, that would have been different, but he remembered that they were of people.

Not having a good visual memory for anything other than well-structured schematics, he could not re-call images of the paintings.

No matter. Just pull off the sheets. A packing order slip was still stapled to the edge of one of the paintings. Under description, it said, "Oil paintings by Grace Lopez." Under value, "Infinite." The houses in Tallahassee and Atlanta and Ann Arbor had always had his mother's paintings on the wall. She had even painted a couple of wild west scenes for Parnell. His favorite had been the sad one of Chief Joseph surrendering. Noble and dignified had he been. If only other men had sworn to fight no more forever.

Deciding it best to move on and not to chew too long on one unresolvable, though fascinating problem, Parnell began to pull out the paintings. The first was of his grandfather, shotgun in hand, directing a white-and-brown dog out into a field, the second of his father in his colonel's uniform. The reserves, of course, as Carlos Lopez had only made it to captain before resigning his active commission. Of medium height, a muscular block of a man, Carlos Lopez was bronze of skin, black of hair, and deep of eyes.

Parnell rose and wandered over to an old mirror resting near a dresser to which it had once been attached. Dust covered the potentiality of reflection. Pondering that insulting loss of potential knowledge for just a few heartbeats, Parnell went in search of a cloth. The cloth he found was nearly as dusty as the mirror, but clouds took away some of the worst of it. Bewitched by the hints of rain inside the attic, the teenager scattered his thoughts and stared openmouthed until forced to cough. Coming to a more mundane reality, he realized his tongue and gums were coated with dust. His lungs were complaining.

He walked towards the mirror with his find, now a mottling of gray-brown haze over a pinkish sort of thing. He thought it to be a sweatshirt, but the problem seemed uninteresting compared to the matters which were already exercising his brain, limbic and cortical. His mind was so confused as to be unable to integrate its integral parts.

Who was Parnell Lopez?

And that revived another question.

Who was Dylan Shagari?

The poet was not in sight, being underground in an urn and taking a tectonic ride into the zone of molten rock. Better to concentrate on what was possible. Better to get a good look at this Parnell Lopez fellow. A living fellow was easier to see than a dead man, though the study of dead men had its advantages. Often could they be posed one convenient way or

the nother.

Once more clouds filled a small region of the attic. Once more Parnell coughed strongly. This time his eyes also watered, but a few moments later, he opened them to see a young man staring out of the mirror. A fraction of an inch taller than Carlos Lopez, or so he liked to think, the young man was stocky and round of face. Though it might have been thought surprising, his skin was almost as dark as if he were Indian and Spanish without a drop of Welsh blood. And even at the end of a tennis summer, he was not as dark as his longfar agoway African ancestors. In fact, dark-brown was his hair rather than black. More disturbing was it to confirm that his teeth were not as straight, as large, as white as those of the man in the Army uniform. From whence where had come those teeth? From an ancestor who could not metabolize minerals properly? Certainly, his teeth had not come from his father, but from someplace had they likely come.

Saddened by the burdens laid upon his shoulders by the past over which he had no control, Parnell wandered back to look at the third of the paintings. It was a portrait of a black man looking slightly to his right. A well-hardened thirty was the fellow. His eyes were too sad to belong to a mortal creature. The corners of the man's mouth were a tangle of creases – perhaps once he had grinned his way through great suffering masses. The poet... Was it truly the poet? What had happened to the mischievous grin and the boyishly smooth face? This Dylan Shagari, so different from the one who had helped to hunt that leopard, bore an ugly scar on his cheek as if a spear, or at least an arrow, had entered there, to be torn out rather cruelly. His face was slightly concave on that side as if he had lost teeth and even part of his jaw. He was dressed in a tuxedo with a red cummerbund.

The background was out of focus.

Parnell pulled the picture out and leaned it against another wall near some old furniture. He struggled with an old gold-velvet couch for several minutes before managing to position it directly facing the portrait. Sitting down and having established a conversational position with the man, Parnell asked himself if the sad man was truly the one who had found so much joy in the arms and between the legs of so many women so well-disciplined in the art of aggressive responsiveness. The painting was not quite right.

The background was out of focus.

His mother found him there when he failed to show up for lunch. Surprised he was that she had torn herself from the company of morbid adults, but the evidence was clear. She stood quietly by the side of the couch and

even brushed Parnell's hair to the side with her right hand.

After a few minutes, Parnell asked, "Is that what Dylan Shagari really looked like?"

Mrs. Lopez drew back slightly so that her hand hovered in contact with her son's hair but not the flesh of his scalp. "What makes you think that's Dylan Shagari?"

"His eyes. They're so much different from the way I thought they'd look."

Hesitantly, Grace Llewellyn Lopez put her hand back on her son's head and tossed his hair to the side. Neither of them spoke as they looked at the portrait.

The background was out of focus.

Parnell left the portrait leaning against that wall and cultivated the habit of going up to sit and commune in silence with his exotic cousin. Typically, he went up a few times a week but more often if he felt sad. He would sit and wonder if it was the women who had taken the joy out of Dylan Shagari or if it was something else. "Perhaps," the intelligent and confused young man wondered, "he developed calluses against the constant irritation of pleasure?" That seemed not likely, and Parnell dropped that line of speculation.

Eventually, it came to him. His mother had not really known what Dylan Shagari had looked like, at least near his death. "Maybe," something deep inside his brain suggested, "she pictured him so worn-out and so sad to protect the feelings of women who so valued decency?" That seemed a bit more possible but Parnell had always considered his mother to be honest to a fault. If she had painted lyingly, it must have been unconsciously. Or not?

The background was out of focus.

Needing answers, Parnell Lopez went looking for his grandfather, once a mighty man of modern times, James Llewellyn. Aging rapidly and even seeming to shrink before Parnell's eyes, he was still the beloved and wise grandfather. Concentrated his intelligence. Wide his knowledge. Deeper his knowledge than that of the poet. Though perhaps not as wide. But...

There were no signs of his grandfather's presence in the house and the tracks of his former presence were quite cold. Parnell persevered. He checked first by the boat dock, for his grandfather had muttered something about draining some motors for winter storage. There was no James Llewellyn to be found and the motors yet sloshed with oils and gas. Parnell

turned for the quarter-mile climb back up the hill.

A journey around the large house and through the rose garden near the east wing entrance showed no signs whatsoever that James Llewellyn had been about since planting the roses. All had been in the ground for at least three years.

With no James Llewellyn to be found, Parnell turned for the long hike to the croquet yard and the tennis court on the far side of the west wing.

As Parnell came around the small shed which was used to store lawn equipment and tennis rackets, he saw a figure outlined against the sky and looking older than a man had a right to be. James Llewellyn stood on a ridge a hundred yards from the house. He was staring into the distance. Parnell stood quietly by, not sure why his grandfather was still so sad and wondering if it had anything to do with the sad eyes of the Dylan Shagari in the portrait. The young man thought softly, refusing to let the schematics and charts reach the screens in the back regions of his brain. He watched an old man trying to will himself to be one with the Earth and afraid that his wish would come true all too soon.

Many heartbeats passed before James Llewellyn turned stiffly and forced a smile in Parnell's direction. The old man's eyes were sad, as sad as those of the poet in the portrait. It was as if James Llewellyn had brought as much destruction into the world as his nephew the poet. Parnell thought that quite unlikely. He had experienced the inner damage wrought by the thoughts of the poet and by mere images of the person of Dylan Shagari. While still wondering what separated a man and his thoughts, Parnell smiled crookedly and, having gathered his courage, asked, "Why does Dylan Shagari look so sad in the picture Mom painted of him?"

The old man closed his eyes and winced as if in great pain. Parnell stammered, "I'm sorry," several times while wishing he could take the question back. When there was no response, he half-stepped towards his grandfather, eventually reaching him to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. For the first time, Parnell realized he was only an inch or so shorter than this man who had always seemed like a giant.

Dylan Shagari was not mentioned again that day. Instead, James Llewellyn instructed his grandson in the darker magic of cryptography and the physical aspects of computer security. Near midnight, he left Parnell in the midst of piles of books – computer security manuals, mathematical treatises on various sorts of codes, primers on number theory with an emphasis on modular arithmetic and random numbers. The information was processed

and dropped deeply into largely accessible regions of Parnell's brain.

Near three o'clock, Parnell was swimming in modular views of the number system which reduced all numbers to points on a tree quite beautiful but only when it was constructed perfectly. With such an object, the smallest of imperfections uglified everything.

Influenced by some of his grandfather's talks on neurobiology and the philosophy of the mind, Parnell was himself wondering if all his mental events were brain events. It seemed as if those beautiful trees hovered over him rather than being inside of him. Maybe not. Were they merely inside the confines of his skull? Was that true of all mathematics and physics and chemistry and poetry? Was it true of his mother's love for him? Did he merely imagine a love eternal? Was such no more than illusion created for reasons quite useful, though in a selective manner? Were her actions heavily interpreted by a self-deceptive bundle of selfish genes which created certain brain events and forced certain hormonal flows? In Parnell or in his mother?

What was the proper question in this entire mess of truths distorted by perverse needs to avoid purpose and morality? Avoidance had been quite incomplete when came Dylan Shagari to protect good men and better women from themselves. The truths of science, though embodied as linguistically inadequate lies, were spotlighted in that mountain of 16,413 words generously left by the poet.

The background was out of focus.

Still...

Parnell's brain was beginning to internalize the problem. He had never realized that it was so difficult to speak the truth. Blueprints of space stations and the field equations of general relativity had always seemed so straightforward to him. At least from the time he first gave up on silly books about talking animals and boys and girls with stunted vocabularies. Those poor children in those books. His grandfather had told him the normal six year-old child had a vocabulary of 10,000 words or more, but Dick and Jane had a vocabulary sized more appropriately for a well-trained dog. It had always bothered Parnell that the school system had used so many books making fun of children who seemed retarded.

But, to be honest, Parnell had almost renounced his decision to study science when it took the five year-old nearly four months to teach himself differential geometry and tensor calculus. After that, relativistic physics had fallen out naturally, as it had never done with the poet, and Parnell

had never looked back. As a matter of speaking, that is. He did re-member things. He did re-view events. And...

Not to worry.

Dylan Shagari had other tricks up his pant legs.

The poet had smiled as he saw the scientists squirm clockwise while saying the only truths were those leading to reproductive success. They squirmed in negative ways while claiming men should nevertheless act as if something falsely moral was true.

There was the beginning of a hint, just the slightest show of only one clue, yes, there was a ray of darkness penetrating the blinding light. No longer caring what happened in a purposeless world, the poet, or perhaps his ghost that was not, saw a glimmer of useful confusion coming to the foreground of that torrent of words he had so parsimoniously dished out.

Just as the sun was breaking the horizon, Parnell decided that brain and mind were categories imposed on a complex mental environment by a people better suited to simple abstractions than to complex facts. Pleased with himself – truth to tell, Parnell was not well-practiced in the art of formulating verbal abstractions – the teenaged man returned to the mysteries of secured communications lines though it was not long before he had concluded this was a useless effort. Then again, he had never known the purpose behind this night of study in the first place.

Still...

Whatever one man could do, another could undo, but the time and effort required to study a particular technology and find its weaknesses might be immense. Especially for one man. After all, it had taken Parnell months to understand the mature and pedagogically smoothed versions of Einstein's theory of general relativity. If he...

Parnell had his doubts he could do what his grandfather expected of him. He had not the computers and communications systems to play around with. Experimentation was as necessary in applied science as it was in the theory of numbers and even in the theory of suspended quantum states. He, merely and humbly a teenaged fan of quantum logic and black holes, was not capable of doing what his grandfather seemed to expect. He had not the talent of hacking, at least not at a developed level.

Then again, there was that self-educated mathematician from the sticks of Bharat. It was he who had discovered the meta-process by which the number line could be entered at a factually arbitrary point. If not for that, computer security would have been a mere matter of physical barriers by

the early 2000s.

So...

Could a man transcend the poverty of his environment or not? Did a lack of a well-structured environment even free a man for thoughts which he would have known to be impossible if he had been trained in the finest of universities or the most elite of research centers?

Truly was it brain-boggling.

One man, isolated, perhaps necessarily so, from the great accomplishments of modern mathematics, had remained ignorant of that entire way of thought. He never had to reject inadequate answers because he never knew the outmoded questions.

Like nothing else in Tennessee, limitations gave of neither their content nor things which were not.

In one of the books written by Parnell's grandmother, she had noted that the real miracle of a Vincent Van Gogh or a Pierre Duhem was that they had somehow retained the flexibility of brain connections into their adulthood to see things to which others were blind. She had written: "There are few things sadder than a person habituated to live in a world which does not exist, yet we are all a variation on that person. It was and ever would be impossible that there could be those who would see even one important thing denied by non-appearance during the periods in which brain connections were forming, yet our history is full of such aggressive and often obnoxious men."

Parnell returned to his work, not sure why his grandfather wanted him to learn cryptography theory and number theory and the best points for physically penetrating a computer or communications system. Yet, his instructions had been quite clear and quite specific.

Several days later, James Llewellyn was summoned to Washington to help on some sort of secret project. Washington had been largely unscathed. In fact, six out of every ten major population centers in the United States had survived with relatively little harm; Mexico had done nearly as well; Canada had done better. Since they had rarely bothered to pick fights with anyone but each other or sometimes small bands of primitive hunting peoples, the South American countries had received little in the way of missiles. The first North American Alliance was formed while Parnell's grandfather was in Washington. Though the Indians and Koreans were rebuilding fast, stripping many other countries of resources and educated people, North America was pretty much the only intact superpower in the

world.

Europe had suffered little from the atoms but once again was being engulfed by huge disorganized mobs from Asia and North Africa. The Atlas Mountains and the Sahara Desert which had protected tropical Africa from the civilizing influences of pagan and Christian Rome were now working to prevent fresh blood from flowing north. The Bantus and Zulus and Masai turned upon each other, finally having the capability to wage continent-wide war to the great displeasure of people poor and peaceful. All the signs were present for the birth of new and glorious civilizations, though the inhabitants of the old ones were not rejoicing overly much while losing everything they thought was theirs by natural right.

There had been damage to many spots in North America. It would have been unrealistic to have expected otherwise. With Provincetown sitting isolated in the Atlantic Ocean and the remainder of Cape Cod wiped out all the way back to Hyannis, Boston was more directly exposed to ocean weather than was good for a major city. Sure enough, the wealth and power transferred quickly to Providence. People in Brownsville and Houston were giving up the ghost of their hope. They waded or rowed to shore and set off to find higher ground. Yet, all in all, even with famine and epidemics moving across North America, the continent was pretty much intact and well worth defending. More to the point, the peoples of the continent could still afford to defend themselves.

James Llewellyn did not return to his daughter and his grandson for nearly a year. By then, the troops of the Kingdom of Bharat had completed their march through southeast Asia and had occupied Hong Kong and Taiwan from the sea. The Koreans moved south, forcing the Indians to withdraw back to Hanoi. Defense lines were drawn along the Red River. From Pusan, the Koreans controlled the largest land empire the world had seen since the fall of Stalinist Russia, nearly forty years after his death.

During his grandfather's absence, Parnell had kept busy though not by way of televised amplification of catastrophes. He considered it more than sufficient to watch the Saturday evening summaries of how the new world was shaping up.

More to the point were the words of the poet, ever the man to see into the future, though as a prophet and not as a seer.

As Parnell pored over small volumes of poetry and much larger journals, Dylan Shagari spoke of war, famine, pestilence, and many a dazed beast suffering from ennui and loss of esteem in a world one-fourth covered in

asphalt and concrete.

It seemed to Parnell that the poet had played fast and loose with the original text, but he sympathized with the declawed lions, the encaged tigers, and the bacteria selected into muchly more virulent and unstable forms by the population density and mass transportation systems of the modern world.

Yet...

It seemed that religion and not science was at issue in this part of the argument, and the befrazzled young man wondered if the Bible could ever be the same if those like Dylan Shagari continued to force it to speak in modern languages.

But hundreds of millions were dying. Many cities were rubble or even craters which glowed under the starry, starry skies. War had come, followed by famine and pestilence. Were the bored and enzooed tigers about to be unleashed?

Perhaps, but such matters were of little interest when the world contained far more schematics and far more good books than he could ever absorb. Astrophysics, molecular biology, fractal theory – it was all so much more interesting than those meaningless figures pronounced so ominously by the newscasters and government spokesmen. Two billion dead people was not nearly so easy to grasp as was infinity.

Parnell longed for his grandfather to return. Without a doubt and quite unlike the conquering Koreans, he could have been much happier with a different state of world affairs. He would have been quite beside himself if anything had happened to bring his grandfather home. While wandering about the house trying to picture the structure of spacetime, Parnell found his grandmother's books, all of them, the ones she had written or contributed to and the ones she had most valued. As a way of unwinding from the gravity of his general situation, Parnell took to muchly deeper readings composed of largely ill-formed samplings from the brain sciences. Puddles of organic substances flowed through and about his brain.

Yes, it was the stuff of great amusement, muchly recreational in its nature. A man sitting at a desk all day would enjoy an hour of digging in the dirt, another driving a harvester for ten hours or eleven would sit and read. It was harder to see, yet the principle was the same. Actually, it was a bit silly but true. After a hard morning of trying to picture a soliton whipping its way through space, Parnell would amuse himself with tales of reproduction, fables most neuronal, and even poetry most elegant on the

topic of differences mostly sublime. Morgan Llewellyn had accumulated a substantial collection of works on the sexual dimorphism of the human neurological system. Parnell did not think that was her specialty but he wondered if she needed especially deep knowledge of men to deal with her husband and her nephew.

And what knowledge it was. The scientifically motivated songs of sex-related differences in brain and senses were musically sphere-like. It was a kaleidoscope of perspectives and opinions. At times, Parnell expected to turn the pages and find blood on the next, but some sort of decorum was always maintained and science moved forward, not always rapidly and not even always in the proper direction, but like the mobbish events within a neuronal mass, improper growths soon enough died.

It was poetry of sorts. The terms most scientific came spinning up from the pages. The rhythms and the consonance would have certainly been better with a little input from Dylan Shagari in his post-pre-poet stage, yet those whirling dervishes of human thought in formation spoke powerfully of man embodied and woman embodied. There was little of the androgynous except for mutilated laboratory rats and a few sad cases where human chromosomes and hormones had gone awry. There were sex hormones aplenty, estradiols and testosterone and progesterone and the cortisones. The mind of a reader was confused as females most feminized became more aggressively female with the injection of hormones most masculine. Masculine? Or just aggressive? Could the line be clearly drawn in man most wise?

Alas, though that might have seemed terribly upsetting to settled opinions, related matters shocked even much more.

Parnell learned never to mess with a woman pregnant or nursing – those pregnancy hormones did not lead to lady-like behavior. Even the poet had trouble beautifying a raging bitch. Even the most god-like tantrum of Alexander would have paled in comparison.

Yet...

The hypothalamus of males grew to quite nasty proportions.

“Why,” wondered the young man, “did the emotional centers of the human brain grow at least as much as the regions of abstract thought.” He realized that if man was capable of complex and rational thoughts beyond the capacity of any imaginable chimp, he was also capable of complex and labyrinthine emotions beyond the capacity of that unrealizable chimp.

The hypothalamus of males grew to still nastier proportions.

The prudish ghost inhabiting that brain nuclei would say, “No, no, no, it

is not right for you to mount woman same more than once too soon. Different woman quite okay. Just give me 20 minutes to recharge my batteries.” Such knowledge resonated with some otherwise meaningless faloodling in Dylan Shagari’s poetry. And his life. Yet, the biologists had named it the Coolidge Effect rather than the Shagari Insight. Knowing little of politics and history, Parnell was not sure why such an important scientific fact should have been named after a mere President of the United States; he had only been able to assume that Coolidge must have had a reputation as being one hell of a good man in bed.

Shagari.

Coolidge.

Did Dylan Shagari know of the Coolidge Effect? Could he have been driven to his championship-level sexual athletics by competition with Calvin Coolidge? Did the poet wish to make the world forget how many different women the President must have serviced throughout the world?

The background was fuzzy.

The male hypothalamus was reaching monstrous proportions. Or at least proportions guaranteed to produce the occasional monster.

Nevertheless. . .

Dylan Shagari deserved better than to be a mere footnote to a President. He had tasted of delicacies most pheromonic. He had scattered his seed in crevices sterile least and fertile most across continents about five in an ishy manner of speaking. Categories were always in doubt – even before a poet began to babble. Was Peking a sister city to Paris? It would not be if Bharat managed to plow through to the North Pole, but that still did not tell the poet if California was distinct from the rest of North America.

It was easier to deal with the southernmost land, though there was no data indicating Dylan Shagari ever did anything of the sort. If any unrecorded liaisons of an icy sort had been consummated, he was not to be blamed as the aggressor. He had never so much as approached that land so inhospitable.

More data of a less confusing sort were also to be found in those tomes of scientific thought, speculative and empirical and intertwined. A half-assed speculation or more were also present, though muted in the interests of the scientific method.

“Was it possible,” asked a non-conforming scientist or three, “that millions of years of selection over two halves playing different roles had embedded some of the selected differences deeply inside?”

A lonely teenaged boy thought so. No longer was he lonely for just good male companionship. Nor did evenings in front of the fire with his mother quite satisfy him.

Embodied, Parnell ached for the touch of gentle fingers warning of the approach of tongue and lips. Teeth? The young man shuddered as he thought of the teeth that could maim, but...

If she smiled, all well would be.

Trust was so important in the deepest of human matters.

The poet half-Welsh and half-Nigerian, and perhaps 100% African, had trusted many a smile, many a pair of eyes pleading for domination most firm and most respectful.

Were those millions of years of selection sufficient to establish criteria for one sex or even two? Too deeply to be changed over periods much shorter? Dylan Shagari's aunt stated such was the case in one of her articles. But the poet questioned if the time had been sufficient. Malaysians and Nigerians had diverged from the ancestors they shared with Ostrogoths a mere 70,000 years prior. Maybe. In reply, and Dylan Shagari had noted this in his efforts to be fair, some scientists had thundered forth, "Maybe not!" Inspired, the poet had written a poem mistitled *Scientific Discourse*:

YES!
NO!
YES!
NO!

Though conveying a certain poorly advertised truth, that poem was not one of his better efforts. He had recorded it in his journal, in an entry dated February 7, 2000, but it did not appear in the official versions of his poetry. Sad as it might have been, it was among the 142 he destroyed in their manuscript form, wasting nearly half a bottle of Scotch whiskey in the process. In a deeply-lived tribute to experimental science, he learned from that experience and made few such mistakes during the remainder of his short life.

Science moved forward, though, to be sure, the background was fuzzy. But it got worse.

The hypothetical selections at the molecular level encapsulated in that hypothetical macro-process which may have occurred in one form or another over a period of time longer or shorter – Parnell caught his breath – told

a tale shocking, pornographic, explicit, and honest, except when it was not even close to the truth.

The penis of the human male was far too large by rational standards; the testicles greedy for scarce resources. A rational economist would have designed a better reproductive system. So it said in one the articles. Parnell thought it might have been a joke, but he knew nothing about economics, so he let it pass.

What bothered the young man was the implication in the writings of some, though not his grandmother, that Eve had been a slut. The mother of all men deserved a minimal amount of respect, whatever her gullibility in the face of natural temptations.

Nevertheless, the biological facts were scandalous quitey.

The chimpanzee male was perhaps seven stone and ten. Man most wise a stone more or more. The silverbacked great ape hit twenty stone and gobbled morely.

A three inch penis, six, and one. Testicles the size of a stud bull's, the size well-known, and the size of grapes sun-ripened.

Parnell wondered if the chimpanzee male realized he was unbalanced. Capable of impregnating a planet full of chimp females before next Tuesday, he had emphasized pump and not hose. Cheetah would not have impressed muchly in the typical bestial porno flick. Scrunched of face, Parnell, who had once seen a couple of porno movies, human actors only – with his cousin Raul, wondered why someone would want to watch such stuff. Once was more than enough for him, but Raul had assured him worse movies there were. Even movies where they killed the actors at the end. The fragmented young man so comfortable with complex field equations decided he preferred quiet nights with Hong Kong call-girls. Not that he had ever. . .

If anyone were really interested, chimps really could be good performers in porno shows of all kinds. True, they did not have huge penises, and they tended to stick to one position, though pygmy chimps, more horny than the other kind, did engage in fellatio. Still, the scientists made claims that could not be denied short of a huge number of contradictory observations in the field. The chimp female, estrus-enslaved, could spread her legs sixty times a day for twelve devoted lovers or more. Though, unclear what it meant, Parnell knew that whorehouses had never been short of workers. There were women sold into slavery by their parents, others enslaved by pimps befriending them in moments of need, perhaps some who voluntarily entered such a life to feed their children. Then, there were those who enjoyed the

good life of penthouse apartments overlooking Central Park or Hong Kong's harbor. And maybe, some women just felt perverse; prostitution was one of the better avenues for perversion open to women; men had far more opportunities.

Humans were so complicated.

Not had been the Dracos. Gorilla females were loyal and faithful to a fault. Gorilla males were lowly sexed and even quite peaceful so long as their harem and nursery were not threatened. Alpha and Xidra had not even known what they were missing.

Placing forefinger to mouth, Parnell tried to bring to consciousness a thought flickering about the back of his mind. It was disturbing him, preventing him from concentrating on other matters. He rose and walked to the window behind his grandfather's desk. Distracted by the blues and greens and purples of the mountains, the grues and grurples could not be seen in a snapshot, Parnell saw the light within 93 million miles, though it had seemed only a few minutes to him.

But. . .

To return to the track of his thoughts – chimps and gorillas had selfish genes of a much higher rationality than those of human beings. They had retained better control over their slaves. Chuckling, Parnell remembered a Shagari verse in which a man was flabbergasted by the realization that his opponents had managed to ask a question which had to be answered but made no sense unless stated in their terms and within the framework of their thought. At least, Parnell thought that was what the poem was about. Truth to tell it was some complex and complicated situation compressed into 86 words only tenuously connected one to the other and all trying to fly away from the syntactical foundation of the poem, such as it was.

Though Albert Schweitzer and Florence Nightingale had once plied altruistic trades upon the Earth, it was hard to deny the nasty truth. Even with all the red-inked comments and simple denials contained in the margins of so many of his grandmother's books, the sheer weight of evidence counted for something. It was hard to argue that Adam was much more than a big dick. Some biologists, thinking to glorify the woman's role in the situation, had originated the noble theory that it was Eve who had selected the biggest dick by selecting all which rose to the occasion. It was the organ with the greatest fire-power which outdistanced the others and placed the sperm ahead of many competitors struggling towards that ovum. Then again, some of the nasty theories said something completely different.

The poet had left many a booby-trap for those falling into suchly silly ways of thought. He had even suggested at one point that it was unseemly for scientists to compete in theories of sheerly nasty human nature. Well, actually, the poet was little concerned with etiquette, except for learning enough that he might more effectively upset people. Mostly, he questioned those who put forth ever-changing theories demeaning to human beings. In a poem entitled *Last Friday's Exposés*, he noted. . .

Mother Eve was but a slut
 proclaimed the exposé.
 Her adam, much not better, but. . .
 One wife to swap, no tramps to lay.

Retreat not from the best of speculations.
 Oversexed we are without a doubt.
 It must have been many lines of evolution
 that brought us courtin' guys so cute and plowing babes so
 stout.

That would explain the ancient gatherings.
 Danced the Greeks and burned the Vikings,
 not for well-staged poetic blatherings
 but rather hot men displaying to cold bimbo's likings.

To be sure is the man a horny bum, his gal an opportunistic and whorish critter. This is not news, but rather known quite oldly well. It was a noble attempt to shock, and I would not take a single observed gasp of shock from the pleasure of those socially inclined biological creatures. Yet, proclaimed the Preacher, "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it. . . and there is nothing new under the sun." To be sure and with not a quanta of doubt, the dung heap of sociobiological data would fail to surprise that preacherman nor not even the mostly genteel Jane of Austen.

That attached commentary had been one of his few public attempts at proserly, though at 107 words, it was quite a rather ordinary paragraph by some standards.

It was easy to understand the hatred of those who lusted after the poet's power to determine the ways of thought of those yet unborn, though it cannot be said often enough that the poet, faultfully honest, had not the slightest idea what he was talking about. His torments were eased only by the knowledge that selection, natural or otherwise, was a many-headed missile. The truth, or at least sometimes a reasonable facsimile, would be outed by those embedded in contexts far different from any imaginable by any particular poet or even the most peculiar of highly evolved biologists.

Parnell vaguely remembered part of a poet's dream.

Dylan Shagari had roamed across a plain, spouting gibberish and killing things which pleased him muchly. A woman came from the heights and parted lips to show a tongue red and slow. He named her Desire and cursed her beneath his thrusting, ruling loins. She, in turn, cursed him with children, though not with the words which he truly desired.

The background was fuzzy.

The foreground fuzzed a bit as well, and Parnell looked longingly at tales of numbers no more than infinitely complex, no more random than endless words could describe.

Morgan Llewellyn had said it was all so many lies, the truth more prosaic and more complex though she never denied that human beings seemed oversexed for the simple task of reproduction.

The poet considered the lies to be of great esthetic beauty. He tried, with only patchy success, to ignore the uncommon sense of his aunt.

And there was the matter of the Nuclear War and a hell of a lot more struggles for power over recorded history.

How about the unrecorded events prior to the Egyptians and Chaldeans?

The background was out of focus.

Mundane but pleasant aspects of reality intruded upon Parnell's mind when James Llewellyn finally returned, a long, long year after being called away. He found his grandson reading a book entitled *Estimation of the Age of the Universe Under Various Cosmological Assumptions*. The old man felt oddly relieved; the young man seemed quite relaxed. James Llewellyn knew a chance yet remained for one far greater than he had ever dared to be.

8

The deck still smelled of chlorine. It was somewhat annoying, and Lee, being pregnant, had to avoid it, but it made Marie happy to have one part of the house clean. Happy her feet as she moved around, trying to get Jimmy and Alicia to eat decent meals. How did she expect a young lad and his younger sister to sit still to eat when there was a new and strange house to explore? They had heard the tales of the waves on the lake and the bounces on the tennis court. The very air shimmered as if the poet was yet around waiting to see if Jimmy and Alicia could make sense of his poems and his dreams. Dylan Shagari had not been able to do so, but the poet knew that the half-Nigerian and more than half-Welsh man had been too old to grow too many new connections between neurons.

A magnificent hunting lodge it was, and it hinted of a mighty man who had built it. Tales had they heard of James Llewellyn, a man who had built factories the size of Detroit and had been a trusted Adviser to several Presidents of the United States. True, they had little idea how big Detroit was. They had less idea what in the world a President was, and the term 'United States' did not ring a bell. Still, they knew he was an impressive man for the descriptive words were inflected so.

Parnell was sure of that.

Of many other things was he less sure. How? could he keep alive the memory of Morgan Llewellyn, serious scientist and the best of mothers, except maybe for the one she had mothered. Parnell had gathered the first from her publications and her biographies in many a Who's Whom, and his mother had told him the second. Parnell had added the qualification. Though he had never met her, it saddened him to think she would pretty much be relegated to the most minor of footnotes when the histories of the period were written. She, of all people, might have convinced her husband, James Llewellyn, to carry messages of sanity into the councils of defense

preparation.

Most of all...

There was James Llewellyn at the center of all things. He had helped to egg the poet on. He had built hospitals and churches and missile launching systems. He had...

He had left journals in his office, three rooms deep in his library suite. Journals? No, they were Confessions. Tore his heart out and offered it to the reader, did he? did. Doubt there was, but, in the end, the truth of the matter was clear. Each entry was an intimate recording of his most secret thoughts and fears at that moment, though not necessarily at any other moment. Heartrending were those words. As difficult as it was for Parnell to believe, his grandfather had questioned the most honorable prejudices of his culture. He left no assumptions unquestioned as he quested onwards, battling windmills and singing of his love to deformed milk-maids.

Written mostly during the days leading up to the nuclear war which had left nearly four billion people dead...

Said who?

Who could separate the natural deaths from the deaths by war? To be sure, the war had killed nearly one billion people directly. It had destroyed hospitals, neighborhood drugstores, and the roads by which firetrucks and ambulances once traveled. Did that mean the other three billion people died from the effect of the nuclear bombs? Was it not more correct to say they had died as a result of the lack of hospitals, the unavailability of the simplest antibiotic ointments, and the incompetence of those local governments which took years to repair roads? Parnell thought not, but that was a popular argument among those wishing to rebuild the nuclear arsenal.

James Llewellyn would have been upset with such stupidity. He said as much, though not in so many words.

Dreams.

Conversations with a long-dead poet.

Twisted syntax and parsements not quite right.

Defenders of civilization would have been as upset as they had been at the words of the poet himself. Far more upset. The poet had some excuses. Not fully civilized could he have been for he had grown up in Nigeria amongst people not themselves possessing nuclear weaponry and language mavens striving to protect the various Niger-Kodifarian languages from the corruption of non-rhythmic European languages. He had not even

been able to keep himself in good standing at a single major university. It was well known that he visited whore-houses and impregnated loose women of noble morals.

No wonder he had so little respect for the higher moral truths.

But, a successful missionary, engineer, and bureaucrat?

How could such a man justify a rejection of the truths of the age?

Having posed the questions, Parnell turned to retrieve his grandfather's response.

9

With all that had happened, all the suffering and the hope, the victories and the devastating defeat which seemed imminent at the end of his life, the journals indicated that James Llewellyn had never understood the warnings of Dylan Shagari. Even when the poet had been dust for decades, the engineer mostly powerful and mega-hugely successful had continued to believe the world would again be coherent if the thoughts of yesterday were revised in the proper way. The poet knew no better but his instincts told him to articulate babble in the hope that he might accidentally name things actuating themselves out of the virtual.

“Why,” asked Parnell of a passing dust bunny, “did men of good will think James Llewellyn to have been a man straying from the straight and narrow path of death? He recorded the poet’s criticisms but gave no indication that he accepted those words of inchoate wisdom.”

There it was in an entry dated October 1, 2023, five days before the missiles were launched.

Men are not equipped by nature to see entire populations of worlds which might be.

Few indeed are those who could see so much as one thing which had not yet embodied itself.

The human visual cortex, as much as that of *ursus* quite grizzly, is prepared to see things which might appear in the natural world of hunters and gatherers. Not else muchly measurable.

People all over the world classify trees and the other things of nature in ways frighteningly similar, in a manner arguing against the possibility of saying much that could be truly creative or even unique in a trivial way. Linnaeus had not really outperformed, or even differently performed, the average rain forest inhabitant in that.

There can be no possibility of seeing mechanical devices or works of philosophy in their true light short of the million years or so which will be necessary to explicitly embed the possibilities of civilization in chromosomes and in the other materials of the ovum.

Despair filled the insides of Parnell as he realized that scientific thought lay beyond the capacity of a superstitious people not given to reason nor the checking of facts. Yet, he had to laugh at an entry made three days later.

The moonscape is nearly enough to fry the circuits of the average human brain, except for those seeing merely a variation on the surface of the Earth.

Men can live without excessive fear or anxiety in the modern world so long as they simply accept automobiles as being natural things.

A Corvette is merely an Arabian stallion which happens to belch forth nitric poisons.

Against Man have blasphemies been committed, yet it is true: Natural things not expected by the brains of Homo Erectus are beyond the visual and cognitive capacity of Homo Sapiens, even those things created by those creatures who had dared to name themselves wisely wise. The brain connections and the flows of neurotransmitters and electrons have to be jury-rigged in a manner quite shaky. Men have made themselves, partly, something which they are not.

The background was out of focus.

The foreground was not particularly clear either.

All things considered, Parnell was a bit confused by the innermost thoughts of his grandfather. They seemed more Shagari-like than Llewellyn-like. It was as if the two men shared more than the expected 25% of their genes. As if the other 75% were more alike than might have been thought.

Though no more dust bunnies rolled by to converse with him, Parnell asked, "Do people differ mostly in superficial, non-substantial ways? Then what is the source of our eccentric personalities? Though, to be sure, not all of us have such."

Not sure what the answers were, the seeker returned to his grandfather's journals. The day the missiles were launched, apparently while he was in the plane out to Spokane, James Llewellyn had dwelled once again on the mystery that had been a faloodling' man.

That was the problem seen by Dylan Shagari. By way of readings wide but shallow, he had seen what the great scientists themselves had not seen. It was amazing and paradoxical. It could not have been and yet it was.

The poet had concepted that he was blind to the world as seen through the instruments and the mathematical formalisms of science. Seeing what was invisible to his eyes, desiring to speak that for which he had no words and not a single logical mechanism adequate to the task, the man half-Nigerian and half-Welsh had babbled succinctly. He had spoken words he did not know, had created metaphors which ignited no sparks in his own brain, and he had hoped those to be the raw tools necessary to the task of embedding men once more in the world to which they were not born. The truth was far more frightening – the world was being born about its citizens.

On a hill in Tennessee, something encased in chrome and plastic, something beyond the control of a people who had not wanted to bother, was giving of many a bush of fantastical shape, though bird-like creatures willing to be the slaves of men lay still in the future.

Though hardened against the unseeable and the unsayable, James Llewellyn had strived to hear the words of his beloved nephew. Considering how poorly he had understood the poet, he had written a few words which spoke of things, and some of those sentence-like structures may not have been completely wrong, though no one yet knew how to determine if a thing was true.

So it came to be that the poems and dreams of Dylan Shagari yet lived, however ghostly, in the mind of his uncle. The words had been set to paper, the dreams had ended and had been told once and for all, and yet none of this yet had any meaning. The context which would define the poet's success or failure was not yet actualized, though the world of the hunters and gatherers had passed away. That world had passed away and man had sinfully and hopefully fallen into a world to which his biological substrate was not yet proper, a world in which he was not adequate to the simple task of being a decent creature.

Parnell was amazed at his grandfather's ability to put so much into a few exegetable words. It was as if he had assumed a pile or two of meanings and relationships on the part of any readers, though it was not clear he ever wished any other person to read these journals, these records of his deepest feelings of guilt as a nuclear war approached.

Still . . .

Parnell knew his grandfather had been right in all those meanings he had clearly built into his few words.

Truly . . .

Men selected for their ability to hunt mastodons, or at least rats, and to

compete for the eggs of promiscuous ape-women suddenly found that they had created a world in which there were moon-landers but no cave-bears, there were moral demands and only women stripped quite cruelly of their estrus periods. Not that women had ever been the aggressively submissive sluts envisioned by feminist Darwinists, yet, in the absence of facts, even poets and engineers spoke gibberish not likely to be selected as true in any conceivable context.

Parnell caught a hint that his grandfather was forced to think thoughts he would have avoided, if possible.

Being an honest man, James Llewellyn could not turn away from that which threatened men's wise opinions of themselves and their race. Against the wills of decent men, the words and dreams embodied themselves tentatively and variously, seeking the context in which they would be seen for what they were, whatever the hell that was.

Parnell had been wrong!

Or at least far from right.

There it was. An entry dated October 7, 2023, the day after the missiles had gone off. His grandfather had not just remained in front of the television, watching the death figures soar. He had recorded his feelings only hours after watching the fires of hell being carried to people, innocent and guilty. By the systems he had designed, helped to build, and then had managed for a while.

Dawn has not yet come upon me, though it has already passed over a thousand cities burned to puddles of slag and littered with hundreds of millions of corpses. It is quiet. Peaceful. How can I sit here in the midst of a wilderness barely touched by man's dozers and shovels when I have helped to bring so much pain and destruction down upon the Children of Christ?

Once again did I fade into a dream-world as I sat in my penitential chair. As best I can remember, the dream, far from fully visual, went as follows:

Speaking in the tropical rhythms of Ibo, the language of a people hardened against the poet's tribe, a ghostly voice chanted,

it sang.

it babbled.

and finally I could hear the words,
 “people was and so they said.”

The words made no sense. They were not poetry. They were not statements of fact. They could not be parsed and then reassembled into a well-defined image.

Truly did I begin to long for the lilting gush of a Welsh tale, but the poet was relentless, and he further warned, “Babble they bled into dense, layered air.”

Wondering if Broca articulated empty-minded or whether Wernicke provided semantic content, I chanted, haltingly and struggling for breath with nearly every word, “The dead was dead, the new still in the womb.” Encouraged by a smile, I, though an engineer, wished to inject some scientific content into my conversation with my nephew long dead. With a bit more confidence, a character more sharply etched, I sang did I, and truly I did sang, “Crestfallen, forlorn, they’d seen the end, quite gred. Gredeen starts when cones and stuff mutate.”

Suddenly dropping to his knees, the dusky-skinned young man smiled and prophesied, “Realizing newly a half-born state, bedropped a departed genius to crawl. But you must cry, mon oncle, mon lecteur. In the end, it matters not, not at’all. Newness is, not a reason to celebrate.”

“What means this?” asked the oncle who was I.

Standing, he smiled a reply, “Is it not obvious it cannot be as it is seen?”

“Do you proclaim yourself to be a genius? Greater men than us have floundered on such claims.”

“At an earlier stage of man’s efforts to create a world to which he is not suited, one man of cloudy thoughts proclaimed his genius by advertising his ignorance. I up the ante by claiming I can’t even see the world, yet alone understand it. That alone suffices to make me the outstanding thinker of modern times.”

“You jest.”

“But of course. I jest, not even knowing the punchline. Yet, I am innocent for all that. I merely stole the jokes from comics better rewarded than I.”

“You were badly damaged, stretched beyond endurance by the obligations of an embodied creature.”

“Some of those obligations bore their own joy. Some I took on willingly.”

“Which doesn’t tell me why I age in such a frightful way.”

“We have already spoken of that. Someday, someone might understand the trash we spoke. Though I understood not even my own words, I still speculated, and it be a favorite thought of mine that the context will eventually reveal the meaning of your words and mine.”

I stared vacantly into the unseen fullness being birthed for all the manly and womanly strength exerted to plug the exits of the womb. I knew that I was one who had pushed myself to the limit to prevent that new world from coming to be. And, yet, it was pointless to think such things. Rather than trying to escape the past, it seemed somehow more productive to strive to avoid the future. And, so, I turned my gaze to a ghost of a young man caught most cruelly between self-contradictory worlds.

Drawing upon my wisdom and my accumulation of learning, I suggested, “It seems to me, nephew, to be little more than the meditations of a desert Father on the execrable possibilities of selection theories.”

“We exert ourselves muchly to prove it be impossible to produce a thought, nearly impossible to speak, and moderately easy to say too many conflicting things about the world which shelters and forms our bodies. We strive to stand independently of all that, but such is the petulance of a child refused the breast. For all that, we need what we cannot have for ages to come.”

Against such an argument, I could say nothing in response but, “You look so young. Were you that young when you died?”

“I was a procreator of poems and children. By official count, I left seven of one and seventy-seven of the other.”

Suddenly feeling an old man, I laughed heartily before asking, “Which was seven and which seventy-seven?”

The poet so youthful in his eternal death grinned and said, “It matters little. They both aged me greatly.”

“And the women?”

“Were the most Darwinian of all my experiences. They lusted after me and longed to suffer my indifference to them beyond the charms of a night. They selected from the possibilities I reluctantly presented to them. And, so, they bred seven more who could carry the chromosomes granting the possibility of such freedom.”

“And so it was the children who were seven in number?”

“Not necessarily. My poetry came also from my copulatory excesses.” Letting his grin fade to a slight, self-mocking smile, the young man who had never been to Ohio added, in his French accent, “Yet, you were right. As Homer imposed mythology and a sense of peoplehood on a mass of barbarians, so must we do the similar for a people quite superstitious.”

“You speak too much like me at times, Dylan.”

“You hear me with your ears and not mine, Uncle James. Nevertheless, I accept the compliment.” The youth bowed gracefully before speaking again. “And so, the next great poet will write of urns to distract his readers. The devious bastard will actually be forming a meta-language to speak of waves which be not particles and of particles which be not waves and each head of the monsters produced by the great thinkers

of science will exclude the others from being too much like unto itself.”

The background was fuzzy.

Parnell remembered the time he had found his grandfather in the attic, sitting on the old couch and staring at the portrait of the man who carried the scars upon his face. From where had those scars come if not from the children and a few poems and an excessive response of women.

After a few minutes, the teenager asked, “How did Dylan Shagari die?”

“He wrote one poem too many.” A catch was in the old man’s throat as he added, “He penetrated one feminine mystery too many. A child was, by himself, too many. Yes, my dear grandson, those women and the children they bore, carried too many conflicting and competing possibilities.”

Not sure what that meant, Parnell sat back and closed his eyes to let his brain’s eye recreate the design for the 20 man version of the Powell Mark III heavy missile interceptor. Unlike most such efforts, this produced not just schematics but also the image of the huge tracked vehicle climbing over the rubble which seemed to have once been a city. The young man was not sure why the crew seemed to be positioning the interceptor to protect the rubble from further damage. The piles of bricks and steel beams, from which an occasional arm emerged, did not seem to be worth much effort. Parnell wondered why the soldiers did not move their vehicle to protect some place where it was possible to build anew.

He had excluded such imponderables from his considerations and was reviewing the schematic for the weapons officer’s control console when his grandfather tapped him on the forearm. The young man followed his elder down the stairs and into the house where they entered the office-library suite on the first floor. James Llewellyn took a stand in the midst of the first room of his library and threw out his arm in a manner quite melodramatic. He pointed at various spots, though all the walls were uniformly fronted by shelves and books.

The names told much of the quality and the substance of those piles of paper bound together quite firmly. Thin wooden planks strained under the thoughts of Planck and Duhem, de Broglie and Schrodinger, Tarksi and Gdel, Church and Turing, Chomsky and Jerne, Sperry and Eccles, Changeux and Edelman. There were encyclopedias and bound journals to strain the shelves of which much was expected. There were atlases of the brain and of the Earth and even atlases of planets upon which the

feet of men had never trod. Star charts occupied space not far from a many-volumed edition of the works of Nietzsche. Field guides to the game animals of North America quite implausibly sat next to reference works on the predators of Africa.

After scanning his immediate environment, Parnell looked back at his grandfather who had remained silent. In fact, the old man stood, eyes shut, with his right hand pointing more deeply into the multi-room library. Letting his eyes drift slowly in that direction, Parnell caught sight of a textbook written by his grandmother: *Restoration of Stable Brain Functions by Re-establishment of Chaotic Base-lines*. Wondering how similar it might be to the use of chaos in boosting energy levels in lasers, the young man was about to grab the book from the shelf when he felt his grandfather's hand gently upon his shoulders.

"Not now, Parnell. It is time for poetry and meta-science. The dirty little details of science will have to wait quietly for another day."

Looking about at the library which was dusted, vacuumed, and washed thoroughly every other Thursday by Mrs. Alvarez, Parnell wondered, "Where is the dirt?" Those were clean books, inside and out. No dust, no dirt, only pure white pages covered with pristine and sharply-formed images of letters and numbers and schematics and algebraic symbols.

Being a trusting young fellow, especially where his grandfather was concerned, Parnell followed the retreating figure into the inner office. James Llewellyn went to the sitting area and took possession of his leather armchair. The young man sat in the canvas chair draped with the skin of a zebra that was not a zebra but rather a horse. He reached down to be sure the book was still there – Harvey and Penwald's *Atlas of the Human Reproductive Systems*. It lay quiet and not moving, and Parnell sat back and waited for his grandfather to talk.

Of a sudden, the guilt-ridden young man noticed his grandfather was staring at him.

"What will you do, Parnell, when they come to get you?"

The young man weakly suggested, "Go with them?"

A man bent under the weight of the problems he had helped to aggravate smiled at the silliness of his question and not at the confusion of the querying response.

"They have lost, Parnell, as they always have, but before they fall they will kill many persons, in a assortment of deaths. They hold the power but they do not understand it. More apish than mannish, they seek to

restore the values of those who spoke little as they roamed the savannas, predator and prey alike. It's not that rulers have always understood the technological and intellectual advances of their time, but someone in public life must – other than the creators themselves for they have ever been and ever will be poor teachers of their own thoughts. We have our popularizers, and some are quite good, but popularized science and technology is often as dangerous as popularized Platonism proved itself to be.

“Entire societies head off in strange ways as superstitions abound, destroying conscious thoughts and even those more solid unconscious thoughts called anger or fear or anxiety. It is possible to teach complex ideas and teach them well. The works of the Talmudists, of Hesiod, Lucretius, and Dante are a test of that. We forget how much Dickens's attacks on industrialization brought those despised concepts within the grasp of young minds. Dostoevsky and Stevenson opened some minds to the possibilities of the brain sciences. Borges and Haverly brought infinity within the reach of any man who could appreciate a tidbit of high-quality human thought, however heretical. Quinnet undid the madness of the radically masculinized ways of human thought glorified by the feminists of the last century. His fictions, set in times far past, made it impossible for the general public to ignore the teachings of evolutionary biologists and Christian saints alike – we carry the weight of the past, of Adam's choices and his ways of life, in our very persons. That genius of biological fiction showed that Pandora was constrained to open the box at one point or another, Eve was driven by biological need to eat that forbidden fruit as was Adam driven to invent the lie. Yet, they had freely chosen their sins.

“It seems that a hundred generations of philosophy and mathematics and poetry has not the power to easily undo 30,000 generations of apish foraging and hunting. That is the curse of man, revealed by Moses and Darwin, each in his peculiar way.”

Parnell could not remember rising from his grandfather's dusty desk, but he found himself in the innermost room of the library, surrounded by some of the greatest literature ever produced by the human race. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was there, along with Dirac's *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*. Chandrasekhar's *The Mathematical Theory of Black Holes* sat next to Ruelle's *Chance and Chaos*.

It was quiet.

The spiders made not a sound.

No bombs exploded, though several books by Wheeler and Landau sat

on the shelves.

As if he were about to suffer a sinus infection, as if his histamine balance was all out of whack, Parnell's skin began to crawl. He could feel the liquids passing from cell to intercellular fluid and back again.

And, yet, it was not a terrible feeling. It made him feel as one with his environment, for . . .

Like nothing else in Tennessee, the background was out of focus.

Yet, and despite the impossibility and sheer silliness of doing so, the poet sang for all those present to hear. "Tyrannosaurus is more like a bird than either likes the distasteful Gila monster."

Chanted he, "Bush might always hide a friendly beaver."

Garbled he a life that he might exercise some control over the minds of the grandchildren of others. His own grandchildren might well carry trillions of copies of a code for poetic possibilities. Might they even be among those lucky people who carried the genes for linguistic genius?

10

The breeze was just strong enough to move a chunk of Alicia's thick and frizzy hair. She put her hand back and, for a reason unknown to Parnell, she moved that chunk of hair farther from her neck. Tossed it she did, like a young woman realizing she is the center of someone's visual attention.

Internally motivated practice?

Or just a response to receiving attention from all the adults telling her she was a pretty girl?

Whatever the case, there would come the day when she would ripple in front of a fascinated young man. Already did her hair turn somewhat greenish from heavily chlorinated pool water. Though blond and green was at issue with Alicia, yet the situation reminded Parnell of a poem he had written on the problem of things historically green, but, for all one knew, futurally blue. 'Grue' had some proposed as a description. Parnell had managed to raise the ante while also weaving in a scientific description of the intertwined nature of space and time.

Green it was until thenthere.

Rippled it blue as blinked the air.

A thousand years blue, then once again green,
raising the question: Not grue but gleen?

He had not named the ditty yet, though he had considered *A Joycean Treatise on the Stability of Species*. That reminded him of one of the talks his father and grandfather had given him on reproductive biology. He had been twelve and perhaps more in need of guidance than the previous time his father had spoken so competently and not at all in that manner so stumbling and confused. Yes, indeedy had it started out badly, with Parnell's father talking about the sex habits of lower creatures, and Parnell passing beyond boredom. After all, National Geographic specials were much more

interesting when it came to the weird sex, or sex-less, lives of bees. The engineer, as had been his wont, had sat back studying the situation and suddenly, he had risen. Inspired had he been. The light of prophecy had shone from his face. He had disappeared for just a moment and then had returned carrying a copy of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. He read a short section about a Jesuit professor at Trinity in Dublin who had stood at his podium, one hand on the *New Testament* and one on Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Blunt and honest of speech, the Jesuit had revealed many a secret to the young men in his charge, even telling them in graphic detail why they were attracted to women.

The grandfather had risen. He had walked over to a nearby bookcase. Retrieved a Bible he had. Walked to a bookcase of the other side of the room, did he. Retrieved a leather-bound copy of *The Origin of Species* he had. Not quite prepared, he had gone to the standing desk pushed against the wall. Turned it so that it was a giant podium. Placed the books properly he did. Right hand on the Bible, left hand on Darwin's masterpiece, he opened his mouth and revealed, "Fantasy is the realm of the male who goes in search of his mate on the grassy savannas of Africa, though, to be sure, she might prove the more effective aggressor at short distances. Why are matters arranged in such a one-sided way? Easy. It is the woman who pays the heavy cost in bearing the young and in caring for them after birth, and, thus, it is she who stays put and forces suitors to come to her. It is also of some importance to note that, however unsatisfied she might be, the woman can have sex without arousal. She can conceive without arousal, though a good orgasm can increase the odds of fertilization. Intercourse cannot happen at all, on the other hand, unless the penis is engorged. Ideally will the vagina walls be engorged with blood as well. Important for the woman's comfort and pleasure be an adequate lubrication. Optimal it might be that her clitoris be enraged and demanding of attention. Yet, Darwin tried to teach us that Mother Nature is a harsh bitch who cares not for comfort nor even optimality. She provides that which is sufficient for an economist to survive and for a sociobiologist to reproduce. And thus..."

Parnell smiled as the image faded. His grandfather had leaned forward, hard of face and bright of eyes. As if he were a Jesuit instructing the young men that they might build a modern Europe not always friendly to Jesuits, the grandfather had spoken bluntly, tying together biology with social and moral needs. Such talks had occurred many a time, from the poetic but blunt talk of the ancient Hebrew scholars – men well aware of their own

physical natures – right up to those modern Jesuits.

That was what Parnell had needed for that he might answer a number of moral and intellectual questions opened by tree-house discussions of yin-yins and yang-yangs as well as by textbook explanations of luteinizing hormones. Details of reproductive biology would have surely been redundant. He already knew how the penis began enlarging by way of hemodynamics. Did not every teenaged boy? The process continued as the ischiocavernosus and bulbocavernosus muscles were activated. He even knew that in the body of a woman, the first of those muscles helped to rigidify the clitoris and the second was ringed around the vagina to help with other activities. That was pretty trivial stuff which could be learned from a textbook. What Parnell had needed was the overview putting it all together. He had not needed moralism of either the pietistic or the sociobiologic sort, but rather blunt honesty about the sexual activities of that peculiar male creature who pondered moral issues while standing about scratching his tingly and aching balls. Not that Parnell's grandfather had ignored the problems of the menstruating half of the species. No, not at all. Even in his celibate decades after the death of his wife, James Llewellyn had retained an interest in women at least intellectual though far more than that...

A little finger poked Parnell in his chest.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, Sweetheart?”

She settled down upon his lap. He, for his part was settled upon a blanket which held the leftovers and dirty dishes of a small picnic.

“Why'd Mommy get rid of us?”

Parnell laughed and said, “She is just sending us away while the work crew has a go at the house.”

“Work crew?”

“The ones who are cleaning up while you, me, and Jimmy are out here amusing ourselves.”

Jimmy!

Parnell looked about, seeing no sign of a ten year-old boy. Well, actually, his fishing pole lay near the shore, and there were those rocks and small logs he had rolled over in his search for grubs and other creepy-crawlies.

“Do you know where Jimmy is, Alicia?”

“He said he was going to look for bears. Ooops!” She had put both hands over her mouth and her eyes had widened in horror. After a few seconds, she released her lips and announced, “I wasn't s'posed to tell you.”

With a deep, Daddy sigh, Parnell rose and said, "Let's go find him before the bears do."

Off they set on their safari. Parnell keeping a firm grip on his daughter's hand. She was skipping along and singing, "Lyin' tigers and bears, oh my." At least, that was what Parnell thought she was singing.

A nice day for an adventure it was, though Parnell would have preferred his son to be by his side and not lost in the woods. Not that it was likely he was lost. Instead, it was quite likely the adventuresome lad was waiting quietly near the cave which Parnell had pointed out as being a possible wintering cave for a grizzly. Not much chance a grizzly would be looking to hole up in early autumn, but there was always a chance a grizzly or a cougar or even a rutting elk might wander by, looking for trouble.

"Daddy. . ."

She sounded a bit excited about something. Her voice was full of wonder, and, so, Parnell looked down to give her his complete attention. "Yes, Alicia?"

"The leaves are crunchy."

"So they are."

"Just like the stuff on the apples in the great-grandpa story."

"The. . . Oh, yes. Your grandmother's memories of her father." Just as they reached the clearing downhill from the cave, Parnell saw Jimmy sitting about eight feet high in a oak tree near the entrance. In a distracted voice, he said, "That crunchy stuff was apple crisp, just like your mother makes sometimes."

"Oh." Parnell looked down at the sound of disappointment in his daughter's voice, wondering if he had lessened the wonder of the story by connecting it to an ordinary part of her life. But, no. She was just thinking about something, and a moment later, she said, "Maybe Mommy will make us some."

"Maybe. Now that we've found her son. She might have been mad if we had come home without Jimmy. She might have scrunched up her face. . ."

Parnell looked down at Alicia and scrunched up his. "She would have growled like an angry mother wolf." He growled, and Alicia cooperated by displaying fear. Already a good actress, Parnell thought she would grow into an interestingly dangerous woman. Perhaps like her great-grandmother, the nervy biologist. His throat felt a bit raw, and Parnell stopped growling and looked about the woods as if searching for something hidden and dangerous. "She would have come to stand in front of us, only inches away. Her eyes

would have gleamed like emeralds on fire. Her mouth would have been drawn thin, just like your Mommy that time you climbed upon the roof of that house set near Walla-walla, of all places!"

Alicia giggled and echoed, "Of all places!" She emphasized the point by stamping her right foot and setting her face into a scowl.

"And then. . . And then, would your mother have said, 'I did not raise Jimmy to be bear food.'" Relaxing his face a bit, Parnell added, "Raising little boys to be bear food would be inefficient, to be sure. She would be right to be angry. If we were going to feed bears, we would be better off sowing a cornfield and maybe raising a few head of cattle. They're much cheaper to fertilize and feed than little boys. At least per calorie to be harvested."

A puzzled look came over Alicia's face for a moment, and then she giggled and slapped playfully at her father. "You don't sew cornfields, Daddy. You plant them."

At least, that was what he thought she had said, but Jimmy came up before Parnell could clarify matters. Planting himself in front of his father and his sister, the lad demanded to know, "What's so funny?"

"Did we ruin your plan to ambush a bear?"

"Yeah, but they probably aren't coming here for a couple months. I was just practicing."

"That's good, but you really shouldn't wander off without telling me."

"You were spacing, Daddy."

"I was re-membering your grandfather and your great-grandfather. In the context of that particular event, mostly your great-grandfather."

It came to Parnell like a bolt of lightning in the blackest of storms. He had never integrated his father's death into his memories.

Odd, that.

Was the entire narrative to be reconstructed from that point? He had loved his father. Perhaps that was why he had not been able to coherently narrate the tale of his death.

Parnell turned, after taking hold once more of Alicia's hand, and started walking back to the blanket. She asked, "Will you tell us the cinnamon goo story?" He nodded, but he was re-membering something less pleasant. . .

His mother had found Parnell in the attic. That much had been integrated into his memories already. She had not answered his question. Never had she directly admitted that the scarred man was Dylan Shagari. Never had she confessed to putting more wrinkles about his face than had been

there.

If that was the case. Maybe, the poet had aged fast after realizing the world preferred its superstitions to rational thoughts from either scientists or theologians.

And, yet...

After a few minutes of playing with Parnell's hair, after a longer length of communing with Parnell and the dead poet, though in a different perception of space-time, Parnell's mother had taken him by the hand and forced him to stand. When she had turned towards the stairway, he had meekly followed. Peaceably had he descended to the second floor, and once more to the first floor. She led him to the kitchen, the room where she did most of her contemplating. Setting a tea kettle upon the burner, she turned on the gas and then turned to motion Parnell to take a seat. She sat next to him and took his right hand into both of hers.

He had not noticed the tears building up in her eyes. Perhaps, just maybe, she had not willfully refused to answer his question. Possible was it that she could not speak. Afraid he knew what was coming, the teenaged boy put his other hand on top of the pile already on the table. He met her eyes. Like a good son, he listened intently as she managed to choke out, "Your father... Your father... He's dead."

Parnell stood and pulled her up. He wrapped his arms around his mother and let her cry on his shoulder. He thought it had been his right shoulder, but, truth to tell, his perceptions had been a bit clouded.

After a few minutes, the kettle began to whistle, and he sat his mother down while he went to make her a goodly sized mug of tea. Two had he made. He carried them to the table and set them down to steep. When he had taken his chair, he took hold of his mother's hands and asked, "How did it happen?"

"I'm not sure. They just said he died when that bomb exploded over San Diego. Your grandfather made a couple of calls. No one knew much, but one of his friends said several hundred men had died of infections when they were waiting in a field hospital with minor radiation burns. The reserve units had been gathering miles from where the bomb exploded, but some of the men were in the open."

She seemed calmer, though she had looked worried when Parnell had said, "No wonder the poet wrinkled so fast. This is not always a world as pleasant as we would like..."

Parnell felt a tug on his hand. He and his children had returned to the

lake-side, to the blanket with the leftovers now covered with ants. Sighing, he used the blanket to wrap up the food, containers, and ants. Like a bundle for a giant hobo it was, and he carried it down to the water where he dunked the entire mess. He left it there. Deliberately drowned the ants, he did. Nasty work, though not as nasty as the events Donnie had often witnessed, from inside the very head of the wisest of killers.

Alicia was already sitting on the grass, waiting for memories of cinnamon goo. When Parnell sat down beside her, Jimmy sat on his other side.

“Your grandmother often spoke of her childhood. . .”

Alicia put her hands up in exasperation. “That’s not how to tell the story.” Parnell looked to his left. Jimmy reproved him also, though with a mere raising of the eyebrows on that head set at such an admonishing angle.

Nodding his head at the wisdom to be found in the words and expressions of children, Parnell confessed, “Yes, a memory is misleadingly easier to digest when told straight-out. Adding commentary is a tricky business. Very often, the least of poets can make his points only by letting his characters speak or by choosing carefully which parts of the story would be told, which details revealed.”

After a short pause, Parnell looked into the sky, “The clouds were few and the air quite effectively reflected the shorter wavelengths of the visible region of the electromagnetic spectrum,” as the poet had once noted of a presumably similar day. “And now I’ll speak of a memory which has become mine over the years though it was my mother who experienced the wonders.”

Cinnamon goo bubbled over the edge of the giant pot. Scooped out, whitish apple slices lay waiting to be covered by brown sugar crunches. The bowl of yummy glop was double-dipped by a little-girl spoon and a daddy spoon. All the while, the faint odor of Uncle Hernando’s fat, brown cigars mixed with daddy-musk from that bottle on his dresser.

Daddy was whitish and grayish-blond, but brown was all around him. Cigars and then dark mahogany desk and tables and wooden paneling and the shaggy brown lion’s head. No matter how clean it was, it smelled of musk as well. Brown was the color of musk. Brown was the color of dangerous animals. Brown was the color of Daddy, no matter how pale he was.

And there was the dung-brown steer hide hanging next to the peach and brown and yellow painting of the desert-skull. A young girl had once wondered if that skull had truly come from an animal or if it was formed of the desert, one with the desert. When she had learned of dinosaurs in school, Grace Llewellyn had always retained the suspicion that fossils had never been living creatures but were instead products of an uncaring desert, whether that of New Mexico or that of Mongolia. Her father had laughed when she had told him of her speculations into the limitations of science. He did not disagree with her but merely told her to keep an open mind and to allow the paleontologists and other scientists to do their work. "Every so often," he had told her, "scientists do seem to come up with something that seems to be true in a very deep, if quite contingent manner." Being but twelve at the time, she did not really understand what he had said, though she was far from being totally mystified by the big word used in such a peculiar manner, such a way as to hint of years of contemplation, perhaps over massive tomes of scholarly equivocations. She had written his words in her diary and had eventually come to understand the meaning of 'contingent manner'. In doing so, she came to understand her father a little better. Sometimes she thought that also allowed her to understand men better, but then it usually seemed that few men were like her father in any way.

Dangerous was Daddy. Attractively dangerous, protectively, comfortably dangerous was Daddy. Merely dangerous to many men who seemed to be his enemies. Frustratingly but lovingly dangerous to her mother. Her mother had once told her that "James Llewellyn is a man who could drive the most patient of saints into a loony bin." Then she had smiled and had added, "But, at his worst, he is fascinating and there are so few men who can hold my interest, even at their best."

Not that Daddy was merely dangerous. He was so much else as well. He knew so much. He had so many books, full of funny stories and equations and words so hard to understand. On a faraway Summer morning, before most people would have been awake – it was a Saturday – he had pranced about in the grove by the swimming hole. Rake braced under his arm, he had done

battle with the windmills, though a young ash tree had been coerced to play the role of the evil giants with the rotating arms. Together they had ducked into a nearby cave, searching for the entrance to the looking-glass world. Not content to merely tell the tale of the man-eating leopard he had hunted with Dylan Shagari at his side, the man with so many pasts had led his daughter on a safari through the woods of northern Idaho. They had returned with pictures of a grizzled motherly bear plowing up a large hillside to the depth of a foot or more. Not that Daddy had allowed his princess near such a beast – the camera had a quite good telephoto lens.

He lived so much more than most men, yet he had also been willing to learn from the lives and explorations of others. His library and office had grown to take an entire wing of that house in Palo Alto. That way, he could work peacefully and, more importantly, without disturbing anyone. Daddy was not only dangerous, he was also a jerk when working on a line of thought. Mom had also been a dedicated scholar, but she had needed but one room in which to read and write about neurons and other mysteries. She often laughed as she told people her engineer husband had a larger collection of books on the brain sciences than she had. He had so many books, so many of the highest quality, both in contents and in form.

The leather bindings smelled pungent-nice and not at all like the musty-nice of the paper and glue inside. Daddy knew all those books; he had not just read them – he had come to understand them, though he said it was a recursive process in which a new reading of *Finnegan's Wake* might allow him to better understand the ideas of Feynman. He had said the research and theorizing of Edelman on the physical workings of the brain had also helped him to better understand the writings of Dostoevsky and Augustine. He understood the works in context but that involved a deep sympathy for the works on their own. He had seen inside the heart of Cervantes-Quixote. More than 100 years too late, he hated the falsely proletarian lawyer Abraham Lincoln with a passion and admired greatly the middle-class Grant and the aristocratic Lee. He knew what the retarded brother was saying, soundfully and furiously, but

he would not speak of castration until she had seen enough to understand the self-righteous cruelty of man to man for what it was. He laughed at the cockroach and the murderer who baptized his victim; so many others had seen only the grotesque in those works written quite consciously as comedies – in both senses of the word. Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and Augustine's *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* bracketed the copy of the *Vulgate* given to him by a Catholic bishop in Chad.

Dangerous. He reeked of the Earth in a world given to ghostly and metallic pursuits. He read dangerous books and understood their radical content for what it was meant to be. He told his innocent and trusting daughter Grace that Kafka, though quite amused by his own writings, had seen the Holocaust coming, however dimly. He spoke to her of Augustine's respect for serious pagan thinkers and his disgust with conservative thinkers, of both a pagan persuasion and a Christian way of thought more than slightly pietistic.

Grace Llewellyn had noticed that most people had one of three reactions when her father spoke of those ideas which mattered muchly to him. The eyes of some had glazed over as if wondering why in the world this man would be speaking of the principles of science or the theories of poetic inspiration or even the failures of moral philosophy; such things belonged in the college lecture halls and not in the conversations of mature adults in the real world. Others had giggled nervously – Grace Llewellyn had been mystified by that type when she was a child and even when she was an adult. Still others had apparently understood part of what James Llewellyn said for they had stepped back nervously as if trying to disassociate themselves from this man who would question the very foundations of a society so prosperous and so noble.

As a little girl, Grace had often sneaked into her father's office as he worked or as he met with friends and colleagues. He knew she was there. That was clear from the signals he had sometimes given that little girls should not be around to hear the upcoming parts of the conversation. She would then crawl from behind the leather sofa which was nearly thirty feet from that marvelous heavy-rich-oily desk which had been big enough

to hold five cousins until a daddy-roar rumbled through walls as the gruff man himself approached. A big bass laugh almost always came as Daddy entered and saw the cousins scrambling for seats. That laugh had also often sounded as Grace, tiny and no more than seven years old, sneaked behind tables and chairs lining the walls. After the first such escapade, her father had called Mr. Billingsley from down the road and they had moved all the outlets on that wall to a height of nearly three feet.

It was a safe, warm house filled with a mother's sounds and with the toys from the dangerous and funny Daddy. Everybody said, "Sir," to the very important Daddy and he would go away and come back with pink, lacy dresses and bracelets and recorders which looked-felt like wood and sounded like angels from the clouds of Heaven.

With a look of concentration upon his face, Jimmy asked, "The Daddy in that memory was great-grandpa?"

Parnell nodded, once again impressed at the cleverness of children who could, almost instinctively as it were, grasp subtle and several-times removed relationships forever beyond the most clever chimpanzee, whether of the more violent common sort or the more sexually adventurous pygmy group. Even the Dracos, gentle and family-oriented, would have had problems grasping the nature of a great-grandpa. And, here, his children, never having seen a great-grandpa so far as they knew, certainly not any of their own, had picked up on the concept as if it were a concept potentiated, though not necessarily actuated, by mere electrochemical connections of this neuron to the other guys over there.

11

October it was, and yet it was a warm, muggy August night. Sticky. Damp. A man's skin felt oily. Perhaps a woman's skin felt the same, but Parnell had never thought to ask and he'd never noticed an oily film on Marie's skin. He stared at the not yet functional ceiling fans arrayed down the ceiling of this great room. Neither thoughts of the steps in repairing the generator and cleaning the fans, nor thoughts of oily, female skin took his mind off his predicament. Sleep was not to be. No matter how he lay, the parts of his body in contact with the sleeping bag or the pillow would soon be soaked in sweat.

It was no use trying to sleep. He sat up and looked over at Marie. She was moving restlessly, but she seemed to be asleep. The situation was pretty much the same with the others, though poor Lee was forced by her bulging stomach to stay on her back.

There was to be no aroused company found in this great room, but Parnell had been often alone with his thoughts and his memories in the four days since they had entered his grandfather's mansionly hunting lodge. It could even be said he had been often alone with his thoughts since he was a young boy. Reconciled to his fate as a loner, he rose and passed between the bodies lying on top of their sleeping bags. His eyes passed over the great stone fireplace of this, the great room where James Llewellyn had so often gathered his friends and his family. The two doors were already open, and he was able to exit without a sound.

Crickets. Millions of them, from the sound of it. Or was it just that it was so peaceful, so quiet in the woods of northern Idaho? He felt his face form a smile as if to agree, "Yes, it is so peaceful up here." His feet longed to dance a bit, but Parnell held them back. Being so clumsy, he was afraid of tripping and waking everybody up. Quietly, he walked across the deck still smelling of chlorine bleach. He moved slightly leftward to avoid

a region needing to be rebuilt. Even a cedar deck bolted in with metal brackets could not last forever.

Two hundred yards away, seen between the trees and over their tops, the stars danced on the water. Some of those wavy things had traveled billions of light-years to make this lake pretty, and, yet, being smooth and continuous, they did not have to worry about such discontinuities as stumbles or falls. Not even on that oh-so short sleepless night spent between this galaxy and the one next door.

Then again, when it suited their purposes, those waves could act in a manner as grainy as any other object.

Time and space.

Waves and particles.

Truly, the world did not act in a manner fit for the approval of Aristotle or Newton. Which seemed neither here nor there, unless a man tied his very concept of rationality to the systems proposed by those all too human geniuses. Or any other systems of particular interest. And geniuses tended to be particularly peculiar in their interests and obsessions.

No matter.

The dance continued across the deathly still waters. Still they may have been, but 'deathly'? Those waters teemed with trout and bass, otters and turtles, ducks and geese. Some of the living creatures could leave at will, to be sure, but the center of their lives was the lake and its economy of plant-captured sunlight, proteins, and – obviously – water. The nuclear war seemed not to have decimated the wildlife in northern Idaho.

Without a doubt, a fast-breeding population of cockroaches and bacteria had survived in Tel Aviv. Here, the more fragile Pumpkin Seeds and water lilies were prospering as well.

Four billion dead. Nearly all of those had died within six months or so of the Night of Missiles. Parnell worried that term for a minute and decided 'Night of the Missiles' panned better. Rhythm made it so much easier to keep something in mind. In this case, if men remembered, perhaps that horrible something would not be repeated.

Still. . .

Four billion dead.

At the time, it had meant little to a boy whose head was filled with the stuff of a greater innocence. He had pondered Einstein's general field equations. He had spent hours in contemplation of the wonder that was a Hong Kong call-girl ensconced in her whitely decorated penthouse suite. In

an effort to keep alive a more noble adventure than war, he had designed and redesigned ion-drives for unmanned satellites which would explore the regions of the solar system still beyond the reach of men. Life-support systems needed to be ever refined that the Mars colony, never built, might be less dependent on supplies from an Earth which spun so many miles away. By the standards of men, that is, not by the standards of photons or neutrinos or even the denser matter expelled at nearly the speed of light in the jets of a quasar.

There was so much to do, so many things to explore, or even discover for the first time. The great scientists, the better poets and theologians, and even the odd philosopher or seven, had left so many good books to read. They had left the subtlest of playful words, the most profound of speculations. There were worlds to explore – the depths of the ocean, Mars, the moons of Saturn, the inner lives of cells and baryons. Now that the number line could be described as a largely factual thing, there were so many theories to be proposed that those facts might be observed. Yes, without the proper <theory|, |facts>, even the properties of the most prosaic numbers meant little.

Why had men insisted on other, less rewarding, and more destructive hobbies when the Enlightenment, for all its problems, had expanded the possibility of exploring God's Creation?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

Though fire-control systems and anti-missile tanks were extraordinarily interesting from an engineering point of view, he much preferred to think about the gravity wave detectors launched into space and still orbiting between Earth and moon, still collecting data for all Parnell knew. Immense amounts of data. By now, there might be enough to find all the missing mass in the Universe, enough to map the distribution of mass throughout all the regions seeable by men.

Seeable?

The poet thought most of reality was not seeable by men, though, every so often, a man would be born capable of seeing something never before seen.

Still . . .

Did that explain his grandfather's misery? James Llewellyn had built hospitals and churches in Africa before returning to the United States to build huge robotic factories and missile launching systems. Had he seen a noble vision of what human society might be? Only to turn away from

it? If so, the sight of those missiles leaving their silos, the sight of the waves lapping at the southern shore of the island of San Francisco, might have revived that vision of what men might be. Perhaps he had begun to wish he had spent his entire career building hospitals or even the occasional communications link between radio-wave observatories.

Realistically, James Llewellyn had been a cog in a bureaucratic machine, yet he had made no excuses. He had done his penance in the privacy of his own thoughts. He had given many of his possessions to various groups serving the needs of the displaced and diseased people who had no families and no communities to depend upon.

The island of San Francisco.

It still sounded funny.

Many of the residents did not mind. They were not happy about the misery suffered by their neighbors to the south, but, after all, the City by the Bay had always set itself apart. Parnell had gone there with his grandfather to review the plans for bringing new power lines and communications links under the waters.

Penance had he done. Acts of charity had he committed. It had not eased his guilt, at least, not entirely. For hours, up to his arrest, James Llewellyn had sat in a chair staring over this very same railing. Aging rapidly, he seemed to be seeing death and destruction rather than a peaceful lake.

Five years.

Five years of relative peace for Parnell and his mother.

From the night the missiles had left their silos until the day the soldiers took James Llewellyn away – five years.

They took him away.

In a retrospective act of re-calling, the narrative focus was provided by that act of police-state terrorism.

The Collective had been formed.

The North American Collective, self-advertised as the wealthiest and mightiest empire of all time. Ruled by a group of Overlords who were dominated by one 400 pound man who had hated the poet and Morgan Llewellyn. James Llewellyn was also not one of his favorites.

They were engaged in experiments which James Llewellyn considered immoral and unjustifiable, though, to be sure, they were drawing upon much of the work of both James Llewellyn and his long-dead wife, Morgan Llewellyn. The Overlords sent soldiers to fetch James Llewellyn that he

might be chained to a work-station in the center so sneeringly named after him.

The James Llewellyn Center for Symbiosis Research.

The very name sent shudders up Parnell's spine, though, to be fair, some good had come of it. Their experiments, after all, had released Donnie. What had happened to that wisest of killers? That seemed a problem more metaphysical than empirical. It was beyond the ken of humans to even know if the wise killer had so much as actuated himself. He might have been no more than a set of symptoms associated with a heavily damaged brain. But, then...

Did that mean that other men were but a set of symptoms associated with brains considered to be normal?

The problem was a nonstarter.

Donnie had been released.

The wise killer was gone.

And, besides...

Was it a mistake to use an end-result to direct a narrative? Was that a backdoor way of introducing predestination into the world? Was it ever legitimate to look at the point of the channel where exited the rushing waters and to proclaim that point to have been the goal of those mindless, boiling, chaotically turbulent drops of water? Was that appropriate in a world seemingly more contingent and historical in its nature? The quantum physicists had developed only a rudimentary understanding of the reasons that two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen had such peculiar properties. True enough, one of the physicists awarded the Nobel Prize for that partial understanding had claimed that to be as important in the understanding of life as any experiments on the genes of drosophila feeding so happily on mashed, over-ripe bananas.

There was a point in such a poorly organized thought, but, then again, was it not proper to adjust the method to the substance being studied?

The poet had considered the imaginary vector $\langle \text{structure} |$ to be as important as the more concrete $|\text{contingency}\rangle$ in allowing life, no – the entirety of physical reality, to be actualized. Observed? Acquired? Actualized?

No matter how expressed, a passive construction was that or else the idea distorted future perceptions. The poet had a word or two on that subject: "A thought passively expressed is abhorrent to those people who have never had thoughts needing such a grammatical construction."

That left open the more substantial question. Was there a person or a

Person doing the actualizing? His grandfather, a devout Presbyterian, had argued there was not. Not a lover of paradoxes, the engineer had proposed God had emptied Himself of His power in creating the Universe, much as His Son had done in allowing Himself to be nailed to the cross. God had given the Universe freedom to grow and develop, much as His Son had given a similar moral freedom to men.

Not all good came from that freedom, but true freedom allowed of no predetermined results. Thus had argued the engineer when he was in a theological frame of mind. After those twelve years of separation, Parnell was still chewing on those theodictic bones. He was growing somewhat comfortable with the horrible implication that God had stood by, voluntarily powerless, while so many children had the skin burned off their faces and hands. Just so power-hungry men might have the moral freedom to damn themselves? Actually, now that he had thought about it, he was not all that reconciled to God's more dangerous gifts. And, yet, was it necessary that all men might have moral freedom?

A shudder passed through Parnell's person. To think that some children might suffer the fists of a brutal father just so Parnell could choose to treat his children well. Or not.

To think nuclear bombs could be built that men might have the freedom to explore and describe the physical world.

Parnell's brain was boggled, as it often was when he tried to grab hold of those five vaporous years. In a cloud had he drifted through that period even as the Milky Way had moved that much closer to a gravitational catastrophe at the Great Attractor. Five years they had been for sure. In such a period, light can travel 29 million million miles, or thereabouts anyway. In such a length of time, the Earth and sun, most of the solar system as a matter of fact, can travel an immense distance, though far smaller than 29 million million miles.

Still, an immense distance, though far smaller than 29 million million miles, might be considered sufficient to take a man far from the most horrible of memories.

Unfortunately, it was not sufficient in the case of James Llewellyn.

His memories, as it had turned out, had traveled with him.

They had almost certainly been carried off with him as the soldiers marched him down the driveway towards the troop carrier and three jeeps. He had been loaded in the armored carrier along with a dozen or so soldiers. An impressive squad for arresting a single old man, beaten down by his

sickness, however much it was a matter of conscience and morals embedded in rather than arising ghost-like from heart or intestines.

12

Dawn found Parnell sitting in the basement, on the concrete floor, and surrounded by hundreds of parts to the house's two electrical generators. When Marie walked in on him, her lower jaw dropped, and he felt obligated to assure her, "I've kept the parts to the two generators separated. The parts on that side of the shadow are..." Parnell's eyes widened as soon as he saw there was no shadow. "Oops."

Not to worry. Not at all. He would just start at one end and put together a generator, and all the remaining parts would be for the other generator. On the other hand, he could wait for dawn the next day and draw a line where the shadow fell. Two solutions were at hand. The problem was twice solved.

He smiled up at his wife who had taken a few steps forward, carefully avoiding all the parts spread over the floor.

"Do you know what you're doing, Parnell?"

"I made a sketch of the generators as I took them apart." He pointed towards his head with a grease-soaked finger and said, "It's all up there... Here... In my head. Not that the schematic was muchly complicated. Quite simple actually, compared to the pressure regulators and emergency systems for the dome to be built over the Mars colony that was never to be, though perhaps some better day might come." Smiled Parnell before adding, "Not that our selfish needs be the guideline for goodness in such a wonderful Universe." He went back to cleaning out the fuel line filter before adding, "Shame, that. We would have been better off exploring space instead of bombing the hell out of one another."

Not surprisingly, Marie did not argue against such wisdom, but her voice was still muted by a lack of understanding when she asked, "Will you be working on this all day?"

Parnell looked about him at the hundreds of parts. Fuels lines needed

purged. Tanks needed to be cleaned of jellied kerosene. Bushings needed to be scrubbed. Bearings had to be packed with grease. Then it all had to be put back together. He smiled up at Marie again and said, "At least that long, Honey."

Marie turned to leave just as Raul came to the door opening his mouth as if he were about to announce something of import. His eyes widened as they panned the cellar floor with the disassembled generators, and Parnell had to agree that it was hard to believe that a complex and chunky machine could be laid out in such a thin layer.

"Just... What? are you doing, Parnell."

"Cleaning the generators."

"Oh." After a moment's pause, Raul asked, "Did you try to just flush the fuel tanks and fuel lines first? Maybe clean the points on the plugs? Or whatever it is that starts those things?"

Parnell nodded in appreciation of Raul's common sense and pointed to a dark-blue box. "All electronics. I don't think I'll take that apart, though there is an electronics workshop on the other side of the basement." After examining the squiggly thing in his hand once more, Parnell set it in the bucket of kerosene. Feeling a bit lightheaded, he tried to rise and almost fell flat on his back. Marie reached out and caught him, and, with her help, Parnell stumbled out the door. He tapped his temple and said, "Kerosene isn't really good for clear heads."

When the young doctor had looked into Parnell's eyes and patted him on the shoulder, he suggested, "It really isn't that good for any kind of heads that I know of."

Raul returned to the doorway and looked inside. Whistled he did, and that for sure, and true it was that the act of whistling perceptually preceded his properly nounish self. Turn he did, though that was an act in which his person was perceived as one with the act. Fascinated by the syntactical implications of his cousin's physical actions, Parnell watched, hoping more revelations to be on their way.

Luck was with Parnell, for a great revelation did come upon him, and he gave out a sound halfway between 'hmmm' and 'ahhhh' if it was really anything more than a perception of envelopes of acoustic energy. And likely it was but quite imperceptible was its true and objective character. The theories formed by the linguistic centers of his brain had forever eliminated his personal perception of such raw data. He could build machines to record and analyze the sounds emitted by human beings, but it seemed not likely

an analysis of human speech sounds would lead to a deeper understanding of the links between a man and his actions. And then there was a man's surroundings and companions. It was a task muchly impossible, but...

Parnell turned to the entrance to the other side of the cellar but never rose. The moment had passed when the finest of instruments could have measured anything of use in formulating a theory. A low, sustained sound of suspiration filled the air, but he turned to Marie and Raul with a smile in his eyes. Noted he, not they, "It is as if a man's movements have more to do with the faloodling of Dylan Shagari than with any specific language which can carry only so much of the infinitely rich context in which we move, perhaps the infinitely rich context which is us and our interrelationships, with each other and with our environment."

So amazed were they with that revelation that Marie could only bat her eyes, Raul could only stare with his mouth somewhat open. Parnell's lips joined his eyes in their smile, and he sat quietly, pleased that he and his beloved Marie and his dear cousin Raul were like soulmates in the way that they could understand each other's deepest thoughts from the slightest of verbal hints.

After five heartbeats and no sounds from his companions, Parnell's confidence was fading. No longer was he sure that their thoughts had actualized from measurements of the same wavelength. As his discomfort increased, he was happy to notice a pleasant old man in a red beret coming around the corner of the house.

And it was a sunny day!

Joy of joys.

It was a sunny day!

Parnell rose and greeted his friend with a hug. Flustered but seemingly happy with the attention, Donnie reached to his beret with his forefinger, the right one to be precise. And pretty much accurate as well.

More importantly, it was red.

The beret.

Not the forefinger.

Though Donnie was a bit ruddy of complexion. Not that he had never had so much as a drop of liquor. Nor a single bottle in half an hour for that matter. Other possibilities were not worth the effort of the mindiest of experiments.

Donnie and Parnell were happy on that day so sunny. The sky was so blue with so many pretty white puffs wispering their own beauty. Parnell

breathed deeply. The air was filled with the pleasant odor of trillions of tree leaves reaching their natural end. Donnie breathed deeply in imitation of his friend. Oh, was Donnie such a trusting friend, now that he was no longer trapped in a man so killingly wise. Parnell saw fit to tell him, "Death does not always smell so pretty."

Parnell watched as the red beret bobbed up and down in agreement. A short while later, he heard a familiar voice note, "Birth can be pretty stinky. You ever been in a cow-barn in springtime?"

The question. . .

Quite profound and deep was the question.

Parnell struggled to find an answer to a question so important to. . .

What question was. . .

Days, if not years or seconds, later, Parnell woke lying on the couch in the great room. The light hurt his eyes. Existing hurt his head. Nevertheless, he managed to keep his eyes open and to somewhat focus them. Raul stood nearby, looking down from a great height. Parnell fought down his nausea and managed to ask, "What happened?"

"You were sitting over a bucket of kerosene in a room without very good ventilation."

"Not very smart."

"Not at all."

With Raul's help, Parnell managed to sit up. Seeing there was no one else around, he asked, "Where is everyone?"

"Cleaning the kitchen."

"That will take all of them?"

"Plus the two women from the area that we managed to contact and hire. One is the daughter-in-law of a woman who used to work for your grandfather."

"Mrs. Alvarez? Is she still alive?"

"Apparently, but a bit crippled up with rheumatism."

"Oh." Feeling a bit lightheaded again, Parnell let himself down on the couch and said, "I think I'll sleep for a while."

"It's probably what you need. Going without sleep last night couldn't have helped much."

13

Walter Sang had provided Parnell with copies of all the notes James Llewellyn had kept during the seven weeks he was at the Symbiosis Research Center. More than that, Walter, who had been the old man's closest friend at the Center, had told Parnell about life for the enslaved man. Horrible it was. Chained to his workstation he was. Confined to one room was he. A simple cot. A single change of pajama-like clothes. A toilet in open view of anyone in the room and of the guards passing by the undoorred entrance. A sink. A small table for eating his meals. A workstation, powerful for engineering design, for theoretical neurobiological research, for the completion of an evolving saboteur.

Isolated.

The man.

The workstation.

Walter was able to speak to James Llewellyn as he was the one coordinating the project. He was able to find and make copies of the old man's diaries after his death. The diary entries, intended to convey a sense of a man's thoughts and feelings, were necessarily cryptic. Dylan Shagari, in a similar situation, might have faloodled each time he had a thought not quite expressible in the words and grammatical structures available to him. James Llewellyn was not the sort, and, yet. . .

Parnell was not so sure the difference was all that great.

By mid-afternoon, Parnell was awake and able to rise from the couch. Feeling a need to be alone, he passed out the door and onto the deck. Any other direction would have taken him near people busily scrubbing or painting.

He had the most imaginary of bra-vectors in his mind, and beneath it was. Not quite accessible to the wording or imaging parts of his brain. Worst of all, perhaps, was the lack of a ket-vector. No, he had not a clue

how to bracket the damned thing.

Though, to be sure, it was not a 'thing'.

<Lonely| ?

No. That was not nearly strong enough, not even quite in the right direction.

<A customized hell for each man| ?

That came closer to conveying the sense of the thing that was not a thing, that could not be imaged, that lay beyond the reach of Parnell's words and ways of categorizing the world about him.

Was it not part of the world about him?

Though it was not an 'it'.

His grandfather had spoken in those journals of a man being a worm-like thing embedded in space-time. Was that a thing? Was a life, a man embedded in a process that was largely his self, to be regarded as a worm-like thing?

If so, it was a pitiful and shriveled thing at each end.

Parnell shivered in fear. If James Llewellyn could be reduced so easily to a pitiful and shriveled thing, then what could men of more normal stature expect? A mighty man he had been, building hospitals and churches in Africa, factories the size of Detroit in the United States. And those missile defense systems not really distinguishable from the most offensive of missile launching systems.

James Llewellyn's diary of those final seven weeks had been extracted with great skill by Walter Sang from its hiding place – in the middle of some spaghetti code for a weapons procurement budgeting forecaster. At least that was the location of the pointers to the diary. The actual journal entries were in a place even more labyrinthine – in the navigational module for a 115 million line program for controlling weather satellites. It had been built up over nearly 25 years and James Llewellyn must have suspected no man would have had the stomach to look inside the black boxes of that system, which to be fair, had always worked well. He had once told Parnell about such means of hiding codes of various types and then had joked it was a trick men had learned from viruses which sometimes hid their self-replicating code in the DNA of their victims.

And, thus, it was that on that fateful day of July 18, 2028, the old man had made his first entry on his computerized journal.

Once mighty was I, but only a few hours ago, shackles were

fastened to my ankles. Humbled was I, not by grace accepted freely, but rather by grace forced upon me. In the manner of Joseph , I watched the chains being attached, seeming to accept fate only because I had no power to raise myself. Unlike that comely youth, I had no hopes of regaining the power to raise myself, nor did I have hopes of being once more blessed in this life. I am an old man.

From the shit and rotted corpses I have come. I have freely returned my shit and soon I will give back my corpse.

What good would it do me, in any case. By the power of God will I live once more, but He will have to make the effort to rebuild my liver and my limbs. In this matter, I feel no guilt in presuming upon God. If He does not fulfill His promises of eternal life, it will not matter. If He does. . .

I can say no more than this – He knows better than I do that I am a creature of bile and blood and not an angelic creature of ectoplasmic stuff.

The greater horror had been yet to come. Walter Sang had confessed to shedding a few tears that day he had walked in and found James Llewellyn with his head and arms sprawled upon the desk.

You see. . .

James Llewellyn had collapsed inward as a mass of red blood cells had coagulated, breaking into smaller chunks as it approached his brain. Several of those chunks had undoubtedly caused immense problems through regions cortical and limbic. Those regions devoted to motor control were already vandalized beyond repair when Walter had found him.

Yet. . .

Parnell knew, far deep in his viscera, that the mighty man had not surrendered to that which was inevitable. James Llewellyn had been a man of flesh-and-blood and like all such frail creatures, he could be killed, but, unlike many, he would not have submitted to dying. Obnoxiously stubborn, he had considered that to be a duty to God rather than a personality trait.

Time, pulled so firmly about him, was unraveling and pulling away from him.

Like Parnell would he have been in many ways.

For sure would he have re-remembered the days. . .

Re-remembered them he did.

Fondly.

An old man's voice spoke with more pride than sadness, "Once had I been powerful of body and mind."

Truly, he had been driven to seek that which would be worthy of his attention. It could have even been said that James Llewellyn had conquered the world about him. At each stage of his life, he had turned quickly towards that which seemed interesting and difficult. He had let his intentions crystallize, he had outlined his strategies, and then he had detailed his tactics. Sure of his goals, sure they would bring benefits for his own self and for the others of his concern, he had found the allies necessary for his plans. Armies of loyal followers had gathered, and, from the beginning, superiors had shown that respect and fear more appropriate for an equal than for an ambitious young man still on the rise. James Llewellyn had willed, he had reached out, and pieces of Creation had bowed to his words and submitted to the strength of his mighty limbs.

The old man paused and regained his breath. It was a magnificent life to be re-called. It had been a life of accomplishment. A prosperous life lived, for the most part, charitably. He had had his enemies, yet he had tried to love each of his fellow men as his Lord had commanded him to do.

He had become a mighty man, as had David of yore, and, thus, it was clear that the Lord loved him greatly. Or was it clear? regardless of his accomplishments, so inconsequential as he was dying.

Still. . .

As a missionary, he had spread his Christian faith and had built many a church and hospital in the jungles of Nigeria. As an engineer, he had built robotic factories the size of Detroit and had designed control systems for the complexes of American armies, navies, and air forces which had spanned the globe and had even penetrated into space. As a businessman, he had founded corporations; he had merged, bought out, streamlined, and sold other abstracted entities of manufacture and commerce. As a bureaucrat, he had served in presidential cabinets, had ad-

vised Congress and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and had supervised the construction of the anti-missile defenses of North America.

So? Sad as it was to relate, people living in a world leveled by a nuclear war were rather unimpressed by the accomplishments of scientists and engineers, bureaucrats and politicians. Not that those accomplishments were to undone, not that all men and women in public life were to be blamed for the horrors. No, they would be with the human race as long as it strode across the face of the Earth, as uncoordinated a millipede as could be imagined. Nuclear fusion power plants, catalogs of neutron stars, and spray-on deodorants which did not harm the ozone layer. James Llewellyn had helped to build the first to power his Detroit-sized manufacturing plant. As a director of the National Science Foundation, he had pushed the cause of the second. The propellants for the third were among the products of a chemical plant near St Louis, a facility with nary a worker necessary because of the sophisticated electronic controls designed by James Llewellyn.

A mighty man he was. Like a giant did he stride across the Earth's surface. In a five-year frenzy, did he design and build the most amazing set of defenses against the missiles of other peoples. As an add-on, and never did he intend it be used for offensive purposes, he had built a system for shooting nuclear warheads at other peoples. Quasi-stable it was, though the newspaper headlines and the Congressional Reporter said, "Chaos Provides our Umbrella." Not entirely wrong, given the linguistic confusions which usually result at the collision of superstition and rational thought. And certainly was it true that the missiles zigged and zagged their way to the enemy, in flat trajectories, in parabolas – some of which penetrated that region of the atmosphere often called 'outer space'. Targeted at a dozen or so possible sites, the orbits were set by mathematical functions so sensitive to initial conditions that if the missile encountered a breeze of two miles per hour when it left the silo, the orbit, and perhaps the target, would shift. Computationally irreducible, both forwards and backwards in time, were the orbit and target selection routines. The enemy could have had the routines but, not knowing the exact wind conditions or the in-

tensity of sunlight or moonlight at launch, would not have been able to figure out where the damned things were headed.

It was a defense system to make a talented engineer and manager flush with pride. And flush-red had James Llewellyn been.

Alas. . .

Those defenses worked as well as such things always have. A nuclear war burned its way across the Earth. Much destruction was wreaked. A few missiles were intercepted by both sides. The countries with greater technological sophistication protected the areas in which were concentrated the leaders and elites of their societies. Until. . .

The diseases came. Hospitals and corner drugstores were nonfunctional. Transportation and manufacture had been disrupted. Even the pharmaceutical plants in the orbiting laboratories and the lunar colonies were so much dust orbiting the Earth and the moon.

As always, men were ready to fix things, but first they needed to concentrate power in their own hands. One dictatorship of North America succeeded another five times, and finally men who hated and feared James Llewellyn came to power. He was humbled and he found himself chained to an engineering workstation to serve men he hated with every ounce of his blood. His revenge, if such were to be possible, had to be subtle and at several years' remove – his daughter and his grandson lived under the executioner's ax.

And, so, it came to be that, boggled of body, James Llewellyn shuffled lonely through the valleys and the sheets which formed the substrate of his embodied and self-conscious mind. Like the memories of a body visiting a ghostly land, James Llewellyn tramped fearfully along, little more than a small set of neural processes, but those electrons flickering in a sea of hormones and neurotransmitters seemed so much like his body. He marched across bridges and climbed down rope-like ladders connecting one sheet to another. Much was fragmenting but a powerful and coherent will persisted and drove the old man on an absurd journey across his brainscape.

Old man, yes. He was now himself, assuming himself was

James Llewellyn. Certainly, it was true that the old man was now James Llewellyn, a fellow who did not feel sorry for himself. Quite the contrary. He was thinking about his mission and not himself, and, in any case, he considered himself lucky under the circumstances, though those circumstances included the increasing fog which was covering his sense of self. "Perhaps," admitted himself, "I am in a position worse than I think." Yet, not in the worst of all positions. He was alive – sort of, and certain important regions of his brain seemed to be functioning. Having been married to a neurobiologist, he understood that intact yet were the ventromedial regions of his prefrontal cerebral cortex. He was a man without legs, but if that center of social and moral consciousness had been damaged, he might have been a pair of legs without a man. Though it seemed that many facets of a man might have lingered on without an arbiter to negotiate some sort of a compromised person from the bedlam and babble.

Yet. . .

Some sense of self survived.

But that self did not feel complete or healthy. It felt to be on the verge of exploding into a vacuum. James Llewellyn was isolated, so painfully alone in the midst of reddish-brown and white matter mutilated by the recent stroke. He imagined that the reddish-brown stuff was dying and turning gray as his self was receiving little information on biological and emotional needs other than the signals from his battle-scarred heart and his stinking kidneys. Once an engineer as talented as any from his race, he was privy only to random whispers of those algebraically encoded abstractions produced by sheets of neurons so well nurtured and so harshly disciplined over the decades.

Knowing that his self was muchly a process of integrating perceptions and thoughts, James Llewellyn knew he was not long for his half-life. Few parts of his brain were functioning, fewer still were the signals reaching the prefrontal regions of his cortex. There was little to integrate, and it would not be long before the process would be nothing but a ghostly hope of divine mercy.

Truly, James Llewellyn's self was decaying rapidly, though it

still dimly lit the way defined by that very act of shining. That was not sufficient to define a human person, or rather, as the old man knew well, if there was only the existential act without something to interact with outside of itself, that would be most perfect and most solipsistic of Hells. And – how long could the soma survive when no longer interacting with its environment.

“Truly,” said the old man, “is James Llewellyn in the worst spot of his life, though unfocused and unsourced hope yet tells him it may be the best spot of his life.”

<Old man|?

|James Llewellyn>?

Perhaps

<James Llewellyn|

(dot-de-do-de-dot)

$a \times |baby\rangle + b \times |boy\rangle + c \times |young\ man\rangle + d \times$
 $|middle-aged\ man\rangle + e \times |old\ man\rangle$

Was such possible? Was there an essence called James Llewellyn which was in some sense independent of the life which the old man was re-mem-bering? Was such to be dotted with the concrete contingencies of a particular history that a person be actualized?

“It is almost enough to make a man echo ‘la-la,’” said the man once married to a neurobiologist who had performed a study on the autistic-like abnormalities and hyper-developed characteristics of the most highly studied brain in history, that of Einstein. It was on the edge of her area of expertise, but she had said she wished to better understand her husband and her nephew and perhaps coming grandsons. And, a grandson of some mental talents and a muchly fragmented personality had come, but not while she was alive. Much could she have done to help the boy develop his genius while perhaps avoiding the worst of its consequences.

And that was why...

The struggle...

Must go on?

The old man, who was also James Llewellyn, was fighting hard to keep up his efforts to achieve that all-important goal of destroying the North American Collective, whatever the hell that was. More than that, why the hell did that thing deserve so much hatred? James Llewellyn vaguely remembered that his grandson and other young men must be killed that they could be saved, but, then again, that proposition seemed ridiculous. He could not imagine what sort of logical reasoning could have led to such a theory, not that he was currently well-equipped to form the simplest of syllogisms.

Not sure of his goal, less sure of its importance, suspecting he might cause more pain and suffering, both <the old man| and |James Llewellyn> were pushed forward by something which was supporting the weakening will of the hims willing to support the effort. Willing to will... Or not?

Perhaps it was a sort of mental inertia.

Perhaps not.

With his will introspectively breaking down, the old man considered surrendering as a way out of his own pain and suffering. Perhaps it was time to allow his hims to dissipate into the inhuman wastes of infinity. There was not much left of most of those many hims.

Blind, he suspected his eyes stared vacantly at the computer's display screen.

Deaf, he thought it likely the Center's life-support systems still hummed.

Mute, he could not have protested if a janitor had carted his body out to a dumpster.

Worst of all, though the Center's security systems undoubtedly operated, James Llewellyn's own proprioceptors were down. A truly important him had died, or at least was falling down on the job. The old man was aware of many bodily functions not normally accessible to the conscious mind, but he no longer knew if his feet were planted flat on the floor, if his knees were bent, if his back pressed against the chair.

Signs of impending doom were increasing. Fumes wafted by, faint hints of urea and other poisons. The flow of fresh air was

fitful; the sound of fluids pulsing by was fading. Decay lay over all things, and death was approaching rapidly.

The old man shuffled across a bridge whose moorings were tearing free and curling up. A few steps carried him an immense distance across this new sheet which seemed like a tightly woven net rather than a smooth surface. He came to an abrupt stop, probably no more than a few seconds after leaving the bridge. A breeze of fresh air passed through, and tears came to James Llewellyn's eyes as he smelled the lilacs on his grandfather's farm. May-like, that odor drifted in an open window and passed over heads bedecked, some in white and some in brown and even some in a shade of gold, as unusual as that was for creatures cousins to chimpanzees and gorillas. Yet, true it was as was it true.

It seemed to the old man, observing as an outsider and not a re-experiencer that the bodies supporting those heads were seated at a huge table covered with bowls and plates giving off the sense of roast beef-gravy-mashed potatoes-hot, yeasty rolls. For the time of a quickly passing memory, he froze and tried to untangle the smells of a Sunday dinner. He hoped to bring order to that potpourri that the presence of fresh-baked apple pies might be detected. It was so, so important to . . .

The old man looked about at the eerie brainscape. Sheets of reddish, white material lay beneath his feet. Gray was his future, but it had not yet arrived. Every so often, a chain of lights would flash across the sheet, occasionally making contact across a bridge or up a ladder. If that happened, the streak of rapidly fading luminescence would shoot off into the distance. Looking down, James Llewellyn saw that something different had just happened where he was standing. A stable circuit of some sort had been constructed, though it was fading in parallel to the unfulfilled hopes of smelling apples baking in a spicy brown cinnamon broth. Yet, the circuit did not seem to be those hopes, nor did it seem to be the memory of those golden-brown, yeasty rolls. It was necessary but not sufficient. He shook his head and moved on, wondering why a phrase from mathematical proofs had any applicability to this situation. Further wondered he if there were memories which could be revived by events

sufficient though not necessary. Multiple his hims, why not multiple the framework of certain types of memories?

Calm had returned as a man not quite autistic was thinking through a complex problem. Concrete had been the memories bringing on the abstract considerations. Yes, the old man knew that, in the end, panic had been averted by the smells of a grandmother's handiwork. Temporarily had he, yes – even most of his hims, forgotten he had withdrawn inside his stroke-scarred brain. Even when he was not awash in the sensations of better times, it was hard to remember where he was. It was still more difficult to remember he was little more than a piece of a cerebral cortex struggling hard to maintain a sense of self. There was so little left upon which to found a self. The sense of body was fading. There was little in the way of fresh smells, nothing of images and sounds.

Yet, the legs carrying him across these bizarre planes felt like the limbs which had once carried him down the base-paths, though these legs were oh so weak. They had once been sinewed with bands of steel, but that was in the days when a young man scaled cliffs above African rivers. That was when he accompanied naturalist friends on safaris to capture and tag polar bears so nasty. Mostly, that was when a moral war had been waged among the pieces of his fragmented self, and he had finally shed his many girl friends and two mistresses, though that was not until three years into his marriage. Morgan had been a saint, or else she just loved him enough to let matters work themselves out.

He was dying at a time appropriate for his body and its environment, and, yet, it seemed as if concrete muscles, though mere shades of those youthful masses of contractile tissue, were responding to his intentions.

The sorry state of the brainscape worried James Llewellyn. Great shards of material fell from those sheets overhead. Strips of the net-like stuff were curling up loosely like so many jagged and worn-out watch-springs. A dim circle of lights formed near his feet and the taste of the spice cake from his twelfth birthday lay upon his virtual tongue. It came to this man, so well-disciplined in the ways of science and technology, that he was

but an image of a fading self. Could the image persist when the self had faded? The old man could think of no better definition of Hell – to be a ghostly thing without a body and without a world to occupy.

His father had once returned from San Francisco with a baseball autographed by the DiMaggio brothers – Joe and Dom. That was the year Jimmy Llewellyn set the freshman home run record for Thomas Jefferson High. Like the DiMaggio's, he had played centerfield barely outside the infield dirt. He had dared anyone to burn him. Few did, even in college, though there he had dropped back a little bit. DiMaggio-like, his favorite feat in baseball had been to throw out a runner at first from the outfield. Even a home run had not been comparable to that.

Pleasant memories and all, James Llewellyn was fading fast. He shook himself back to an awareness of the task that lay ahead; the programming had been completed, but he had not yet spoken the code words which would send that murderous program to reside in a small box of old-fashioned silicon chips. The silicon substrate for that killer would be secure – two decades before, he had placed it there, secretly and on a hunch it might be needed some day. All it could do was accept a program and then listen for specific conditions to download the program into the general defense system of North America, though he had built the box before the United States had expanded into Canada and then south to the northernmost districts of Uruguay.

As director of the defense system at times, the chief engineer at others, and sometimes the major consultant, James Llewellyn had been able to see that the connections to his booby-trap were maintained. Booby-trap? In fact, he had not known why he built that box and placed it in the communications network for the North American defense system, self-powered for centuries, as an unmarked and undetectable node in that air-defense system. It had the capabilities to push programs past most types of systems safeguards; it would have few problems sending dangerous instructions into the master control systems of the North American Collective. Much technology and much knowledge had been lost after the Nuclear Wars, especially when many scientists and engineers had chosen to retire quietly rather

than work for the Collective. The Overlords had eventually realized what had happened and created a special police team to track down people with technical skills and knowledge, not that it had taken much of an effort to find James Llewellyn. He had retired, but in a rather public and ostentatious style. A fool he had perhaps been, a coward not.

The box had finally revealed its purpose. It could be used to destroy an evil government. It could sit quietly, listening for a particular pattern of signals telling it that certain tests were being conducted. Those signals would tell the little box that men were breaking down barriers in an attempt to enter sacred ground. The old man did not really think the barriers between the human and non-human could be demolished, but much that was human might be tortured or destroyed in the attempt to do so. Men had always sought to be gods, but not James Llewellyn. He had always had too much fun being a man and was willing to pay the price for that troubled but rewarding state. Now, he was determined to discourage divine pretensions on the part of other men. It would be that box which would listen for signs that certain unwise experiments were being conducted. It would strike out and destroy James Llewellyn's enemies and save the human race in one attack which could easily breach any security systems the Collective was capable of building. It would save by killing more innocent people, some of them likely to be boys, or at least young men.

Through the accelerating self-destruction of a body once wondrously adapted to the demands of an often harsh world, past a bridge carrying the memory of his wife's favorite perfume and her bodily odor, past another which channeled the strains of *Silent Night* sung in the bell-like soprano of his twelve year-old grandson, Parnell, James Llewellyn was driven by a will tempered and sharpened by years in the upriver jungles of Nigeria, by more years in the trench wars of corporate and governmental bureaucracies, by the sight of his greatest work launching wave after wave of rockets carrying the fires of Hell in their heads.

Nearly four billion people had died in those wars, mostly in the aftermath when the institutions of society broke down and mostly from medical problems once considered minor. A high

percentage of the children born after the wars were retarded, limbless, or defective in their innermost organs. It was not radiation but rather rubella and hantaviruses and starvation which had wreaked such havoc.

The old man fell to his knees and wept uncontrollably. Still embodied, still actualized, though weakening fast, James Llewellyn's mental barriers were broken down by a whirlwind of a process cycling between the barely living limbic regions of his brain and those organs and glands of his visceral region which still responded, however weakly. He saw again those images of defenseless and innocent young men dying as that program did what its creator had willed, however reluctantly. He had lived much of his life with blood on his hands, nearly all his adult life with the blood of billions threatening to spill onto his person. He would go to his Maker with fresh blood to be spilled, perhaps even as he was being Judged. Shrugging off that concern, he told himself that, for men though perhaps not for women, the sins of omission lay heavier than the sins of commission.

His preconceptions confirmed once more, James Llewellyn stumbled to his feet and set off for a distant bridge in a gait ever more shuffling. He noticed the air seemed to be changing into an amorphous substance, glass-like but more short-termly liquid. Ignoring gravity, the thickening air was forming itself into vertical panes as if hot and cold were henceforth to be separated east to west and not up to down. James Llewellyn shuffled onward through increasingly thin and dense layers of air.

The great sheets, formerly fraying on the edges and on the surface, were beginning to buckle and tear. Bridges and ladders were collapsing and being shredded by the movement of the sheets. Once again intent on his poorly-understood mission, James Llewellyn stumbled forward as a gently curved sheet began to osculate, to slope and climb, to drop unexpectedly. Ignoring the wrenching in his gut, he shortly reached a critical turning point. Refractions jiggled and then they jaggled and soon he was seeing where he had been. The stooped figure of a man approached, straightening and growing brawnier with each lurch forward.

James Llewellyn, or at least one segment of him, stopped as the man came into sharp focus. Thirtiesh, he stood a hair over six feet tall. He was well-muscled, thick of shoulders, chest, and stomach. His eyes burst questions at the world; his mouth was set firmly in a face strangely devoid of wrinkles. The young man's entire person, but especially those eyes... those eyes... those Adamic and apish eyes, spit forth internally generated possibilities. He presented not well-formed circular or rectangular pillars to be fit into experimentally controlled peg-holes.

Not at all.

This young man presented shapes convoluted fantastically. Clearly, most such possibilities generated within a creative mind would find no place in the environment of the moment. Some would not have fit in any environment in the Universe. Others would have fit in environments a few centuries prior or a few hence; still others could have fit but never happened to find their proper slot.

Rich in possibilities, the invader was also a man of practical accomplishments. Spare of gesture and ascetic of expression, the young man projected a confidence well-founded upon a highly developed set of talents. He was a successful man of the world.

As he stared at the invader, James Llewellyn wondered how he knew so much about this fellow who looked so oddly like a James Llewellyn of 60 years prior.

Hesitation lay upon a complex and recursive environment before rings of lights were seen in the distance, aurorae limbicis was building up to some sort of climax. The lights played left to right, up to down, and sent tentative projections into regions no longer within the knowledge of the battered old man. As the lights passed, he felt hot drops represented upon his sunken and virtual cheeks, tasted salt upon his lips cracked and celibate. His vision was clouded. The hands clenched, appendage-like, even as they terminated those frail 91 year-old arms. Lungs sucked stale air and an empty stomach quivered. Heart weakened just the tiniest bit more. The aurorae flashed in from all directions and tightened a circle around James Llewellyn. He knew it was time to feel sad.

His remembered body recursed again and remembered that

of a young man grieving for his father. That young stomach had been poisoned by emotions too strong and too sudden. The purging of the gut had continued for an entire day; the heart was never cleansed of that pure and Godly acceptance of suffering.

The two grieving bodies came into communion with that of the 66 year-old James Llewellyn, standing, shaking and weeping, at the open, flower-strewn grave of his wife.

Memories and the multitude of one person in whom they inhered wormed their way through spacetime. The worm bled in many a segment but seldom moaned. He wept only for others. When still young and driven by the most innocent of lusts, James Llewellyn had learned that endurance is the necessary link between suffering and character. It had been much harder to internalize the tentmaker's claim that character produces hope. He had ever after wondered if there are statements true only when conjoined to belief.

By the greatest of miracles, a young man had come to believe in hope and it had never disappointed him. Suffering had come as frequently as success, and it was the suffering which penetrated more deeply to the hearts of James Llewellyn and those he loved. It was that which formed his character more than the rather superficial effects of worldly riches. And, so, hope had survived in the fertile ground prepared by misery and pain. It had even grown stronger through those driest of periods when faith had been discarded like a suit no longer in fashion.

It was a gesture of hope when the old man moved one step closer to his younger self. The worm was not turning on anyone, but it was trying awfully hard to examine its own hinder parts. Movement was to no avail. Legs motionless, the simulacrum of the ghost of the memory of an actuate long since dissipated into the biosphere moved a compensation backwards. Safe from the demands of the present, it raised its left arm and pointed righteously at a heaving bridge leading to a once planar sheet contorted in ways quite non-Euclidean.

The sheet quaked and heaved and gave off an eerie light as if it were on fire. With great reluctance but determined to see his mission, whatever the hell it was, through to the end, James Llewellyn went down on all fours and inched his way

across a most uncooperative bridge. Reaching the other side, he struggled to his feet and limped on aching knees and ankles towards a fuzzy image hovering over the central region of the sheet.

Whatever was there, it was sheltered by flames starting a foot or so above the sheet and rising to several times the height of James Llewellyn. He shuffled through the flames with barely a twinge of fear. Half expecting to confront the fires of Hell he had helped to unleash upon the Earth, the old man was surprised to see only six young men sitting on what seemed to be chairs of legal murder. A few steps forward and he was able to see five of the young men were sitting at the points of a pentagram outlined on this sheet of brain matter. The young fellows were all motionless from the shoulders down. One looked to be frozen in panic from the neck up, the others were gabbling away. Streams of meaningless numbers struck the ears of a man once known as the greatest of all human engineers.

Not sure if the lack of patterns was a cognitive illusion or an actual property of the number line, James Llewellyn stopped to test himself. " $2+3=5$." That seemed right. " $7\times 5=35$," came also quickly and resonated calmly. He said, "Now let's try for prime numbers." It was not hard to remember '3' to be a prime number, but then he halted to think before telling himself, "3 primes the numbers 6, 9, 12, and so forth. They must also be primes."

Satisfied that many of his cognitive functions were intact, James Llewellyn moved forward to stand in front of a young blond man with a slack face and dull, blue eyes. The fellow spoke a mass, orbital parameters, and a list of elements. Quickly calculating the likely volume of the described object, and allowing for the chemical make-up, James Llewellyn guessed it was a large asteroid.

His attention shifted to the young man at the center of the pentagram. Though the paunch and the gray hair seemed not familiar, the old man moved a step forward and shouted, "Parnell!" at the middle-aged man who looked like his grandson with another 20 years added. James Llewellyn's image of himself shivered, reviving the sadness barely sufficient as a bulwark

against the Satanic anger which welled up as he stared at those tubes and wires running into Parnell's arms, legs, and groin. There was a metallic and plastic collar about his neck with wires and a few small tubes running in. Other wires were attached to electrodes above his ears, at his temples, and beneath his eyes.

James Llewellyn tried to burst into the pentagram, past the poor young men wired and entubed just like Parnell. The entire pentagram, with the six men, moved a compensation backwards, just like the recursive image of his younger self had done.

It came to the tired old man that projected memories had not the substance, the sheer sensual density of actual memories. He wondered if such an insight could help him move about a brainscape increasingly alien, but, instead of returning to his work, he willed his will to relax and fell to his knees where he prayed to the God he had abandoned and hoped with all the strength which had deserted him.

Somehow finding the desire to rise, James Llewellyn struggled back to the bridge and once more crawled across on his hands and knees. His other self confronted him as he rose. The younger image stood with muscles tensed and mouth set more firmly than ever.

"Why did you build those systems for them? Did you not guess what they intended to do?"

Feeling weak and sad once more, the old man swatted at the mists obscuring his vision.

"Of course I knew," confessed the elder James Llewellyn, constricted of throat and thick of tongue. He swallowed but fluids flowed into his mouth that much faster. "I have that in my past, but you have such sins in your future."

The younger self was so horrified as to part his lips slightly. His eyes still blasted his internal presentations at the world and precious seconds passed while wave after wave of gentle accusation and merciless pity and harsh forgiveness pounded upon the older self. Elder-self-loathing flowed also into the ocean of suffering in which the old man was bathing, and the younger James Llewellyn moved backwards, legs still motionless.

Suddenly melancholic of expression, the smooth-faced man said, "You may burst some of the constraints I have placed upon

you, but you shall never transcend yourself.”

The old man and the memory of his image of his younger self moved off side-by-side, intent on reaching a place from which James Llewellyn’s will could bring about the possibility of ruthlessly merciful death.

Marched the two wormish segments deep.

Deep.

Deep, so deep that Euclid’s π was down to a slice.

Was that truly what had passed through his grandfather’s mind as he was dying? Doubtful, but how was Parnell to do better than anticipate one plausible set of thoughts in a dying brain of a man of both science and faith?

14

Parnell returned to the cellar and moved the buckets of kerosene outside. He was finished cleaning the parts off and. . .

It was time to assemble the damned things.

Generators, that is.

True things, if ever things there were.

The assembly of which was not nearly as exciting as the dismantling of which.

The back-hoe was waiting, and Parnell would shortly be ready to tune it up and dig up gold and diamonds. Important, that. Damned straight. Of course, Parnell always tried to be straight with himself, and, for the most part, with other people as well. Happy that he had a good memory for schematics was Parnell. Happy also that he could draw a schematic in his head as he took apart a complicated device. He had little idea what was the name of the squiggly thing that fit into that cylinder and could only reason on general principles why that thing-a-ma-bopper was attached by wire to the last of the nondescript boxes. To be sure, it was not black, but so featureless that it might as well have been.

He had chosen not to take apart anything that looked to contain electronics. That seemed wise as he sat in the midst of goodly piles of dirt and smears of grease. He was also uncertain how the delicate instruments in the electronics lab would have survived the years of neglect. The generators would, of course, be nice, but once he fixed the back-hoe, he would be able to corner the world's market on generators.

Well. . .

The market in this part of the country anyway.

As Parnell was tightening the last bolt of the first generator he assembled, he heard footsteps behind him. Turned he did and smiled he did as well. Marie stood there with Raul right behind her. Raul just looked in

amazement at the generators and Parnell smiled proudly. Humble he tried to be, but not falsely or pietistically so. He let his smile grow, though Marie just stood there, arms akimbo and staring at him. Parnell's smile broke into a grin and he announced with prideful feelings increased a bit more, "You're standing akimbo." She scrunched up her face in that ripply way that Parnell loved so much, and he added, "I've never, not once in my entire life, been able to use 'akimbo' in a sentence that did not sound artificial and stilted."

She laughed, and Raul shook his head a few times before saying, "No wonder you and Donnie are good friends."

With his mind still occupied by practical matters like getting a back-hoe running, Parnell was a bit confused by such a remark, seemingly out of its proper context. He wondered if Donnie also was proud when he was able to use obscure words in ordinary conversation.

No matter.

Parnell announced, "Now I'm ready for the back-hoe."

"The back-hoe?" asked Marie. "I haven't even seen a back-hoe around here. It'd sure be useful in cleaning up that jungle out front."

"Rose garden, sweetest Marie."

"Whatever."

Raul looked intently at Parnell as he interjected, "And it would be useful for moving supplies around when we start repairing the deck and cleaning out the septic system."

Parnell grimaced as he realized that the back-hoe would also be useful for things other than retrieving gold and jewels. Including some yuckie things. Not that cleaning and repairing were 'things'. It was just that. . .

"Where is the back-hoe?" asked Marie. "I've been all over this property and I never saw one."

"Sealed into one of the grizzly wintering caves in the hill a mile west of here."

"You sealed. . ."

Marie stared at Parnell long enough for him to note, "You're standing akimbo again."

She closed her eyes for a few seconds. Not Raul. He laughed with a quite open face. Parnell decided to help her out by saying, "I suppose you're wondering why we sealed the back-hoe into a grizzly wintering cave."

All she could do was nod.

"We wanted to protect it really well and we didn't want anyone to be

able to drive it off. It's also just a small one. We didn't want one of those 1500 pound grizzlies to knock it over."

"Why did you put it way out there?"

"Because that's where the gold and diamonds are." Marie and Raul froze, and Parnell decided to be helpful again. "We buried it pretty deep. And near the bear caves. We didn't want anyone to get it in case I was able to get back for it."

"Why didn't you tell us, Honey?"

Parnell shrugged. "I meant to, a couple of times. I just never got the chance."

"How much gold is in there?"

"Not much. A half-ton or so. And a handful or so of high quality diamonds."

"A half-ton? How much is that worth?"

He shrugged again and said, "Maybe 35 million or so, at the prices during 2024. It's probably still worth a lot today."

"Yeah," agreed Raul in a dazed voice. "Gold keeps its value pretty well."

"That's why grandpa chose it."

"How did he get that much?"

"Mr. Budakian, who used to live down the road. He was an Armenian banker with contacts all over the world. All people who kept secrets real well."

Raul was a bit puzzled about something and, after a moment, he asked, "When are you going to..."

"Pretty soon," answered Parnell with a nod towards the two generators ready to be tested.

"No, I meant, when are you going to dig up the gold."

"As soon as I get power in the house, then I'll check the back-hoe out. I guess we'll have to dig the rocks and dirt out by hand to get the back-hoe out."

"I guess so." Raul looked still more confused.

"We still have the gold our mothers gave us. There's no real rush."

"I guess not. Why don't you take me out there sometime and show me where everything is. It's not a good idea to have the futures of all our children resting on your shoulders alone."

"No. I guess not."

That was enough to convince Parnell to return to work. He went to

fetch the cans of oil on the shelf near the doorway. As Raul and Marie watched silently, Parnell put in enough oil. He was not really convinced he was putting on such an interesting show, but there they stayed. As they watched still, he walked past them, heading out to the shed near the pool where the fuel cans had always been kept. Halfway there, he stopped and snapped his fingers and turned back towards the garden storage shed near the front of the house.

The tractor would be useful for hauling rocks out of the cave entrance rather than moving them slowly with iron levers. If the back-hoe was not in working order, the tractor could even be used, slowly and carefully, to get that gold under ten feet of dirt and a pile of small boulders. The shed door was broken off its hinges. The tractor was gone, along with the fuel that used to be kept with it. Parnell looked around in disbelief. Nearly all the tools were gone and there was a message painted in lime-green: "We the pinkin REBS!!!"

Parnell found Raul and Marie right behind him when he turned. "What's a pinkin REB?"

Raul said, "Probably a youth gang."

"Oh. Why did they steal my tractor?"

"Probably because they thought they could have some fun with it."

"Oh. Makes sense. It's good to enjoy life as much as possible. Within proper moral constraints." Parnell set off towards the fuel shed with the announcement, "Guess we'll have to carry the fuel tanks by hand."

"How about that hand-cart we've been using upstairs?"

"That would work. Let's get it."

Marie and Raul exchanged glances as Parnell moved briskly past them and in the direction of the front door.

It was no more than a half-hour later that Parnell turned the ignition switch and generator #1 went on line. Almost immediately a scream came from the house above, and he turned the generator off. Parnell reached the kitchen just behind Marie and saw no injuries. Lee was giggling. Donnie was holding his hand over his mouth to try to hold back the laughter. They were looking upwards. Parnell looked up to see a rather dizzy-looking Jimmy with his arms and legs wrapped around blades of the ceiling fan.

"What are you doing up there?"

Jimmy could do little but roll his eyes. Raul hopped up on the center island and held out his arms. "Let go with your feet, Jimmy. I'll catch you." Jimmy looked unconvinced that was such a good idea, but after Raul

repeated his plea in a gentle voice, Jimmy let go with his feet and Raul grabbed hold of him above the knees. By then, Parnell and Donnie were both standing below to catch Jimmy as Raul got him to let go with his arms as well.

As soon as Parnell had his still dizzy son in a chair, he asked, “Why in the world did you climb up there?”

After a few seconds of bringing his eyes under control, Jimmy smiled up and said, “I don’t know. I guess cuz it was up there.”

Parnell looked over to check out the likely path Jimmy had traveled. Up on the countertop and then up on the cabinets to the rafter and then shimmy over to the fan. While his eyes were still fastened on that end-point of Jimmy’s little quest, Raul said, “I guess he really is your son.”

Wearing a distant voice and speaking from afar, Parnell responded, “Nope. He’s James Llewellyn’s grandson and the genes skipped a generation. I had too much of my father’s caution in me.”

Marie snorted. “Not according to some of the stories your mother told me.”

Parnell shrugged. “I only did crazy things for a specific reason. . .”

“Like fetching a book about gun control systems on old battleships?”

“Yeah.” Parnell lifted his hands and turned them palm up, in his attempt to silently ask, “What’s so strange about that?”

15

Hot the sun. Red the skin. Sore the muscles. Decided Parnell, he had, and that without a doubt, that this business of digging shafts in the earth was not much more fun than digging ditches. Worse. Ten feet down meant the dirt had to be hauled up ten feet. If only one of them had been able to handle the back-hoe a bit better. Well... At least, they got a good five foot deep crater with the back-hoe before digging a shaft by hand. An impressive hole it was at that and an impressive pile of dirt twenty feet away. Looked as if someone had tried to remove the hill.

When Lee and Marie showed up with sandwiches and thermoses of ice-water, Parnell and Donnie climbed out of the hole to join Raul. Only two had been able to work at a time in the hole and they had been taking turns. As they climbed out, Jimmy slid down into the hole to the cries of Marie. Parnell looked back down at his son and waved his wife off. "I'll get him out. Jimmy..."

His son's name was barely out of his mouth when Jimmy had picked up the tamping rod they had been using to poke for the metal boxes. A loud clang hit their ears. Parnell and Donnie exchanged smiles and Raul came flying over to the edge of the hole.

"Let's get Jimmy out of there before he gets hurt, Parnell, and then let's get down to see our treasure."

Before the sun had moved much farther in the sky, Parnell and Raul had hauled up the first of the eight boxes of gold buried by Parnell and his grandfather nearly 14 years ago. The bolt was a bit rusty but Parnell dropped back into the hole and came up with the pick-ax. Everybody retreated from the box and Parnell lifted the heavy tool straight up before bringing it down upon the bolt. He grunted as a shock went through his right elbow and shoulder, but the bolt assembly snapped off. While he was still rubbing his elbow, Donnie came forward and opened the box.

“Gold!” he shouted gleefully. “Just like the pirates. That’s us. Just like the pirates.”

Parnell looked down upon the ingots as Marie came forward and caressed his elbow. He smiled at her. She was usually golden, or at least her hair, but Parnell decided he would rather have her than all the gold in the world, even when she was somewhat greenish of hair and ripply of boundary. Parnell was starting to remember when he first lay at her side on the shore of that lake near that ranch-house located near Walla-walla, of all the places in a rather large universe! That day, she had been nearly as greenish and as ripply as the waters so full of fish and beavers. He was interrupted from his memories of that lake-day when Raul looked up from the box and asked, “How many more are down there?”

Parnell shook those dear patterns so much more primal than images from his head and replied, “There should be seven more with gold bars. We didn’t want to make them too heavy because we lowered them by hand and rope. There should also be one with a couple of handfuls of very high-quality diamonds including a few blues set in platinum.”

A few hours later, the gold bars and diamonds were behind the steel door of the safe built into the basement wall in the electronics lab so long the domain of spiders and their victims.

Though the excitement had not dissipated, everyone but Parnell and Jimmy returned to cleaning up the living area. Those two went off to park the back-hoe behind the tennis court so much like a weedy field after more than a decade without the trod of rubber-soled, white shoes. With his arm around Jimmy’s shoulder, if only to keep him from sneaking back and getting the back-hoe, Parnell headed down to the boat-house. It was time to tune-up boat motors, to clean boats and boat-sheds. Most of all, the dock needed to be rebuilt. Parnell had helped his grandfather and Mr. Alvarez re-build it once, no more than 21 years ago. He had a good plan for the thing in his head and had already counted up the bolts and brackets, the wood of this length and that, and he even remembered how many bags of cement they had mixed to pour the footings for the dock.

When Parnell opened the door to the boat-shed, a smell of must came forth. Webs there were. Everywhere. Husks of insects as well. And not to be ignored were the black things scurrying along the guy-wires of the webs. He looked down at his son and noted sadly, “I think human civilization has existed mainly to build hidey-holes for spiders.”

Jimmy shrugged and smiled as he peered in the shed. Parnell feared

he was thinking of ways to lure his poor sister down into the shed. Sure enough, when he said, "Let's get to work cleaning out this mess," Jimmy's entire body drooped as if in mourning for dearly departed friends.

Not sure if any of the spiders were poisonous, Parnell fetched a six-foot stick from the nearby woods and began clearing the worst of the webs. After a few minutes of that, he put the stick down and grabbed hold of the floored front-end of the john-boat. The front-end supports for the boat had given way, the rear-end banged to the floor, but it was still a solid piece of heavy-duty aluminum and no harm was done. It was barely out of the shed when the swarm of bees rose from inside the boat. Without a word, Parnell turned to spot Jimmy only five feet away. He grabbed his son and took off for the lake nearly fifty feet away. He felt the first fuzzy little thing landing on his neck just as the water had reached his waist and a second later, as he felt the sting, he told Jimmy, "Hold your breath," and took both of them under the water. Quickly, for he was not sure how long Jimmy could hold his breath, Parnell swam down the beach. He came up, gasping for air, underneath the low-slung branches of a water-loving maple tree.

Smiled he did at the thought of that six-pound largemouth bass he had caught here when he was thirteen. Silvery and green and such a fighter it had been. The sound of Jimmy sucking in air brought him back from his memories. Manfully was the young lad struggling to show no sign of discomfort, but little was his success. Parnell looked back to see the swarm moving slowly back towards its disturbed nest. Not liking the feel of muck under his sneakers – leeches and critters of that sort had always bothered him – Parnell swam out a ways and then side-stroked his way back to the dock area. On shore, he caught his breath for a moment and then checked Jimmy for bee stings.

None.

Happy the father who had reacted as fastly as if he were not the inwardly directed thinker that he truly was. Scared the ten year-old boy who was still not sure what had happened.

No matter.

Give him a few hours and the little reincarnation of James Llewellyn would be heading out to find an adventure.

Parnell walked up towards the house, giving the john-boat a wide berth but noticing the jellowjackets were not pleased to be exposed to the sun's rays. They might clear out soon. If not, he would take care of them with some kerosene. As territorial as the fiendish things were, Parnell did not

think they would stick around if the nest were uncomfortable and the larvae were all dead. That would be a bit much for the most home-loving of beasts.

Up the hill towards the house marched the loving father and the coming-to-life boy. Up the stairs to the deck. Stripped they themselves of shoes and socks, shirts, and even jeans. Stood Parnell in his red-hearted shorts, sloughing off water with his hand for just a moment. Turned he to the lad carefully sloughing water off of his body as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Spoke he, "Come on in and ask your mother to get some dry clothes for you, and I'll go into the bathroom and get us some towels."

Smelling faintly of pond-water, Parnell walked past a open-mouthed Lee to enter the downstairs bathroom where Marie had stored all the towels. He dried himself off quickly and returned to the great-room to hand Jimmy a towel. Marie was already seated on the couch interrogating the mid-sized fellow. "And a fine example of man self-labeled wise-wise is my son," spoke Parnell under his breath, though smiling for all the world to see.

Marie turned and asked, "Did you say something, Sweetheart?"

"No. I am still somewhat overcome with joy at our good luck not to be swarmed upon by those little fiends." With a smile, he repeated, "Fiends. A fine word for such nasty little buggers."

"What's a bugger, Daddy?"

"Uh, well, um. . ."

Marie rescued her honest but not always forthright husband by replying, "It's one of those words whose meaning is lost in antiquity."

"Who was Auntie Quitie, Mommy?" Alicia was standing in front of her mother, and Parnell, a good judge of devious little children, knew she was trying to regain center stage from her brother.

Once more muttered Parnell, "And a fine example of Homo Sapiens Sapiens most modern is my daughter as well." Suddenly concerned with the lack of accuracy in his statement, Parnell spoke more loudly. "Though, to be sure, Homo Sapiens, redundant or not, extends back at least 100,000 years ago, 95,000 years past antiquity so-called as defined by human records."

"Who's Auntie Quitie, Daddy?"

Beamed the proud father at signs of such linguistic genius on the part of a young daughter. Wrong she might have been, but quite clever in trying to fill in a gap in her knowledge. Still, he had not the patience for a vocabulary lesson, and he said, "I'll show you a picture of her later."

"Parnell!"

"Yes, Dear?"

Marie looked exasperated for a moment, but then she laughed and shook her head. “Never mind. Just tell her the truth when you show her the picture.”

“I had planned to do that.”

She lifted Alicia up in the air to put her on the couch, and then returned her attention to her son. Pulling him forward, she ran her eyes down his front and then turned him around. Inspection complete, she announced, “I guess you really didn’t get any bites.”

“Lucky were father and son to be so close to a lake full of water not well-loved by bees except by the smallest drops at a time.”

“Yes, lucky were you, Sweetie-pie.” Looking up, she suddenly became hard-edged about mouth and eyes before continuing to speak. “And you better be careful with Jimmy.”

“But, of course, he’s my son as well.”

“Yes, and James Llewellyn’s great-grandson to boot. And, if we can get him past his teens, he might be quite a man, even a mighty man like an engineer who once built hospitals in Africa. As I have heard thousands of times.”

“I am making much progress in my narrative of the context in which I lived much of my life. When I am reasonably sure it is complete and coherent, I shall commit it to paper and not bother you muchly with oral versions of my family’s history.” Parnell halted a moment and then said, “Tangled-gooky stuff comes out of my mouth too easily. Truly must I have inherited my grandmother’s genes for academic talent and my grandfather’s talent for bureaucracy and corporate management.”

Parnell could hear Lee and Raul laugh on the other side of the room. Marie just smiled and Parnell went over to his suitcase to fetch some dry clothes.

A few minutes later, he and Jimmy were heading down towards the boat with a can of hornet spray he had found in the garden shed. He was wondering why pinkin REBS would have no need of hornet spray in a world so filled with stinging creatures. Yet, the two cans standing on that shelf were likely an accident caused by oversight or simply distaste for aerosol cans.

Still. . .

From a safe distance of 15 feet, with Jimmy right at the water’s edge, Parnell killed off a part of the wildlife population in his environment. Not willingly. He would have preferred to have let them live, so long as they

left the boat, but he knew no tales of men negotiating successfully with yellowjackets. Died the little fiends, shriveled and unable to even flee.

Parnell pulled the boat down closer to the water to get it out of the way and headed for the open shed, hornet spray held out in front of his body. Alas, the remainder of the day was taken up with cleaning the insides of the shed. Not a single critter more troublesome than a horsefly attacked over the next few hours as they carried out cans of jellied gasoline, put two motors – horsie frames and all, on the grass in preparation for a good stripping and tuning up.

The sun shone. Father and son worked as a well-practiced team. Such a day had it been, at the very least. But, it had been, in fact, more than that.

“All in all it was a productive day,” spoke Parnell to his son as they headed up to the house near dinnertime. “We tuned up one of the motors. Cleaned the shed. Stripped several pairs of oars for painting. Dug up about 40 million dollars of diamonds and gold this morning. Can’t complain much. Wish I could get that much done most days.”

“And we got chased into the lake by bees, and we got to drive the back-hoe.”

“How could I have left those accomplishments off my list? It is unfortunately true that we often see things only from our own perspective, though man most wise-wise, of all creatures, is equipped to see the world, however inadequately, from the viewpoint of his fellow-creatures, even those not among the surviving species of hominids. Not that it is wise to assume our ancestors tried to empathize muchly with those other species of hominids, all of which lasted not past the New Stone Age.”

“You talk funny, Daddy.”

“I know. My speech patterns were long ago corrupted by Dylan Shagari.”

“He the one with the holes in his face?”

“Yes, that was one of his facial features, after his encounter with the poachers who had killed one of his dearest friends from the family Draco.”

“Can you tell me that story?”

“Yes, that tale can I tell, though I know not yet much worth saying about that gorgeous creature named Aimélie Minh.”

“Aimee Minh?”

“Something like that. But her tale, if it is to be told at all, must be sung another day, for, as yet, I know not much about her.”

“Where does she live?”

“She died before I was born.”

“Wow! How you gonna find her story?”

“There is another box of journals from the poet’s last year. I found them under my grandfather’s bed just last night. In those bound chunks of paper might be a tale worth the telling. For now, I will gather all around me, perhaps after dinner. . .” Parnell laughed and roughed up the hair above Jimmy’s disappointed face. “I dare not court your mother’s anger a second time in the same day.”

“Are you scared of Mommy?”

“Let’s just say. . . I love her too much to raise her blood pressure.”

“I used to be scared of Mommy when she got mad. When I was just a little kid, I mean.”

“Kids are immature goats and not pre-adolescent humans, though you do have a knack for getting up rocky slopes.”

“So?”

“So. . .” Looking to his left, Parnell saw the tennis court enclosure about fifty yards away. He decided to issue a challenge. “Last one to the fence is a rebbin PINKS.”

As expected, Jimmy delayed just a second to protest, “A what?”

16

Twice had Parnell fled killers more deadly than the most agitated of yellowjackets. The first time had he been merely confused. Only later did he learn of his mother's fears as she sought safety for herself, but mostly for Parnell. Only later did he learn how hard it had been to leave the house they had occupied all those summers.

For just his mother or for him as well?

Odd that he would decide it had been so hard to leave, almost in a retrospective manner. He thought that, perhaps, he had merely been confused, but ever since he had learned of his mother's feelings and thoughts during those hectic days. . .

Had it been so hard for him to leave or had he merely been confused?

Parnell sat on the edge of the bed which had once been his mother's. The dust rose. In all likelihood, the sheets and cover were exactly as she had left them that morning, only four or five hours after they had taken James Llewellyn off to be chained to an engineering workstation.

For hours had he sat at the kitchen table as she spoke of her cinnamon goo childhood, of her life with Carlos Lopez, and of the years after the war as enemies of James Llewellyn oozed their way into power. All but one that is. The 400 pound man plowed straight ahead, as he usually had done in his life.

He remembered a day close to their capture by the wisest of killers. She had told once again of the departure from the lodge. And, yet, he could not remember her words for her piece of the story had already been integrated into his narrative.

Staring at all the memory-laden objects in the bedroom which was itself memory laden, Grace Llewellyn Lopez realized the colored-smells and the peopled-things would have burst through her feel-thoughts as long as her defenses were down. She struggled to face the harsh facts, remembering her

father had told her to consider him already dead even as the soldiers were first marching up the driveway from their big green truck. She gasped for breath a few times as the image faded away – Dad turning one last time to smile sadly and to say, “Take good care of your mother, Parnell. You’re the man of the house now.”

There was so much to be done now that she was alone with Parnell. Yet, she did not at all regret those dreams of feel-thoughts for it was those which provided a defense against despair; it was those which provided a focusing motivation for her efforts to save Parnell. A better world had once existed, and it might again some day.

Once more moving through the world of things which so firmly anchored her dreams, thoughts, feelings, and the multitude of combinations, Grace Llewellyn Lopez returned to her dresser and scavenged ruthlessly amongst all her favorite jewelry. Those pieces which had a good street value made their way to her pile to the exclusion of some pieces with high sentimental value and even a few pieces of higher quality which might have been readily traceable.

There was not much room for the belongings gathered so carefully over a prosperous and favored life. Two suitcases and a shoulder bag were all she could take; they had to be enough because she had promised Parnell he could take two or three cases of his books, manuals, schematics, and drawing materials. She would pack one case with her clothes, one with Parnell’s clothes, and the shoulder bag would be stuffed with cash and gold coins and the jewelry that could be sold safely and quickly. Other than those few belongings, she would take only two small boxes of photographs and a larger box of her parents’s correspondence, often too feisty to be labeled love letters. There would be barely room in the small car for those things and for Parnell’s two cases.

Letting images of her dead father and her enslaved father pass through her mind, Grace Llewellyn Lopez suddenly felt weak and nauseous. She spun half-around and sat on the bed, so proper and lady-like in a conscious effort to keep her emotions in reign. The effort failed, and, after a few seconds of shaking, she began to weep, overcome by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The North American Collective seemed so powerful. It owned every thing on the continent and many of the people as well. Its armies and its agents were everywhere.

In her despair, she wondered how she could ever hide Parnell. It was her son that she sought to protect; she no longer cared much about her

own life. Her father had warned that the Collective would one day come for Parnell and his marvelous, though unfocused mental skills. He had smiled and added, “Parnell will be useful to them because he has my technical abilities without my hard-assed attitude towards everything and everybody around me.” She had smiled and given him a hug before reminding him of the love he had always showed to all the members of his family, to all his friends, and even to those of his supporters that he did not personally like.

After shaking off that attempt to penetrate his dark mood, James Llewellyn had reminded his daughter that he had altered all of Parnell’s public records, at least those he had been able to access through the Collective’s computer systems. The danger would return if they ever heard rumors about a man with extraordinary abilities and an absentminded nature bordering on the autistic. James Llewellyn had refused to elaborate, and she was left with the simple knowledge that James Llewellyn had considered his grandson to be in great danger. She thought it revolved around the work her father was being forced to do for the Collective, but... It was all so confusing.

What could Parnell do for the Collective? If he was gentle and not capable of being the bastard his grandfather had been, the young man was also unfocused, nearly to the point of withdrawal from the world, at least the wider world outside of his family and his rooms of books and drawing materials.

The question remained – what could Parnell do for the Collective? His mind could not be easily directed, one reason why he was once condemned to special education classes. They had just moved, money was a bit tight, and they were in a highly-regarded school district. If not for the reputation of the local schools, they would have borrowed the money from her father to send Parnell to a private school in the first place. In a way retrospectively predictable, the Principal and the Superintendent had refused to put Parnell in advanced academic classes, or in any academic classes for that matter and Carlos had called his father-in-law.

The following morning, funds sufficient for three or four years worth of tuition had arrived at their bank, and Parnell was shortly in the best private school in the area. The nuns were befuddled, but also delighted by the odd mixture of genius, little boy, and fragmented personality to be found in their new student. Mostly, they drilled him in the social graces and worked on his communication skills. When it came to most subjects, they simply supplied him with materials and suggested an interesting question

to answer or a difficult puzzle to solve.

Parnell had learned, and continued to learn, history as well as mathematics by such a method. Rather than adopting the disciplined ways of a scholar, Parnell had grown into some sort of omnivorous intellectual being that selected food by criteria not known to his fellow creatures. He selected, he ate, but did he do anything with such an eclectic mass of material? Grace Llewellyn Lopez was not even sure what could possibly be done with such a chaotic mass of knowledge and skills. Her father had also had an inclination towards such undisciplined browsing, but the demands of his career, more accurately his ambition, prevented him from collapsing into the wide-ranging grazing habits of Parnell. Grace had always been confused by her son's habits. Perhaps they should have put Parnell in a college-level program for child prodigies like her father had suggested. He could have been studying material of some importance and some interest instead of the air-conditioning systems of old-fashioned skyscrapers. Not that she was truly surprised when he moved smoothly to a study of the life support systems of the lunar colonies. Parnell himself, not one to justify himself who was Parnell, had claimed that it mattered little if his learning material had been archaic since it had helped him to learn basic principles.

Still, it was an odd way of learning and didn't promise success in the modern world. That realization made it all the harder to even guess how such knowledge and the intellectual being who sought it could be of any use to the Collective.

Whatever else might be said about the leaders of the Collective, they were practical men. They would have gladly burned all the world's libraries and leveled all its architectural masterpieces to gain control over still another country.

Parnell's weaknesses seemed to overwhelm his strengths, as much as it hurt a mother to admit such about her son. He could solve well-posed problems as well as his grandfather had been able to do, but worldly success depended on a man's ability to select the proper problems. The young man's memory astounded even the neurobiologists among the Llewellyn family friends, but it was filled with the most absurd and useless information, if one could consider as information such things as the plans for the docking system of the station intended to orbit Mars but never built. His ability to manipulate the most complex of objects in n -space – Parnell's mind did not limit itself to three or even four dimensions – delighted the brain scientists still more. In a gentler world, Parnell could have perhaps teamed with more

aggressive young men and might have accomplished many great things in his name and theirs. Such small-scale alliances among men, such local loyalties, were not allowed in a world of collectives spanning continents.

The words of James Llewellyn passed through the mind of his daughter: “I was a bastard in a world of bastards, but some of us made room for gentler men, if only for our own advantage. In the world of the Collective, Parnell and others like him will be most useful when connected to a computer intended to direct their attention to specific tasks.”

Grace Llewellyn Lopez had listened to her father and then had grown silent for a moment while he had searched her face for signs of her thoughts and her feelings. As the image had come of her son hooked up to be one with a machine, she had shuddered, but then had simply said, “I’m sure we’re letting our fears run away from us.”

When her father looked up at her, she saw his steel-gray eyes filled with fear. She knew he was not likely to be afraid of anything for himself but God’s Judgment. He had been truly frightened for his grandson’s sake. They spoke no more about such things, but her mind spun for weeks, often enough at a level fully conscious but sometimes she merely fretted without being able to pull up any specific thoughts.

When the time passed with no major changes but the fall of another government, the formation of still another, Grace Llewellyn Lopez began to think more clearly. She was well-educated in computer science and understood a little bit about the neurosciences. Many fools or tyrants had dreamed of a direct linkage between man and machine, though she certainly did not know what man was to gain from the bargain. Her own father had experimented with computer-enhanced or even machine-generated vision. He had been interested mostly in helping blind people but also in supplying sight to men sending machines into mines and other dangerous environments. James Llewellyn had told his daughter he’d been close to solving the problem, or so he’d thought, when the needs of the military build-up and then the two nuclear wars had directed research towards vision enhancement systems of more direct use in tanks and planes. As always, there was much overlap between military and humane technology but the uses. . .

One to kill, one to save lives, or at least to save the quality of lives.

Much of that knowledge, along with vast amounts of information in all fields, had been lost and James Llewellyn had set out to reclaim it, but he had always used the computer, and not the human brain, as an instrument. The goal had always been, at least in James Llewellyn’s mind, to provide

something for the human brain to “chew upon.”

Grace Llewellyn Lopez tried to push her fears away, but the pattern was emerging from the background. She tried to remember it might yet prove to be a pattern she and her father were imposing upon the world around them, but her duty to assume the worst and to protect Parnell against all dangers was clear. Her father’s warnings, so long misunderstood, were crystal-clear. She wondered why she had not seen the obvious before – the Collective was trying to dissolve the barriers between the computer and the human person. Shudders passed through her once more, and, then, after a vision of Parnell being taken into a room with the equipment to wire and entube a man and a computer into one horrible thing, she stood and returned to her dresser to fetch another sweater.

As Grace Llewellyn Lopez closed the suitcase, she breathed in the smells of her things – the cherry-wood furniture, the autumn spice potpourri, her perfumes and Carlos’s cologne which she kept in its proper place, the freshly laundered smells of the drapes. There were pictures on the walls, on the side-tables, on the dresser. There were far too many memory-laden things to take with her. Nothing, not even her memories of Carlos, would be allowed to interfere with her duty to her son. There were several quality pieces of art just in this one room, starting with the triptych of Jesus and his mother and the two of them together. James Llewellyn had brought that back from Poland for his son-in-law who had somehow developed a taste for Slavic art. Grace had always preferred Japanese art, and her father, never one to deny his princess, had brought the newlyweds a few of the more sensuous wood-prints from the land of the floating world.

There had been raised eyebrows above the shocked pupils of those convinced the artistic tastes of the Lopezes had clashed too much, even in a post-modernistic era inclined towards incoherence. It was true that many rooms in the houses of the Lopez family had glowed with a strange and otherworldly beauty, or rather beauties. Radiant purity and glorified sin had co-existed with a surprising degree of peace. It was as if God Himself could be seen at the same time as His Creation, as if those sinful creatures were no more and no less than incompletely embodied instances of things more pure.

The pale-blue paint so fresh on the walls had been dispelled so hangingly into the air.

Grace Llewellyn Lopez had long ago developed the habit of painting a room or refinishing a piece of furniture or clearing the ground for a new

garden when she felt deeply distressed or sad. By genes or example, most likely both, she had followed a path near that preferred by her mother who had cooked gourmet meals or made Tiffany lamps or fished when she was upset. Moping had not been an acceptable alternative, though. . . She remembered her cousin Dylan Shagari had been given to moping. A poetically depressed spirit had often possessed him.

Her eyes roamed once more over those walls of such a pale blue as to appear whiter than the glare of dead-white. She thought it likely her mother would have told her the perception of bluish white as being so perfectly white was an oddity of her perceptions, a bias, but never a mere bias, introduced in retina or optic nerve or in the rearmost regions of her brain.

She had painted canvases and not just walls during those pleasant and painful hours when her father and her son had been listening to Bach choral pieces or had been hunched over tomes of engineering magic. Those peaks of the Rockies visible from the back deck of this house had been captured in water-colors upon the finely textured surface of canvas. Undoubtedly, the shamans of the former inhabitants of these regions would have cursed her for her act of violence against the spirits of the mountains. A few might have cursed and then would have left their villages under moon-bathed skies to learn her magic that they might also create worlds over which to rule.

Grace Llewellyn Lopez turned to gaze out the window at the mountains of northern Idaho. She had known these mountains even before she had formed self-conscious memories. This, her father's North American hunting lodge, had been her vacation home for nearly the whole of her 48 years.

Just as she placed the packed suitcase at the door of her bedroom, Parnell, her 19 year-old child of a son, wandered in and grabbed her by the hand. He wore a hugely innocent smile as he pulled his mother towards his room, but he put his finger to his lips when she tried to speak halfway down the hallway.

Arriving at their destination, she saw a small trunk lay open on the floor and a backpack was unflapped. On the bed was a neat pile of five or six sketch pads with several sets of drawing pencils on top. There was a technical manual for a system designed by his grandfather two decades prior – a network of circuits labeled 'Bayesian Filters for Chirachua Missile Recognition Systems.' Mrs. Lopez did not understand most of her father's work – she had dropped out of mathematics after a short course in partial differential equations and out of science after she had struggled through

a year of quantum mechanics – but she knew the label implied the device could learn how to recognize incoming missiles by weighing new information and new experiences into a scheme composed of prior weightings. The entire concept seemed superstitious to her for it seemed to imply an infinite regress back towards a good hoist on a bootstrap. That seemed impossible. What would have hoisted what? Her father told her it was like all scientific procedures in explaining how things seemed to operate once they had come into being, but he warned her not to try to trace any scientific law or process back to its ontological foundations.

Not having been aware of an innate tendency to see ontology where lesser thoughts lived, she had filed the warning in the back of her mind and only thought of it as part of her memories of her father. Otherwise, it meant nothing to her. Apparently, it had also not meant much to the quantum-electronic Apache scout. The system had not worked as well as expected, and she remembered her father had wandered around the house in his bathrobe for three sleepless days grunting and occasionally muttering something about the need for 'motivations' or 'values'. Unlike the Red Giant who had opposed the Spanish and the Mexicans in the Arizona deserts, and, quite unlike his warrior grandsons and great-grandsons who had fought the war-hardened American cavalry to a standstill, the thing had not loved the land it was to defend, and, even in the most simulating of war-games, it had not defended as well as Geronimo and his still more intimidating sons.

Pulling his mother back from her thoughts, Parnell directed her attention to an oversized book in his hands. It was a collection of specifications and schematics for the fire-control systems on an American battleship of the 1970s. She gasped slightly as she remembered it was that book which had fallen on Parnell's four year-old head. A momentary memory of alcohol-antiseptic-white surrounding bustling people of serious mien was interrupted as Parnell gleefully pointed to a three volume catalog of gravitational anomalies in the Milky Way. She had been in college when the revival of soliton theory had confused many issues and had caused 'black holes' to be temporarily relabeled as 'anomalies'. It had meant little to her at the time and far less as her life progressed.

Parnell's next treasure was that damned manual for the heating systems of the two main buildings of the World Trade Center, perhaps the source of future tales of Babelistic towers and perhaps no more than a reminder of the ephemerality of the works of men. Not that the Twin Towers were more missing than the rest of Manhattan which had been scoured to its bedrock

and now rested peacefully below the waves. That had been the largest concentration of deaths attributable directly to the nuclear weapons rather than indirectly through the destruction of roads and telephone systems and hospitals. Other than those seven million deaths which occurred within ten minutes of a single barrage of missiles, no more than half an million people had died from an attack on any site in North America. It was the diseases and the starvation and the genocidal practices of crisis-driven governments which had killed most of the people.

She had still that month of magic lived in the shadow of that earlier month in New York City, so long before the Collectives, so long before the Nuclear War.

Then had Carlos been called into active duty and was on his way to San Diego. The plane had landed and the men had climbed aboard the bus when the first of the Chinese bombs exploded high above and many miles away. Carlos, she had been told, had suffered no worse than a bad burn on his left arm. Twelve hours later, he was at a small field hospital awaiting surgery to clear away the radiation-damaged flesh. A staph infection passed through. All 97 of the wounded and three medical men with minor cuts died within the next three days. Grace Lopez knew the pain must have been great but she hoped it had been of mercifully short duration. The army had never released any details. Even James Llewellyn himself had not been able to discover much. So he said in response to his daughter's questions.

Her attention returned to Parnell as he paged his way excitedly through an anatomical atlas of the human neurological systems, male and female. Her mother had written much of the commentary on those pictures of the brain, and Parnell had loved the book though he had never met his grandmother. When he was a little boy, he had refused to believe that his grandmother had not been directly responsible for those beautiful and fantastically complex drawings, photographs, and brain-scans.

Fighting off still another wave of despair, Grace Llewellyn Lopez called to mind her father's standard lecture on suffering, endurance, character, and hope. She understood how much those Pauline ideas had meant to him, but she could not help wondering, as she watched Parnell, if there might be a shortcut to hope available to a blessed few.

Momentarily confused by Parnell's excited gestures towards a manual of weapons specifications from 1997, she tried to remember if the month in New York City had really been more magical than that month of desperate

hope while she had waited with her father and her son for the soldiers from the Collective. Then it came to her that such a complicated judgment was more a matter of re-evaluating both experiences in light of further revelations of the context of those times and succeeding times. Such judgments and thoughts were not the sort of things to be carried in memories. As her father might have said, they were the stuff of the brain chewing on its own memories, some of it perhaps invented to suit its purposes.

Whatever the neurobiological truth, there had been much joy in both those months. The month in New York City did have that one thing in its favor – Carlos had been with them. He had just started teaching at West Point and she and Parnell had not yet moved up from Alabama. The sale of their old home and the purchase of their new home had not gone smoothly, but James Llewellyn had taken his daughter and grandson up to New York City. Carlos had been gone for nearly three months at that time, and she had missed him greatly. It was the middle of the semester; Parnell was able to go only because he had a private tutor that year. James Llewellyn took over the tutoring chores for that month; the college student had not minded as he had been paid for the month and all he had to do was to test Parnell upon his return to be certain grandfather and grandson had done their work.

Carlos had made it down to the city for one entire week and still one more week-end. The Lopezes had taken their son to the Bronx Zoo, on a cruise around Manhattan, and to an amusement park in New Jersey.

Looking around at the walls covered with charts of the Periodic Table, a map of the Solar System, an evolutionary tree, and various schematics of tanks and fighter planes, she wondered if it was possible that only eleven years and a nuclear war had passed since that vacation. It seemed only yesterday that her father had taken her on a shopping spree at Tiffany's and at a variety of art shops, Oriental and Occidental. She looked at the Japanese print sitting incongruously amidst the artwork of science and technology. Parnell had always liked to walk in the rain, and, the first time he saw it in his grandfather's library, he had loved the picture of the people walking across the bridge as a drizzle fell. The rest, as they used to say, was history. James Llewellyn did not refuse much at all to his loved ones.

A flash of anger passed through as she remembered that print, like so much else in this house and the much larger house in Alexandria, would be lost, probably into the clutches of some public-spirited official from the Collective. She hoped desperately some free-lance gangsters or small-time

hoods would loot the houses first.

Parnell was sitting and searching his mother's face. The summary ops manual for the life-support systems of the abandoned U.S.-Brazil lunar colony lay on his lap. He had looked at her sadly and asked if they would ever see Grandpa again. She had avoided his eyes as she said nothing. And perhaps everything.

Closing the life-supports ops manual for the colony which had been blown to dust several years prior, the young man placed it on a pile of treasures and rose to fetch a book titled *Group Theory Applications to Spectroscopic Analysis*. He added it to his pile and turned towards his bookcase, stumbling halfway there. He chose a book of nautical charts of the Great Barrier Reef and the technical manual from the high-powered computer his grandmother had used as no more than a word-processor.

Parnell sat back down next to his mother and stared into her eyes a few seconds as if to fix her attention. Then, with a face just a bit on the slack and emotionless side, he replied, "Grandpa used to tell me about Dylan Shagari's dreams. And he used to read me some of Dylan's poems."

She had asked how much he knew about Dylan Shagari.

Seemingly confused by the question, or perhaps upset at the undertone of fear in his mother's voice, Parnell stared at his mother without answering. After a few moments, she had said, "There are evil people who didn't like Dylan or his poems. They hated him as much as they hated your grandfather. Maybe even more."

In a weak voice, Parnell suggested, "They just don't have to read his poems. And nobody knows about his dreams, except a few of us."

With a sigh, she rose and told Parnell to finish packing because Uncle Hernando and Aunt Teresa would be expecting them in Walla-walla.

Parnell shook the memories to the back of his mind and looked up. Against the wall were several canvases. Covered by sheets they were, but Parnell had known immediately what they were. He walked over and pulled off several layers of sheets. Turning one of the paintings, he found a view of the mountains on the far side of the lake, apparently from the viewpoint of someone just about in the center of the lake. Turning a second one, he saw a portrait of a woman so non-threateningly beautiful as to make him wonder how she had ever gone in public without being propositioned by even the most decent of men. Her eyes were as green as those of Marie. Her skin was creamy, not a sun-worshiper had that young women been. Her hair was highlighted in auburn. Her lips were a little thin, but her smile

made a mockery of such judgments. Parnell checked the corner and read, "Self-portrait, Grace Llewellyn, 2003." She had been but 18 years old, and his own birth was five years in the future.

Setting aside the first treasure, Parnell turned around the next canvas to reveal a woman still more beautiful, perhaps threateningly so. Dark-brown were those eyes of almond-shape. Full the red-red lips. Shy the smile and slightly buck the teeth. Tiny the ears, and small the golden hoops which hung from them.

He knew this woman. It was she who had been the one woman too many for the poet. It was she who died before bearing their son, and she who had put those wrinkles into the face of a man who had formerly borne only mischievous eyes.

Shaking, Parnell backpedaled but continued to stare at that woman so dangerous, so talented at arousing men, so skilled at coaxing information out of sliced and diced rats' brains. His eyes shifted over to the self-portrait of his mother and then back to the image of Aimélie Minh. There was not really all that much difference.

Except...

His mother had had the good fortune to fall in love with Carlos Lopez rather than a poet. And she had not attracted the attention of an ambitious young man aiming to be a 400 pounder who could sit wherever he pleased.

Parnell's hands were still shaking as he placed a sheet over the portrait of his mother and then one over that of Aimélie Minh, so talented a neurobiologist. Doubtless the obituaries in the journals and newspapers had noted the sadness of a young woman dying when she had a promising future in scientific research.

Parnell turned and walked down the hallway towards the room which had been his and was to be his and Marie's. Leaning against the frame of the doorway, he looked about at the room, cleaned but not yet refurbished. Painting. Staining. Waxing. The good bedroom set from his grandfather's room would be refinished and moved down here. There were simply too many things to do in such a short amount of time, and some of the gold had just been deposited in the bank. When they had cash to hire helpers, the house would be fixed up quickly. He moved to the metal-framed, leather chair near his old drawing desk. He positioned it to face the Japanese print of the people walking across the bridge during the light rain. So peaceful. Greens and blues.

Still...

He could not avoid the flight. The narrative demanded such a thing rather than a simple claim that Grace Llewellyn Lopez and her son Parnell Lopez showed up in Walla-walla, of all places!, only a few days after the arrest of James Llewellyn.

It was brutal, but necessary for Parnell to relive that flight – through his mother’s eyes.

Taking as many backroads as possible, they had approached Moscow more than once only to draw away. Grace and her son had spent the first night parked in what used to be a national forest. Fortunately, the night had been warm and they had been able to sleep under the stars with only light blankets. Grace had developed lower back trouble as she had approached 50.

Pain was not to be avoided, and Grace asked Parnell to pull over that she could walk around a bit. By the side of a brook did they stop, into a grassy meadow did she walk, while Parnell took a gallon water jug and walked upstream away from the road. He had been gone just a few minutes when a car pulled over next to Grace’s car. It was painted in the dark-blue and bright-yellow colors of the Collective’s security forces. Thinking it might be wisest to run towards Parnell and flee into the woods, she stood in contemplation a few seconds too long. The single policeman in the car was moving into the field after her. He undoubtedly had seen she was just a lone woman.

Sore back hampering her greatly, she turned and fled, away from Parnell. She had not managed to go more than 50 yards before the man grabbed her from behind and threw her to the ground. She kicked quite hard, but missed her target, making contact with his abdomen. He grunted and smiled sadistically as he stooped over and, flipping her on her back, handcuffed her before she could react. He was young, strong and seemingly in good shape. She later would remember, again and again, that the young policeman looked quite a bit like Billy, the neighborhood bully in Newburgh who had protected Parnell from the other bullies. He had a heavy jaw, powerful neck, curly blond hair, and the massively strong hands of an apish creature.

He never bothered to even question her, starting immediately to rip off her clothes. When he had her naked at his feet, the young man sneered and said, “Your tits are starting to sag, grandma, but they’re not too bad, and you got yourself a nice, healthy cunt.” He spread her legs and crouched between her legs, leaning over to brutally squeeze and knead her breasts.

Exerting her will, Grace avoided any screams, not wanting to draw Par-

nell. After the man had mishandled her clitoris a few times, she, to her everlasting shame, lubricated as much as she ever had for her husband. Smiling as he felt the liquids, the young man laughed hoarsely and said, "That's good you got yourself so much cunt juice left, grandma. You wouldn't want this to be uncomfortable for me, would you?"

He undid his pants and forced them below his knees while still crouching. He had penetrated her and was pumping away when all of a sudden something pulled him violently from between her legs. She could feel his organ bend in a direction for which it was not designed. Dazed, she stared up near the Sun for a few minutes before hearing the young policeman moaning in pain. She looked over to see Parnell dragging him over to some trees, and, before she could utter a sound, she saw her son smash the man's face into a tree. And again. And again. And a few times more. He threw the man down on the ground. As Parnell walked towards her, she could see the man was still breathing. His chest was laboring and the blood running from several holes where his face should have been.

Parnell took off his jacket and covered his mother's nakedness as best he could. He held her while she sobbed. After several minutes, he helped her to her feet and the two of them struggled towards the car. Grace Llewellyn Lopez sat on the edge of the driver's seat for several minutes trying to collect herself. Taking stock of the situation, she realized she was quite sore in several places. One peek down under Parnell's coat, still draped about her, showed that the man's handprints remained on her breasts. Otherwise, she seemed to be fine. She rose and went to the trunk where she pulled out one of her suitcases.

She retrieved a washcloth, some soap, and some clothes. Parnell followed her to the stream, and she told him to turn around while she washed away the filth and put on some clothes. Nearly as dazed as his mother, Parnell turned around and walked back to the car. When she had dressed and walked back to the roadside, she found her son at the open trunk holding the large-bore magnum rifle in his hands and staring in the direction of the policeman. Taking it from his hands, she went around the car and pulled the metal ammunition box from behind the passenger seat. Loading the rifle, she looked at her still-dazed and now frightened son and said, "Get some gloves on and take his car and drive it into the woods on the other side of the road." Hesitating just a moment, she pulled out some ammunition for the police special and returned to the trunk to give Parnell the pistol and bullets. Dutifully, he loaded the pistol and then stared at his mother

as if to ask what he was to do. She said, "Take the gun for protection and go get rid of his car. Don't go too far, just far enough that it won't be seen from the road. Then come over and help me to hide his body."

Parnell went to do as he had been told while she gingerly walked towards the wounded young man. Reaching his side, she saw he was still bleeding though not profusely. He had dragged himself a few feet into the trees as if to escape. Not sure how strong and tough he was, she did what needed to be done. She kicked him in his badly injured head to stun him again and then rolled him over when she saw it was safe to get within reach. If she was to do what needed to be done, she at least wanted to be looking at his face rather than his back. As he stared at her with semi-conscious fear showing through the blood and damaged tissue, she raised the rifle to her shoulder and shot him square in his chest. The bullet, designed to penetrate the hide, fat, and muscle of a bear, ripped a hole inches in diameter in the man's chest. As the bullet hit the back of his ribcage lying against the ground, the man's trunk heaved up as if a jolt of electricity had been shot through him. Blood squirted out from a major artery, and Parnell reached her side, out of breath.

She had told herself she had killed the man so that he could not live to give a description, yet Grace Llewellyn Lopez feared she had killed the young policeman just so she would not have to admit Parnell had killed him. Her gentle son, so innocent and protected, had brutally smashed the man's face in. True enough, it was in defense of her, but she had thought Parnell was different from the other men about her. Even those most decent of men had always been capable of such great violence, such misuse of women. Parnell had been different, and he no longer was.

Tears flooding from her eyes, she directed her son, "Pull him farther into the woods. There's a gully over there." Holding the rifle and keeping guard, she watched as Parnell did as he had been told. He carried out the implicit order as well and tossed the man's body into the gully.

Knowing the wild animals were losing their fear of men, Grace Llewellyn Lopez was hoping the man's corpse would become bear or wolf food.

Parnell was still staring at the Japanese print a few minutes later when Marie entered the room. Immediately did she realize something was wrong. She came over to take him by the hand. Leading him to the room they were using down the hall, she laid him down on the bed and then herself beside him, letting him bury his head between her breasts. Softly did he sob. Only once did he speak, to say, "I sang of the flight and told of all but

the disease that Grace Llewellyn Lopez caught from the rapist.”

She just stroked his head and shushed him to sleep in a mommy-rhythm.

17

To the laborer belongs his wages and, so it was, that after two weeks of hard work cleaning up the lodge and its grounds, Parnell gathered about himself his family and the couple, Raul and Lee, and – of course – Donnie, the good-natured man of wise hair but no longer of wise skills.

Shivered the children visibly in fearful anticipation of shivery fear. Dark the moonless night creeping in all the windows. Dark the room except for the light cast in one direction but not the other by the small blaze in the center of the huge stone cave in the exterior wall of the great room. Great it was, and diluted was the light long before reaching the far side of the room.

“This be the proper sort of a night for tales of long-dead poets,” started Parnell sitting in the shadows to the side of the fireplace. He looked out on his audience. Marie as amused as she always was when he told a tale or tried to sing a poem. Tonight she could be doubly amused for he would do both. Lee seemed uncertain. She probably did not know what to expect, not knowing Parnell all that well and having heard only the shortest and most deceptively accurate rumors of the poet. Raul was meta-observing. Not was he fully standing outside the show watching that part of the audience to which he was married, but he was casting regular and paternal glances boyward and girlward. The youngsters were pajama-decked and resting heads on hands in their turn resting on elbows which were not able to float freely to the center of the Earth. The floor prevented such a natural but unexpected event from occurring. Donnie... was grinning in a Donnie-sort of anticipation. Were the Poet and the Grandfather, the Grandmother and the Mother also watching? Was Parnell no more than pleasantly deluded? He didn’t know but his mind had turned heavenward, towards the stars as well as the company of the resurrected. And, yet, he felt others needed additional explanation and so, he – Parnell and not another, presang:

The dragon shines in the moonless sky.
 The world is warmly dark and free of lighted movement.
 The fireplace is funning many a shadow about,
 not scary this flame be.

'Tis just the night for girls and boys
 or even a Donnie gray-haired wise
 to hear tales of a poet ne'er grown gray,
 a man once flea-picked by a Draco-ape.

We shall sing of a man crying o'er a skinless ape.
 We shall hear of a poet cheeky speared
 as across the stage shall dance in a stately way
 an uncle known as a grandpa quite great in other tales.

Properly warmed up, Parnell sat back against the stone-wall to the side of the fireplace. From a region darkish to the perceptions of men spoke he, dreaming of a poet and an engineer, two neurobiologists, and a family of gentle apes. Truth to tell, Parnell had been browsing in the poet's journals hidden by James Llewellyn. He had read enough of Aimélie that he was beginning to see the faintest image of a gorgeous young woman who happened to be quite talented at slicing and dicing the brains of laboratory rats. A risqué tale had it become, but he had rarely held much back from Jimmy and Alicia. His parents and his grandfather had rarely put him off with claims of childhood idiocy, and Parnell thought he had not turned out half-bad.

A deep breath he took, easing the tension in the silent room. For just a moment, he imagined his upward-lit face so eerily shining out of the dark, and then his mind was filled with an image of a dark-skinned young man and a woman of dark-brown eyes and the longest, straightest, darkest hair that Parnell had never seen. And he saw her through the eyes of another man. And he saw the poet through the eyes of another man, somewhat similar to himself. And, finally prepared, he spoke.

The poet.
 That was what he was, whatever talent he may have lacked.
 Others wrote streams of words more pretty than he, but few
 were so fluent with the unpronounceable Diracishly bracketed

phrases so beautiful in and of themselves. It uglified a bit to bra and ket the complementary truths of modern science. Confused matters, it did, to speak of the truths outside of the ken of the scientific method. Yet, a poet must have the courage to speak the truth, however utilitarian it might someplacetime be.

The poet.

Faloodling was not what he was, but rather something he did.

And, yet...

Was a man truly less than what he did and when-where he did it with whom and under what skies? After all, does not an environment shape a man's thoughts? Verified has it been that the Eskimos have at least one word for snow, at least that many for ice. Most likely have they one for white, another for ivory, and perhaps one for the color of blood-drained whale-blubber. Truly, one can imagine how a person's thoughts are molded into Eskimo thoughts by such a language expressively snow-flaked in one way and restrictively iced-over in just the same way.

Had the poet said that men were superstitious because they spoke a superstitious language?

Once or twice, but not consistently. He was too wise, though not clever enough, to always avoid such an error.

No, the poet had said something entirely different.

Ever one to steal an idea from another field of thought, he had stolen from the general relativists, though most were, in fact, invariantly absolutists of a mild sort.

Said he, and did he ever speak it with the greatest gusto, did he? did:

The mind tells words how to move;
the words tell mind how to shape itself.

But where could he have gotten such an idea? He was only a poet and not a psycholinguist, though it be possible that he once registered for an introductory course in linguistics. No, it was from the camp of the physicists that such beautiful poetry had come. The poet was rather an unscrupulous opportunist than a scientist noble and disciplined of thought. Known to have stolen Dirac's elegant tools for dealing with complementary

idea-things, he boldly sneaked into the textbooks of the theorists of gravity, though not all grave were they. Invisible under his mantle of timelessness, he claimed the right of poets. Recessing at an acceleration nearly infinite, though short by a hair, he sped into the night before a physicist could lay a hand upon him. The caper had been carried off, and the poet gave no one else credit, claiming to have stolen the phrases on his own.

I have not answered the question which shall decide the fate of the poet's reputation: Was a man truly less than what he did and when-where he did it with whom and under what skies?

A puzzling question, that. Still the aspiring poet remained convinced that a man was not an essence defined by nucleic acid stuff.

Incoherently had dualism entered the world of science by many back-doors. Drunkenly did that evil twin dance across the stage of the globe, though morely was it a planet than a theater.

Dylan Shagari, though merely an unattached apprentice of a poet, rose from the bed. Departed from the side of the pretty neurobiologist did he. It was time for a self-examination. Knew he well the body five feet, ten inches tall. Slenderly muscular was the body, that of a slightly out of dance shaper of words.

That was not the point.

The face.

Dark brown eyes from Nigeria. Twinkled they with the fluid rhythms of a soul bridged to the world by a culture mostly Niger-Kodifarian, though descended somewhat further, but with several modifications. Welsh were the thinnish lips set upon a face of a complexion not well-selected for making vitamin D in the northern latitudes.

The scar. . .

Nasty. The metal prod had gone through the right cheek and out the left, taking four teeth with it.

"Daddy," came the little girlish cry.

Before she could protest further, a boy's voice complained, "What about the gorillas?"

“Yes,” agreed a motherly shape quite shadowy. “A tale taking place in the poet’s bedroom seems not appropriate for little ears.”

Parnell shrugged. “If there is something beyond them, it will pass that way without doing any harm. In any case, the poet lived not an immoral life. No matter how recently he had met a beautiful woman, he would bed her down only if there was some chance of making a baby.”

The motherly shape shook her head, but waved him on.

“Truly, the gorillas will enter the tale in the very next line. If the minstrel had not been interrupted, we would be in the middle of the African jungle. And that is where we head.”

Letting his eyes drift off once more into the dark shadows overhead, Parnell added, “You see. . .”

Dylan Shagari, though possessing no specialized training in primatology, had been friends with the gorillas. A reciprocal relationship had they had, yes, had they had such for sure. The poet smiled, and then he remembered bringing fruit to his jungle comrades. In return, they had combed his body with their strong fingers, searching for fleas and ticks. Any of the little critters on his body would have recently jumped from his massive friends and would certainly be gone after his next shower.

Still, he minded little, though slightly allergic to fleas.

He had accepted the gorillas for what he thought them to be, and they had seemed to mirror his tolerance.

The poachers. . .

He had heard Nudra scream and had reached the clearing to see the little 150 pound fellow in a net and his mother Xidra being skinned though she was not quite dead.

Nudra?

Xidra?

He had named them after two of the more famous stars in the constellation Draco, of course. It had seemed appropriate at the time. It even gave them a family name – Draco. The big cheese, the fellow who sat wherever he damned well pleased, the 400-pound patriarch, was named Alpha, though largely a figurehead had he been. Like most male gorillas, he was not really inclined to fighting, and he ruled at the pleasure of his harem, though

the females tended not readily towards the overthrow of a still living lord and master.

Alpha did not seem to mind his lack of unlimited power.

He and the four females, other than Xidra, had likely been long gone when the poachers had so rudely driven the metal rod through the face of a young man more a poet than a policeman. To be sure, he had surprised them, and they might have thought that to be rude, but – they had inflicted horrors upon gentle Xidra.

Came to a while later, did he. Uncle James, rifle lying on the ground, was cutting Nudra free from the nets. Dylan Shagari felt pinches in his cheek and he realized his face felt as tingly and numb as when his wisdom teeth had come out. Aunt Morgan, a researcher rather than a clinician, had nevertheless set herself to the task of stitching his face up as best she could under the circumstances. Perceptions fuzzy, thinking processes not doing much better, he had wondered why there was a man slumped in a sitting position against a tree on the other side of the clearing.

Dylan Shagari, not feeling muchly like a poet wishing to celebrate life, noticed that the man had a gaping hole in the center of his naked chest. “An odd spot for a hole,” he thought to himself, not having a lot of control over his vocal apparatus. From a short distance into the jungle came the sound of semi-automatic rifle fire. Nudra took the opportunity to skedaddle into the jungle, looking back in the direction of his dead mother and howling just before he disappeared into the foliage.

Xidra still had her hide attached at her legs. Above that, she was a fly-covered mess. One side of her skull was caved in. Undoubtedly, the result of bullets fired in mercy.

Too bad.

A generous, loving creature had she been.

She had shared with Dylan Shagari the fruit he brought her.

She had given fleas, only to take them back and crunch them between massive jaws.

It had been better that way, even if some might have questioned her sincerity.

Not a selfish gene had she in her body.

Well. . .

Maybe a few trillions of billions, but that was all.

And clearly she had not always heeded their commands.

Dylan Shagari was still conscious when Chief Shagari entered the clearing. Uzi in hand. Big man. Six feet, three if he was an inch. Not that he was really an inch.

Still . . .

The unclly Chief and the unclly engineer, one so dark and one so light, traded nods. Odd that two men so different would have been able to communicate so easily. A small band of pygmies who were themselves small, though not stereotypically tiny, followed in the Chief's wake. They wore nothing but loincloths and weapons. Traditionalists, they carried bows and arrows. Great hunters, they smiled as if they had enjoyed success. Dylan Shagari wondered what they had done with the corpses of the poachers, though it would not be long before the question would be moot in a jungle teeming with hungry life, small and large.

Chief Shagari, concerned uncle that he was, nodded towards the man with the gaping hole in his chest. The pygmy hunters, agreeable fellows that they were, smiled in response to the command, but, first, two of them came over to fulfill their social obligations. Touched Dylan Shagari's numb cheek in sympathy, did they? did, as odd as it might have seemed to a person of European descent. Looking as if they were watching the suffering of a child of their own, they smiled sadly at him and then made clickety word sounds before turning to help their comrades dispose of the corpse with his chestly innards exposed to the environment both nurturing and unforgiving. All materials must needs be recycled for the sake of other things deserving their chance at life.

The Chief, though dressed in khakis and more a Harvard-trained wildlife biologist than a tribal politician, walked over and moved the young man's head to better see his wound and the stitches provided by Morgan Llewellyn. Inspection completed, he stood and, as strange as it seemed under the circumstances, spoke in English. "We'd best get him to a hospital as soon as possible."

With a hole through his face and veins full of morphine,

Dylan Shagari did not feel up to participation in such difficult projects.

He merely listened as the aunt more European than African nodded but said, "I've cleaned the wounds and..."

Touching the scar as lightly as he could while still making contact, the poet could re-call nothing from that point until the middle of the night when he woke up in a hospital in Lagos. Not a minute of the trip by helicopter and plane did he remember, and he never put in the effort to collect data that he might re-member the painful trip. A few fuzzy images and unrecognizable sounds had been re-membered of his experiences in the operating room while the surgeons were cleaning his wounds and surveying the damage that they might repair his jaw and cheek.

"Poor Xidra!" spoke the poet out loud. When he added, "I hope Nudra found his father and aunts and cousins," he heard stirring behind him.

Aimélie was sitting up, dazed and sleepy of face. Her breasts were above the covers and pushed up like those of a teenaged cheerleader. Never was it clear to him when she entranced by natural motion and when by calculated posing.

"Mystifyingly magical, your perky breasts project papillae towards my perturbed perceptors."

She scrunched up her face and cocked her head towards her right. Though obviously less than half awake, she roused many of a region of a brain so ingeniously, if accidentally, adapted for speech. From her white-flecked lips so poutishly pink underneath, from the depths of a throat parched mouth-breathingly raw, came forth, "What?"

"Nothing, Aimélie, just a compliment that was a first-line effort at a misdirected and metaphorically impoverished poem."

Cupping her own breasts and smiling playfully at a wordfully frustrated poet, she asked, "Are not my perky breasts the stuff of which many a poet has spoken prolixities of praise?"

The poet pounced, crawling up the bed rapidly, to leave himself upon all fours above the beloved sufficient unto the night. Lecherously leered he downward. Bared he his teeth, and that he did for sure, as he hissed, "And spoke of gazelles a king too

wise to have ever threatened to sunder a left breast so succulent from a right breast just as suchlike.”

Aimélie, 100% French though her almond-shaped eyes and light-bronze skin came from elsewhere, laughed and asked, “So, my dearest, are your perturbed perceptors recovering?”

“Perhaps, though my brain is seized by wondrous images. Suffer I perhaps from temporal lobe seizures. I am often seeing large breasts and small and few indeed to be labeled as average let alone normal.”

“And mine?”

“Are quite perky.”

She laughed and wagged a finger at him. “The brave poet displays his cravenly diplomatic side.”

Even as the young man shrugged, he was already dropping down, down, so far down.

18

Parnell stood on the deck and watched the snow fall. A few dustings had come and gone, but this looked like the one which would separate them from the rest of the world. No helicopter had they to fly out past all the unplowed highways. They could have afforded one, but Parnell had considered it a needless luxury. In an emergency, they could get through on snowmobiles. That was how Raul planned to see his patients.

No matter.

More important the speckled wind. Soon, the lake would freeze. Parnell had bought ice skates for everyone. Consumer goods were already becoming available after the constant shortage of the days under the Collective. And certainly, the ten million dollars in the bank and the quarter ton of gold re-buried on the property would allow the Lopezes and Gueverras to buy pretty much anything they would be likely to desire. Simple their needs in such a wonderful world. And that much gold could buy a lot of simple things.

Wandered his thoughts around such complex situations stated so overly simple. It reminded him of one of the poet's unfinished, drafty poems from his journal. *Traces of a Day* was it called, for reasons less obvious to a student of the English language than to one who merely spoke it.

Each day sufficient unto itself
though 'itself' be so pretentious
for even the blankest of markers
holding a spot, empty and useless,
in a human mind relentlessly processing,
piece by piece by non-existent piece,
a slicey view of a Universe
impoverished and barely diceable.

Nary a magnetic pole had mono.

Hardly a cold, dark chunk of matter
could the feverish searchers find.

A pox, a plague, a roof upon your house
could protect you not a bit from all the nukey ash. . .
But then again, that nukey ash makes us.

And, besides, a psychotic linguist once claimed
a missing trace is missed all that much more.

Fall back, good lads, to a line well defended.

Each day intertangled sufficiently with all others.

The door opened behind Parnell, and Marie came up to his side a few seconds later. She placed herself under his arm, which, almost on its own, pulled her tightly to his side. Truly was the day sufficient unto its entangled spacetimey multitudes of selves. Truly was never such a thing said more truly, as dictatorial as it might have been.

But more than anything else came a feeling much like the sound of a bass being sawed while a dobro kept lonely pace in a minor key.

Not much more lonely than that could a man imagine.

Unverbalizable as it might be.

If the dobro were to sound a riff in front of the bass, no better would it get.

A dobro cuts through the soul a man has not,
though ties has he of many a varied sort
between his own sad, lonely parts,
amongst himself, a woman, and a bottle of wine,
and perhaps between himself and God.

Lonely-lay-da-loo and a hippie-tie-die-yay.

Why?

Parnell was damned if he even knew what the question was about.

Why did the sound of the dobro and the piercing tenor of Hank Williams make a man feel so lonely?

Grandpa had told him a dobro and Hank Williams both sang from the bottoms of the souls they had not. Though they...

Parnell decided not to get into a sentimental circle.

Besides...

It was hard to see how the bass could mark positions so well for the happiest of motions or the saddest of emotions. Was that always a property of deep, foundational things? Not that sounds were things, but...

Not to worry.

Parnell gave Marie a good squeeze and she turned her face up to offer him her lips.

Some things truly were sufficient unto themselves.

Almost, anyway.

She was shivering and Parnell turned with his arm still wrapped about her. Into the house did he steer her. Into a lodge warm and well-appointed by the gift of the grandfather. To a bedroom so full of memories warm and wet did they go. Off with her coat, and her dress dropped on its own. The forwardly fallen woman she wished to play, and froze she to he one spot-second. Off came the bra. Braless, ketless, yet her breasts were for real.

Lovely.

Both of them, to be precise.

And mostly accurate as well.

Her eyes locked still on his, she reached down and dropped her panties.

Oh boy, did Parnell ever wish he could move.

Catatonia.

Sounded like a region of Spain.

Felt like the region of Hell where satyrs viewed the firm-breasted maidens of Heaven.

Or some other such nonsense.

She signaled with her eyes. Enslaved he could only follow her to the side of the bed. She stood in front of him and raised his hand to caress her breast, the left one. Ever the obliging fellow, Parnell did the best he could for her, and she moaned just a few seconds later.

"So far, so good," thought he.

Marveled he at the nimbleness of her hands as she undid the buttons of his shirt.

"Oh joy of joys," said one part of his brain in a general broadcast. "She has unbuckled the belt."

And joy it was. To Parnell had it always seemed that the payoffs for treating a woman well were disproportionately large. That must have been the poet's secret. Though merely passing through one bed or another, he must have truly respected and loved those women, for however short a time. Was that what they were seeking when they used him so ruthlessly?

The poet. Poor, dead Dylan Shagari. Only his poems, a few scattered DNA replicators, and a small urn of ashes were left.

And . . .

He lived yet in Parnell's memories. Every time Parnell quoted a poem, every time he exegeted a dream, the poet lived once more, though, to be sure, and only at times, he looked a little like Parnell Lopez. Or perhaps it was morely true to say that Parnell looked a little bit more like Dylan Shagari. Or at least he saw the world by perceptions Bayes-weighted towards the poet's prejudices.

It was the poet who was the key to Parnell's narrative. Not the man who could, with equal facility, build factories the size of Detroit or small churches in jungle clearings. Important was James Llewellyn, that giant amongst men. Important as well were the two neurobiologists, the mother, the father, the wife sometimes somewhat greenish, in certain contexts, and often ripply. The wise killer and his captive self, Donnie, had played roles. And, surely, one could not fail to notice the 400 pound man who sat wherever he damned well pleased.

But . . .

The poet.

It was he who held forth the prospects of re-integrating that which had been split asunder as if a noble Israeli king had encountered a pair of cold-blooded wannabe mothers. Two halves of a baby would have been no fun, but two halves, or more, of a would-be human culture was also kind of sloppy and bloody and not well-coordinated.

Still . . .

The role of James Llewellyn was not to be slighted. A critic might have suggested the engineer should have spent more time building hospitals and communication links between radio-wave observatories and a bit less time working on weapons systems – whether defensive or offensive. That did not undo his more positive accomplishments. So long as he had lived, there had been the chance he might have realized what the poet was saying. All memories and records indicated the poet had not been able to figure out what he himself was saying, so it had been left to someone else . . .

Parnell?

Bereft of the embodiment of Dylan Shagari, though not of his ghostly words, the world was waiting for Parnell to tell them why a sane man should faloodle in blatant disregard for all the grammar and all the well-formed vocabulary he had acquired at such a cost.

That seemed a bit silly to Parnell, yet, he was willing to play the game. Many a violent act of exegesis could he perform upon the inseparable person, work, and context of the poet.

Parnell was back where he had started, but there was much that could be said, though far more that could not even be thought.

After all. . .

Dylan Shagari's written output had been so massive as to take up nearly 200 pages of large and generously spaced print. More precisely, it took up 64 pages in one book, 47 in another, 32 in still another, a mere 7 pages in an anthology, and 50 scattered pages in various magazines. The construction of annotations and glossaries of the scientific terminology playfully misused by the poet would have resulted in additional pages to that encyclopedic life's work, but no one had ever bothered.

The scientists already knew the stuff that would have been in the footnotes though most had not grasped the context in which that knowledge had been poetically embodied. Most nonscientists had not a clue why it was important to try to understand what the evolutionary biologists and sex researchers had actually discovered before forming one's opinions about misbehaving men and manipulative women. Or other matters.

No matter.

They had given Plato and Augustine no more respect.

Probably less.

At least more hatred.

More threats of violence.

Scientists did not really have it all that bad. Of that Parnell was sure. The poet would have seen more deeply into the matter. Of that was Parnell just as sure, but. . . No matter.

The effort mattered most, for it was not clear that the scientists always understood their own work, not even the greatest of geniuses. Such had occurred in all ages of man with all intellectual advances. It was notably a problem presented to Dylan Shagari only because no sculptor had arisen to depict a woman horny after losing her major sex organs and another sexually indifferent after losing her adrenal gland and its hormonal output

largely masculine. The poet had in fact written a poem on the need for a massive research effort to determine why female hormones had little effect on the desires of women while masculine hormones made them feministically aggressive and as lustful as a teenaged boy.

James Llewellyn would have been motivated to provide an interpretation of the works of Dylan Shagari, layers of confusion always aided the presentation of rhythmic gibberish, but after decades as an engineer and scientist, despite his constant side-trips into the bureaucratic and political arenas, he had not the slightest idea why any halfway intelligent person would not have known the background behind all those words drawn from the works of Fowler and Bethe.

Who could have passed through college, or even high school, without learning of the various nuclear fusion cycles taking place in the core of the Sun? After all, the energy released by those processes made life on Earth evolutionarily possible. The constraints on the relationships between those processes and those things made life on Earth structurally possible. Though, to be sure, and to speak more strictly, the energy released by those processes occurring during the lifetime of James Llewellyn would not reach the surface of the Earth for millions of years. It only took eight minutes to travel the 95 million miles of kind of open space, but those first few thousand kilometers near the center of old Sol were a killer, in vulgar terms of little scientific exactitude. The scientific explanation took pages – twenty or so of text and ten of references to hundreds of pages worth of technical articles from magazines found in the physics library of any major university.

The problem had remained in Parnell's mind as he was settling down in that house situated in the vicinity of Walla-walla.

Why?

He had no idea, though his grandfather had told him why those photons had been pushed out of the center of the sun. Pressure. They could not be where they were not supposed to be, that is, until they were overwhelmed by gravity, so weakly powerful.

Why?

Parnell was damned if he knew, and he had no memories of his grandfather proposing an answer. Apparently, the motivations of the fundamental forces and elementary particles were poorly understood.

If whys were still infinitely far away, should not man have still sought hows? Of course, any man of moral integrity would strive to understand the world about him. At least if his name was James Llewellyn. Or John

Wheeler. Or Jaroslav Pelikan. Though biased towards the physical sciences, James Llewellyn had a deep appreciation for the art and sciences of history, though it had not been passed on intact to his grandson.

Or had it been?

After all, was he not expending much of his mental energies, using much of his mental spacetime, to construct a narrative as historical as any ever written by a man with a single, bias-edged viewpoint?

Still...

If it was the narrative that was of primary importance, why was he spending so much of his time contemplating the meaning of events, exegizing poems, and trying to understand motives? Was it true not only in science that theories created facts? Without a theory, without a well-formed meta-viewpoint, were data simply... Data? In history as well as astronomy?

Parnell had known of some of his grandfather's opinions on the difficulties of integrating scientific thought into the mainstream of Western culture. Positivists on the left, pietists on the right, and in the center – naturally selective men who thought the humanities should exclude population genetics and paleontology from the middle of modern education but include Aristotelian logic unaltered by the synthesis of modern modes of thought in which geometries, legitimate in one embedded sphere but not another, were fruitfully differentiated.

Continuously.

Or was that the point?

By point?

Was it a cultural critique to faloodle in a neonishly protrusive manner, to even build up a poem misusing well-defined terms not known at all to men claiming the authority to define which ways of thought were proper and which were not to be mentioned at the dinner-table? Not that James Llewellyn spoke always in ways proper to the dinner table. Often harsh had been his opinions.

On the edge of his consciousness, James Llewellyn had known of the wanky state of scientific education, and he saw fuzzily the abominable and boring level of most popular works on astrophysics. The very word was not mentioned in most of those books as if it were a dark matter to be hidden away from those interested in more exotic and more sexually charged aspects of big bangs and space probes shaped like...

As if no more than a character from a poem, man never escaped the

early stages of his cultotypic growth. The mythical phalluses of ancient Greek heroes of many another part remained ever on the minds of men looking for rules from ancient times, rather than the guidance which one group of men may truly offer another.

Nevertheless, and as if ignorant of man's depravity, James Llewellyn had taught the grandson, implicitly and mostly unconsciously, to assume that all men had a grasp on the modern understanding of the world. The absurdities of the opposite positions frightened rather than amused. If most men remained ignorant of science, how could they understand, how could they decide, how could they even vote, when the modern world was being so radically constructed by scientific views and by sophisticated technologies based on modern science? The boy had accepted, with the most open of hearts and a guardedly open mind, his grandfather's vision of a world seen more clearly through the lenses and viewing screens of scientific instruments, even more importantly through the theories and meta-theories of science.

After all, the argument went.

And never came back.

Yet, Parnell still believed it to be true that all men realized their language was infiltrated with ragged pieces torn from the works of the great theorists of formal logic and quantum mechanics and primatology. Since that was clearly true, would not all men strive to understand what the hell they were saying?

Or was it only poets who were so silly as to self-consciously gibber and babble?

The poet had been a prankster and had left many an incomprehensible joke behind. For why is the purpose of a joke not understood by the teller nor even by the greatest of mathematical physicists?

Dylan Shagari was damned if he knew. By the time he had written his 143rd poem – the first 142, other than number 53, had been destroyed when the poet's instincts had been sharpened by seven or eight shots of the finest of Scotch whiskeys. That was the night he had decided Socrates had not had the slightest idea what the important question really was, had been, or ever would be. That was the night he first faloodled and quickly realized Socrates would have been better to have simply blah-blahed. Then it might have been possible for the world and its historical processes to have selected an appropriate question from a stream of disconnected syllables. Yet, it had occurred to the poet that some sort of structure was needed.

The poet's Aunt Morgan had suggested that since man's view of physical

reality was being reshaped by science, then perhaps. . . And perhaps not. Despite the uncertainty, Dylan Shagari was fascinated by the possibilities of utter chaos in the spoken word. Quasi-stability, to be sure, was of the hardest to detect when the researcher was upon the fluttering whirligig.

He had also passed through his seduction by that young Brazilian woman with the tan that knew no lines. Thus, he had discovered sex to be a manly activity rather than a subject of bookish research. Not that he ever denied the womanly aspects of sex. He had a biased viewpoint because of his testicles and his masculinized hypothalamus, but he tried always to understand the position of the sexual other.

That was the least of his problems as he was more empathic than the average male brute. The bigger difficulties came from the possibilities hovering over the abyss that had opened at his feet. So many women to bed down and so little endurance. Compared to the average stud bull. Or even the typical sheepish ram.

With the prospect of a dissipated life as a poet luring him on, the young man, well-read and not at all corrupted by those few minutes he had spent in academic lectures, had responded by stringing together a handful of terms biochemical and a few anthropological into tangledy-gook of the most absurd sort. A few years of such foolishness gave much practice. More books were absorbed. Theories on the beginning of life grew into intricate structures not retaining many of their original properties and relationships. Life had retained a lot; it was theories that changed muchly. A scandal, yet undeniable – February's scientific truth was October's scrap from a superstitious past.

The ends did not justify the means, but the means still provided one of the better ways to kill a few decades of time which might have otherwise been wasted productively. The process had a nasty tendency to roll over its own goals as a variety of settled opinions gave way to others just as shallow and just as silly.

So thought the poet, though he admitted there was an advantage to replacing the superstitions of modern thought by the confusingly qualified thoughts of scientists.

He was damned if he knew what the advantage was, but he was pretty sure it was there. Besides, the process had taken hold and reshaped the world, and Dylan Shagari decided to go with the turbulent flow.

He sang and he danced. He chanted the formulas of celestial mechanics to the accompaniment of a steel drum. His Jamaican friend suggested that

perhaps partial differential equations had internal rhythms different from those of reggae. Chaitan's theorem on the underlying randomness of the most Platonic of numbers was set to the rhythms of *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Even when read in the stately accents of Alec Guinness, that did not work either.

And, so, it came to the young man of Nigerian and Welsh parts. If even the Queen of the Sciences was mostly and randomly data-like, though sometimes nearly factual, why not the less formal parts of human knowledge? Why not make a presentation or two of babbly stuff in the hopes that someone would make sense of it, some upcoming century? After all, reasoned that young man who had once rented rooms at MIT and the University of Paris, superficial readings of works deserving deeper study must serve some purpose. Else why would have occurred such a complex and contingent set of perceptual perusings and ensuing contemplations?

And, so, Dylan Shagari presented the world with...

Actually, the truth of the matter was, if anyone were able to reconstruct those poems, his early work was not worth the whiskey used to soak it before it was ignited greatly. In the specialized world of a creature with an oversized and overly active brain casting about for interesting mischief, even babbling seemed to have become an art which needed muchly of the practice-thing.

But hope had never been tossed away. Dylan Shagari knew that he had a great multitude of pretty images of the surface of scientific thought. A scattering of observed data, a few perceived facts, and not many ill-disciplined mathematical skills completed the picture. A poet had given birth to himself and he was ready to forge a union of science and those other ways of thought. Once those 142 poems had been burned, progress leveled off. That first keepable poem had taken no more than three sets of silky smooth thighs. Of the whiskey, the poet had kept not track.

The poet's future had an extremely low ratio of poetistic words per bed. The poet had to work damned hard to achieve what seemed so little at the time. Nevertheless, James Llewellyn, as little as he himself understood, had preached that the work had resulted in much good. A way of thought emerged as Dylan Shagari warped using terms scientific and weaved with the rhythms of Welsh, French, and Yoruba. From the pool fronted by that quite sloppy linguistic mat rose a thing not quite living. It had the curly hair of Einstein, the impish grin of Feynman, wore the distinguished and torn clothes of a fruit fly expert sired by a Civil War hero. On top of it all

rested a beret as if it were a freethinker of chemistry. Oddly enough, it was a creature quite thin, famished in appearance, as if it were as careful of its diet as Gödel had been in his last years.

Why no poets?

Perhaps because Shakespeare did not know enough to look for a black hole at the center of the Milky Way?

Like nothing else in Tennessee, perhaps Wordsworth did not give of neither relativistic concepts nor set theory.

Perhaps those responsible for interpreting Dante for modern man had failed to do their jobs?

Maybe narrative poets tried too hard to do what had been left partly done by neither Tolstoy nor Faulkner?

The poet had jumped on such a radical set of suggestions. Whether true or not, they defined a concrete establishment against which he could rebel.

And so that thing had risen from the putrid waters entering a modern waste processing plant. Taking all the corruptions and filth onto itself, being such a crud-crusted collage of things – and other things, it had supplied the poet with the inspiration to cover his flimsy artwork with the thinnest of layers garishly esthetic.

To his everlasting credit, the poet had prophesied: “The care which avoids lies will often miss reality as well.” Would a poet have truly said such an ugly thing, so disheartening to the carefully qualified men of his age? And ugly it was, in many a way. The rhythm was not there or anywhere else, the words not elegant nor common. There was no metaphor, though ‘miss’ was used in a way metonymic. The physical imagery was weak. Who could have visualized reality, let alone something passing it by?

With Dylan Shagari returned to the nature he had never left and James Llewellyn gone somewhere, Parnell Lopez felt the weight of the world upon his shoulders. Something was to be done. Was it not?

The construction of a narrative of a poet, an engineer, two neurobiologists, a wise killer, and a 400 pound man?

The exegesis of poems misusing the most shallow understandings Dylan Shagari had gathered from the prefaces and jokes written by the likes of Einstein and Polanyi?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

He was also starting to empathize with the poet, though it was the curly-haired one emerging from the slop of his own creation and not the

one able to sniff out a clean whore from the other side of a large city. He had not needed to be told that Dylan Shagari was lurking about, awaiting to find out what his poems meant. If anything. At least as history actually unrolled.

Like nothing else in Tennessee, the thoughts negated the On quite topologically.

Ontology?

Well. . .

Maybe not.

But. . .

Maybe.

Truly, the thoughts corresponded poorly to schematics with well-defined keys.

Much of what the poet had said, Dylan Shagari had not thought. He had not had the concepts. The abstractions were orthogonal to those available to confused thinkers of his species and of his time.

Parnell was ready to conclude he had been born into a race quite besilled, if not out-and-out stupid. Not setting himself apart, feeling himself as much a jerk as his fellow men, not at all resembling a foundling, Parnell felt the problem came from inside himself, but he was not unduly overturned. Other than being so boring and ordinary compared to Dylan Shagari and James Llewellyn, he was not much less than no other man.

Certainly no man who had never been to Tennessee a number of times in his life.

Once innocent, Parnell had known only the observable facts of the hypothetically realized entities of neuroscientists and evolutionary biologists, the abstract theories and formulas of electronic engineers and molecular biologists. And vice versa. Yet, the fuzzy things inhabiting the gray regions between remained unperceived by him if not by no other man.

He suspected such at times, but did not know what to make of his suspicions.

He had wondered if the strange fragmentation of his being was less an effect of his own mind and more a result of living in a world where most men stood with feet planted firmly on the shoulders of old wives, heads stuck between their own legs. In that dignified position, at least more dignified than if their heads had been stuck between the old wives's legs, they obtained the best possible view of their own crotches.

Not innocent no longer, Parnell knew not how to faloodle words nor

even how to unfaloodle concepts as historical things unfuzzled futurely.

How could Parnell ever find the truth?

The poet had been rapidly oxidized years before.

The engineer and great doer of deeds had been taken away.

Such a sad and lonely world for Parnell it was.

It was a world without purpose it was.

Such a strange land for an alien youth it was.

Where was the question to be found?

Which were the appropriate paths to be taken?

Over the mountain passes?

Winter snows and cannibalism awaited.

Through the wavy heats of deserts?

Falsehoods of the most unEnlightened sort hovered above the waterless sands.

Into the far reaches of space?

Martian poets were far and few between. Just as well. The last race of Martians before that planet had died had been morely inclined to the making of dioramas than to the writing of poems. Of still more infinite importance, they tended to consider all other species to be sources of protein rather than potential partners in conversation.

The lines had blurred. What was the science of James and Morgan Llewellyn? What was the poetry of Dylan Shagari? What were merely jokes left behind by those men who had been inclined to crudity after a night of whoring chased by a whiskey or nine?

Not longer able to see Dylan Shagari through the eyes of James Llewellyn, Parnell Lopez saw only the faintest images of buxom, Nordic ladies of the night from the streets of St Petersburg, less than that of the African-Indian beauties of Brasilia.

Separated from his grandfather, Parnell lost the focusing guidance which had directed his humbled mind, albeit to many a this and there, each leading to a structurish thing as eclectically furnished as the mind of any Renaissance gentleman.

Suffering came and quite an experience it was for Parnell.

An embodied process it seemed to be.

Even a thing it seemed.

Black and shiny hard.

Glistening like an occult promise of open possibilities.

Sharp-edged and fatal to 2.756% of those who dared handle it. The

remaining 97.244% were rumored to have eventually died of other causes, though the universal negative had not yet been found to kill false dreams of immortality.

Parnell struggled to keep the thing in view and to ignore any refining arguments, any well-intentioned qualifications, though some were not all that well-intentioned. Some merely distracted as did the poems of Dylan Shagari when put into the unformed minds of those men no longer Platonic nor Thomist but certainly not yet scientific whether the a priority allowed God His existence or the other set of assumptions held sway. One of Dylan Shagari's poems had in fact asked if the conclusions of evolutionary biology held since many men sought sway rather than reproductive success. As hard as it was for a sociobiologist to understand, leaders of the poet's time were expected to have an ecologically sound two children or fractionally less, with no concubines allowed to hide contraband young'uns.

The poet, to be as sure as he ever equivocally was, had placed his bets with Darwin rather than the ascetic saints of politics. He never disparaged the still other sort of saints, even those from the strangest sorts of Asian sects. It was possible to transcend biology, but only if you had a goal which truly lay above the amorally physical. Politics lay rather in the morally physical, or so Aunt Morgan had taught the young man not yet a poet. Uncle James, the practitioner, had been possessed by more cynical views.

Perhaps the questions to form Parnell's world were to be found in those few words left by the miserly poet.

That panderer of verbal wares of the most tawdry sort could not have told Parnell a thing. Dylan Shagari was hoping the world would yet birth and nurture someone who could form those poems into something that made sense, though perhaps in the language of a subspecies not yet born.

The suffering thing, which brought plenty for all, had not left Parnell's mind. Dangerous, God-given, and god-making, it spun about, showing first one featureless side and then the same thing by a different angle. Wishing to feel a creature of free will, Parnell wondered if he spun the thing. The question worked its way through his mind even as he read another book on Lie algebras and one on the structure of space-time under different theories of gravity. No clear answer came and he sought a design for a controlled experiment.

The hypothesis would have been: Suffering is but an epiphenomenon, a cruel hoax played by a physical world, necessary and Pannish.

At what level of confidence could the hypothesis have been rejected?

Such is always a matter of great importance in designing an experiment. It must be set beforehand to prevent a biased interpretation of known results. *A priori* ignorance trumps Fisherable bias in the laboratory. Despite such defects in the widest possibilities of discursive thought, the young man was convinced that all who interpreted the results of studies and experiments on carcinogens and ecological disturbances, on new drugs and on sexual tendencies, must have understood the logic behind the statistical analyses of data. Of a certain in a scientific age, congressmen and journalists and priests and rabbis and others with public responsibilities must have made the effort to . . .

The train of thought drifted into a remembrance that lawyers for drug companies wanted an extremely high level of confidence that a new drug did no harm before it was to be marketed. It said so in one of the textbooks on neuropharmacology left by Morgan Llewellyn. Theories less life-threatening could have used lower standards, yet Parnell feared. . .

No, he had the poet to drive away all fears. Or at least to reconcile him to those fears.

The sadness was completely a different thing, though emanating from similar regions of the brain and non-neuronal body.

No longer convinced that feeling sad was such a terrible thing, Parnell courted thoughts of Dylan Shagari. Arm-in-arm, the two shopped Rodeo Drive, examining many a skinny blond, some even emerged from puberty. Not believing an anorexic woman to be appropriate with Ash Wednesday approaching – how could such a woman survive 40 days of fasting? – they fled to the hearty and meaty wares of Dublin.

It would never be.

Parnell once more felt sad. The something came flashing from his brain, focusing the pain, constricting his chest, upheaving his stomach, and flooding nasal passages.

The results were not yet analyzed, not yet fed into a computer to calculate many a lettered statistic having nothing to do with the real world not muchly a controlled experiment. Not at all Fisherable, not by any alphabet soup of agricultural statistics. No, the report had not even been written. Less the never be taken out of context, it was true the experiment was a success. Clear and well-defined results had been obtained. The proof remained in the eyes still red, the nose yet clogged.

Full of that scientific spirit falsely claimed by so many of his fellow-citizens, Parnell willed his chest to tighten a bit more. It obliged to the point

of bronchial spasms. He thought of the time he and cousin Raul had stolen a bottle of bourbon whiskey from his grandfather's office. Without further ado, his stomach acidified and gassed up quietly. Parnell belched and was relieved to discover that did not alleviate his distress. Dedicated was he to seeing the experiment through to its unknowable resolution. Staring intensely into the glare of the lake brought tears to his eyes and soon enough a watery mucus was flowing. A certain sadness was in the distance, but it approached only when he pictured his father and grandfather setting up the volleyball net by the pool.

Missing his grandfather, wishing his father were about, longing to have met his cousin, Parnell strived to recover those simple and innocent dreams of Hong Kong call-girls and nubile African princesses.

Great things could Parnell have accomplished.

Dylan Shagari was no help, being ashes.

James Llewellyn was little better, having disappeared.

Without the guidance to be given by the soul of a poet and the mind of an engineer and bureaucrat, the young man was lost in a wave of facts and disconnected, inconsistent theories.

Great things were out of reach.

Sad world it was.

Bad world it was.

Saddish in a warm sort of way.

Baddish in a mindless sort of way.

Not all was lost. Characters were built, and people remembered that, under the tightest of controls and with the strictest of scientific measurements and calculations, pessimists of disthymic personalities tested out as having a more clear and more accurate view of reality. They saw facts as they were, estimated probabilities more truly, and no one pulled the wool over their eyes.

Disturbing world it was. Apparently, though, maybe not. In any case, not Moses nor Darwin nor even Jesus of Nazareth had ever promised an easy life, a world in which a moral life could be lived without a struggle with the nature of man and the processes of the physical world.

Did not men deserve better?

Many characters of much or little character were striving to learn that hope was the next plateau. Was it worth the effort to be bled upon the slopes? Others wondered why there were questions when there seemed to be no worthwhile choices. James Llewellyn had already given the answers

to his grandson but somehow the best defined intellectual truths slipped away without reinforcement. Parnell wondered if he were simply a weakling who would have eventually caused much disgust to boil in his grandfather's viscera. . .

Still intertwined with an earlier segment of his worm-like self, Parnell rolled over and took Marie in his arms. Cuddled her he did. Longing not to make her feel good, he intended to force her to comfort him. He could accept the sadness of the world, even the badness, but great things were out of reach!

19

Brown and white and blue was the world. A little bit of pink in the shape of a little girl skated on the cleared space on the lake. A dark-blue hominid a bit bigger skated nearby. A boy it was, ten or so. Parnell moved closer to the fire he had blazing on shore, though the ice was so thick, he would have been safe making a fire right on the lake.

He shivered inside his thermal underwear and heavy pants and boots and down coat. Why so cold? The sun was shining so brightly that it had raised the temperature into the teens. Not much for hot weather, Parnell would not have been on the shore of that lake if it had not been for the children. . .

Fun were they having. Alicia and Jimmy and suddenly Donnie shot into view. A bit arthritic, he had trouble keeping up with the children one-fifth his age, but he did his darnedest.

The sound of packed snow crunching caused Parnell to turn his head. Marie was coming down the pathway, carrying two large thermoses. Hot chocolate! Probably marshmallows as well. She set the thermoses down by the fire and moved closer to him. They snuzzled for a moment, kind of like the Eskimos were rumored to have done, though Parnell trusted not learned academic rumors of other cultures. So often were they wrong. Like the stories that the Eskimos had 23 words for yellow snow. One word identified snow peed on by polar bears, and there was one for wolves. Another for men and still another for boys not yet sexually mature. One for women past the age of menopause, and one for. . .

The details were so muchly as one would have expected, that it was almost surprising the tales were not true, yet, Parnell was sure that even people needing to tell the mark of a polar bear from that of a potential mate would not develop such a vocabulary. Undoubtedly, the men of the far north had honed their perceptions so that they could see weak spots in

the ice before the typical cow-hand from west Texas, but, then again, how many Eskimos could have found a true cowboy bar in Austin?

The two children and their aged playmate came in at a wave from Marie. Joy was upon their faces. Parnell was glad that Jimmy and Alicia were learning to appreciate the simple pleasures in life. Not that he, growing up in a more jaded time, had been known to ever disdain a mug of hot chocolate with the marshmallows floating on top.

Still...

He had been more naive than most. He was still naive. He knew what was what; he simply did not know why who would do what to whom.

And, yet...

That first time...

Naive had he been. Inexperienced as well.

No matter...

He had been thinking about the poet and his attempt to spread his words about, irregardless of his inability to understand his own words.

Not to worry...

20

More good things than the best of poems lay in store for Parnell. He did not worry much that he had not been able to resolve the relationship between man and immortality when he had found himself by the lake staring at Marie Levecque, so ripply and so greenish.

Was this young woman truly ripply and literally greenish? Perhaps to the dropped eyes of a shy young man, but even his brain, however aroused and dazed by rising hormonal levels, tried to adjust for the unreliability of certain perceptions.

Voluptuous but with well-defined boundaries, Marie was fair of skin with a sprinkling of freckles. Without a doubt, her eyes were green, though they moved grayward on dark, cloudy days. It was not hard to obtain empirical verification that her blond hair tinged greenishly after exposure to chlorine. Parnell knew that for a fact thanks to Aunt Teresa who liked not the feel of mud squishing between toes and worked hard to maintain the pool. Though it was not her best color, blues and muted purples far to be preferred, Marie did sometimes wear that green sweatshirt with the logo of the North American Collective's Army Rangers. The sweatshirt had not been made with the intention of being so gently disturbed from a straight drop from lean chest to flat stomach, yet it was even more important to Parnell's way of thought that green clothes did not make a lovely young woman at all greenish in a more innate sense. Not that her winter-time hair was as innately blond as it was made to appear, but, once again, Parnell's brain made certain adjustments to the raw perceptions which it actively formed while interacting with a confusing world.

Weighing all the evidence, running the mass of data through various analyses that sought to create information from would-be facts, applying the experience and learning of a short life-time, Parnell's embodied mind had worked hard to adjust his view of the world towards the direction of a fuzzily

seen reality which seemed so insultingly beyond human manipulations.

Marie Levecque was not ripply nor was she greenish.

It was not that Parnell was unaware of the bias of human sensory perceptions. He knew how hard his brain worked, in ways unconscious and conscious, to obtain good data, transmute it into facts, and process those into meaningful information. He was simply willing to let his substratal self work its magic without inflicting upon it the inefficiencies of interference.

He had in fact acquired a huge backscap of knowledge which his brain found useful under the circumstances. Bias from human perceptions was understood reasonably well. Seen through the lens of an infrared camera, Marie would have appeared somewhat different, though a man would have translated such an image through his imagination, logically enough, supplying false colors and other common sense corrections. He would have understood the warmth of the brain, the coolness of the unaroused breasts. How? Such things would have been in the infrared pictures no more than they were in X-ray pictures read by so many doctors implicitly well-practiced.

Unbiased was Man, and unlike himself Man knew nothing at all.

Without biases, there were no facts.

The empirical facts of science were all contained in its meta-biases.

Parnell remembered reading words to that effect in one book or seven of his grandfather's library.

Sad to relate it was.

Finite was man's being, limited his perceptions. The entirety of a Universe needed mostly to be understood by way of an unreasonably narrow band on the electromagnetic spectrum. The expansive capabilities of scientific instrumentation enriched the possibilities inherent in the biases of men but, quite fortunately, did not eliminate those biases. Dropping down the spectrum towards heat would have introduced additional data of some import but it would have been largely filtered out by the process of translating raw signals to conperceptions of real entities. Heading up the spectrum towards the rays of X, Marie would have been quite a pale and insubstantial thing, not much in comparison to the least of stars.

Of these facts was Parnell quite aware. He even knew how her brain would have glowed on a phosphorescent screen if she had been fed radioactive sugars and then placed under a PET scanner. That seemed not to be much relevant to the basic situation.

Marie Levecque was not ripply nor was she greenish.

She laughed often, nervously and gently, lips parted just slightly and eyes

darting here and there as if to assure herself that herself was not the joke. Softly and yet with a tentative invitation, she touched Parnell's forearms and hands. Often. Freely. Still, she would draw back from Parnell's hands. Always. Reluctantly.

Attracted to this woman, Parnell estimated that 98.7% of heterosexual males of European descent would have also been attracted to her, likely even highly aroused by the sight of her naked body, or the soft feel of her skin. If her ears had been just a bit better matched, if the left side of her mouth had been a bit more rightishly responsive, nearly 100% of those lusty males would have jumped her, given an invitation. Some would not have needed an invitation.

Of those projections into reality was Parnell less than absolutely certain. He had read of the phenomena of sexual attraction in some of his grandmother's books, yet estimation, using the best-established of theories, was a tricky business, even for a young man with an estimated IQ of 195. Itself was the IQ a tentative shadow of a ghostly projection of something real but unseen and not much understood.

No matter.

Other things did matter. Some of which were not, strictly speaking, things at all. The IQ in particular, not that it was well-defined enough to be considered particular, could not have been considered a thing.

More to the point – Endowed with an excellent memory, Parnell also knew that if he were equally as attractive as Marie on purely physical grounds, he would appeal to a far smaller percentage of women. Those books on evolutionary biology and sexual dimorphism had provided clear reasoning and hard experimental data to support the claim that women were unreasonably choosy. In one of her articles collected in an anthology of radically differing views, Parnell's grandmother had said that choosiness on the part of women, odd as it might have seemed, was the reason they had become the meat rather than the shopper. It seemed to Parnell that it must have been a joke, but he did not get it. So far as he could tell, he was driven to shop for call-girls, not for meat. It was just that he had not the slightest idea how to get a call-girl. What was the proper pick-up line? What was a man to wear when courting a courtesan?

Yet, and nevertheless, after purging himself of fears of how irresponsible and abusive men would be if women acquired even greater freedom to be choosy, Parnell realized that Dylan Shagari must have been a damned attractive fellow. Except for one pretty nun dressed in street clothes, history

recorded no case where a woman refused a direct invitation from that poet terse and dusky. While true that he would have had little reason to speak of his non-engagements rather than his battles, the poet certainly had a great glut of success.

Accepting the burden of masculine slavery to female choosiness, balanced by a process of male ownership of the woman once she had chosen – a process not overly comfortable to men nor women not living under Stone Age conditions – Parnell consciously kept his eyes from the friendly and confused face of Marie. He was even conscious of the paradox of his being. He had been raised on a steady diet of tales of sexual adventures and misadventures. He was a grandson of James Llewellyn, as devout and sometimes as promiscuous as an Old Testament patriarch. He was a cousin of Dylan Shagari, that man so frustrated by the task of understanding a world in which the old Nigerian ways of life and the Welsh moral certainties had been smeared together into a pungent sewage. His father's cousin, Hernando Gueverra, was a man who would have been as much a giant as Dylan Shagari; specializing in non-professional women, Hernando had in fact fathered far more children than the poet. The power of women to point at a particular man in a crowd of combatants had helped to make these, the Gueverras and Llewellyns of the world, what they were; that power had helped to destroy Dylan Shagari.

Still, Parnell, being partly immune to the attractions of women, was not inclined to mistreat them. He wondered if indifference was the true foundation of social decency.

Surreptitiously, he stole an image of the young woman so fair, and he saw the truth.

Marie Levecque was not ripply nor was she greenish.

Surely she was approachable, even a bit describable by statements not entirely negative. With a certainty was she other than not ripply and not greenish. Not exhausting her possibilities, that statement did not even tell a truth about her.

Could that have been so?

Was she other than not ripply and not greenish?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

Hard it was to judge a woman's thoughts when the only bits of evidence were her spoken words and her image reflected in a lake's surface or seen quite sideways. As Parnell shyly saw matters, the spoken word belonged to all women and a few politically astute men such as his grandfather. Parnell

was neither woman nor politically astute male, and he accepted Marie's words and expressed emotions as being dangerous and biased pieces of data.

Even ripply, she was pretty.

Greenish, she yet smiled invitingly.

Why? Parnell Lopez was not James Llewellyn though he likely possessed copies of one-fourth of the man's genes. Thereabouts anyway. He was not Dylan Shagari though he shared perhaps one-eighth of his genes. Why was Marie attracted to Parnell? Was she playing with him?

There was much about Marie which seemed dangerous and unearthly to Parnell. He could not name those things. It had been Dylan Shagari who had been able to faloodle words about a woman ripply and with a greenish cast about her.

With poet could not Parnell compete. Muchly knowing a few things, the befrazzled young man could have spoken only of hormones and neurotransmitters, of a body soft and curved as it was adapted to attract males and to conceive and nurse and suckle. Biological prose could not compete with Solomon's zoological poetry. Who would listen to talk of progesterone when words were beautified by images of gazelles or mares of Pharaoh's chariot? Hair like a flock of goats moving down to the slopes of Gilead made sickly in comparison those luteinizing hormones from, of all the absurd places, the pituitary gland. Breasts like two fawns feeding among the lilies were far more luscious than mammary flesh decorated with the most delicately brown aureoles. No, it was no use. Parnell's knowledge of science and its arcane terminology was of no avail. It spoke truths ugly. It had no appeal to XX humanoids, when compared to the beautiful poetry based upon a knowledge of Palestinian flora and fauna circa 800 BC. Struggling hard, the young man managed to avoid comparing his available phrases to the elegance of Elizabethan street slang.

What was to be done?

Was it necessary to make extraordinary efforts with a friendly young woman who was neither ripply nor greenish?

Parnell was confused.

Above all, Marie was. . .

Like nothing else in Parnell's dreams, she was nearly as innocently embodied as was he. No conscious desire for profit lay behind her offers of friendship. No guile lay behind her straightforward manipulations of that small percentage of those 98.7% of the heterosexual males of white European descent with whom she had come into contact.

Parnell was not a racist, not he of such mixed ethnicity, nor did he project such upon Marie. Nor would he have claimed racist were the dark-skinned men who may have seen Marie's hips sway to gentle rhythms but perceived her to be paler than a pretty women, no matter how sickly. It was simply that he knew perceived beauty in face and body was defined by averaging processes starting in infancy, and the persons standing about the crib and playpen, as well as those in church and school, received great weight in that oddest of Bayesian processes. It was a mystery to Parnell how any woman had found Dylan Shagari so irresistible. Was a dash of Wales and several pinches of Nigeria more averagely Hong Kongish than men of almond eyes and high cheekbones? Or was such a person more averagely Homo Sapiens Sapiens? How could those exquisite creatures ensconced in penthouses of whites and pastels have had the proper experiences to have known of such a broad average? Did a desire for the exotic perhaps survive that averaging process?

True was the need to mix up histocompatibility complexes to make life tougher for viruses and bacteria. Did such lead to a desire for exotic sexual partners and mates? After all, the genetically diverse Africans had not had too much trouble with the diseases brought by the Europeans, but the Native Americans descended from so few. . .

Garbled and tangled, the gookish stuff was coming down upon Parnell just when he would have preferred to have been obsessed with Marie. Though this connection between disease and sexual desire seemed. . .

Marie smiled, broader though morely uncertain.

He was sure that his brain had successfully filtered out the ripples. She was starting to appear as he perceived her. Interesting, that. Even, comforting. Yet. . .

Sure was he that she smiled for him, even at him.

What was to be done?

There was little to prevent the processed sensory information from cascading from cerebral regions of a cortical sort down into regions limbic. The signals reached such dangerously strange nuclei as the amygdala and hypothalamus. No, it could not be denied, and little was to be done about it. The medial preoptic neurons of the hypothalamus were up to no good.

Parnell grimaced and shifted his pants about.

Marie Levecque smiled, ripply and greenish of hue.

A presence seen reflected as if from another time or place put forth her hand and grasped the hand of Parnell, fingers interlocking with his.

“Listen,” commanded a voice sweetly soprano. “Small trees are falling. Can you hear them?”

Parnell listened though he had once believed it was leaves that fell, sometimes even apples. He wondered if the local trees had found another way of reproducing, perhaps by sprouting young trees and then dropping them when mature. Yet, she was right. He could hear small trees falling in the not far recent distance-interval.

As if knowing of his confusion, Marie added, “The beavers must be working. Let’s visit them.”

Parnell remembered that Dylan Shagari had once spoken of friendly beavers hiding under bushes. Poetry more sublime than the music of wavy particles. The poet had truly been a wonderment beyond even his own imagination. The distracted and fragmented young man smiled and rose, pulling Marie to her feet. His eyes glanced shyly over the irises of green, down the puggy nose, to those lips so redly parted in a smile that radiated the warmth that passed down Parnell’s chest and into his gut. Her chin was so elegantly tiny, her neck more slender than any tower of David could have been. No, that much was clear. Full of life was she and not at all militant, not at all resembling a fortress of the leader of mighty men, not at all like a myrrhish Frankenstein, she. . .

It came to Parnell that his mind was babbling as meaninglessly as Dylan Shagari in his most drunken state. Like the poet, he had even begun to twist the words of a great and wise man long dead.

Meaningless were the words flowing through the specialized language centers of Parnell’s brain.

Without reference were his extractions from a reality which was not.

It was all humorless trash of the most godless sort.

Dragging Marie for the first few steps, Parnell headed towards the sounds of young trees being brutally killed by a species known for wreaking havoc upon many local biosystems. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw a sight that brought more warmth to his body. He even trembled in rhythm with the jingly firmness of Marie’s breasts. As she took charge and brought him ever closer to that sound of those industrious creatures, he wished the sparse and parsimonious language of science could match the beauty and profundity, the sheer meaningful niceness, of words written by men from worlds long dead.

Sure, he could speak of the supraoptic and paraventricular nuclei of the hypothalamus. What did mere body parts matter in comparison to procla-

mations of ethereal love unconsummated? What did they matter compared to the body parts of desert animals or to the structural components of the ancient fortresses of Judaic kings? True, there was that peptide hormone, smallish, named oxytocin, but how could orgasms and suckling reflexes compete with those thoughts from ancient worlds when men really knew the worth of human beings? Placental lactogens could do no more than give a hormonal boost to maternal love. . .

So materialistic. Of the slime and of the dust and not of the stuff of which human beings truly were composed.

And ugly.

Where was Dylan Shagari when a faloodler of words was truly needed?

Science was technical and precise and spoke so ugly. How could it speak of maternal love?

How could it. . .

An image came to Parnell of Marie placing a baby to her swollen breast, and he fidgeted while still skipping along at her side.

A baby suckled and, with little delay, the gossip was spread to the cord of the spine and thence to that often troublesome hypothalamus.

Suckle, darling, suck my titties, and then. . .

Ooh-la-la, a squirt of milk and a burst more than tingle.

What a pleasure is this giving of the maternal self.

Lost in contemplation of nipples red and raw, having visions of orgasmic females, Parnell forgot where the pituitary gland had fit into this whole mess. A tear came to his rightmost eye as he realized the words of love had been lost and man was left only with prolactating females. Where puppets of mandrake once danced, neurons held the ground, rocking and rolling to their own chemically-mediated rhythms.

Dylan Shagari would have brought Marie to the ground. Undoubtedly, she would have smiled her, "Yes," and responded so aggressively as to have knocked his pants off. Or at least dragged them off.

James Llewellyn would have seduced her with dirty jokes. More than that, he would have taken her to the finest of restaurants, perhaps one in Paris on Wednesday and another in San Francisco on Thursday.

Parnell could do nothing but go to his knees between the legs of a woman crouching, back against a tree. Visions of oxytocin danced in his head while a nipple swelled between his lips. Guided by hands so femininistically aggressive, his right hand moved down her body, reaching the entrance to the paradise of his current desires. He stroked and caressed until his loved

one was warm and receptive. And then he set her down upon green grass and not the white satin sheets of a Hong Kong penthouse. . .

The Earth moved rapidly, spinning on its axis, revolving about the Sun, and even moving towards the center of gravity of the Great Attractor. Nevertheless, the ground did not move under Parnell who was quite surprised to find himself staring at a cloud which looked suspiciously phallic as did the pine trees and the fire-tower across the lake. There was more data to be transformed that it might recursedly inform his world-view. Marie's gyrating hips seemed not as innocent as the gentle smile she still wore. Parnell thought maybe she'd been nice to him in order to use his manly desires for her own purposes. The thought was a mere joke of an abstraction to the more self-conscious centers of his brain, yet. . .

In times more pure, virgins and chevaliers inhabited lands still decent and clean. . .

Suddenly came surges separated by no more than 0.8 seconds. Something similar seemed to be happening in a select and lucky few of Marie's ten trillion cells. Well, maybe seven trillion – she was no more than 110 pounds. Maybe a bit more or maybe a bit less. No, Parnell realized the ten trillion was just a rough guideline. No human being was typical and it was quite hard to estimate accurately the number of cells in one of those unique entities. Even a mind as powerful as that of Parnell would be off by billions. Usually. Sometimes luck intervened. Perhaps it was accurate still more to claim facts could only dance lightly about the expected. In a world complexly woven from complicated things, luck played no more a part than when integrating a well-measured function of reasonably, though not perfectly, good behavior.

Contemplating the thoughts of Lesbique and Stieltjes, Parnell gazed up at the still glazed eyes of a young woman whose tongue was slowly licking her own lips.

Curious that mathematical theories and feminine psyches were so intertwined.

Once more, Parnell's memory produced an odd and mostly useless fact. He rolled Marie over on her back to aid the little sperms on their arduous journey. He rubbed the belly of a woman who suddenly seemed to mean so much more to him than the everything she'd meant only minutes before. He kissed her cheeks. Seeking to calm muscular spasms deep inside of her, he calmed an exterior softly responsive to his touch. True enough, he understood the error of his ways. He longed for actions unconsciously

motivated. He desired the opaque. He wished to no longer ponder if it was Parnell or Parnell's genes which so strongly desired Marie to conceive a baby. Their baby. What an odd thought to a young man who could never compete with the likes of Dylan Shagari or James Llewellyn. He, boring young Parnell, might have fathered a baby.

And it had been fun.

Eve had put the fruit into his mouth and the taste would never leave him. It would be ever upon his tongue.

Unless a major neurological disorder disrupted his memory pathways or even the circuits of one or more of his cognitive regions.

Take, for example, the hippocampus. . .

Parnell decided he would just as soon forget about the hippocampus and further decided it was nice to have Eve to blame for everything.

Instead, he looked to his side and watched Marie's breasts move with each breath, wondering if her belly would begin to gently bulge. Would she become moody, would she be sensitive to strong smells and tastes, would her body be distorted by the growth of another life?

Parnell reached over to caress her stomach, but Marie must have wanted to sleep. She threw his hand off and rolled over. Wondering if women always grew sleepy after sex, he lay back and looked at the clouds moving rapidly through the atmosphere.

It came to him as a revelation, though in fact it formed itself out of the most subtle hints, the least of mnemonic traces. Parnell's grandfather had told him of a poem that had never made it into the oeuvre of Dylan Shagari. It had never been completed, being only an overblown title and two unedited stanzas of three lines each, plus another line so ominous and loaded with possible meanings:

A bra dots a ket, a breast is for real.

Often did Parnell wish the poet had maintained a consistent distinction between observation and actualization. And reality was still another pot of pickled peppers.

How was it that Parnell had seen the way.

The poem had sat unfinished for nearly 25 years.

More than long enough, that was.

It could not wait, not even for the restful needs of his lover.

It was of the utmost importance was it.

He, though merely Parnell Lopez, knew where the poem was headed. Not a poet, was it possible he could yet be a metaphorist, a metonymist, or even an allegorist? Could he create prose bridges linking the worlds of science and poetry, using the poetically enshored and consequently verbal remains of his cousin?

No, but...

It was a new game, perhaps as exciting as reconstructing the blueprint of the tracking systems of the F-550 sub-orbital fighter and reconnaissance plane.

Probably not, but...

The words painted a coherent, though implausible image. What could be as exciting as the game of determining the nature of what-is and the subsequent goal of using that knowledge to build and manipulate things? Knowing such was the way of thought traveled by his grandfather, knowing further that Dylan Shagari had respectfully but openly laughed at such impiety on the part of a devout Presbyterian, Parnell was betwixt and between. He was more comfortable with the habits he had acquired from long association with the great man, James Llewellyn, yet...

Parnell sat up and looked about at his environment. There was a fight 150 feet away, nearly 30 feet inwater from the decrepit apple orchard. One beaver must have invaded the domain of another. To steal resources? Food? Or females? Pondering the matter, Parnell looked at Marie, once again lying on her back. She had the cutest of overbites, showing more clearly with her mouth open just the tiniest. Her right hand was touching her disarrayed hair, her left lay only inches from the region where Parnell's sperm raced against time while under constant assault from her immune system.

Exasperated, Parnell blew out half a lungful of air. Those women, those females of all species, put such demands on men. Selecting healthy, successful specimens and then doing all they could to kill all possible sperm. It was as if they expected to be able to bear babies not just free of genetic defects, but made of superior stuff. It was as if bearing a baby would be the most demanding and most costly thing they would ever do.

Marie, who had already drawn Parnell's emotional and physical desires towards herself, had of a sudden become the center of the young man's intellectual efforts, those actions of his mind which seemed to ever grind on through unconscious and conscious regions, through periods of time equally well divided.

She held the answer to the question which Parnell could not form. She

was of a form more explicit yet equally as open and as undefinable as the question.

It was as if she were a world in herself, and Parnell wished he were good enough, or at least interesting enough, for her. “Why,” he asked himself in a whisper, “had Marie chosen me if she is driven to mate with superior males? The most superior she can attract? I have not built hospitals and churches in Africa. I cannot spin allusive webs to catch the dust, the dew, the rays of dawn. I am not my grandfather nor am I my cousin. Neither builder nor destroyer am I. Neither destroyer nor builder could I be.”

Grayish eyes, so gentle, so reflective of an embodied intelligence of body and behavior, stared back at Parnell. Her mouth was open enough to show her front teeth touching the lower lip. Though having little to do with her reproductive capabilities, that tender defect caused a spasmodically intensifying pain to push forward, up and along unseen tubes in Parnell’s groin.

Leaning over the young woman not quite awake – despite the evidence of her grayly exquisite eyes, he asked, “Why is it that your most ethereal qualities, your most spiritual attributes, arouse pain in my testicles? Why is it that your abilities, your desires, to give me pleasure and to conceive my child, irritate my most rational self, causing it to operate frantically, trying without success to understand you?”

She shook her head, whether in confusion or in ignorance knew not he. Then who? Secondly, he knew not that neither. Parnell was, in fact, losing his confidence in the consistency of his reasoning processes. Was he Gödeling himself? Were his thinking processes, normally so powerful, being disrupted by Marie’s very presence? How? Would her mere presence be sufficient to scramble the Collective’s eavesdropping equipment in Leavenworth? That could not be so for then. . . . Would it have been better to have simply made some. . . . It could not have been easy, maybe not even possible, to have made another Marie. Of that was Parnell sure. Parnell retreated and found himself at Marie’s side, resting on his elbow.

“I remembered something.” Still dazed, perhaps due to her recent efforts to create as many incoherent images of herself as possible – Parnell was narrowing in on the ways in which she disrupted thought patterns so rational – she merely nodded for Parnell to continue. “My cousin, Dylan Shagari. . . . I never told you about him, did I?”

Marie, not much green but rippling a little in confusion, shook her head.

“He was half-Nigerian and half-Welsh which meant he may have come

fully from the genetic stock of the ancestors of non-African peoples. He was a poet who spent his time searching out the most receptive and most self-giving women of Europe and Bharat and Hong Kong.” The mere mention of Hong Kong was sufficient to bring a smile to Parnell’s face. Marie smiled in response, though not sure why.

“And people hated him because he spoke of the need to newly speak.” Dropping his voice as was appropriate for a great secret, Parnell told her, “The poet thought it a sign of cultural senility that not a single cliché had ever grown from measure theory even as it overwhelmed theories of a more probable nature.” Nodding his head wisely, the fellow more in touch with the mathematical structure of the universe than with the politics of Micronesia, added, “I tend to agree with him. Do you know of a single haiku mentioning Chaitin’s proof that essentially all numbers are random?” Suddenly confused, Parnell equivocated. “It’s not essential in the technical philosophical sense, since it seems more an existential matter, though...” Parnell’s voice dwindled as his thoughts drifted off to attempt an escape from the trouble he had got himself into by trying to concisely discuss mathematics in a language better suited to the needs of manufacturers of buggy-whips. After a few minutes, he was a’fearing there was no escape other than that described so inadequately by Dylan Shagari. Gathering his courage, he leaped into the unknown and added, “And the poet spoke of the silliness of a race which had kept dust-covered words describing inertia inversely impulsive yet not covering the complexities of things quite non-linear and more as well.” In a voice showing but a hint of outrage, Parnell said, “And to think – a race so stupid as to use so many antique words to deliberately obstruct their view of the world even as they piled crime upon crime by purging their daily gabble of words speaking eternal truths.”

Not having known James Llewellyn, never having heard the night-scattered tales of the poet, Marie merely asked, “What race?”

Taken aback for a second, the young man who presumed all others had known James Llewellyn, had heard the night-scattered tales of the poet, stammered two times and a half before responding, “Us. I think. Homo Sapiens Sapiens, I mean, though Grandpa said it is possible we carry some genes from the offshoot lines of Cro Magnon and Neanderthal. Unless, of course, Cro Magnon men were really some of us, but... Anyway, as always happens with species differentiation, we still overlap our erect and toolmaking ancestors greatly. That is, in the types of enzymes we produce, though the overlap may be moderated a lot by differences in regulation of

growth patterns or by subtle changes in our metabolic use of the enzymes. The strangest complication of all is that a virus might have carried a gene fragment to our ancestors from an ancient lizard, though that would mostly mess things up by causing cancers or other dysfunctions.”

Parnell stopped, having exerted himself to extend words beyond the paths yet blazed by human languages. Other reasons seemed to be rising from depths of his being only partly plumbed. Marie’s eyes were graying. Still showing signs of confusion, Marie was also firming up in some strange, unsayable way. A tale came to mind. It coalesced from pieces scattered throughout his brain. The poet had once shared the bed of a poetess specializing in country music lyrics, but occasionally given to the formulation of sonnets. Barren of womb, she had been protective and maternal in the way she welcomed Dylan Shagari into her home. The poor lad had been wandering the streets of downtown Denver, lost and homeless. It had been raining, and the streetwalkers were on a holiday.

Though not a professional, she had extended an invitation generous and gracious to a young man in need. He had accepted, and, that night, as the story goes, and not as any other story known to Parnell had ever gone, Dylan Shagari learned of poetry not so drained of blood as was his. Suffering as did he from the lack of words useful or possessing unexplored beauty, she had declared the daffodils still yellow. Legend had it that such a stand, so courageous and so disorienting, had impressed the poet greatly. But there was still more. Inhabiting a world of decaying concepts, she had emanated the bouquet of the rich, black dirt of her native Iowa. Through his uncle, though but an engineer and a poet quite amateurish, Dylan Shagari had left word of the woman’s love of what she could caress or smell. She had been fascinated by his efforts to create evolutionary metaphors and quantum metonymies, but said that her day was not yet. To her granddaughter would she pass on the responsibility to lyricize the co-evolution of flowers and butterflies, but only after those things had once more materialized out of the vagueness of a world morphing its way to a new form.

No! Sad it was. More than sad. Beyond words, was it gut-wrenching. Yet, not to be denied was it. It was not possible to speak of the concrete things of the world when they had decayed into things entering into unlabeled relationships.

And she would never have a granddaughter!

Many could have lived with such a sadly complex situation, though not

the poetess. How many burdens so heavy would be laid upon the souls of men?

Those things, though unlabeled, were still there. They had form and substance. It was simply that they could not be seen or talked about. Words had died and the grieving concepts had thrown themselves into the open grave. Stripped of those concepts, however abstract, the concrete things of the world could not be recovered. Facts had melted away though their data-like substrate continued to exist. It was as if the world was mocking the sons of Adam. The descendants of the Namer had once more discovered that they were incapable of speaking in such a way as to form the world for all time. James Llewellyn had told Parnell that it took only a few facts about the empirical world and people lost their ability to speak of things transcending the very empirical things which were their manifestation. When the words had gone – Poof! All truths, contingent and necessary, had vanished into the thin air.

Parnell re-remembered his grandfather leaning back in the big leather chair behind his massive mahogany desk, puffing mightily on the fine Cuban cigar supplied by Uncle Hernando. Then, seemingly relaxed, the great man had smiled wryly and said the poet had warned the woman that in a Creation seen through a language reborn, women would be more interested in giving their breasts to poets and future poets. More and not exclusively, yet it was true that poems gave no relief to swollen and tender breasts and women with swollen breasts tended to be more rational than men with swollen testicles. In the matter of blood-dammed ischiocavernosus muscles, were they morely somewhat equal, though not completely.

While Parnell's mind had been resonantly and conjunctively recocreating those slightest of traces in his brain, Marie's eyes had grayed still more. And, yet, they reflected the green of the leaves overhead. That is, when she turned her head that way. When she turned her head the other way, all was gray and wise.

Surprised that a man could be lucky enough to receive a multitude of revelations in but a single day of heightened life, Parnell suspected he knew what this woman wanted, but before the words could form she laughed and said, "You talk pretty when I don't know what you're talking about. How'd you ever learn about so many matters of evolutionary neurobiology and transfinite set theory so discretely continuous?"

Parnell reddened. He hemmed and then he hawed intermittently.

"I lost it," ejaculated he.

“Lost what?”

“For just an instant, I thought I knew what it is you want from me.”

Marie shook her head in puzzlement, but her eyes remained gray and her lips parted enough to show her overbite to advantage. With all of her attributes which approached that limited perfection possible to finite creatures, Parnell was fascinated still by that overbite. And her left ear was the tiniest bit larger than the right. Though graceful when running or skipping along, Marie was known to stumble or to hesitate when walking slowly. But her sometimes green, often gray eyes... Her complexion so creamy with but a handful of freckly dust scattered across her nose... Was that also an imperfection or was that an attribute which helped to make her so unique... So much an individual?

Marie was not green nor was she ripply, yet Parnell knew not what she wanted. He did not even truly know her.

Unresolvable questions were pushed aside and Parnell pushed ahead into the unknown regions created when his memories coalesced to interact with his environment, to reflect back possibilities he had not seen when he had fathered an earlier set of possibilities and sent them forth to make their way in the world.

“Grandpa told me something the poet once said when he felt necessary to his own existence, though that feeling lasted but a fraction of a day...”

“The Poet?”

Puzzled at the tone which implied ‘Poet’ when ‘poet’ had issued forth from his mind, Parnell asked, “Why speak as if the poet is to be Idealized? He is not long enough dead to be sport for such abuse.”

Marie’s eyes were as gray and well-tempered as the finest of steels. A shiver passed up Parnell’s spine as he wondered if she had marked the measure of his soul... or... Was such unnecessary for her to understand him? “Is it possible,” pondered Parnell silently, “that I could be as attractive to Marie as if I were a poet, profligate and prodigal?”

She seemed interested. That she did. She had acted as if she really wanted to have his baby. If she had no barriers chemical, for he knew she had none rubbery, then perhaps she would have his baby. That seemed a good sign that she really was interested in him.

And those evermore gray eyes held him as if she were freezing his soul under an examining scope. Of such things was Parnell knowledgeable, for his grandfather had spoken often of his agreement with Aristotle and Aquinas that the soul was the form of the body. No body, no soul, except perhaps

as an abstract memory of God. That was disturbing but also comforting to Parnell as he could traverse blueprints and designs of all types of object the way a farmer traversed land, picking up the slightest hints of inclines, stagnant water, of soils leached or overloaded with organic materials. From lines and equations did Parnell move towards complex artifacts; from natural objects did a farmer move towards plans and schematics drawn on the sheets of his brain.

Was one way or the other primary in any sense absolute? Parnell knew that reality would enforce itself upon all minds eventually, but he also knew that reality could not penetrate to his thoughts unless he first opened his senses and presented possibilities to see if they agreed with the things about him. Autistic-like he was in some ways, autistic he was not. The two, the water and the wave, the being and the becoming, the body and the soul, were two in the clearest sense, but two in being aspects of one unified. . . Thing? There was no word to describe such a . . . Thing. He looked towards the pond. There was a water lily growing in the water. The cellulose and other minerals were united with the growth, but there was not a way of saying so. Such was conceivably sayable but only in a language less well adapted to Enlightenment needs.

How could he, merely Parnell, newly speak of such things not seen until their possibility had been concepted, however unformed the corresponding words and syntax? He was no woman in touch with embodied life. He was no great engineer, accomplished in the arts of redirecting the things of the world, that they might serve the needs of men. He was no poet, trying to create words and syntaxes faster than they could be embalmed by the liberalizing and abstracting acts of civilized men.

He had the abilities to examine the details of anything small enough to fit into his mind. Was the soul such? Could it fit? Could it even be manipulated in such a way as to be put somewhere? If he could but. . . He could not. And he was no poet. He could form no metaphors to resolve problems created by the need to change words and bring concepted things into perceived reality. No, as far as he could tell, such problems were most unresolvable to the extremest degree. To the veriest great extent, they were even impenetrable to the mind of poor Parnell. Limited creature that he was, he had not been able to absorb the knowledge in his grandmother's neuroscience library in less than two years. Something inside of Parnell threatened to shrivel into nothingness as he remembered it had taken him four whole months of nearly half-time effort to find a single solution to the

field equations of Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. How was he to reunite mind and brain, body and soul, world and movement, all those non-things men had split so asunder one from the one? How was he to penetrate to the heart of such a deeper mystery as Marie Levecque?

So gray and firmly defined was she.

Yet the possibility of green of eye, ripply of moral character, persisted.

"Dylan Shagari was a great man."

Marie's eyes brightened in anticipation, for she had already heard of James Llewellyn from Teresa Gueverra and Grace Llewellyn Lopez. She was ready to believe this family was composed of more beguiling personalities than any she had ever imagined. She placed her left hand gently on Parnell's shoulder, intending to encourage him to speak. Instead, it seemed to arouse him in such a way as to disrupt his thoughts. Apologetically, she said, "Please tell me more about the poet."

"He used to travel all around the world, finding the most talented street-walkers and call-girls. And he would let all those other women seduce him, and then he would leave them with babies." Parnell saw an expression of shock pass across Marie's face, and he knew his words were not coming out as he would have desired. Something was being scrambled in the process of relating historical facts. It came to him that a better theory was needed to organize those facts that the true greatness of Dylan Shagari would display itself. Not able to decide if he could better use the analogies of the textbooks or the allegories of the poem, he moved on naively. "And he left 77 poems averaging 213.1558 words apiece." After a short hesitation, Parnell decided he could add little to the discussion by reciting his tabulation of the poems by parts of speech. The nouns were of course separated by proper and common, the verbs by tense. To be sure, not always were verbs easily distinguished from adjectives, but mostly, the adverbs were difficult to categorize. Something was dreadfully wrong with the English language or with adverbs. They did not quite fit. Unless...

Was it the concept of verbs and adjectives and adverbs which misled Parnell?

A puzzlement was that, but not one to be easily settled at the moment's time.

Rousing himself back to the world of worms and mud, Parnell smiled at Marie to let her know that it was her turn to speak.

She was bewildered. So much so that her eyes were green. She was also rippling quite a bit in the mind of Parnell, though she did not seem to be

moving the air and the blades of grass by her very confusingly confused presence. In such a state, virtually actualized in the mind of a young man, perhaps actually actualized in reality, she asked, "Is that all he did? That would be just one small book."

"No!" protested Parnell. "It was two tiny books and several pages in anthologies and magazines." Weakly, he added, "And seven children as well."

"And he left them to go searching for more prostitutes!?!?" Marie blushed as such a world came from her mouth.

Parnell had seen a great disturbance come upon the woman he loved. Laying upon his side, he pulled her close, cuddling her head under his chin and stroking her hair. Certain he had hurt her by his virtuous act, Parnell would still not forsake his honesty.

He did not abandon a man beloved of his grandfather.

Objectionally and with exception a'tooken, Parnell gently demurred, "They wanted his babies. They loved him dearly because they knew he would abandon them."

When Marie pulled back and looked questioningly at the young man suddenly so much a stranger in a non-categorically strange world, he thanked his Maker that Marie was so much more sensible than those silly women.

Seeking to calm her, Parnell said, "Dylan Shagari once started another poem never added to his official body of work. He titled it: *One may conjecture higher thoughts to be not always popular, yet it remains true we may rise above the abominable and aspire to the vulgar.*"

"That's a strange title. Did he leave anything to the poem?"

"Well, most of his poems had more normal titles. Like: *Ode to a Milkweed.*" Marie looked as if she suspected Parnell was pulling her leg. To be sure, that action appealed somewhat to him, but he felt that he should treat her with enough respect to finish the conversation before returning to that sort of afterplay. Or any other sort, for that matter. He leaned over to kiss her gently on the forehead and said, "It wasn't one of his stronger poems. It was about photosynthesis. He thought it odd that people could eat so much plant-life without making any effort to understand how electromagnetism was converted into the most succulent of tomatoes. But he only allotted himself 417 words, and so he passed over most of the interesting details. Though..." Parnell's eyes clouded slightly as he withdrew to count words. A second later, his eyes brightened and he said, "it was his longest poem. At least of those he kept. He had burned his earlier, practice work

after soaking it in whiskey.”

Marie pulled back and looked bewildered once more, and Parnell resolved to pass directly to the scrap of poetry. “One night, after he was bepleased by twins, both genetics researchers, and damned good ones according to Grandpa. . .” Parnell blushed as he realized he had ignored his grandfather’s advice. At least he thought so. “Grandpa had said a man can tell dirty jokes when he has a lady. . .” Parnell looked about and added, “in a field?” After a pause to gather his thoughts and to suppress the image of the geometrical structure of spacetime in the vicinity of a passing soliton of primordial. . . Something not being nor becoming?, Parnell asked, “Do you mind if I say words like ‘damn’ when we. . .”

Giggling, Marie pulled back and asked, “When we make love?” before pecking him on the lips. When he no more than blushed, she said, “I hear words like that all the time.” As she snuggled back up to Parnell, she asked, “What were those twins good at? Genetics? Or bepleasing men?”

“What depths there are to be found in Marie, though her surface is not much green and her ripples lie mostly in her innermost being.” Parnell had, of course, spoken to himself. To her said he, “He wrote only seven lines to the poem, but I’ve composed a finish.”

Marie pressed her left hand into the muscles at the side of his chest as if he fascinated her. Or annoyed her. At any rate, he had some effect on her.

He interpreted the signal and chanted:

Besodded, bediddled,
he brought forth his fiddle
and played to oblivious clouds.

Without pulling back, she said, “I don’t understand.”

“What’s to understand? The poet said that someday someone will understand. It seems to me that he was saying certain patterns of words will resonate in the associative regions of the brain, perhaps in the conscious brain, perhaps the unconscious. The resonance will set up new associative and cognitive relationships. . .”

Marie, all asmile, pulled back and theorized, “And those relationships will allow understanding to grow?”

Parnell withdrew to his thoughts for a few seconds before saying, “I guess so. I was going to say that those relationships will themselves be

understanding. You speak of conceptualization based on assumptions and the derivation of theorem-like higher structures.” In fact, Marie was not sure that was what she had spoken, but she remained quiet and let Parnell add, “While I speak of complex and embodied facts in the manner of the theologian John Henry Newman and the likes of Walter J. Freeman.”

“And so,” said Parnell before his voice slowed to a near stop. Finally, intelligible sounds were strung together and he continued, “The poet was a complex fact and not much like a theorem proved from a set of axioms. Thinking along those lines, tracking the paths of history and then reversing to move forward again, much can be learned as a foundation for the illicit operation of projecting the future of historical beings and historical becomings.” He pulled away from Marie and sat up to look into the greenish waters of the pond before he concluded, “I can complete the poem.”

At an angle could he see Marie’s eyes graying to a new depth of solemnity.

“He singled,” started falsely the young connoisseur of schematics and field equations.

“Singled?” asked Marie incredulously, yet her eyes showed a desire to believe in all that Parnell would do and say.

He nodded and gathered his strength to chant once more:

He singled, he sangled.
His integrity dangled.
The truth can be seen as what’s loud.

A bra dots a ket, a breast is for real.

Marie looked confused as Parnell reached the end of the poem as left in the notebooks of the poet, and he retreated to a prior position.

“It needs be,” said he, “that the entire poem due to the efforts of the dead poet and his living cousin must be related as a whole.”

Parnell hunched forward, leaning into the breeze now blowing up moisture from the pond. He rose to put on his pants. He was about to put on his shirt when he saw Marie shiver. Longing for her to be covered by what was his, he draped his shirt over her pimple-goosed body. Then he sat and cleared his voice.

“From title to ending, the completed poem is as follows:”

One may conjecture higher thoughts be not always popular, yet it remains true we may rise above the abominable and aspire to the vulgar.

Besodded, bediddled,
he brought forth his fiddle,
and played to oblivious clouds.

He singled, he sangled.
His integrity dangled.
The truth can be seen as what's loud.

A bra dots a ket, a breast is for real.
A tisket, a tasket, a theory we'll steal.
A well-mannered hog in a white, strapless gown.

What a wonderful world will it be,
what an endless climb I foresee
when superstition gathers all around.

Impressed though lacking in nearly as much understanding as Parnell, Marie stared at him. Love was in her eyes. Fear was in her eyes, too. "Will my children," wondered she aloud, "speak a language foreign to me. Is that the fate of all mothers and still more fathers?"

It was Parnell's turn to be filled with wonderment, though Marie knew not that she had just spoken her first piece of metaphysical nonsense. Dylan Shagari's magic had not followed him on his journey. The poet, so it was clear to Parnell, had hitched a ride on a piece of continental crust. The ashy molecules once his would be traveling to regions of molten rock only to rise again one day. His resurrection would perhaps be spectacular and by way of an exploding volcano. It might be by way of the more mundane levitation of sheets of rock cooling and becoming ever lighter.

"But one day," prophesied Parnell, "the poet will rise again, one way or the nother.

"Of course, you would say that," spoke Marie with a smile well-formed. "You already told me you had been raised as a devout Christian."

Confused by the modal change of context, Parnell chose to appear wise by speaking not his ignorance. He knew that it was an unscientific attitude but fell into that sin with his eyes wide open.

21

As Parnell heard his name being called, he looked up and saw Marie shivering in her parka. Alicia was in her arms, and the little girl looked a bit chilled as well.

“Don’t you think you should call in Jimmy and Donnie?”

Parnell looked out to see the two of them playing a game of hockey with a sparsely populated rink. Donnie looked tired, but they were still going at it. He smiled at his wife and suggested, “Why don’t you take Alicia up to the house? I’ll wait a little while longer. Donnie doesn’t look like he’ll last too much longer.”

22

Once had the poet been a labyrinthine man; the gorgeous neurobiologist who was 100% French – though much of her DNA came from Vietnam – had been merely an unknown. Now she was also a maze of dead-end pathways and misdirecting signs. Of a certain was progress being made in understanding such a unique human being. Not simply a one-of-a-kind, but gorgeous had she been by the testimony of mother, grandfather, and Uncle Hernando.

Nearly had Parnell fit her into the narrative as a minor character. And then he saw the portrait of the long-dead woman. Her cheekbones had been high for sure, but her face more narrow than Parnell had imagined. Her hair had been black and straight. Her skin creamy-white. Her lips thin and not as femininely appointed as one would expect from the stereotypical oriental woman. True... Parnell had no reason to think she had been a stereotypical oriental woman. But, still... She looked not like many women Dylan Shagari would have been likely to have seen during his childhood in Nigeria.

And, yet, there was speculation with a scientific veneer that beauty was defined by an averaging process built into the human brain. If a baby saw faces black and broad of nose, then he would associate such with beauty. If he saw faces pale and thin of lips, then...

That did not answer one major question – What was beauty? Apparently, it was a smear of what men were accustomed to.

Or maybe not.

The poet had not worried much. Speculations were proposed to be pushed this way and that, to be bent and twisted and stretched to the limit. A bit like a rubber toy were they.

Or maybe not.

After weeks of contemplation, Parnell, though nearly 20 years old, had

come to realize it had been Dylan Shagari's intent to discover the truth in the matter. After all. . .

Terse of words and widely shallow in scientific lore, the poet had tentatively accepted the theory that young brains were busily averaging faces in such a manner as to bring a smile to the face of the Reverend Bayes, he who had contemplated conditioned probabilities and other matters of theological import. Scholarly men of God aside, the poor baby, confused and striving hard to create a model of beauty, watched a confusion of women pass by, mother and aunts, sisters and neighbors, the minister's wife and possibly the doctor herself. Several years would pass, and the faces would become a smear of loveliness. "A lovely smear?" had once asked the poet, a man well acquainted with the library location of many fine books in the neurosciences.

Stepping in areas beyond his expertise, he ventured a "Yes," and continued he. "A lovely smear indeed." Without a doubt was he right in some sense, though doubtfully in the other six. Truly, at least according to some controversial theories with only slight support, the situation was as he later described it to be.

More average than any lady I know.
Her nose is symmetric, her eyes sky-blue.
A good-sized mob crushed into one,
she carries the beauty of a thousand tons.

Beyond the power of the longest of poems,
she left a wake of shattered homes.
Failing to center my attempt to explain,
normally well-balanced, my left side's in pain.

Suffer I from fantasized foreplay syndrome,
I'd send off the Bomb to take her home.
Flatly spoke the feminist with stunted humor bent,
"And that's why no man should be President."

Her beauty is more than my eyes can bear,
Forever at this she-smear I would stare.
More average than I, can I only watch,
More average than I, too fine a catch.

There was much of substantial interest in such a complex statement, so long as the overlying theories and metatheories were properly unbundled. Yea! More than mere substance, there was even some excitement of the sort which drove men on to the moon and into the depths of the baryons. A true description of the scientific process seemed this poem to be, though neither accurate nor precise. Without a doubt, though not at all certain, was it that much in the way of the wildest of speculations, and a small bit of neuro-psychological knowledge, was contained in such an ad-hoc assembly of words and images.

In a journal entry dated only a week before his death, the poet had noted, “The semantic content is flimsy stuff, but the syntax is garbled.” Never had truer words been spoken of the recused difficulties of making intelligent and meaningful statements in any language of men. Parnell fancied that Dylan Shagari had been speaking of *On Average, We Know Not How We Know, But Most of Us Don't Give a Damn*.

Not that the poem, however confused, was without certain clear problems. In truth did Parnell doubt that most men would painlessly refuse an offer to enter the bed of a slender blond with creamy skin and a nose quite asymmetric. It remained likely, little did Parnell doubt such a clear truth, that Helen of Troy and even Cleopatra of the perfectly sized nose, probably had faces which were perceived by the biased neuronal clusters of men as being more symmetric than they truly were.

But that was a qualification, and, first, it was time to turn science on its side. Time it was to seek the Big Picture before filling in the details.

The poem was as good a starting point as any. From the miscued hints, from the descriptions of processes pulled out of context – both descriptions and processes were out of context as the poet had been a master at putting multiple levels of meaning in his works... Even when he didn't know they were there. Ah, but that was the man's genius, and, after all, Einstein also did not know that black holes lay underneath his general field equations.

But the general field equations raised mostly questions answered by Parnell the previous summer. Time it was to move on to other questions; time it was to conquer new areas of confusion and complexity. Parnell wished to continue questing forward in the name of science. Actually, he knew that in the matter of female beauty he was not as thoroughly disinterested as scientists were generally believed to be.

There was Aimélie Minh to consider. Without understanding the nature of her beauty, without...

So skilled were her hands at wielding sharp instruments, and, yet, as absurd as it sounded, men longed for those hands to roam over their bodies. Were they masochists? Had they longed for castration in payment for all the crimes committed against women over the millenia?

Parnell thought that to be a bush of thought likely to bear poisonous fruit.

Closer to his heart. . .

Marie.

Greenish in a well-defined manner and usually only after swimming in a chlorinated pool.

Marie.

Ripply in the most fascinating way as if she moved with limited, but true, freedom inside a well-defined and topologically well-behaved structure.

Sort of.

Parnell had recently thought it somewhat obscene to think that his Marie could be fairly described by mathematics or even the most theoretical of physics. Muchly had she affected his mind and the body from which it was ultimately inseparable. It seemed reasonable to set himself to the effort of fully understanding the poet's position in the manner of the perceptual formation of beauty. Much thought and a little information, okay it was more the opposite of the perceptual formation of beauty – no matter, would be added together to produce a view of a real-world process.

There were problems even in the application of such a dense theory. Marie was not really all that much average-looking. Not by Parnell's experience. He had grown up surrounded by women dark of hair and Welsh-light of complexion and other women bronze of skin and black of hair. How could he have acquired a sense of feminine beauty that would have included a woman fair of complexion, with a sprinkling of nose freckles to be sure, and hair blondishly frizzy. Sometimes greenishly frizzy, but that was a complication, and Parnell needed first to understand the basics of the situation.

That was what was needed. Some fundamental research. Establish some general results before moving on to the specifics of how any particular man happened to find any particular woman to be lovely beyond the descriptive power of Chomskyian modules so poorly selected for some tasks, though probably not for the tasks for which they had been selected.

And, so. . .

How was a young man to understand the ways in which science collected

data and sometimes found meaning in the physical world? Having lost a father to the ambitions of men on the other side of the world, having seen his grandfather on the edge of his grave, having never known his neurobiologically based grandmother or his poetic cousin, Parnell could not make sense of the world. He was beginning to suspect he could not have made sense of the world if none of that had been the case, but that helped not in understanding the ways of scientific exploration of a world so intractable to human analysis.

Basic principles needed to be established before a good scientist could design experiments or even decide if college students, sea slugs, or rats were the appropriate test subjects. Parnell thought it important to decide if beauty was in the visual cortex of the masculine creature who be older than those too young to have seen an adequate sampling population. “Or do we,” asked the young man confused by the leftward locus of pain in the poet, “tentatively see beauty even when we have not seen a statistically valid sample of those who form the average, even though they be not average enough in and of themselves? Furthermore, does this averaging process occur in brain region V1 or does it occur in those portions of the visual cortex where meaning has been joined to raw data?”

Parnell smiled. An interesting problem this be. If only he knew what sorts of mathematical tools he should acquire, if only he could find adequate descriptions of the unsolved problems and the possible solutions, if only...

Parnell sighed. For reasons still not clear to him, those who studied the human brain did not seem able to define the problems and the possible solutions with as much clarity as did the physicists define the foci of their obsessions. Not that the physicists were always right. The theories of relativity, especially the more general one, came out of the blue. Poincaré, a brilliant and special mathematician to be sure, was halfway there and refused to even admit he was on ground relatively alien to his preconceptions. Yet, the problems had been well-defined for Einstein to begin his work.

Smiled he again. This study of aesthetically pleasing female faces was truly a new field, at least to him. His highly-developed skills would not suffice. It was time to highly develop a different set of skills.

Which ones?

Once more, no, this time it was an out-and-out grin, it was and little doubt there was, to be sure. A grin it was, though only within the social context of a species which interpreted the drawing back of the lips and the showing of teeth as being an external manifestation of genial amusement.

Certain species, including perhaps those of extraterrestrials sought with such desperation by certain scientists, might interpret such an odd movement of the lips, such a display of dental work, as being a sign of hunger about to be satisfied. "From such misunderstandings might come the first of interstellar wars," sighed Parnell, head bowed down upon his chest.

Back to the problem of primary interest. . .

Though Parnell thought it likely that the problem of how people learn to interpret facial gestures might be oddly related to the problem of determining which of many women is the most averagely beautiful.

Still. . .

It was important when doing science to stick to one well-defined question.

"Was that," pondered Parnell, "the difference between the cousin, poet that he was, and the grandmother, neurobiologist that she was? And Aimélie Minh? Had she learned well from the grandmother, who had been a teacher in that different context, though it is likely she carried some more or less constant core of a personality into all contexts?"

"The most beautiful woman is the most average woman? The theory has this in its favor: It's the sort of ad-hoc solution in which nature, not much motherly, indulges. Sometimes it even seems that nature displays a morbid and silly sense of humor more appropriate to a nine year-old brother."

It puzzled Parnell that he had produced such a thought without ever having had a nine year-old brother. "Odd processes of extrapolation and interpolation must be working upon my limited knowledge of human beings. Must this be why I so clearly see Marie in her localized greenishness and global rippliness. Must it be?"

Joy of joys. Such a problem. A glorious and poorly stated question to tax the brains of many a scientifically inclined person. Philosophically inclined persons likely had much to add as well. Clinical persons, too. Most likely would irrational people also jump into the fray. No stopping that. Mayhaps it would even increase the excitement. Parnell was not opposed to all forms of struggle, no, not he who had once enjoyed a hard-fought tennis game with an overly competitive grandfather.

A pinch of brains and a barrel of sweat would be needed to make any headway on this one. Parnell sat back and calculated quickly. Between the ages of five and 22, he had put in nearly 25,000 hours learning mathematics and physics, a little bit of chemistry, and a bit more of the art of electronics engineering. Upon this foundation had he stood when solving

Einstein's general field equations, both unique in his separation and repetitive in his common racial heritage with the likes of Kurt Gödel. The need for peer review and public discourse demanded he check his results against those already known that he might publicly propose the possibility of a new solution, if he had found such.

Proposed?

He had told no one.

Pondered Parnell the possibility of proposing his speculations in public.

"Nope," said he. "Such would take a vast effort. Self-publicity and self-justification would be needed, and Parnell, speaking for his own self, feels not self-centered enough to devote time to such silliness when there are interesting problems to be tackled. By his self, as a whole, and by his self, component by component, Parnell feels he has better things to do with his time."

Still Dylan Shagari had a point when he wrote a little ditty entitled, oddly enough, *The sociology Of black holes*.

Billy was a big boy with a bigger ego.
 Being right meant having a stronger push.
 Immense grew he and spouted a blow-hole.
 Being right meant the other guy on his tush.

The ratio of mouth to cerebral cortex
 in life plays such a major role.
 Hot the air blows from the vortex,
 parches the brain, harms not the ego.

Such a confusing poem was this. The undercurrents disturbed Parnell, and he felt somewhat as he had felt when listening to his grandfather talk of the infighting and backstabbing in the bureaucratic corridor and in the most scientific of laboratories. It seemed to Parnell that Dylan Shagari had likely heard many of those tales. The poem even spoke to him of Eddington's nasty treatment of the young Indian gentleman, Subhramanyan Chandrasekhar. True enough, Chandrasekhar would later be awarded a Nobel Prize for having been the one with more brains than mouth, but still...

The ways of science were strange, and truth seemed to play a central role in only a global sense, and not at all in the day-to-day scribbings of

the theoretical physicists and the daily feeding and mutilation of laboratory rats.

Still. . .

Remained the question.

A Holy Grail.

Of sorts?

“How does the brain form an idea of beauty by an averaging process?”

True enough, many men sought exotic beauty unlike any seen in their youth, but that seemed to be a problem for the experts in infectious disease.

Yet. . . How was a simple youth to draw out meanings from such a strange and ill-formed question? Parnell was realistic about his abilities. After all, it had taken him a number of months to learn the mathematics of general relativity. . .

The way was clear.

Parnell had spent time reading the poetry of Dylan Shagari and meditating in front of the man’s portrait, as inaccurate as each might have been in relating the man’s thoughts. But, fortunately, there was more. James Llewellyn and his scientist and engineer friends. Morgan Llewellyn, well-known as an aunt to the poet, known to Parnell as a late grandmother with a wonderful library of neurobiological works. Much had they taught both cousinly persons about science and mathematics and technology, yet not much about the ambiguities in the very syntax and vocabulary by which Parnell tried to form his thoughts.

The poet had been willing and able to move amongst such ambiguities and even to use them for his own purposes.

“Truly, and then again perhaps not, still. . . While scientists explored the tense surfaces of the foamy stuff, the poet swam in the still greater tension of the vacuums lying between stuff.”

And, so, having reluctantly accepted the need for ways of thought not rigorously technical, Parnell first noted that the poet had said, “thousands” rather than “millions” to emphasize the prosaic aspects of his claim for the underlying mechanisms of the appreciation of feminine beauty. “Billions” would have been merely grotesque and was likely never seriously considered. “Zillions” was, of course, no more than vulgarly childish. No, he was making a claim of everyday, ordinary scientific truth, if that. Not a bit of poetic excess was claimed in the poem, so simple and down-to-earth.

But. . .

Of what thousand women was her beauty an average? A thousand

women from tropical China, soft and bronze of skin? A thousand women from the northern provinces of France, blond and fine of facial features? How about the women of Bharat or Madagascar, Chad or Brazil? Did not the Cherokee women, so oddly and cruelly located in Oklahoma, or the Basque women, so linguistically misplaced anywhere on Earth, deserve a chance to be smeared into that beautiful average? Average beauty?

Parnell thought 'beautiful average' to be the more accurate term, though it did not seem to be descriptive of the process in any deep sense. At most, it could be a coded reference to detailed scientific studies, results contained in a multitude of small journal-sized fragments, overall conclusions perhaps stated in a book with overly interpreted results but perhaps also containing a number of graphics, sumptuous to the eyes and of doubtful relevance to the subject matter. All in all, Parnell thought the world of science to be a wonderful place, the summarized results of research being nearly as complex and ambiguous as the real world which was supposedly being reduced. There were seemingly endless levels of patterns and implicit meanings, real or humanly imagined?, and all those levels were connected so tenuously. At least, seemed it so. Did it not? it did.

A blurred image came in front of Parnell's inner eyes, no longer complete as once had been the plans for the gyroscopic navigational systems of the ship planned for the mission to the moons of Jupiter. The ideas came, but the exact words had to be reconstructed by Parnell's active and presently-biased thought processes. It was there, but perhaps it was as much the work of Parnell Lopez as a work of Morgan Llewellyn. Yet, much was there of her thought as well, for Parnell knew nothing of the philosophy of science except what he had read in her library, and many of those works had been written by her or else had strongly worded comments in the margins. The image was from a volume entitled, *Materialism: A Heresy or a Return to the Beliefs of Ancient Christians and Jews?*. In the article she had contributed, the grandmother, nervy biologist that she had been at times, had stated that science was in danger of building such a mass of poorly understood results as to lead into a period of third and fourth person exegetical excesses of the sort which had plagued both Jewish and Catholic scholarship near the end of the Middle Ages.

It was clear that Parnell was by himself in his scientific work. There was no third or fourth person, and, so, he was free to interpret the results of his grandmother and others who had written on the processes by which men and women form ideals and prejudices in their brains.

Beauty – ideal or prejudice? Parnell knew not. He did not even know if there truly was a difference.

What remained unshakable was his faith in the great difficulty and the sheer fun of finding the averaging strategy of the human brain. A face could launch a thousand ships only because millions of neurons in a multitude of brains happened to match that face up with the most average face which they could smear together and morph coherent from all the available faces. Amazing. How was such a thing be accomplished by mere assemblies of chemicals? More than that: how could an embodied creature of a moral nature come to be in a world reducible in any sense to physics? Or chemistry. Or biology. Or sociology. Or any one of many not yet completed fields of study.

It happened.

James Llewellyn, ever the devout and logical Presbyterian, had made a radical claim for God's freedom. The engineer, who had struggled hard but never quite mastered the poetic art, had proposed that if God had chosen to use the laws of physics rather than to order things by fiat, then that was within His right. The Angel of Light might have objected to the way in which God chose to create things, but that was generally a dangerous path. James Llewellyn had stared off into space and had spoken in the lowest of voices, as if he had tasted of the fruit, however devout he had been.

But it was science and not theology that was of interest to Parnell in his attempts to work first person exegetical magic upon the poems of Dylan Shagari and the theories of Morgan Llewellyn. And science on the grandest of scales was it to be. To understand the true nature of how facial beauty was decided in any concrete society would require an effort of the scope of the Manhattan Project. It would. Honestly. Parnell tried not to lie to himself, though he knew it was sometimes unavoidable.

But...

The investigation of beauty mostly average would require lots of time just for the planning phases. Blood, sweat, and charisma would have to be expended to draw together the people and materiel. Mostly, would money need to be found. Skills would have to be developed. Some on the project team would need to become experts in the breeding and care of rats and sea slugs. Still others could comb the forgotten works of scientists more diligent and mannerly than self-promoting, looking for clues, not understood in earlier contexts, not pushed through to new contexts, of what brain regions were to be attacked with chemicals or mutilated with a scalpel. Mattered it

little how destruction was wreaked, for most of those brains would be sliced, diced, and run through a food blender only to be poured upon blocks of gelled starches.

Like a pious tribesman, Parnell dropped his eyes to ask forgiveness for all that men did to their fellow-creatures in the name of science, in the name of all the suffering children who had been, or might be, saved. He almost imagined the voices of many of those children joining him in his "Amen," but then he could not figure out why his eyes had lit upon a red and white checkered tablecloth. There was not the blood of many a rat and a few rabbits. The young man was contemplating science while seated at a kitchen table. Odd, that. It made things seem not much more orderly when he noticed his mother sat at his left and his Aunt Teresa sat at his right. They were not part of the mind experiment. Things, though they were not really things, were pretty strange. How could those two beloved women be so close and yet so far from his attention. Furthermore. . .

Radioisotopes.

How could he have forgotten that essential step? If the right chemicals were not contaminated with short-lived radioactive materials, if they were not fed into the rats and sea slugs, then it would do little good to slice and dice, to pour brain goop upon gelled blocks of starch. With the radioisotopes, it made sense to leave those gel-blocks sitting on X-ray film for a few days. Then the analysis could begin. How much of the contaminated chemicals were taken up?

No good. Weeks of the most tedious effort had been wasted. The laboratory's measuring instruments and computer software were not sensitive enough to measure anything of significance in the sliced and diced rat's brains. Soup or salsa? Parnell knew not. His practical experience with scientific experimentation placed definite limits on his ability to truly understand the results of much research, however well documented. He wondered if theoreticians ever truly understood the results upon which they chewed.

Parnell sighed and then it came to him. Instrumentation problems were the sort in which he had both theoretical and practical experience. If anyone could find a way to better use those instruments, surely would it have been a fellow who once stood at the side of James Llewellyn fabricating tools and electronic controls for precision control of boring operations. Another time had they built charged coupled devices to scan the sky for variable stars. Intelligent were those panels and the attached circuitry, in a manner of speaking, for they could detect variations in luminosity and report them

to the human investigator. Attached to a computer was that system that the stars already cataloged might be identified and eliminated. No sense in a scientist looking at things already named after another man.

Yes, by such had Parnell developed the skills which would have been of such use to a laboratory worker searching the brains of rats and sea slugs in an effort to discover how the brains of human men averaged women to determine which were to be considered beautiful. He could have redesigned and rebuilt those instruments if necessary. Nary a proton fleeing those remains of rats's brains could have escaped his amplified and thickly mediated attention.

And, so... Five cycles of three tedious weeks of labor would pass, and the experiment would show the averaging process took place in seven different regions of the rat brain.

But...

And then again...

Parnell was confused by a matter of some importance. How does one know which rats are perceived as beautiful by other rats? Ah! So deeply embroiled in an experiment and a problem of the most fundamental sort arises.

Science must continue. The experiments, the research project itself, must continue, though there be reason to doubt it will produce anything other than data.

Still...

For the next two years, barely different variations on the same experiment would have to be repeated, in the original lab, and in labs set up by former students of the honored and granted scientist now wondering if she knows a rat's brain from its elbow.

By huge expenditures of energy and sheer cleverness would a map be derived. By clever collaboration with surgeons trying to help neurologically crippled people, and by way of non-invasive measurements of the human brain, would the ratmap be tentatively transferred to the human brain. Somehow, amidst all the confusion of species, all the failed experiments, it would be discovered that the male brain devotes a disproportionate number of cells to averaging female eyes, lips, and breasts. Sure they would be that progress was being made until someone asked the obvious question, "Female?" A laboratory scientist's worst nightmare would have arisen, as is likely in any meaningful area of research.

A public scandal.

Charges of sexism.

Misuse of public funds to perpetuate a patriarchal system of repression.

The scientist goes home that night to complain to her husband, but there is little to be done.

He rolls his eyes and returns to drinking his beer. "A quarrel between women. None of my concern," would he have thought.

Parnell knew how things would go from there. Congressional hearings would be called. Confused would matters have been when the leading scientists were called up in front of the noble political men to give an accounting of their sexist activities. Women, to a man, might have been those patriarchal scientists so expert in rats's brains but it wouldn't have mattered. So often was there, "No matter," in a world of men holding so much public power and so talented at avoiding public responsibility.

"The hypocritical bastards would have ended up lynching the janitor, the only man around" had once claimed James Llewellyn when in a deep funk about something he would not discuss with Parnell.

Nevertheless, the silliness would have raised some questions worth considering.

Did the male and female brains average differently? Did the mother hold the boy longer to her breast, thus enculturating a fetish for female body parts? Prejudice would have indicated that female brains might have actually spent more energy forming ideals of female beauty.

Such would never have occurred to Parnell, but Marie once told him that women usually dressed for other women and not for men. Bewildered was he by such a claim, bruised was his ego, but. . .

No matter.

Or, at least, little.

Things would have gotten worse as some scientists speculated that no historical conspiracy, no cultural indoctrination, could have twisted women so that they so clearly enjoyed the aggressive and often disrespectful attention of men. Such biased ways of thought might have even led some to believe the object of desire cooperated in her objectification and wished to identify with other objects of desire rather than reciprocating by objectifying men.

Then. . .

Did no one appreciate male beauty?

The poor male striving to be an object of beauty.

The poor female thinking objectification to be necessarily an act of

brutality.

But...

Science would have moved on.

By the time the politicians and controversialists had found new games to play, the scientists would be busily creating models on the most super of biochemical and quantum computers. Based on testimony of those entities, would they speculate that a major effort to create images of male beauty would be a great deal of vector arithmetic for not much purpose in the all-important struggle for reproductive success.

Still...

All those statues of Greek men with penises of exactly the same size – three inches when flaccid. And there was all the pious art of the Middle Ages. David? The god-man Hercules, thick of body? Not much boyish beauty in that brute.

Ah! That's the rub. Only some things make sense, and, so, the scientists realize their model is wrong, and all the facts must be thrown out, having been generated by a defective theory. Everyone retreats, having learned a lot about biochemistry, a bit about reactions of neurons to artificial conditions outside of their bodies, and more than nothing about the behavior of animals in stripped-down environments having naught to do with those for which their phenogenotypes had been selected.

Then a paper comes in from a colleague in another country. Not only was the model wrong in detail, it missed the entire picture. It seems the brain sites being tested, whatever else they did, carried out only a small part of the first stage of the complex process of averaging many to derive standards only a very few can reach. However, the colleague was able to derive a tentative map of part of the complex process. The cells holding the running average of a beautiful nose are where the chin cells should be. The left and right ears are reversed. The psychologists intrude and claim that also is wrong. The process is more holistic, say they. Somehow, the broad noses and thick lips of many African peoples are tied together as are the eagle beaks and retreating eyes of one or two Roman aristocrats.

Afraid they might be missing a bit of fun, and possibly some grant dollars, the historians and anthropologists come in to the fray to say that the Romans were already an averaged people, mongrel, one might say. "Which people are not?" asked still others, cynical and not appreciative of the stages by which scientific knowledge advances. Stages? Well, Parnell had to admit the process was more than linear, perhaps even chaotic in the

proper sense of quasi-stable.

Realizing his mind was wandering from experimental to theoretical misunderstandings, Parnell returned to the discovery of the processes by which rats averaged other rats to produce an ideal of rat beauty. It was just in time for the field reports of the anthropologists claiming that, for many species of close genetic relationship to *Homo Sapiens Squared*, novelty counts as much as the grossest of averages. No longer can data be denied until infectious disease experts find the time to study beauty. Anyway, everyone had known it to be the case from the beginning. Yet, with a scientific justification, the obvious fact-like thing has become more... Well, scientific and even a candidate for facthood. The theory is simple and elegant.

Wondered Parnell, and that he did, if it was a theory formed by averaging many other theories.

Not to worry.

The context of the silliest of rationalizations does not matter so much as the context of validity. And sense does this theory make, though not in the same sense that man makes a theory.

Parnell saw the theory and it set his mind on usefully bounded paths. The greatest enemies of large creatures were parasites and infectious microbes. Variety would ensure a thoroughly scrambled immune system. Too much of a goodly average would leave large populations susceptible to the same diseases.

Well, then again, maybe not.

Maybe something else was true.

And perhaps the case was different from that.

Though, of course...

For the moment, Parnell was not sure what had happened to the men and women of original interest, but he knew that by such pathways did science progress. His grandfather had said so. In fact, Grandpa had told him this tale of average beauty transmuted to variable immune systems. Had he not? Parnell thought not had he not, but not had he quite done so, for he suspected that Grandpa had told a far simpler fable. The events of Parnell's life had allowed the tale to more fully unfold in a context viewed as richer.

A new puzzle...

Was it the theory that unfolded, or was it the context which expanded forcing the theory to expand also, as if into a vacuum?

Or...

Did they move together?

This was a matter more than puzzling, though at least that. He, merely Parnell was expanding, creatively?, upon a story told by his grandfather. Tale? Not a knife was exposed except to dissect the rats. No guns at all were to be found. Watching rats make love was rather less interesting than scanning the skies for heavenly bodies of an uncommon sort. If uncommon, Parnell was not sure if they would be more or less beautiful than most bodies falling through space. But, more importantly, how? could a tale come from mere thoughts.

A grandfatherly man had once told Parnell, albeit with a sneer, "The humanists have set themselves up as enemies of reductionism, and, in the process, have decided no tale is acceptable unless it is told entirely in terms of external events and physical bodies. Yes, since they have had few thoughts of their own for the past century, the surest way to exclude science from literature is to exclude thoughts and immaterial relationships."

That made no sense to Parnell, but he thought that perhaps the distinguished engineer, who had also commonly played the part of a grandfather, had perhaps been joking, though not in a genial manner.

Those had been matters alien to the thoughts of a fellow who had once lived amongst blueprints and schematics, a young man given to interpreting physics in the most formalistic manner possible. Somehow, the context of Parnell's life had expanded. Marie? Undoubtedly. And his insides were still churning. He had not a clue how this process was evolving nor where it was headed, but it seemed an interesting topic for future contemplations.

Returning to his main line of thought, it occurred to Parnell that no supernatural entities came to terrorize, though it was eerie the way that brain events seemed to be neither here nor there, but perhaps all over the spongy mass of huge neurons and pads of more normal-sized glia. Was the progress of human learning a tale in itself? Was it possible to tell it by speaking only of who slept with whom on the laboratory staff? Parnell remembered a tale of twins who were geniuses at genetics research and other things, and he realized that human persons, the empirical world, and abstract thought were all part of the tale.

Narratives of internal events, narratives of external events, and even narratives of the growth of knowledge, implicit and explicit, could not reveal themselves in the flat and positivistic tone adopted by so many anti-reductionists in literature.

Still curious it seemed to think that human knowledge, or at least

the process of science, might have become objectified in some manner. Henceforth, would biology and physics enter intelligent narratives as co-participants along with the people and the orangutans? It seemed silly to think that even technology might play a role as if to be a quasi-person.

As always, there was much to be found in the works of the poet. A silly little poem there was that, among many other worthwhile attributes, contained the word, 'reduce'.

Sillyware, Souls, and bESIDES – Marx is Standing on Hegel's Ears

The simplest of rotational groups it were.
 Flip head to toe, shingles to bricks.
 Scramble a Magi with an aggressive stir,
 before long, re-scramble and reduce the mix.

Banish the soul, make man a computer,
 Let Mao pass the Chinese room test.
 Dual-la-la-du, the joke's a real tooter,
 you've resurrected the ghost as a list.

Dashiel Hammet and Thomas Mann were both worthwhile reading, though lacking the discipline of science – methodology and substance. The grandfather had even asked, "Would Dante have been a giant if he had not absorbed Scholastic theology and philosophy into his poetry? Would Goethe, despite so wrong, have been himself if he had not battled his perception of reductionist physics? Then who would he have been? Still. . .

"Would Borges have been so great an influence if he had not written eerie and abstract tales about infinity in the globally staccato style of an encyclopedia? How was literature to proceed? Was it to pick up pieces of modern science and mathematics by way of popular superstitions? Were writers to absorb only those reductionist aspects of science to which the humanists claimed to be most opposed?" The grandfather had shaken his head and added, "That is what they did for too many decades. And thus the humanities stagnated and scientific knowledge became occultist in one etymological sense if not a more modern one. Meanwhile, society was raising technological gadgetry to the altars."

Not only Parnell was more confused than before the dedicated experts in rats's brains had began their experiments. Those teams of dedicated scientists were themselves bewildered, if not more. The only route open to them

was to systematically destroy the clusters of brain cells which seemed to carry out tasks of linearly aesthetic algebra. Alas, discovered they that the rats were still able to carry out those averaging tasks, though, half-brained as they were, they functioned as rather half-assed rats when carrying out tasks of interest to rats, however stripped-down the environment.

Re-calling that aesthetically average but meaningful poem to mind Parnell marveled at the poet's talent for putting so much imagery in so few words. True, and to be sure as well, Parnell knew he shared much of the context of Dylan Shagari's life. Many people, not having known James Llewellyn, never having been exposed to his scientifically inclined followers, not once having wandered through the library of a late grandmother-scientist, would not have been able to re-create the poem in all its true complexity and theoretical richness. The poet's knowledge base was so extensive, and his thought processes so profound, though quite shallow in any specific field of study.

"Were not the thoughts of Shakespeare also widely shallow, though he waded in the surf of different oceans than Dylan Shagari?" asked he, merely Parnell, of his humble self. "Yes," came a reply, "but he was part of his culture. As for those humanists ignorant of all but superstitious versions of modern thought, they were part of a background out of focus."

There were so many facets to a thought worth having, a poem worth writing. The grandfather had once told him, "Parnell, remember that a poem is always at least its words, usually far more, but if it is not at least its words, it is mere hallucinogenic gookedy stuff." In response to a grandfather not present and surely dead, Parnell asked, "Did you really say 'gookedy stuff'? It seems not your style, Grandpa. Am I imposing my own style upon your thoughts? Is the substance of thoughts never thought by you embedding itself in my memories of your words and actions?"

The only answer that came was a vague remembrance of the grandfather saying, "There is something amazing about the confused and confusing games played by scientists, theoretical and experimental. With all the backtracking and contradictory results, with all the personality battles which often overwhelm the effort itself, science..." The grandfather had come around his massive desk to sit beside the grandson on the leather couch. Leaning Parnell-ward, he had whispered a great secret. "Somehow the damned mess works, despite all that we do to disrupt the great task of communicating with God's Creation. Knowledge and understanding grow, no matter how often they have to be reformulated and restated to preserve

their truth.”

Well . . .

Maybe the remembrance was not so vague. Or else, Parnell had elaborated based on his knowledge of his grandfather and the context of their relationship. Or maybe based on some other set of prejudices.

Still, when all was said and done, when tributes were paid to the highly qualified glory of the scientific enterprise, it seemed to Parnell that the poet had spoken of a concrete, embodied woman who lived in a peculiar historical context.

Was she who?

Parnell knew not.

Rumors came back to life, alongside a fair amount of gossip derived originally from an authoritative, grandfatherly figure. A young woman had once studied neurobiology with a grandmother named Morgan Llewellyn. Broca had she come to study, or rather a group of neurons named after him. Destruction of those cells led to aphasias. Following in the paths blazed by those who had confused themselves with studies of nervous systems in rats and sea slugs, she had asked, “Does Broca’s region control speech or is it upstream or downstream of the regions truly controlling speech?” Implied she as well that Broca’s region might prove to be a necessary component of a complex of brain regions, some playing also a role in matters not fully verbal, some perhaps playing a role in reading, and maybe even having a tangential effect on the formation of poetic meter.

Happy was the lovely young neurobiologist, happy was her teacher, Professor Morgan Llewellyn, at having found a confused mess of structures and processes in the human brain, not that a neuroscientist had to look hard to find such. If more specific questions could be formed, true science could be done. A life’s work could be foreseen as a neurobiologist formed models of brain processes at the tender age of 28. For decades to come, she could critique and dismantle successive generations of models. She could engage in a dialog somewhat solipsistic but mostly open to public critique.

Was this creature, so hardheadedly scientific, the beautiful woman of Dylan Shagari’s poem? Shaken out of his attempt to understand the methods of experimental biology, Parnell realized, came it even upon him, that a person was a non-repeatable experiment of one, or less in some cases of barely lived lives. Perhaps more than one in a small percentage of cases. Still . . . The methods of analysis for understanding a person, were different from the well-established, straightforward, and rigorous methods by which

could be understood the interactions of well-specified groups of neurons in the brain of a rat. Even individuals rats could not be so understood.

Experimentally one, more or less? Or... Historically one, more or less? If a scientist could have understood the general processes by which Dylan Shagari had internally grown confused and externally faloodled words, then such would have been of great interest and greater import. By such knowledge could people ill be made well or at least taught how to live with their problems. By such knowledge could a poet have raised the ante by raising unique questions not answered by the well-tested proposals of science set in black-and-white, though, to be sure, one of the problems of communicating science was that neither the processes nor the hypothetical substances could be accurately conveyed by any such means. And they were the only means available to human beings.

Convinced that even the shortest line written by Dylan Shagari could lead to infinite complications and complexities when set into context, Parnell realized with a shock that he was winding his way through a rain-forest of fantastic, nearly impossible growths. The least of thoughts, unwound within social and historical contexts, would lead all the way back to Adam. Well, not quite. Parnell knew that simple mathematical knowledge of the most qualitative sort predicted that most real-world processes would be computationally irreducible, and thus unpredictable, whether looking into the future or the past.

A man struggled with the real-world, having no tool but a brain so inadequate as to have required several months to learn the mathematics and physics of General Relativity. "True," Parnell told himself, "I was only five, and I have matured intellectually since then, but still... Disciplined thought is so hard, and it is even harder to apply it consistently and coherently to the real world. I wish I were a lot smarter. Then... Then I guess I would move on to higher level things which would still be nearly impossible for me to master. What a wonderful world impossible to understand in its fullness has God given to us." Parnell lowered his head and gave his thanks to a God so merciful as to put men into a world which would ever lie beyond their control and their power to predict even the simplest of physical systems. Yet, that blessing was also a source of frustration.

The woman. Who was she? who? The mixing of a particular woman with abstractions was necessary but quite wearying to the brain, especially with a language seemingly as inadequate as the poet had claimed all the languages of men to be.

James Llewellyn had spoken of some problems involving that woman, beautiful and intelligent, named so fittingly Aimélie Minh, though 'Minh' was a family name and should have come first by Vietnamese traditions. Probably half Vietnamese in genotype and likely half French as well, was she. Half French and half American was she culturally. The grandfather had proposed that made her 100% French and 100% other things, but even the young Parnell had thought the grandfather may have been joking. "After all," had the teenager thought, "everyone knows that probability distributions are to be scaled down so that they are no more than 100% in total." Even had it occurred to Parnell that perhaps that was the foundation of the joke. "Then again," had proposed some brain region or another, "perhaps the realities of the physical world corresponded not fully to the formalism of measure theory in its intuitive and probabilistic manifestation."

And, yet, did history intrude upon Parnell's meta-historical ponderings. Important in the context of those early rumors was a man who had once weighed a bit less than 400 pounds.

Parnell decided to turn to more fruitful areas of research. In fact, he posed the question: "Was that mysterious woman, Aimélie Minh?, as beautiful as Marie Levecque, ripply in only certain ill-defined dimensions of her being, and greenish of eye except when gray and greenish of hair only after swimming in chlorinated waters?"

Lost in his contemplations of things repeatedly experimental and once-upon-a-time historical, the sneering tone of his Aunt's voice yet penetrated to resonate muchly with matters of a background cast.

"Buck Kasic," said she hatefully in response to a question lost to Parnell's investigations. Thinking to ask what question had generated such a response, it came to him that he could not recover the context of the question and answer. Thus had much information been destroyed in a world not really corresponding to the concepts of electrical engineering.

It seemed more appropriate to give in to his feelings and, so . . .

"Buck Kasic," repeated Parnell in a tone of detached wonder. A warm and revelational glow passed through his brain in but seven wavy cycles before receding to regions largely inaccessible. "Buck Kasic," said he redundantly though his mother and aunt stared at him, fear showing in the wrinkles about their eyes and mouth. Momentarily, wondered he, "By what averaging processes have I learned to interpret those wrinkles as expressions of fear? Wrinkles at the corner of a mother's mouth, let alone at the corners of an aunt's eyes, map not directly to anything which might be labeled

'fear'. Is this but another example of a largely irreducible fact, not nearly constructible by the rules and the pointy principles of axiomatic systems of thought?"

Parnell felt distinctly uncomfortable and realized his mother and aunt were still staring at him. "Buck Koscic?" asked he.

"What do you know about Buck Koscic?" responded fretfully the worried mother.

"Was he," queried Parnell in continuance of this open-ended search for complex theories capable of handling such extraordinary data, "the one who loved the beautiful, young neurobiologist who, in her turn, loved the poet half-Welsh but only half-Nigerian?" Wondered he silently, "Did I create a question grammatically and conceptually more complex than necessary? Or was the question merely complicated? Is it less than the many questions to be pulled from the context of Dylan Shagari's poem about beauty averaged over so many?"

"Buck Koscic," replied Aunt Teresa spitefully, "was the man who destroyed your grandfather because of his hatred for Dylan Shagari. And he was the one who killed Dylan Shagari with his own apish hands."

Still partly caught up in a scientific mode of thought, Parnell raised his right hand to stare at the thumb ever in loyal opposition to the fingers. In a soft voice, he asked, "Did Buck Koscic have a thumb running parallel to his fingers and thus a weak grip for tools and weapons?"

Confused, perhaps even forgetting she had used the adjective 'apish', Aunt Teresa stepped out of context and said, "He always had a strong grip on weapons."

Disoriented, Parnell tried to perceive the historical background, the personal and emotional foreground, of this new situation. So many people, worried he, were sloppy and cavalier about shifting conceptual schema, so willing to jump erratically from one context to another, as if unaware of the need to mediate objective reality through human systems of perceived contexts and prejudiced concepts. Particular contexts destroyed facts, even sometimes raw perceptions, only to replace them with new facts based on perceptions shifted by one or two neuronal groups. Sometimes a more efficient encoding of those facts was also possible. Not always.

Pondered he the perplexing place in which he, Parnell, found himself. His mother and aunt stared at him, as if expecting him to explain himself.

"It was not I who changed the context of our discourse," protested Parnell in a pitiful attempt to justify his confused and humbled self.

Buck Koscic remained a mystery, larger in some sense than the poet, but not as profound, not as interesting in and of himself. How could he be? Parnell knew not enough of the man to be confused or mystified. Yet, played he, did he? and he did, a role in the mystery of that young neurobiologist, so averagely beautiful. “Why did Buck Koscic kill a man who used no woman not wishing to be used?” Before an answer could come, Parnell spoke again. “And did they use the poet as well? I believe they did, and Grandpa said the poet was excessively affirmative in most of his responses, and thus did he. . .” His voice tailed off and still no answer came from the mother or the aunt. The historical problem was unresolved, and Parnell explored anew. “If Buck Koscic killed Dylan Shagari, why did Grandpa say the poet was killed by one woman too many? From an excess of words did he not suffer. So, the truth of the matter would seem to be between Buck Koscic and the one woman who was too many. Perhaps the woman who knew Broca better than he knew himself?”

Unbounded confusingly it did. Whatever it was. Whether? it was. But the battle seemed to Parnell to be other than a simple conflict of the essential and the existential. Neither was it of the utmost urgency to decide why? it was. Where? and when? and how? seemed more to the point. Hours of contemplation had led Parnell to believe that God had embodied men in an empirical and physical world. Possessing the branches and leaves for years, he had only seen the forest after his grandfather had looked up from a scientific journal and had joked, he had? had he not, “The proper study of man is rat.” In the context of the unknown paper which had annoyed him, James Llewellyn, an anti-Idealist if ever one was there, may have intended ‘Rat’ rather than ‘rat,’ yet that seemed to be of overriding importance only at places other than the kitchen table where sat the mother and the aunt.

Ignoring his own ruthless elimination of entire classes of questions, Parnell asked, “Why. . .” Realizing a question whose mark lay infinitely far ahead was barely decent, he qualified the prior historical actualization of himself by asking, “Why did Buck Koscic kill Dylan Shagari?” Confronted by blankness in expressions and data and mostly meaning, the young man pushed on. “Was it because of Aimélie Minh?”

And down a particular channel of possibilities, from the concrete vocal chords of the aunt and yet contexted firmly in a world mediated by abstract structures of meaning, came simply, “He wished to own her, to possess her to the exclusion of other men, the world, and even God.”

That made no sense to Parnell who asked, "Why would he wish that? The poet loved without possessing. Love I Marie, ripply in only a qualified sense and not muchly green at all. Possess her not I though there be bonds of the strongest sort which make us as one."

"Marie?" asked the aunt.

"Levecque?" asked the mother.

Confused by the under-specified nature of the first question and the second question's wrongful implication of labeling a concrete and rich entity so simply, Parnell said, "Yes, properly understood," and "Yes, though there be more to her than implied by her family's name and history."

"Parnell?" His mother's hand rested on his left forearm, her chair somehow moved closer to his. Seemingly worried by something, she asked, "Did you and Marie... Did you... Did you?"

Parnell answered, "Yes," and then chose to ignore the second and third questions, poorly formed as they were. There was even an implication of sexual one-sidedness more appropriate to Buck Kosic than to Parnell Lopez. He was working hard to adopt a theory. If "Buck" was a nickname, then that fellow might have been the same as the Aristid Kosic of the grandfather's tale. Puzzlement and wonder at his own creative powers came over Parnell, possessing him for a speechless moment. Finally was he able to look up. His aunt's dark, dark, nearly black eyes, showed shock and confusion. Parnell wondered why he had never before noticed the curly length of her eyelashes, the slender graceful fingers with which her upper limbs terminated. That slender gracefulness seemed barely reconcilable to the strength of her hands or the oft times overwhelming power of her will. Mother most dear of all creatures, save perhaps Marie, sat wordless. Her eyes were nearly as green as those of a young woman ripply only in certain contexts. Her lips were gently apart. Her right hand tightened slightly on Parnell's forearm, her left hand, clenched into a fist, was pressed against her breast.

"Why," wondered he, barely moving his vocal chords and not at all opening his mouth, "have I never noticed the kettle of ancient shape though I knew it was in the house in Miami and here it appears in Walla-walla? The tinnish material has a nice dull, gray tint to it, and that is a nice wrought iron stand upon which it rests. I saw it at the edge of my perceptions, probably hundreds of times, and now that I notice it, I have finally become aware that it is an object outside of my mind." Returning his gaze to his mother, Parnell said, "I must not have seen it, not being prepared to see it. I am a finite creature, after all, and I can function only by censoring that

which I am not prepared to see and those which benefit me not to see.” As his mother’s face collapsed into deeper confusion, he followed her lead and asked, “Is it my wishes that determine what I see? Are my prejudices conscious or come they from evolutionary and cultural constraints? Or is that merely a question intended to draw my thoughts down paths leading to lands parched and muchly lacking in life?”

At the same time and no other time, at that time that is, slid they, but apart into more deeply confused contexts. Quickly saw Parnell that a problem had arisen. He realized he had communicated his thoughts inadequately, translating them rigidly from his viewpoint to the public arena. Too late, saw the young man, that the context must be bundled up, compacted and contrasted, and then transmitted with nearly each individual statement. Not only the target moved, but also the background, the foreground, and the shooter. Each component had its own rich and densely factual embodiment in the domain of spacetime. There was no discursive function mapping those domains onto the range of public speech. Parnell thought it unlikely that such could ever be available to a creature small and infinite, a creature not comfortable in the range of reasonably large or complex settings.

“Is she . . .” asked Grace Llewellyn Lopez of her son. As he nodded, a smile passed over her face, merging with the fear and concern.

Jimmy, conceived in love, had truly been a love-child. Happy and proud had been Parnell. Happy and worried had been Marie and the mother. The aunt as well. Had it been such worrisome tendencies that had worn down the happy-go-lucky poet as he had wandered from one bed to another too many?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

23

Spring came and passed, and still the narrative did not cohere. There were a number of problems. Aimélie Minh was still as much a mystery as the poet. The wise killer's story, related by Donnie in his child-like terms – like a nightmare had it been for him, was still not integrated, though it ran parallel to the story of Parnell's life. Present at the murder of the poet, the wise killer had been sent to find Grace Llewellyn Lopez and her son. Once had he failed. The second time he had brought them to his 400 pound master. Kasic. Enough said.

Morely dangerous. . .

As Parnell contemplated his life, some strands of meaning threatened to unravel. The young Parnell was becoming a person separate from the Parnell sitting on the bank of the lake and watching Jimmy squish his way through the mud near the boat dock. Were the many Parnells truly separate persons? Or were they superficially different manifestations of the same essential thing? Or perhaps merely segments of a wormlike thing making its way through spacetime?

The again, Parnell knew he was not a thing. If only the word 'person' had not become so corrupt in its ghostly essence.

A squeal eased its way through the air as Alicia slid down from the dock, letting her feet sink into the muck. The muck. . .

The muck was much like that in the dream of Dylan Shagari. Once had the grandfather told that tale to Parnell. Later had he integrated it into his thoughts when he and his mother were living undercover and in great danger of being found by Kasic's bloodhounds.

Clean had been that muck compared to the goings-on in that building with walls so spotlessly white, with furniture so chromy, and with all those planners and engineers and bureaucrats and only a few men worried about the poor, displaced bullfrogs.

Those poor things. The plans had clearly stated that 8,767 adult male bullfrogs were on the grounds which were to be used to build the James Llewellyn Symbiosis Research Center. Where were they to go? More room was needed than one might have first thought as there were an unknown number of immature male bullfrogs and a large number of female bullfrogs. The number of tadpoles was almost certainly astronomical.

Where were they to go?

How were they to make a living?

Who could have destroyed the habitats of creatures so innocent of crimes of war and finance?

Why. . .

Parnell detected something both complex and complicated rising from the depths of his memory. It was not warm and comforting, though he thought it not to be evil. Marie Levecque it was not, though greenish and ripply in parts. He panicked and reached deeply into his memory striving to pull up memories of one of his favorite sets of books, though sadly left in Virginia several years prior. He shed a tear for those four volumes, hefty, substantial, and dense to the touch. That set had contained some of the most interesting schematics he had ever absorbed. 7,848 pages worth.

They had come not from Grandpa but from a used bookstore in Alexandria. He had pestered his mother to buy them. Parnell was forced to smile at the memory of his naive, 14 year-old self. He had been innocent of news programs counting the deaths after a nuclear war. Dad had not died of infections after a minor radiation burn. Grandpa had not been taken away by soldiers wishing to make him work on something that would enslave innocent young boys. Free of both base desires and the highest of virtues, Parnell had dreamed of Hong Kong call-girls and had not yet met Marie, a woman of the flesh. Absorbed had he been in schematics and blueprints and the occasional textbook on gravitational theory or quantum electrodynamics. But not so totally absorbed that he noticed not the man in the trench-coat who had followed him and his mother into that used bookstore.

That man, pretty of facial features and oily of hair, had watched Parnell intently, but once or twice his eyes had dropped to the five books in front of the sales-clerk. His mother had bought a copy of the collected works of Lewis Carrol, the version annotated by Martin Gardner. Parnell had dipped into that book a number of times, picking his starting points at random. Out of order and overlapping, Parnell had decided he liked the works as well as in the original, mostly non-redundant order. He had, of

course, reconstructed the book according to the original order in his mind. That had not been so hard, not compared to the task of memorizing those four volumes. Twelve whole hours! Parnell called up one of his favorite schematics from Volume III, *Non-linear Josephson Junction Gate Complex – XOR*²⁵⁶. That was actually a lie. Quantum effects were linear and could not be used in a straightforward way to create an “exclusive or” logical gate. It was actually grouped together from components including two linear devices hooked up so that they were non-linear. Beautiful it was in its harsh simplicity. Of such a contrast did it pose to those complicated schematics usually preferred by Parnell.

Tunneling. An interesting quantum level effect. With some small but non-zero probability, could an electron pass through a solid object, seeming to appear instantaneously on the other side. Having read somewhat in the field of quantum theory, Parnell knew the appearance of instantaneity was misleading. In fact, the leading edge of the particle’s wave packet, able by normal physics to pass through solid matter as could light waves, was already on the other side of the solid wall. The modal or most likely observation point of the wave packet, seen as a particle, simply shifted to the other side of the barrier. It would have surprised Newton or Maxwell, being a different sort of rationalization of physical reality than they were accustomed to, but the phenomenon could be rationalized lessthenever, though quite after the fact.

But...

Parnell’s eyes were out of focus. With a mighty effort, he managed to bring lens, retina, and optic nerve together. His brain was a little slower, but it too joined in after a delay of some seconds, though the magnocellular paths of his visual system were not enthusiastically cooperating as far as he could tell. At least that would most economically explain why he seemed to have two left hands with three thumbs in total.

He sighed and sat back to relax. Sitting on the back porch of a house near Walla-walla, Washington was Parnell. Why would he would be sitting there?, of all places, watching the Sun set. A true problem it was. Parnell knew of no theoretical reason why he would be near Walla-walla, Washington rather than being in the Pacific Ocean somewhere south of Japan. Or on some asteroid for that matter. Upsetting was the realization that some things happened without a specific goal, at least one to be discovered by any abstract rules of logic available to men. Off-balance on top of having lost his hold on the schematic, Parnell watched with horror as the complex

thing struggled to re-create itself from Parnell's memory. Muck. All over the ground, that is. A thick layer at that. Tall grasses and stunted trees lay all about. The Sun was high in the late morning sky, but dusk lay over him though there was nothing above him to obstruct the solar rays.

Disturbed by his very presence in this memory-laden, memory-based, recursive thing, was once more humbled Parnell. He tried to call up the design specs for the air-conditioning systems of tower 1 of the World Trade Center. Through several layers of non-linear qualifying descriptions did he descend before a large, white rectangle came hurtling towards his inner eyes. Just before it reached viewing range, something threw a hunk of mud and goo on the clean paper which was almost certainly covered with those fascinating black lines, so purposive and so neat.

He returned his attention to those outer-inner eyes used for denser memories. The marsh in which he stood up to his knees occupied the inside of a bow in a large river, peacefully flowing by. Parnell left the muck, passing through thick gatherings of water weeds to wade into the current. He paid scant attention to the water snakes, bullfrogs, and river otters. They, for their part, gave him little notice, thought some of the smallest and most timid of the critters would glance through him before returning to their various activities.

He turned to survey the places he had been. Not dreamlike, the muck bubbled as things no longer alive decayed and gave off methane gases. As the muck grew more watery, the grasses and water weeds grew thicker before thinning out rapidly in the current. Movement. A frog had been perched on that water lily pad. It had strayed near the edge. So Parnell thought to have observed, though it remained possible his mind filled in the gap. Frog on water lily pad. No frog, pad pulled underwater, and the water swirled. In between, the frog must have moved to the edge of the lily pad. Perhaps it had even started to enter the water?

Water pushed against the calf of his leg, and Parnell looked down to see a largemouth bass swim by. Grandpa had taught him how to catch them, lurking in the shade of tree branches or perhaps in an ambush spot where the vicious predator could attack schools of small fish. At the front edges of weed masses, sometimes behind islands where the current rejoined itself. Occasionally in the open waters of a large lake where schools of perch or dace or blue gill were swarming about. It flickered every part of its body, did the bass, and moved away faster than Parnell's eyes could follow. Even faster than that, it shot out of the water to grab something green jumping

from one lily pad to another.

Despite the empirical evidence that largemouth lurked about, hunting frogs and perhaps innocent minnows as well. . . Yes, despite that and for reasons not quite so negative as well, Parnell decided to retain his speculation that a pickerel had grabbed that first frog so deep in the weeds. Having thought much about science, and having engaged in some slight efforts at scientific thought, he knew of a certain that theories argued against facts more effectively than facts negated theories. He even knew that dominance of theories over facts, which were after all created in the context of particular theories, could be seen only by upwardly retreating to the airless regions of meta-theories. Maybe it was not true, but he knew it against all odds.

That confused him but not as much as the gray, fuzzy film which covered everything presenting itself to Parnell's eyes and mind. A second, more conscious inspection revealed that the gray covered the marshland, those parts where Parnell was not as well as the parts where he was. Above was a normal, blue sky, though Parnell knew not by which tricks well-defined objects could penetrate an optically confused region of the atmosphere. Beyond the atmospheric mask lay sunlit grasses and the skyscrapers of man which glaringly reflected some of the electromagnetic energy so generously sent towards the Earth.

No vampires, no ghouls, no living dead, not even a one of the dead amongst the living, came out of the shadows to pester the young man who walked peacefully through the domain of creatures so somewhat adapted to this shifting chunk of environment. Ad hoc though their adaptational mediocrity was, Parnell knew most of the replicating things compensated by being okay specimens over a wide range of possible environmental chunks.

Confusing though that was, Parnell found himself not moving down a corkscrew corridor of iridescent colors as he did that day in ninth grade when that doctor gave him a foul-tasting pill. Parnell's father and grandfather had nearly knocked each other out getting out the door to kill the fellow. They never went to jail, so Parnell had assumed they had not actually killed the doctor. Parnell was not totally innocent even at that age. He had watched a few movies which had presented views of the American justice system, and so he knew about dramatic court scenes and lawyers who were as talented as Winston Churchill at moving the hearts of embattled human beings. Yet, too blatant a murder of a man dressed in a white smock would make it difficult for even such a lawyer to get a man off scot-free.

Perhaps the doctor had fled to the lunar colony. Parnell had never again

seen him at the school. A conceivable scenario, but speculative. Such was not on the first floor of the highest quality science, though Parnell knew such reasoning to be necessary in fields where people had less control over the data. History. Poetry. That sort of stuff.

Still confused, Parnell looked up again. The Sun hung high above. He dropped his eyes to gaze about himself. Dusk. “How,” he asked a passing largemouth, “can far things be seen clearly through the muddled fog which hovers around our persons?” The bass, a damned good one at six pounds or so, was silver and green, but he offered no answers, neither authoritative nor speculative.

Suddenly, Parnell’s mind cleared and a white, rectangular thing came hurtling once more towards the centers of his awareness. A diagram. From page 87 of a book titled *A First Course in Solar Physics*. In the Sun’s core lay the region where the major hydrogen-to-helium fusion process took place – a footnote stated the process actually took place over several intermediary stages. The interested reader was referred to page 143, a matter of some confusion to Parnell. After all, was not the text-book self-contained? A wise reader would follow the reasonable strategy of reading the entire book before analyzing it in detail. Then, he would know of the detailed discussion on page 143 while analyzing the diagram on page 87. Would he not? Certainly if he were educated properly for an age of science. And even more certain was it that Parnell had, in fact, followed the proper procedure for such an investigation.

To be sure, the material on page 143 was of the greatest importance to those people who had worried so much about the missing neutrinos. It described the region at the edges of the core where beryllium-7 was transmuted into boron-8, a matter of some small anthropic, though not necessarily small anthropomorphic, importance. Without paying much heed to the near impossibility of the creation of carbon and oxygen, the authors did discuss, though 17 pages later, the ways in which this particular fusion process was speculated to follow a slightly chaotic cycle of slightly more than a decade. It was further noted with appropriate qualifications, which seemed trivial to Parnell, that the Sun’s luminosity seemed to follow the same cycle with a lag of two or three years.

Parnell blinked his eyes, causing an eerie strobing of the bald eagle dropping rapidly towards the field on the other side of the driveway. At perhaps 40 miles per hour, the predator grazed the top of the grass in three discrete points before dropping a foot more and then rising into the

sky with his furry prize. The book regained his attentions as the pages stopped turning on 768 where the authors, having completed their rigorous technical tasks, speculated on relationships between the beryllium-boron cycle, sunspots so symptomatic of spaghetti-like magnetic lines of flux, and short-term cycles in the Earth's climate. The book further noted the gossip of the beryllium-to-boron cycle which, after all, took place more than a hundred thousand miles deep in the Sun, had come by way of neutrinos known to be too shy to talk readily to even the friendliest of astrophysicists. That comment further befuddled Parnell who understood the joke but did not understand why it was necessary to make fundamental scientific jokes by way of such convoluted and highly qualified statements. Was it the Shagari effect again? Were men still speaking as if they manufactured buggy whips in a world reduced to rationalistic nonsense by Newton and Laplace? "Do I," asked Parnell of a turtle slumbering in the Sun's rays, "inhabit a world being reborn in the concepts and words of men? Is Marie right that our child will speak a confused babble and that her child will speak a language beyond our comprehension? Will the phase transitions of complex systems, the non-linearity of quasi-stable dynamics, and the geometries of gravitational theories, be embedded in the languages learned by our grandchildren? Will they even attempt to seduce one another using language loaded with metaphorically expanded knowledge of the working of the hypothalamus and a sexually related neurotransmitter or two?" The turtle slumbered on, paying no heed to any possibilities that man's cultures might retain old truths and gain new ones by the most radical refounding of traditions.

Dylan Shagari, even when being consumed by his own appetites, had never ignored such fundamental issues. Parnell shed a tear for the passing of his innocence, for the anticipated loss of his beautiful black-and-white schematics, even as he confessed his inability to ignore questioning his own thoughts, querying the innermost regions of his self. He had fallen from grace and found himself waist-deep in the clean, cold water of a river running by a marshland filled with frenetically moving creatures as well as many which slumbered, seemingly waiting for something. He did not know what they waited for, but the matter seemed uninteresting to a man who realized Marie, greenish in a sense and apparently quite ripply when cast in the role of a prophet, had spoken truly. His children would gossip in a confused tongue, his grandchildren would speak an incomprehensible language in a world dis-Enlightened and born anew.

Having already fallen a second time, Parnell surrendered to the surging tide of memories pushed back in the absence of his grandfather. Daring to face ancient things without the protection of his grandfather, Parnell yet heard of those things in the resonant tones of James Llewellyn's bass.

"A fine name it was, Dylan Shagari, a mixture of his mother's Welsh tongue equipped to tell many a wondrous tale and his father's Yoruba which resonated with the rhythms of God's Creation.

"He spun many a fantastic tale, as you well know, and he chanted marvels of poetic prolixity. But..."

The grandfather had leaned over as if to whisper that which could be divulged only to a soulmate, "In his quieter moments, he told me that he would carry his greatest poem, one longer than the sum of his other works, to his grave that it not terrify little children and other souls wise enough to fear and to seek ghosts and goblins.

"He spoke of a riverbank where the dusk lay upon the land, impervious to all changes in the Sun's rays. That did not frighten him much, but one Halloween when the Harvest Moon peered down upon saints and witches battling for the fate of God's Creation, Dylan Shagari walked from the yellowish-orangish glare into a grayish dusk, and he feared that the very foundations of the world would soon be under attack from the various things, harsh and beautiful and true, which were gathering their strengths in that terrible place. That which was impenetrable to the glow of the Harvest Moon lay beyond the struggle between angels and demons. Truly, would a man's actions accrue towards his judgment. Truly would a man be revealed in his incompleteness. Truly would he lose all righteous indignation that his ultimate fate lay in forces beyond his control for here was his fate given to him as a great gift, horrible and mostly unwanted.

"Parnell, that land reflected the grayish visage of Nox, she who so frightened Zeus that the greatest of all mortal gods could not bear to look upon her face. That reflection of the horrible primeval she-thing echoed infinitely through the many layers formed by neuronal sheets and the materially based, immaterial relationships of gut to brain, brain part to brain part, gland to body. By such confused ambiguity was created the consciousness and unconsciousness of the poet half-Welsh but only half-Nigerian. A reflective infinity, countable one-by-one, of cackling Nox. She glared at the poet with all their eyes, she leered lecherously at him, desiring to debase his body and steal his soul, though the acts be not much separable. She whispered in a voice like a flywheel shattering, vibrating thousands of times per second

and ripping through its steel container. It is true, my dear grandson, that objects as massive as flywheels and human persons cannot tolerate such fine displacements repeated so violently often. Though our generations are but instants in the evolution of the shortest-lived massive star, we live by stately rhythms indeed compared to molecular oscillations.

“And she, Nox redundantly noxious,” leaned forward the grandfather before adding, “she said, no, she promised that her father Chaos, not even quasily stable, loomed just below the horizon, biding his time till he swallowed all, good and evil, truth and lie, beauty and hideousness.

“Parnell,” he confided, “it was the very uniformity of the dusk, akin to that of the highest quality goods of men, which caused the oozing poxes to burst open upon the thighs and arms of Dylan Shagari. There was no play of shadows, no ghosts flittering about the edges of the multitude of his senses. There was no sign of life, past or present. Neither was future.

“Parnell, flesh of my flesh’s flesh, I knew Dylan Shagari better than did any man, yet I knew not, I still know not, if he was a man more heroic or more cowardly than the rest of us. That which terrified him was the absence of ghosts.”

The memory faded and Parnell was still not in a clean, pure space, yet he was in an office building with white walls and gray floors sharply defined. Parnell checked a few corners, the edges of a few doors, and even a table supporting a copy machine. Yes, it was true. The edges were sharp, though perhaps not as sharp as they would have been in the architectural drawings. Yet, despite the reasonable expectation carried by Parnell, there were no interior walls rising from floor to ceiling. Short walls, mostly five feet high, stretched and jutted and broke across at right angles as far as Parnell could see. A large building was the place, though not abundant with internal support structures.

Marveled did Parnell at all the imagery and knowledge to be exegetically expanded from one small dream, rendered with few details. Thought he so, as feet failed him not, moving him down a corridor past some number of cubicles. Every ten feet was one, 27 inches heel-to-toe was Parnell’s step, but he thought it of little interest to measure out the building by either standard, though to be sure, they were one from a circular viewpoint, since the estimated cubicle size had come from rounding a step-based estimate to the nearest three inches.

In one of the cubbyholes, Parnell spied a drawing board complete with rulers, protractors, drawing pencils, and some exotic pieces of equipment

Parnell had never seen. Or had he? Must have been. How could things unknown have entered Parnell's dream? But, then how could anything new have come into the minds of boys and girls with brains rigidly formed by early experiences? "When the fatty sheeps," joked Parnell out loud, but in a dream, "come into the head of an infant, the process of cultivating some brain connections, allowing the others to die, is well under way. Surely, it is impossible that I could think of anything I did not see during my first three or four years. Is it not?"

The chairs and light fixtures responded no better than had the slumbering turtle.

A low rumbling came from down the corridor. Parnell walked that a'way, whistling the recorder line from Telemann's Concerto in E minor. He had barely penetrated the Largo when he reached the source of the rumbling sound. There was an opening in the sea of cubicles. He wondered if Moses had passed through, raising his staff high to create this sixty by sixty foot passageway. No, a table sat in the middle, so it was not for those forced into the pilgrim way of life. Men sat at the table. It would have been unlikely that men would have sat at a table in the midst of the Red Sea and waited for Pharaoh's army. Maybe these men were from Pharaoh's army? No, that could not be for they were dressed in uniforms somewhat familiar to Parnell, and he remembered not ancient Egypt. He thought these men might be officials of the North American Collective, muchly more boring human objects than men from 3,000 years ago would have been.

Parnell checked the group of men, wondering if one of them might be Aristid Kotic, often known as 'Buck.' But, no, the greatest of these men was but half the man Buck was rumored to be.

Yet, there was a figure of authority. Uniform impeccably ironed, medals arrayed on his chest seven layers high, the fellow's shoes were undoubtedly as spitty as could be, though Parnell, truth to tell, was just guessing. The feet of the authoritative figure were hidden by the table. Then again, the entire building of empty cubicles and one populated conference table was likely a product of his mind extrapolating, richly and non-linearly, from the poems and dreams of Dylan Shagari, the gossip of James Llewellyn, and the fearful warnings of Grace Llewellyn Lopez.

Thin, with a still thinner mustache penciling his upper lip, the man of authority pounded the table as if to ensure that all people understood the importance of the Project. He raised the report to eye level with a dramatic flourish and then dropped it along with his own suddenly limp arm. Barely

six inches above the table, he acted to prevent the terrible accident and then ran his thumb over the edge of the entire report, allowing Parnell a chance to read most of it. Not catching all the words, yet able to fill in most of the gaps, Parnell read of the plans of this talented team of engineers. “It was possible to carry out the Project”, so said the report – if reports could be said to say anything, “as the bedrock of granite was strong and thick, long and broad. Just as importantly, it lay but fifty feet beneath the muck. It would be sufficient to support the six massive structures of steel and concrete.”

The report noted that long-dead men from some long-dead civilizations without the wisdom of the Collective had raised buildings on marshlands only for their great-great-grandchildren to see them sunk one or two stories deep. Parnell was not sure if the report meant the long-dead men were one or two stories deep by the time their great-great-grandchildren were grown or . . . Did the report mean to suggest the buildings had sunk one or two stories deep? In either case, Parnell could understand why those civilizations were long-dead. But, not to worry. A talented team of engineers, “Also talented individually?” wondered Parnell, from a mighty Collective would not make such mistakes, though Parnell was also not quite sure what those mistakes had been. The report wrapped things up on a note that made more sense to the young man. This team would not have recommended this location if the bedrock had not been so massive and well-placed on the planet Earth. They left it unsaid that the buildings would not be endangered by the Earth’s sloppy and not quite closed attempts to orbit the Sun, the Sun’s dance about the solar system’s center of gravity, and even the rapid movement of the entire system to that center of gravity of many galactic clusters known commonly as the Great Attractor. Parnell was not really sure that it was safe to assume the complex, whatever its nature, would remain undamaged by the locally small but globally unimaginable forces unleashed by the efforts of locally dense regions of the Universe to come together in small thuds.

A matter for contemplation was that. To be sure, that complex designed by the talented team of talented engineers would not be likely to survive even the rise and fall of pieces of the Earth’s crust over the next 100 million years or so.

Of more immediate interest was Parnell’s theory that the report spoke of the poet’s gray and fuzzy region by the river. He read of plans to drain the water off, erect dikes to contain the river, and strip off the fifty feet of

muck to build foundations solidly and safely on the bedrock. In case some water seeped towards its old domain, barriers of concrete could be erected and painted with tar and latex. Pumps and French drains could take care of any excesses of water eking into the crushed rock base layer which would begin ten feet below the lawns and gardens of this complex.

The drawings were not included, though there were references to the drawers where they were stored. Seeing the shortage of concisely schematic information amidst the verbiage, Parnell was interested in only one other facet of the report. More than that. He was bothered. It was even true that the young man was shocked at the insensitivity of men to the higher morality of the scientific enterprise of the human race. Parnell could find no reason why the ecologists thought there were 8,767 adult male bullfrogs in that particular marshland. More importantly, nearly all of those bullfrogs were to be displaced, but the report did not indicate where they were to go.

The dream faded and Parnell found himself on the back porch of a house near Walla-walla, Washington, though he still had no good theory why that was so. But that was momentarily of little concern. Admiration for the poet had overwhelmed Parnell. Dylan Shagari had put so much content into his terse poems and incomplete tellings of his dreams. Yet, though oriented towards schematics rather than profound poetry, Parnell speculated that the poet did so much by creating the least ornate of signs and pointers in contexts which held nearly all the rich detail. It was in those contexts of the poet's life and the humble life of him, merely Parnell, that meaning inhered. It was from those contexts that so much richness of meaning arose, so much complexity as to overwhelm the human mind and leave false impressions of paradoxes. Not helping matters was the tendency of men to bring *a priori* categories into their theorizing about the fundamental pieces of the physical world. Paradoxes and illogically complementary relationships developed when those categories overlapped one thing and then another muchly separable. Objective was the world, but richly meaningful, not at all linear, not muchly reducible to categories arising from the mind of Aristotle nor Newton.

And, now, a new and fascinating problem had arisen. If the dream was a true narrative of plausible events, how came Parnell to know of such things as the bullfrogs and the talented team of talented engineers?

Odd, that.

Alicia asleep on his lap,
Jimmy stretched out on the ground.
Half in the sun was the boy.
A light so warming.
Half in the shade was he.
A dark so cooling.
An image so rhythmic,
a moment so timeless.
Fast moved the Earth through space,
long held the second so stable.

Parnell kissed his daughter's hair so blond. His coloring had she, and likely would her hair brown up as she grew older, but for now she was his fair-haired princess.

y

24

Such a day it was.

Oh truly was it a day like no other day which was ever a day in history.

Mattered it not if there were 20 billion years in that history. Yea! and quite a multitude of days was that. Seven trillion, 300 billion days, to be precise, though not really all that accurate. Yet, that was not to be helped. No theories spoke of the existence, or not, of leaping years before the first man looked into the skies, perhaps to crack his neck and relieve a headache in the base of his skull. Anthropological issues aside, it seemed to Parnell that the hypothetical nature of the one hundred, seventy-five trillion hours, give or take an astronomical chunk, seemed to make those fleeting units of time truly irrelevant.

In certain contexts, it was undeniable that hours were truly not of the greatest concern. At the least they were clumsy, though to be sure they merely added 12.256 to the most logarithmic of annual calculations.

Still..

Logarithmic calculations also did not seem to be of the greatest importance in perceptively forming the context of such a day.

“Is that what I’m doing?” asked Parnell, so sunk in his wonder that such a day had ever occurred.

“Am I actively forming this day into such?”

The grandest of all mysteries was it.

More beautiful, even more elegant, than the Standard Theory or GUT or TOE or other sets of mathematicized submetaphysics so ugly named.

Of course, it was the foundation of such sets of submetaphysics and, as Parnell sighed deeply, he admitted such sets to be the foundation of the names so non-mythically meaningless as well.

No, men were past their collective childhood. No more would things be anthropomorphized. Sad as it was, things were to lose their pagan dignity.

Apollo would no longer drive his chariot towards the Great Attractor; Odin would no longer gather tenuous masses of ionized water vapor and ice crystals over parcels of ground suddenly grown rich in electrons. Processing relentlessly and endlessly, as if working some cosmic assembly-line, things would be freed from the restrictions of human thought historically formed. Valued would they be, for it be clear they have their own strange charm.

Whatever those things were, for things no longer were in such a silly context.

Sadder was it that, stepping here and there but certainly not in the excluded middle which did not really seem to exist anyway, those poor Joycean creatures would never see: Truly was science less friendly towards paganism than Christianity.

Or maybe not.

Or maybe was one of those statements true. Or false. Or maybe something was true or false about both of them.

Such a day!

Was it?

Undoubtedly yes.

Still a multitude of questions remained, and, among the least of those was: When did the symmetry of the year first break, complicating timely equations by forcing an ad-hoc adoption of leap years and other adjustments more rare?

A problem was that. Not did it lessen precision, but accuracy was often desirable if not really often important.

Remained. The problem, that is, even if the Universe were a mere 8 billion years old, precisely two trillion, 920 billion days, though giving up accuracy for simplicity. Yes, despite that, it was a quarter of a billion billion seconds, plus or minus a lot.

“The man who first discovered the concept of ‘plus or minus’ was truly among the greatest of our race’s geniuses,” said the historically contemplative young man. “By contingently chosen paths do we climb the slopes of Mt. Olympus, hoping to reach the same peak seen from the ground.”

Mattered such things at all?

Take the age of the Universe, assuming anyone knew what it was. And assuming it to be a coherent concept. Useful it was, but “So what?” asked a center of feisty speculation in a mid region of Parnell’s neocortex, or so he thought though thought it not to leave a forwarding address. “Have we so much confidence that our geometric models are sufficient for spacetime

as it actually exists? And what sense makes it to say that the Universe had a temporal beginning which men could ever identify if those same pitifully discursive creatures know they cannot identify a spatial point from which all things began?"

Still . . .

No, more yet could be said if only to note the decades of inconsistent measurements of the ages of the background radiation, stars, galaxies, and longfar agoway objects so strange as not to be readily classified as one thing or even the other. And, besides, what difference did it make if some galaxies were 15 billion years old while the Universe was no more than ten billion or so?

Mostly was it a result of incompatible theories used to measure the age of the Milky Way and the visible Universe. And visibility was itself a major problem since everyone knows that the older the Universe is, the more of the early Universe can you see. Assuming, is that, that men have properly shaped their minds to the geometry of spacetime. Assuming it exists.

Odd all of that, but still unchanged the basic situation.

Parnell was embedded in such a day.

Cosmogenic issues did not affect matters, for, at least in theory, there were an infinite number of pathways of development, perhaps a higher Cantorian infinity of possible meta-structures by which that odd beast labeled the Universe could have reached such a state.

Yes, such a stately day was it.

Not that the daily state was all that much to brag about.

In the overall scheme of things.

Parnell was well aware he had been raised to the pessimistic side of the Knoxian re-formulation of Pauline theology, and, yet, he considered the birthing nature of the Universe to be perhaps more important than its odd mixture of goodness and evil. Not that he considered himself an expert in theology, having only a passing acquaintance with Augustine and Maimonides and Aquinas and Calvin and Pascal and Gilson, and he barely knew anything at all about the Cappadocians and the Fathers of the East and the Hindu re-formulation of Vedic mythology. Heck, he knew less than nothing about Buddhism or Animism or Neopaganism, for he knew only public rumors and he assumed those were all wrong.

Still . . .

Those considerations, even if falsely labeled 'things', mattered not muchly a bit.

Nor precision neither.

Not even the tiniest bit.

But mostly accuracy mattered as much as a point on a continuum.

Awfully little.

“Was it accurate or not?” whined a confused region barely accessible to Parnell’s introspection.

Continuously was that question a nonstarter.

Doubts could have been raised, perhaps confidence intervals placed about any of the statements. Perhaps: 5% the probability that the first statement would be rejected though true, 10% the probability the fourth statement would be accepted though false.

Truly negative and falsely positive.

Whatever that meant in a world more factually random than statistically random.

Second by second could men have spoken of such matters but never continuously.

Yet in the middle of the school of thought most aggressively excluding the excluded middle, Pauli had said something seemingly and deceptively different, though in a similar way. Not possible was it to say a particle was never here nor there, yet, if it was here or there, no other particle could be in the same place.

Some people wondered how the hell you would know. Not Parnell. Some questions were nonstarters once you realized the trick was to understand the ultimate irrationality of the ideas ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Still. . .

Of a certainty could any well-defined and even well-quantified perception be confused by the proper use of human reasoning upon data that were pretty much indigestible without the warm and cuddly hugs of even the most wrongful of theories and meta-theories.

Not that it was the fault of men and the peculiarly discursive way in which their discretely finite minds rambled drunkenly, tracing footsteps in the sand, a line here and an ill-formed circle there. Could such scratchings form a picture of the Universe? Oddly enough – perhaps. And, after all, the fault lay not entirely with the perceptions of a creature who saw purple though no such color existed on the electromagnetic spectrum.

No!

Not did the world make it muchly easy for men to aggressively form the truth from the few bits of data collected by a scientist here, a poet there,

and a trickster everywhere.

No matter the uncertainties and sources of confusion, it was clear that such a day had never before occurred, and, if it had, it would have been such a different day.

It was just as clear that such a day would never again occur, and, if it does, it will be a day just as suchly different, if not more so.

But...

Was it really such a day? The matter was not clear to Parnell, emerging as he was from a techno-world founded upon the rigor of schematics and encyclopedic knowledge, though his thought was increasingly fuzzed and fractaled by the realities of scientific thought alive and not yet frozen into one man's circuitry conventions. Or more sadly – another man's favorite dogmas.

Smiled Parnell at the realization that a man could only say those things permitted by his words or his grammars, but deconstruction followed by crazy-quilt reconstruction might always force the most Newtonian of thinkers to see the time dilation that froze the horizon of a black hole into a record of a cataclysmic implosion, albeit a record played infinitely slowly and never to be seen completed by a finite creature living in a finite and physical Universe.

Did a singularity exist at the heart of those black holes?

It mattered, but not as much as might have been thought.

Did those black holes exist?

Maybe, though, to be sure, no one had sent postcards from those imperfectly orbiting regions deeper than they were wide.

James Llewellyn had always claimed that God had the freedom to create the Universe as He wished. "Men," he had told Parnell, "might argue about whether or not God exists – or not, but that is not where the most basic lines are drawn, perhaps ultimately the most important, but not the most basic. No, genes of my gene's genes, multiple lines are drawn, first to split off those men who strive to use human reason and then to split off those men who are pious in the deepest sense. That remnant of reasonable and pious men, are set against all of their brothers. Pagans, atheists, Christians, Jews, Hindus, and any others willing to use human reason in good faith and possessing a pious attitude towards Creation. Such men and women will forge our future... Or else..."

Parnell had not been able to get his grandfather to complete the prophecy, but he himself had come to see that the preconceptions of men mattered

little compared to the physical hints to the factual nature of God's Creation, the factual nature seen by men as a contingent world. By an act of willful imagination, men saw God's Creation as a world well-structured. And true it was that many of the building blocks and fundamental forces of Creation were unreasonably well-ordered. Yet, that was not a sign that God has restricted the freedom of His Creation or its citizens in muchly strong a manner.

Such were the beliefs of a young man influenced greatly by a grandfather of Knoxian and Pauline theological beliefs. Not even embarrassed was Parnell by the realization that that set of beliefs was perceived silly by those who believed that the God of Moses and Christ could have never allowed ape-men nor non-commutative observables and dynamical variables.

For his part, Parnell was not sure why God would choose to build a man from puddles of mud rather than by way of billions of years of evolution starting from a puddle of prebiotic mud. He was also of the belief that God was not an algebraic bigot and would have been willing to create a world in which momentous position did not always flip-flop nicely to position a well-determined moment.

Yes, indubitably was it true.

Such a day it was.

Parnell smiled into the sky. Sky there was. Blue it was because of the peculiarities of the atmosphere's scattering of bluish photons. Not a good hostess was mother Earth to those entities who traveled so far to reach her bosom. Sun seemed to hover in the sky, no matter how fast it was flying around the center of the Milky Way, no matter how fast that galaxy was spiraling towards the Great Attractor. Clouds passed by slowly, gathering and dissipating on the move. No rainbow was there in the heavens.

Still. . .

Wonders there were of a plenitude, even a satiety. Wondered Parnell how the ancients could have been in such awe of so many things they understood not at all. For his part, he was awe-struck by the warm rays of the sun, millions of years in the journey from a dense, plasmic core. And, for why did they enter upon such a journey? He looked about himself at the plants allowing the photons to knock about electrons in the outer shells of chemicals so subtly selected over many a million years. The rocks had been pulverized into fertile soil over the years by the pulsating, chaotic processes energized by those photons so conveniently dropped from dangerous levels of energy to levels usable by complex and easily damaged forms of life. The

millions of years of battering brought about that mellowing of X-rays and even those of a gamma tendency. Necessary were those rough and tumble years, to be sure. At least, if protoplasmic life were necessary. Without that reduction in the frequency of the radiation, the Earth's surface would, in some qualified ways, resemble the inner chambers of a nuclear reactor.

Such would not be a proper setting for such a day, would it? – not. Unless, of course, man had become a creature with a hide capable of harmlessly absorbing powerful levels of electromagnetic energy. That would have been terrible, for then men would not have been protoplasmic and, as horrible as it might have seemed to some ways of thought, perhaps their life's fluids would not have been red by the action of metallic proteins.

In the most tentative manner, a part of Parnell's brain suggested, "That matters as little as it seems. Perhaps as little as those 12 billion years of uncertainty in the age of the Universe."

No, not much at all mattered it, though 'it' was as much a problem as any other sound which existed largely as a place-marker in the speech of a creature so oddly limited in grammatical freedom. Yes, 'it', and 'thing' for that matter, oddly pointed towards somethings which were not things.

Truly was it a wonderful world, a life still more wonderful.

"What," asked Parnell, "would I do with so many excess billions of neurons, with a brain so oddly selected from apish brains for abstract thought, if I could not worry about the lithium-boron fusion process? which plays so important a role in the sun's core, producing so many neutrinos, or not, that remain undetected after decades of efforts to speak to the shy, little fellows. Truly, Amélie Minh must have been a woman with looks so average as to have been of magnificent beauty, yet, if that averaging process proceeded by logical and straightforward steps, if we were not historical, contingent creatures in a rationally recalcitrant world, we would be mere processors of formalized data. We would not be part of a Universe in which a star helps to create life by trying hard to turn itself into a useless hunk of cold, dark matter." After a moment's pause, Parnell sadly noted, "It is time to drop theories which were once useful for understanding the nature of beauty. The poet had a yen for women not much like those in the land of his upbringing. I, myself, love a woman with more freckles across her nose than any woman who would have entered my averaging processes in my impressionable youth."

But dropping that theory negated not Parnell's perceptions of a world filled with beautiful things and still more beautiful women, Marie most of

all. Not even did it undo the insights gained by a theory which had said something true though something false as well.

Wonderful was such a world. Even full of wonders was it, and wonders were wonderful things. Parnell doubted he would have been amused by years of searching for grubs under rocks or even flaking other rocks into pointy shapes. So, the problem was...

Man's brain had been selected for complex social skills and abstract thought when there had not been a shopping mall nor even a library in sight.

Or had that been the case? Ignoring the question of 'case' for the moment.

Had the selection been for something else and urban social skills and abstract thinking abilities only an accidental result?

But...

Then again...

Perhaps no human-like creatures had ever been accepting of the routine and mundane aspects of life?

And, even, as weird as it sounded to the back regions of Parnell's mind...

No, the idea was rejected before even reaching a more respectable part of his brain.

Still, maybe the real problem lay in understanding how man realized that there was no apparent reason why he came upon the scene. To be sure, human genes were about to overload the Earth, but humans existed for tens of thousands of years before the most ingenious and most selfish of genes had realized that this was a creature capable of breeding not much prolifically – by bacterial standards, but also of surviving with greater skill than nearly any land creature bigger than a cockroach, or at least the more common of black or brown rats, even those of Norwegian extraction.

Yes, it was undeniable that Dylan Shagari had been onto something. Beautiful and irresistible had been the women who had used him without qualm, beautiful had been the world he had inhabited. Wondrous the jungle growths which had hidden the man-eating leopard. Beyond wonder the academic campuses the poet had passed through like a craftsman touring an assembly-line. Yes, truly could no one have guessed that the reduction in mass as hydrogen became helium could create grass and grass seeds which could be turned into people who could become leopard food or...

Sometimes, under the right circumstances, the process could pass through

a different stage. Photons could be used to make asparagus which could be turned into people who would then, for no logically discernible reason, become factories for turning perceptions into theory-laden facts. An occasional genius among them might even produce a fact-laden theory. More amazingly, those theoretic and factitious things could then be usefully poetized into sheer confusion of the sort which could dissolve language and make it possible for grandchildren to see the unseeable and to say the unsayable.

Certainly, and beyond a doubt, the sun was shining, the grass and trees were busy turning photon-transported energy into hydrocarbons of various sorts. Energy was also reflected in forms suitable for Parnell's sensory organs. But was that a logical tautology? Even a corollary to the weakly silly anthropic principle? If light was not produced in wavelengths which Parnell could see, then he would not be able to see those things. On the other hand, another creature might have come into being which could have safely seen by way of gamma rays.

Puzzled Parnell the useless insight with a frown on his face. All surface and no substance was such a thought. The poet was right, as usual. The language of modern man was all traps and dead-ends, however Enlightened those false pathways seemed. Needed man the words and grammars capable of holding the artful thought of a Wallace Stevens, the elegant thoughts of Dirac. "Was it," asked Parnell of no one in particular, "a pure coincidence that the same century produced two radically different thinkers in modally different fields who both emphasized the beautiful, though the poet Stevens believed in the beautiful and seemed to have doubts about the true, or at least the human ability to see the true, while... Dirac had pursued the truth, ridiculing another scientist for writing poetry, but... Dirac had been willing to consider the possibility of beautiful falsehoods. Where lay the truth? Or the beautiful? Or the good?"

And, so, the conclusion was undeniable. In this case, it was no different from the hypothesis formed at the start.

Such a day was it. Undeniably was it a day. With a high probability was it such. Yes, the two thoughts merged in some associative region of Parnell's cortex, a region perhaps hyper-developed in the poet or perhaps the other one. Analysis was possible, though dead-ends and traps were buried beneath the words and linguistic structures borrowed from Elizabethan man.

Still...

A day it was – not hard to visualize, concrete and extractable from rich

personal and historical experience. Such it was – more abstract to be sure, fuzzy and even ghostly. Was that inherent in <'such'|such> or was it but the vapor from the friction generated by an inadequate language?

More to it was there than simply a day or even such. Partly against his will, pondered Parnell the puzzle of a small spongy mass thinking the concrete and then the ghostly and then, wonder beyond wonders?, the two merged so smoothly. Pondered Parnell further. 'Thinking'? Still deeper went he. Thinking? Which question was appropriate: 'Thinking'? or Thinking? Knew he not, though, being widely and deeply read in science, and, with a probability of one-fourth, possessing the scientific intuition of his grandmother – maybe? – Parnell understood the importance of asking the correct question.

It was just that a correct question did not always emerge from even the most strenuous of contemplations.

Oh well. The lack of good questions seemed not to bother muchly the sun or the plants or even the rabbits ducking under the bush down near the lake.

Reduction had failed. The objective world remained a complex mess of things. Beautiful it was, though the truth of the world could not be abstractly untangled so easily from the fantastic growths of the fertile soils and climate of the land near Walla-walla. Rain and sun had been plentiful and weedy in growth were nearly all plants.

Not all goodly did that tend, let alone bestly.

The fantastic growths of a rain forest, whether in the tropics or the temperate zones or the human brain, were not easily reducible by the best of intentions. More was necessary for a better chance at reduction. A D-10 tractor or barrels of herbicides, perhaps a bullet or a vial of cocaine. A mess of lowly-reduced organic materials would result from any of those treatments. "Yet," thought Parnell, "such would seem to be a sort of reduction not muchly pious, certainly not leading to deeper understandings. Before such experiments could be conducted, I would already know that a bulldozer could reduce one type of rain-forest, a mere .22 caliber bullet could reduce the other. There be little reason to conduct such tests, and there seem to be not many good reasons to do such things in non-experimental contexts."

No, little to be gained was there in trying to understand the fantastic growths of . . .

Creation?

All of Creation?

The whole ball of wax was that rich and complex and entangled and interdependent?

Apparently.

Parnell worried the matter of Creation for a moment or so before asking himself, "How could men come to understand so much as a single tree, or even the metabolism of a single humus-worm thing?"

Clarity was needed.

Simplicity.

A visible horizon.

The poet had once claimed that the Hebrews had been chosen by God because, as desert-dwellers, they could more easily see truth in the spare and sun-baked climate. In a verbal commentary, never – so far as Parnell knew – committed to paper for submission to a learned journal, James Llewellyn had noted that there was a serious question as to whether the Hebrews had inhabited a desert, at least prior to the time that Nebuchadnezzar's engineers had cut down hundreds of acres of trees in a multi-year and ultimately successful attempt to bake and crumble the walls surrounding Jerusalem. "Then again," had noted the engineer and bureaucrat, and truly he had, "the climate may have remained moist until nearly the coming of Christ. If so, the land might have recovered from the chemical summer created by early forms of siege warfare."

Such a day it was. The sun warmed the skin on Parnell's forearms and even that on his thighs. Even more than that did his cheeks and eyelids feel good, comfortable, and secure, as if resting in a world where Parnell belonged. Perhaps even could it be said that Parnell belonged to this world in his holey, if not holy, wholeness as well as in his part-by-part aspects. Nevertheless, he suspected his whole self occupied a world denser and richer than the world inhabited by his legs and heart and pancreas. "Even perhaps," asked Parnell of a hawk passing barely over the treetops, "could it be true that the brain itself couples with a world not as rich and dense as the world intercoupling with the whole body? Then how can it be that the brain can occupy a world immune to the analyses of Medawar, perhaps because too much light has been lost in the catastrophic collapse nearly experienced but not quite perceived by Chandrasekhar when he was not much more than a youth?"

Mystified was he that such things could happen just because gravity liked to turn hydrogen into helium and helium into other things even less

well understood by quantum theorists. True it was that chemists irreducibly understood many of those things, but that was the very point. Anyway, one of the points. Though points were hard to define in such a world. Admittedly, that would have been one way to have eliminated singularities from gravitational and quantum theory – to posit a Universe made of points, that is. “Perhaps,” asked Parnell, mostly of himself, “that would have been one way to combine the two ways of thought?”

Yet...

Things and 'things' were an even greater problem, though things typically existed unlike the other things which functioned as strangely empty containers for even things that were not things. Empty of container as well as of content, to be sure.

Not that Parnell was much sure of <much|'much'> anymore.

He decided it was time to pass over problems of knowing and to deal with the practical problems of the world, though men could not really know all that much about the world nor could they even necessarily know much about the true nature of the practical problems confronting them. Not that they really confronted them. They confronted them? They confronted them, and them was confronted by them? Logical that last one.

Anyway...

“If the race is to avoid self-destruction,” pontificated Parnell as he sought a sure foundation of speculation, “and if scientists are to have the freedom to find new and more interesting traps for the mind and dead-ends for the spirit, poets, and the occasional weaver of tales, must find new ways to speak sensibly of the collapse of a wave-function, not to mention processes of thought grounded in the physical brain though not really taking place here, there, or at the other place in the frontal lobe despite that one set of experimental results from tests custom-designed to prove they occurred at the other place.”

His attempt to find certainty in some aspect of his knowledge of the world was floundering and he knew not what to do about it, though, to be sure, he felt not really all that wet, and drowning seemed not an immediate danger.

Parnell checked himself, feeling so inadequate to the task of correcting words and grammatical structures not really wrong but kind of not sufficient for the needs of algorithmic information theory though well-selected for the metaphorical needs of sailors and dog trainers. Elizabethan English, no matter how Enlightened, did not even seem up to the needs of anthro-

pological research. How was one to speak of other peoples in a respectful and honest way without compromising the glories of a civilization securely floating on the Mediterranean?

No matter the responsibilities and problems of being a pious and reasonable man self-named wise-wise, in reckless disregard of the ironic proteins in his bloodstream, no sadness oppressed the heart of the young man a little bit less fragmented than once he was. Or at least, more fragmentarily balanced between schematics and wordy things. Though things and 'things'...

Parnell did not wish to be eternally recused and he checked himself, though himself not a member of the species *canis lupis familiaris*.

Nevertheless...

Happy was he.

After all...

A day, yes, surely it was. The flowers were opening, offering food for fertilization services. No clinics needed they when bees worked so much cheaper than did human doctors and medical technicians.

Such, yes or no, was what? Parnell was damned if he knew. A miracle was it that the children of Einstein could see into the core of the sun, a region which they could never visit or even observe by any but the most indirect means. True, the sun's core sent a prodigious number of neutrinos in the direction of the Earth, speaking particle-wise in a language willfully if not blissfully ignorant of the subtleties of quantum mechanics.

Yet, problems there were.

Quadzillions of quadzillions of neutrinos came forth, assuming the proper window of time was used.

But...

That was not nearly enough for most theories. Despite the efforts of so many scientists who had spent years diligently watching the huge vats of cleaning fluids at the bottom of abandoned shafts of gold mines. That was a matter to bewilder the most scientific of thinkers. Data. And no theory. And, in all honesty, most people would be wondering why the scientists had placed huge vats of cleaning fluids at the bottom of abandoned shafts of gold mines. Parnell did not worry muchly for he knew they had their reasons. He could reconstruct most of those reasons, with fully quantified descriptions, yet, that seemed as unimportant as so many other aspects of that odd region of human thought which could have been labeled either 'ignorance' or 'knowledge' depending on the context. More important was

the unformed data gathered with so much effort.

“The poor things,” said Parnell softly, in a voice that cracked. Yet, he could not bring a tear to his eye for the poor orphaned data in search of a theory. Hardened of heart by his efforts to penetrate to the core of human knowledge, Parnell also could not cry for the poor theories not capable of generating the observed data.

Said they that quadzillions of quadzillions of neutrinos were not enough. Were theories in need of revision to downgrade the importance of neutrinos in the unseen and unheard processes taking place in the center of the sun? It had not been so hard to manipulate the theories to generate the proper photonic facts. Was it going to be necessary to allow a still greater role to photons, already responsible for life on Earth?

No.

Such prejudice did not seem to be justified.

Yet.

And, besides. . .

Parnell was not a particlist. No reason was there to believe neutrinos were inherently inferior to photons.

Still. . .

Humans had eyes to see photons of certain energy levels. No sense organs to detect neutrinos had any man, woman, or child known to Parnell.

Unless. . .

Such a wonder it was that the mind could see so much invisible to the eyes, could hear so many things undetectable by the sharpest of ears. Leprechauns? They had sharp ears. Maybe they could hear more than men, women, or children. Or, maybe, perhaps, the sharpness of ears was still another metonymy? with a limited domain of validity?

“Where lay the questions?” asked a confused young man. “How deeply? were they embedded in the structures and words of our discourse? and what strategies? have we taken to try to hide them?, the better to ignore the need for difficult and disciplined thought.”

Happy was he, despite all the hardships borne by his mind and spirit, and ultimately pressing upon brain, glands, and muscles.

Such a day was it.

Even true was it that a day, yes, it surely was.

Such, yes or no, was what?

Structures within structures, meanings within mere information.

Data, which were sort of embryonic facts, seemed to be little more than

a symbiotic mind-form living off richer and more substantial things.

The objective nature of reality arose from a direct confrontation and was merely fuzzed by the most basic analyses, whether scientific or philosophic.

Then it was clearly impossible for human reason to understand anything, if much at all.

Still . . .

No matter how rationalized, it was beyond the words of man to describe truly, or even beautifully, how he knew what the hell was happening in the core of the sun, mostly millions of years prior to the act of investigation. Where did goodness lay in this whole beautiful and, perhaps tautologically, true world? Was the beauty somehow tautological as well? Maybe neither beauty nor truth were tautological? That human beauty emerged from a complex process of averaging, sometimes anyway, seemed to argue for some sort of embedding of beauty in things as they existed. Or was it that men were made to see beauty in what existed? Or did men force reality into beautiful perceptions?

Men saw, or perhaps created?, beauty by a process as similar to a Bayesian estimation procedure as to a Platonic revelation. Men saw into the center of the sun, however imperfectly, a region ever inaccessible to human visit or direct observation.

How did these things happen?

The second was easier to understand, or at least necessary to understand first. Without such an understanding of how men saw the unseeable, how was one to see into the recursed, complex, and plastic operations of the brain?

Parnell knew a thing or seven about the interior of the sun, though he was far from an expert. Tiny things sometimes fissioned, more often did they fuse. Much matter was striving to enter that stable sinkhole labeled 'iron' by men. Equations said those processes, if they took place in a region never to be seen by men, would produce a plenitude of pulsating piles of energy to be passed exclusively as packets nucleus to nucleus, two steps out, one step back, a dose-y-do with a quintillion of quintillion ions or maybe more, and then an astrophysical number of steps around in circles or shapes less regular. Probably, by probabilistically measured processes, did they eventually reach the more tenuous regions of the sun. Having taken a million years to travel tens of thousands of miles, it would be a short journey of eight minutes to the Earth. Ninety-three million miles, an easy jaunt that.

Yet, not was that the point. A cluster of birch trees accepted the sun's gifts. In a parcel of land perceived by the right halves of both of Parnell's eyes did they stand. Yes, stand did they, thus producing a stand of trees. Fluidly, though not categorically, logical, also though also beside the point to a young man seeking to understand the processes by which concepts and relationships were actively embedded in languages used by thinkers of living thoughts.

Sunflowers.

Much like unto the ones which had stood by the lake near that house located so peculiarly near Walla-walla! Imagine that, if you can!

Yes, sunflowers they were. Different sunflowers had the other ones been, but sunflowers nonetheless.

And without a doubt did such an insight link Parnell to his 20 year-old self. . .

Sunflowers stood near the birch trees. Worship the sun did they, the yellow-rayed pagans that they were. Stood they, yet not a stand did they form. Why? Categorically strange. Perhaps there existed in the mind of some great poet a fluidly logical justification for such a linguistic oddity. Passingly strange and pretty sorely obscure it remained to Parnell despite his recognition that order might yet be forcibly extracted from the entangled growths, but such could not occur for he had no bulldozers and no cement mixers for the job.

Metonymies, and even metaphors, seemed to be second-order problems to Parnell as he realized that it was actually quite odd that the children of men, or even the grandparents of men, knew that those individual things were sunflowers. More than that, how did the de-sexed daughters of bees, though the grandparents were never de-sexed – at least not for their entire life-spans, know that one sunflower was as good as another? It occurred to Parnell that the de-sexed daughters of bees perhaps knew not of sunflowers, not even in a language of gyrations and wiggles. Such was the curse of men and not of bees.

And ever did he return to such, a true problem for 'such' was such an abstraction, was it? that. Perhaps, though, in a sense, it was a concrete pointer to an abstraction. Or a container empty of itself as well as being empty of contents. And, yet, frustratingly necessary to human speech.

Parnell wondered, "Where are all the poets when the faloodling really needs to be done?"

No answer came, so far as he could tell, and, therefore, reached the

son of a concrete and particular man, did Parnell. Yea! that was the God's honest truth. Reached he forth, grasped he the slender, rounded arm of a creature labeled 'Marie Levecque', though that name was itself an abstraction beyond the power of man to understand, also though also a pointer to a peculiar and concrete woman was it and, at that, difficult to understand.

And, so, set her flat on her back, he did. Parnell saw soft, soft-green eyes with his own ocular organs, did he, aye! he even felt soft, though not soft-green, lips yield to his own. Not for more than a thousandth of a second did he consider that his senses lied to him. No! She was a creature set in a world that was so much hers. And she was so much the world's creature. Not <as well| nor even |'as well'>, for they were, in truth, but one statement.

Such a category-breaking truth held for Parnell, though the matter boggled his mind. Matter? Such? Of what did these things speak. Abstractions which could have been mapped back to geometric objects or social insects and the logical validity would have remained. The meaning would have changed, but Parnell knew not how meaning entangled itself with abstract words and concepts. Boggled more, his mind, that was. For a certain, strange it seemed that prior to being pierced by the ghostly arrows of man-speak, those concrete things floated about, loosely connected to the dense environments in which they were so strongly embedded.

Sat up, he did.

It came to him, all of a sudden.

A poem to sing towards his child, that boy or girl whose language would assume as a matter of course so much that could be grasped so tentatively and so weakly by Parnell. It mattered not how much he pushed his mind, so inadequate as to require months of work to learn the mathematics and the physical substance of the Theory of General Relativity.

Still. . .

He smiled at a woman, quite beautiful, green in certain contingent ways, ripply to Parnell's eyes as he tried to draw forth a structure from such a richly historical creature.

Striking a pose, finger pointing to the heavens, Parnell confessed aloud, "Though striking a pose, I do not truly hit anything, yet. . ." He stopped speaking, confused by his own inability to sensibly decompose such a simple phrase. A mere nine heartbeats later, he spoke again. "I have written a rhyme for you to use in the nursery of our child. By such ditties shall you

lull a child born into an age when men will perhaps learn to take God's Creation as it is given to them and not as they wish it to be."

Doodle-a-diddly-doe.
A fi, a fum, and half a foe.
Darwindle a Diracy-doe.
Ionize a quarky ρ .

A scientific nursery rhyme,
To calm a babe in modern time.
Not a waltz, not a tango,
A faster-than-light Big Bango.

Doodle-a-diddly-doe.
A fi, a fum, and half a foe.
Darwindle a Diracy-doe.
Ionize a quarky ρ .

Posing strikingly again, though still not hitting anything in even the most process-oriented adverbial manner, Parnell announced, "I shall call it *Faloodling a Doodle and a Diddly*. Yes, truly are these words suitable for a baby born into a world already deconstructed, conceptually and physically, by modern science and its weapons. In his innocence, if not hers, our child shall accept those alien perceptions and conceptions of the truth which we have forged after such a great struggle against our prejudices, those once justified as well as those which had never been appropriate." Parnell relaxed and turned tender eyes upon the young woman he loved so <purely|lustfully>. "Marie, dearest of all living creatures," said Parnell. Stopped he from speaking further as he buried his head in her hair, smelling so. . .

Afraid to make a mistake, he lifted his head and stared intently into her eyes, needing to acquire a better perspective. "Marie?"

"Yes, Parnell." She stared up at him, smiling as if ready to giggle. Already having come to understand some aspects of his personality, she was sure he was about to spoil the mood in the silliest of ways. Yes, that was clear to Parnell's perceptions, but such sight directed at her, and the subsequent insight penetrating the various parts of his self, only made him that much less confident.

Sure enough, he asked, “Live we in an age in which it is more highly considered for hair to smell fresh? or to smell perfumy?”

Once again had Parnell surprised her with the sheer silliness of his unfocused and explosive intelligence. And, once again, he knew what was up, though it did not really bring him down.

The smile faded from Marie’s lips, but not her eyes. Not a full second passed before she batted her lids a few times and replied, “Either one will do, Parnell. You are the most lovely strange man I could ever strangely love.” Adopting a more serious expression, she added, “Perhaps your intelligence must be unfocused if you are to father the children who will babble to such great effect. If you spoke like a specialist, then you would fall into the pedanticism of the German professoriate and that is partly what got us into this mess.”

“I am a specialist,” replied he. “I love to read schematics and difficult textbooks in physics and engineering, and I found several solutions to Einstein’s field equations though I have not yet succeeded in finding any without singularities.”

“Your mind. . .”

“Yes, that is true. I also read my grandmother’s collection of books in the neurosciences, and it remains possible that I was aided in my work on Einstein’s general field equations by the understanding I gained of the ways in which the human brain perceives and conceives the world wrapped securely about the person which is belonged.”

It came to Parnell, whose hands were working more or less on automatic pilot, that Marie’s breast, precisely the left one to be accurate, was quite firm and soft. Furthermore, he felt an indication that she was as aroused as he had been a few minutes ago and might be again. Showing confusion, he looked at her, wondering how in the world her shirt had come unbuttoned and her bra undone. Yet, naked from the waist up, she showed clear signs of arousal, in some ways similar to the sign he would have shown if he had been naked from the waist down.

And soon. . .

But first, he asked, “You desire <me, muchly|me muchly,> as I do you?” Confusion reigned as a complex inflection was yet dying on the breeze. Not sure himself how his tongue had communicated such a complementary set of possibilities, Parnell, as much a Savant as a more versatile genius, yet no more of either, asked, “Can you no more parse that sentence than can I? I am bewildered by the shadings of meaning possible when the modern

understandings of being show up in my speech. When discussing a true continuum or even a wavy particle, it bothers me that the middle is no longer excluded, yet it lies within my powers of formal manipulation. Such is not yet internalized in my models of the world about me and, thus, I am still twisted with a mental torsion quite irresistible when my very own speech slips past my understanding and reflects those ideas more powerful than the prior generation of superstitions and dogmas.”

Sad to say, Parnell was right, and he knew as well as any man could know such a fuzzy thing. The short period of clarity was finished. To be sure, Parnell had realized that clarity was typically either blinding or was sharply focused and surrounded by a kingdom of darkness. Neither possibility seemed appropriate for God’s Creation. The cousin, half-Nigerian and more than half-Welsh, had been blinded. The grandfather, engineer and missionary, able to see one thing at a time. Parnell imagined that the grandmother, neurobiologist and mother to a mother, had somehow achieved a more balanced viewpoint.

How?

Knew he not.

No, Parnell was damned if he had the slightest of ideas how such a position was to be reached.

Yet, one thing was crystal clear. Marie’s hands were grasping his upper back, her fingers digging into his skin. Between her legs was he gyrating in the most peculiar way. Never did his eyes leave her face from the time he regained full consciousness of what he was up to. No, no. Attention was of the utmost if the rhythm was to be found, that rhythm which would give her pleasure. Parnell tried hard to be a considerate lover, did he? did – for the most part.

So . . .

More slowly.

More fastly.

Pushing upwards to massage that piece of flesh so sensitive and so otherwisely useless as could be. Yet, knew he, remembered he from a book or seven, that her orgasms, so deep and long, came from her desire to be impregnated by him. Most likely were the insides of a woman to contract, spasmodically and rhythmically, for love self-sacrificingly fresh and strong or for lust illicit and exciting.

Why were they, of all things, so intertwined?

Came she. Came he. Came she once more. Smiled he in wonder and

appreciation. Yet, the word 'muchly' had begun to bother him as did the entire syntactical and semantic and contextual confusion of the eight words. Ten? The counting was well-defined, the objects to be counted not muchly so.

You desire <me, muchly|me muchly,> as I do you?

Parnell felt capable of no more complex and subtle a poem than that. As Homer had smithed away at the ancient Greek language to forge weapons to speak of a <great people| and a |rabble>, as Dante had come to speak of <human order extracted from Creation| and seemingly arbitrary |divine grace>, yes, even as Thomas Mann had sung of a <civilization muchly Enlightened| and |a cultured people with no will to exist as such>, so would he, though merely Parnell give birth to the world prophesied by the poet. Without changing a damned thing, he would sire children who would speak of <structure| and |contingency>. Thus would the same world as the day before be remade the day after by sons of Adam.

Morely important. . .

Pleasure did he feel when she tickled his chest, so warmly and comfortably was it, as her fingers ran through his chest hairs. It came to Parnell that he really was losing the edge on his concentration. Soon might he even lose his ability to call up the plans for the life support systems of the Mars colony never built. What a shame, but still his grandmother's writings on the sexual dimorphisms of the human neurological systems remained with him, if not necessarily in literal and graphic exactitude. Came he to realize that he did remember the full details of his proof that sodium chloride was bound to form crystals, all else always being equal. Nearly had he forgotten that derivation which had come so surprisingly easy during a single sleepless night while he and his mother were trying to reach Wall-walla. He had even nearly forgotten that he had expanded Schrodinger's Equation to a multi-particle coupled version. Since the Big Bang, as hypothetical as it was, had left everything coupled, else could they have been in the same Universe? knew he not, the expanded version of the Equation could be quite complicated, but Parnell had found a way to jump a level into a rather weird mathematical space he understood not. Complication had been turned into a difficult but manageable complexity.

No matter.

His grandchildren would be as comfortable in that weird mathematical space as he was in the Riemannian space of Einstein's version of general relativity.

Returning such matters as Big Bangs to his memory, Parnell rose above Marie, his hands on the ground at the sides of her head, his groin resting on hers, his legs between her legs. Marie smiled and licked her lips, eyes still closed tightly. Moaned she. Once more? Had she moaned while they made love? Unlike the Parnell of old, he sort of thought so on the edge of his mind, but he had neither been totally lost in his own world nor had he consciously absorbed every detail of that which lay about him. Memories had he, but not muchly photographic were they. Rather were they morely of the nature of recipes for reconstructing scenes. Unlike the Parnell of old, unlike many people trapped in their own mirror-house, he had contemplated his beloved and he had concentrated his desires on Marie, for truly they were the same, though Marie was not constantly lovable as was no woman. "Or man," speculated Parnell though lately more concerned with the belovedness of women.

Though...

He knew not with great certainty if she had moaned – a puzzling matter if he had truly been concentrating on her. Sure he was that he had been mostly concerned with her rather than with his own organs while he made love to her. Truly, he had known Marie rather than 'not'. Yet, puzzled Parnell, did it? did. He knew Marie, so complex and utterly unknowable, and yet, no longer knew he 'not'. No longer knowing 'not', knew he something he could have never imagined when such was not the case. If only he knew 'such' and 'case', still more would he know.

Now knowing of the Fall of Adam in all its full and fruitful glory, he turned to Marie and, in a voice underlaid by torment, said, "Knowing that the sensory-motor regions of the brain are sequentially mapped into the linguistic centers, yea! even knowing that they may be the model for the speech centers, does not at all ease the pain brought on by our efforts to abstract a world which does not exist from one which ever teases us and ever encourages our desire to control what lies about us, or to destroy it if it be beyond our powers to control."

Tormented was Parnell.

Limited was he, finite in extent and merely discursive in intellect.

Happy was he.

Being a man, even a merely physical hominid, however advanced, was

not so bad. If he had been something else, he would not have been Parnell.

Offered up he a prayer to the Son of God who had so willingly endured the infinite and divine pain of kenosis in creating Parnell and offering him his freedom.

Yes, glory did he offer up to Him who deserved glory!

Older, wisely less wise, and much more skeptical, the older Parnell still offered up praise to Him who deserved it. Tried he to remember his Lord each and every day. Not that Parnell underestimated the confusions God had introduced into the mind of His finite, discursively oriented creatures. Puzzling it was that the creative process involved things sliming about in a tidal pool a half a billion years ago and other things, vaguely man-like hominids, strange in their near familiarity, but who was he, merely and humbly Parnell, to question the working methods of God.

And, the evidence, so clear and powerful, continued to present itself to him for his selection. Actively exercising his God-given intelligence, Parnell chose a beautiful world filled with beautiful things and many a beautiful woman, some of whom who were not really very average.

It could not be denied, certainly not by a pious man in a scientific age.

Such a day was it. Rolled he over, lying on his back and at the side of a woman he knew, a woman so rich in concrete experiences and so legion in possibilities as to be tantalizingly and invitingly beyond the knowledge of any finite being. Forever, more or less a day, would he love the woman lying flat on her back in the dark-green grass, not much more than four inches tall. The grass, that is, for Parnell had decided he had not the size-shifting dreams of a man troubled by temporal epilepsy.

He saw the world with the perspective proper to an undamaged human being. Yes, indeedly saw he a woman, and stared she into the sky. Rose her arm, so deliciously rounded, so soft and useless compared to the arm of a seasoned farmhand. A slender finger rose still farther. "Look at the old crone's face in the sky, Parnell." Rolled he over and looked into the sky did Parnell, yet he saw only the face of a beautiful young woman. She wore a sweeping, feathered hat.

"Once before, we lay in the grass and I told you how much I loved you."

"Only once? I can remember several times, my beloved Parnell. Are you building another part of your narrative?"

He nodded and asked, "You desire <me, muchly|me muchly,> as I do you?"

She collapsed flat on her back, arms spread on the ground. Laughed

she did, and quite energetically at that, for sure. After a few minutes, she lifted herself on her elbow and, with tears running from her sparkling eyes, asked, “Are you still trying to enrich the complementary barrenness of the English language?”

Parnell smiled and lay on his back to watch the beautiful young woman in the sky. Marie moved over and cuddled up under his right arm, just as she had done those 12 years prior. . .

Spoke he even as his eyes scanned the sky, keeping tens of millions of neurons busy. “You desire <me, muchly|me muchly,> as I do you?” She smiled and nodded, though her eyes squinted as if in confusion. Mere seconds later, she asked, “Muchly? I love you much, but I do not understand ‘muchly’.”

Confused for a few seconds, Parnell said, to himself, “Do you love me muchly, as I do you?” Not feeling the matter settled, he asked, “Do you love me muchly as I love you?” It was clearly not the same as the more complete query complete with Diracish punctuation and inflection. The second question, unbundled and standing alone, seemed actually quite insipid, at least to Parnell’s taste though he considered himself the arbiter of not much other than his own taste.

Clear was it from Marie’s face that she saw through his efforts to poetically confuse matters for the most utilitarian of purposes. Adventures in the penthouse suites of Hong Kong call-girls were forever beyond the likely. Never could he fool his beloved with tales of going alone to the Orient to buy her a jaded statue, for there seemed to be little that could get past his Marie, occasionally green of hair and often ripply in the boundaries she shared with the world about her. To be sure, the forces upon those boundaries were self-cancelling, allowing the tension of local non-zero forces, but preventing any real separation between her and her world.

Choosing to check his theory, he rolled over on his side and leaned on his left elbow as he looked down upon this woman so fascinating. He was overflowing with wonder at the sheer linguistic genius of this daughter of a man and a woman, both so concrete and each so peculiar. Little there was in her genetic background to provide well-formed and well-quantified predictions of such a powerful and intuitive grasp of linguistic and conceptual problems. Not just Parnell as a creature entire, but his voice as well, overflowed with wonder as spoke he, “True are your instincts. The complementary version, combining both statements is richer and denser than the sums of richness and denseness of the two individual statements. The ket, in fact, seems a

bit shallow, if not stupid. This not muchly at all like quantum mechanics where multiplying two vectors from orthogonal bases results in a collapse to a single actualized observation. Instead, such dottish multiplications of human words and concepts seem to expand things in the sense of making them more complex. Or. . .” A grin came over Parnell’s face before he said, “Or maybe it is true that concrete reality is richer and denser than the open possibilities of human language and thought. Something is happening muchly interesting.”

Important inflections lay beyond the developed skills of his tongue though it seemed important to allow modality to enter the language along with Diracish dottie things. It was not real easy to speak a Diracish bracket to be sure, even piece by piece as bra or ket. Not sure it was all that important to Dirac’s re-formulation of quantum mechanics, Parnell nevertheless wondered where the ‘c’ had gone. It was such things as the mutation of bracket to bra and ket and loss of the ‘c’ code on completion that future scholars would study to understand the forces causing a nuclear war.

A distraction were such considerations, though the poet had once noted:

If Sarah N. dipped it, he
 would get himself up
 and a fresh donut he would get.
 and miss the chance to see
 the cold’ning coffee fuse
 on its way down and down
 and down much, much more
 towards the tiniest Lord Kelvin
 you’d ever wish to see
 and you wouldn’t, no, not at all,
 for he had become, get this if you can,
 a highly unified, if frigid, man,
 a veritable single atom of a manly thing
 and not able to democratically suppress
 the many uncertainties of self.

He could be under the scope or in your pocket
 but uncertainly all at once for mostly sure.

The only single piece of a man to ever be.

It was not entirely clear what Bose-Einstein condensation said about the problems in the English language, but Parnell and his grandfather had once brought a few thousand atoms of rubidium to within a hundred-billionth of a degree of absolute zero. The equipment had cost nearly as much as a small car, but James Llewellyn had never been a man to let such considerations get in the way of having a good time with science and technology. And anyway...

Of many a time, Parnell wished dearly he could keep his mind under control when speculating on such matters. Perceptions and words and conceptions were so much more difficult to pull down a narrow tunnel than were the specs for the deep-space telescope that was to have been built on the space lab circling Mars and in constant contact with the colony which was never built.

And, so...

He returned to wondering if it might be possible that his grandchildren would be able to combine the inflectatory power of the spoken word with the subtle conceptual powers of the written word. Once again, had Marie raised an important problem which had grown as a language developed for discussing one set of problems had been distorted out of shape as its speakers tried to deal with a completely different set of problems.

It was clear that Marie's instincts were often more effective than his pitifully weak powers of analysis.

Such a woman was Marie.

To his knowledge, a truer statement than that had never been put forth by a mortal man.

The bounteous breasts of context had filled the empty container, which in a sense was not, with the richest and most nourishing of milk.

Such a woman was Marie.

Smiled Parnell warmly at Marie. Reached out his hand and stroked her stomach softly did he. "Truly," said he softly and lovingly, "are you such a genius to pack so many rich meanings in the words you speak or even the words you interpret. The poet, though half-Nigerian and a bit more than half-Welsh, could have done little better. And that despite the context in which his poems were set. An aunt there had been who knew so much about human neurological systems. An uncle who built hospitals in Africa and missile defense systems in North America and then returned to Africa to kill a man-eating leopard. And the poet had known so many women responsively aggressive. I know not of your aunts and your uncles.

I know little of those with whom you have socialized over the years, though I imagine you have known few call-girls from Hong Kong and probably not even a buxom chemistry professor from Oslo. If I knew more of your past, sure am I, and I kid you not, that your words would confuse and delight me still more than they do in this simpler context, though it is rich and dense enough in its own right.”

In a state of tightly rapt appreciation, Parnell looked about at the woods and the lake and the dark-green grass no more than four inches tall.

Marie smiled, albeit some confusion showed upon her face. Parnell smiled back, willing to assume she was as profoundly and truthseekingly befuddled as was he.

It came to him of a sudden. Nearly as abruptly was he flummoxed beyond mere puzzlement. The professor of neurobiology who was an aunt to the poet was also a grandmother to Parnell, though he had never met her. An amazing relationship, that. Despite their relative strangeness, the contingencies of history had granted him, humble and merely Parnell, access to her books, to codified versions of her very thoughts on the human brain. Not all was well, that, for it was the coding was itself a problem, as well as an interesting challenge. Contexts could be shared, but they could only be communicated in a coded form. Thus were the works of human science often as mystifying and as difficult to interpret as were the works of nature.

Shrinking back to boyhood, Parnell dropped his head to rest upon Marie’s breast, the right one, to be both precise and accurate. He curled up against the side of a beautiful young woman with green eyes, a woman who had an actual existence and thus was ripply to all perceptions schematized.

“Could there possibly be perceptions not schematized?” asked Parnell.

“I . . . I don’t know . . . What are you talking about, Parnell?”

Parnell bit his lower lip and then smiled before saying, “Truly, you spoke like a prophet when you spoke truly that our children would only babble confusion . . .”

Marie’s eyes widened and her face wrinkled as she asked, “Did I say such a thing?”

“Truly, you did, and more said you as well. Venturing further into the future, you foresaw our grandchildren speaking a language we would not even understand.”

“I did such a thing?”

“You did, and I expanded, in my mind, upon the possibilities. A language shall they have which contextualizes rather than categorizes, though

it is far from clear that any human language not mortized rigorously by philologists ever gave of bird or bush, much preferring to remain at the species level.” Turning to her with an air of prophetic announcement, perhaps he merely wished to keep pace with her?, he added, “One of the differences between thou and me is that I am ever burdened with a self-consciousness impinging upon and judging every thought, every movement. Thou moves through the world a unified self, though not muchly frigid as would be a body unified to one quantum wavy length of a thing. On the other hand. . .” Parnell looked down in confusion wondering if he had ever used the first hand in the other place or if he was now using the other hand in the first place. After a few seconds of struggling to focus in on a problem which would not allow itself to be verbalized, he decided in the interests of decency and common sense to push forward. “On the other hand, I am ever striving to unite myself by being aware of every motivation, every thought, yea!, I am driven to analyze all that occurs about me and within me.”

“You truly are a natural philosopher.” The comment merely puzzled him, merely and humbly Parnell and not a university-trained scholar. Perhaps satisfied that she had confused him sufficiently to shut down his spoken analyses, he was not sure, Marie asked, “Parnell?” Her hand rose towards his face, but the back of his right hand stroked her left cheek first. Contact was established and she closed her eyes and smiled as he stroked her cheek. “You speak so abstractly, Parnell, yet, there is a strangely hardedged tone beneath your thoughts.”

“Like a hairless orangutan, I swing by way of abstract scaffoldings be-decked in things green and stringy. Thus, I also play the role of a prophet for my words speak of a human culture housed in a building constructed upon that scaffolding when more decent folk have cleared the wild growths that travel just behind the architects and builders. Re-integrated shall be culture, and for the shortest of historical periods, no more shall most men have contact with science only by way of superstitious fictions and the most occult of tales in which selfish genes travel through time to meet a fully evolved god of a Universe.” Parnell shook his head in sadness at the inability of even well-trained scientists to keep their meta-wits about them, “It’s a sad thing to admit, yet men will turn even radical innovation into an oppressive and irrational conformity. Nevertheless, I foresee poets greater than Dylan Shagari, yet like that most courageous of pioneers, they shall find the rhythms of Einstein’s general field equations. . . Or. . . Perhaps Lopez’s general field equations? There remains the possibility of

eliminating singularities by reconstructing general relativity inside a still better geometric model.”

“Is Parnell Lopez to be like Albert Einstein?”

“I know not, for I have, thus far, tried and failed to smooth out a few rough edges in the systems he had created for biased, and thus seeable, observations of the physical world. An ‘elegant factory of farfetched facts’ as the poet once labeled the Theory of General Relativity.”

“Then, it will be my children who will ride elevators to the stars?”

Parnell smiled, pleased that he was about to marry a woman conversant in the history and the future of science. And, truth be told – with only the slightest of qualifications, though as much bias as necessary for the narration to flow in Parnell’s head, she had read many a biography of influential men and women. Scattered amongst the emperors and generals and bishops were a handful of scientists and mathematicians. Much knew she. Of Newton’s obsessions with alchemy and astrology could she speak. She knew of the great genius shown in childhood years by Gauss, the Prince of Mathematicians. Yes, truly had he possessed a flair for languages, though few guessed which language he would make his own, as much as any man could. It was Marie who had told Parnell of Dirac’s preference for beautiful lies over ugly truths. In the natural course of things, she had come to know much more of Planck and Haackel and Heisenberg and even Husserl, yes. . .

Gauss and Einstein.

Of some interest were they to Parnell.

Marie said he resembled them in certain ways.

“How?” asked he only of himself. “I took months to learn the torturously twisted tools of relativity, more months to work my way up to the general field equations. Why, even though I am convinced that singularities are truly so ugly as to be Diracishly eliminable, I have had only spotty success in speculating on ways to correct or reformulate the general field equations.”

Aloud, and mostly in Marie’s direction, he asked, “In what way do I resemble Einstein and Gauss? Einstein was a giant in physical intuition and only moderately tall in more formal, mathematical ways of thought. Gauss taught himself Russian in his middle age in just two years while teaching in a university, running a laboratory, raising a family, and maintaining a complex web of relationships with thinkers in a variety of countries. The facts of my life and abilities seem to be quite a poor match to either of those geniuses.”

Marie laughed and said, "In asking such a question, in phrasing it in such a silly and abstract manner, you reveal the talent which allows but a handful of men to provide the raw stuff of human thought to scientists, philosophers, and insurance claims attorneys alike."

"Insurance claims attorneys? What role do they play in the advance of human thought?"

Once more laughed she. Spoke she again to say, "Though ignorant of much of poetic history, you speak with some logic in denying you are much like Gauss, he who was a hardheaded and successful businessman and, at times, even an actuarial consultant, though he must have been like unto you when he tested the method of estimation by minimizing the square of the error. As he walked about plotting the orbit of Mars in his head from three observed points, he was likely an image of absentmindedness. Or, maybe not, for he rarely was."

Parnell sighed in his joy at meeting such a woman who could so easily see the power of the poet's confusion, his mission of reducing scientific speculation and ordinary common sense more clearly to the babble which they had always been. "I understand not much of what you say," spoke he to the somewhat greenish and awfully ripply woman he so loved. "There remains the slightest chance that there is a core of meaningfulness in that babble which is so incomprehensible in the Enlightened language of a superstitious people."

Not afraid of falling into predictable habits, Marie laughed still again and said, "Not entirely unlike Einstein are you. Possessed was he and are you of an inoffensive and naive egocentricism, an ability to follow complex arguments in the midst of childish or totalitarian bedlam. In the midst of a personality oftentimes childish, do both Einstein and Lopez possess islands of genius, pockets of overly sensitive perception, even an ability to ignore those prejudices no longer aimed in the direction of truth, whatever that might be."

Shook his head sadly did Parnell. "Be it sad that truth is not even definable in any finite system of thought formal enough to publicly speak statements verifiable beyond a doubt?, or not?? At most times, I think not in the spirit of an adventurer who does not want to walk well-paved roads, yet, it can make the life of a human thinker that much more interesting and interesting can be tiring as well."

Confused was Marie. Befuddled was perhaps not too strong a word. Parnell imagined she had detected a mere hint of querying inflections em-

bedded inside a question. Yet, saddened was she not, for, truth to tell, there was an implication that they were beginning to speak the same language, if not a similar one different from one they ever would be able to speak. Their child? Not all that much hope of the quaiest of stabilities in linguistic utterings. Their grandchildren? Of a certainty would something begin to coalesce after a generation of confusion had freed the race from the superstitions useful to those who had enriched mankind by freeing actualized men from the local things which gave meaning to life.

“And, yet,” spoke Parnell in heartfelt sadness, “they created little in the way of words or linguistic structures which would allow the uncertainties of quantum theory or the entangled growths of the neurosciences to enter the language of common discourse.”

Parnell Lopez and Marie Levecque smiled in empathic confusion.

Yet...

What meant that?

Could any two human beings understand each other?

Each of them was part of a context largely inaccessible to the other.

As Parnell analyzed the situation, first Marie’s smile faded and then his remained only by inertia.

He knew so little of her. No listings were available of the books she had read, the movies she had seen. Biographies of those people most important in her life, parents and teachers and friends, had never been written. Perhaps she had been psychomeasured, but, if so, he had no access to the reports. He knew so little of her.

Yet...

He did know a thing or six-and-a-half about Marie Levecque.

She had been a surprise to many people.

Prejudices be necessary, yet a wrongful prejudice was nearly as dangerous as the frothy stuff that forms the oddest figures in the open minds of those who would see all things and agitate all ideas. Experiences, being muchly more concrete than things and ideas, were not so easily trapped in such flimsy stuff.

Prejudices abounded.

Simple girl she was, was she simple girl?

Sad to say, people were wrong in their first judgments.

Sad to say, Marie Levecque was intelligent and well-educated.

Truth to be told – if it was, and likely was it to be told though not certain was the truth of the matter – many who should have known better,

even Grace Llewellyn Lopez! of all people, had judged Marie Levecque to be as simple as she seemed in most settings and in most conversations.

“Who amongst the well-educated and coherently prejudiced people of the modern world,” asked Parnell of the poet’s ghost, “would assume a woman to be simple because she knows more of Einstein’s personality than of his general field equations?” Pondered Parnell still more quietly, yea!, deeply in his mind, he asked if she also knew more of Parnell’s personality than of the solutions he had found for those field equations? Professor Llewellyn, though sometimes known as Aunt Morgan or Mom in other contexts, had known little of gravitational theory. She had considered it sufficient to understand the signals by which the hypothalamus controlled the pituitary gland. More than that had she accomplished, for she had researched the role of hippocampus, not really shaped muchly like any sort of horse, and the reticular activating formation, not really a single thing nor a formation, in forming short-term memories and maintaining alertness. Did anyone think the less of a neurobiologist because she knew little about non-Euclidean geometries? To be fair, and Parnell prided himself on his heartfelt efforts to be fair, no one thought the less of Marie when they had discovered she had a university level education in modern German history and had read much about, and some works by, the great modern scientists, an occasional mathematician, and an odd philosopher here and sometimes there.

With love glowing in his eyes, Parnell looked down and a little bit over, at Marie. He realized how much he had changed when he did not bother to estimate the number of degrees his vision was disturbed from the vertical. More than that, he largely ignored his sore elbow. As he caressed her belly, she moaned and then reached down to move his hand up to her left breast. He was slightly disturbed, not being certain if he had last caressed her left breast or her right breast, and he wanted to be fair and he wanted to keep track of what had happened that he not worry too much one side or the nother, yet. . .

The newish Parnell shook his head and said, “You fascinate me, embedded as you are in a context quite historical. I, more limited in the horizons of my experience, am forced to live in a world of concepts which would attain the status of universal truths. How bare, how empty, how shallow, be an expressible truth, yea! even an empirical scientific truth, when set beside a squealing baby, drooling and peeing all over himself.” Stopped! he did. Somehow, an attempt to convey an image of pristine beauty had come out as a vulgar truth. Self-conscious was usually the new Parnell who

was busily entering the world in a way different from the typical person. And, in such a manner, he giggled and said, “The poet once spoke of men who would rise above the human state for moral reasons admirable only when stated in the explicitly dualistic languages of Christian heretics or the implicitly dualistic language of modern, Enlightened science. Ever the trickster, the cousin, though not at all a personal acquaintance, titled this poem, *The Dream of Man<i>y> Men.*” Ignoring Marie’s confusion, Parnell chanted,

Diamond-clear and angel-light,
no more a man was he.
Bloodless flowed his lifeless power,
and trod the ground metallic feet.

’Twas said could not be done,
’twas said ’twas not so wise.
And, yet, his soul, it could be moved,
and did? it under wine-dark skies.

Not all was lost,
he was deathly free,
and, half a ton of alloys later,
not deaf as Kate was he.

“Who,” asked Marie, “is Kate?”

Parnell smiled and noted, “You are ever the historian like no one else I know, are you not?”

“Not. . . not.” She slapped him on the arm, though in a gentle and playful manner, and said, “You are so difficult to understand, I often don’t know if I am answering your question or its opposite.” Suddenly, her eyes widened and she giggled before slapping him playfully once more and rolling him over. Sitting on the lower regions of his belly, she tickled him unmercifully, and the young man, ticklish for no one else but Marie Levecque, laughed as if to have a fit.

Yes, there was no way to deny the fact, and, as a matter of actualized contingency, there was little reason to deny the fact.

Many a time had it happened so uniquely, and once more had it come to pass.

Such a day it was.

Revelations were as much a part of human history as the dates of the bloodiest revolutions. Such a revelation was not at all weakened by Parnell's realization that receptivity to such had been selected for in the brains of hominids who had wandered around the savannas of Africa when they were not wandering around some other places.

25

Spring passed and then summer. Harvest time was upon the land, though Parnell had not planted much besides pumpkins and squash and corn. Not much of that. Enough for the Thanksgiving feast. There had been tomatoes and peppers of course, but those had been harvested daily from early August until mid-September. Gone were those fruits of the earth, converted to flesh and blood.

A good year had it been. With money in the bank and gold buried in the ground, there had been no pressure to grow. Pleasure only. Sticking the fingers in the warm, black earth. Breathing in the heavy, cloying odor of the tomato plants. Watching the plants grow so rapidly in July and flower profusely in August.

Marie had labored at his side, until she had begun to feel pregnant once more. The ozone layer had not yet recovered, and she took no chances. She was not sure if unfiltered UV was particularly dangerous for a baby in the womb, but she figured there was no need to take chances. On his own did Parnell weed, though Jimmy was willing enough to drive the tractor here and there hauling tools or compost. Alicia was willing to pull a few plants up, some of which were weeds.

Parnell had smiled down upon Alicia so fascinated with a box turtle trying to escape down the hill and away from the large presence which had driven it from under the leaves of the pumpkin plant.

Still . . .

Were his memories many different. Things grew. Some were pruned away, some were pruned to make them bear much in the way of fruit. Marie had said things were not all that many different for her. She had been confused during those months after they had married. The Lopezes and the Gueverras had been all waiting for the Overlords to find them. Actually, one of the Overlords – Kosic. Rumors had come of Kosic's great

success in exterminating his fellow Overlords and in purging the ranks of the Collective's central bureaus of those not terrified of the 400 pound man. There was no reason he would go after the relatives of James Llewellyn, but everyone knew the Overlord-General would not let James Llewellyn, or Morgan Llewellyn, rest in peace. Nor the poet. Maybe the pretty, young neurobiologist. It was possible that he had truly loved her, though mostly he had wanted to possess her.

The narrative. . .

Did that part of the tale belong to Marie?

It somehow seemed appropriate, and she had told him of her feelings during that time.

Feelings?

Had they a place in an objective account of the past?

Objective?

More to the point. . .

Past?

Well. . .

What was a young woman to think when cast in the midst of such confusion? Clearly, there were many powerful and highly intelligent people in the story, but so little was known about them. A few dates, a couple more second-hand personal impressions, and a few tales of ambitious hunger or loving self-sacrifice were nearly all she could discover about a man who had built hospitals and churches in Africa and had returned to the United States to design systems to deliver nuclear warheads to many parts of the world. A neurobiologist who had left an impressive library, though not as large as that of her husband. Much of those books, in a literally exact form, still existed in Parnell's head. There was also a dead poet, half-Nigerian but supposedly more than half-Welsh. Marie did not understand fully this business of mitochondrial and maternal effect genes, but she did understand the poet had impregnated and abandoned loose women about the world while writing the strangest poetry about rats's brains and charming particles. Somehow, men, even gentle and selfless Parnell, thought the poet to be a great hero. Uncle Hernando opposed the poet's legacy, but only because he felt himself to be in some sort of fertility competition with the long-dead cousin of Parnell's mother.

To further complicate matters, the Overlord-General Kotic, the apish man who ruled North America, had played some role in the tale as had a young neurobiologist who had been loved by Kotic though she had loved the

irresponsible and quasi-stable poet who could not keep scientific methods and literary techniques separate in his own mind. Less was known of that young neurobiologist than of any of the other characters. Parnell knew little about her, though he kept saying the young Dr Minh had been 100% French and not much more than 100% other things. “The most beautiful average woman in the world,” he had said. Something like that, anyway.

Maybe it was “the most averagely beautiful woman in the world.”

Or something quite different from that.

“Now Parnell has me babbling as if I should fit my language to the world rather than...”

Truth to tell, and by inclination was she as honest as Parnell, perhaps more objective for good and bad and her conceptual schemes were less convoluted than his, she had realized that the study of modern German history had somewhat prepared her to study such a Baroque, if not Byzantine, and maybe Germanic, people.

People?

The Llewellyns?

The Llewellyns and their sort of, kind of, nearly half-Nigerian nephew?

The friends James Llewellyn was rumored to have, even amongst the Overlords?

A partially trained historian, Marie worried that she knew little about a Cuban-American historian who had died of the most minor sort of infection during the first nuclear war. And his investment banking relatives, the Gueverras. Who were they?, in actuality? Uncle Hernando was a most likable and not quitey harmless sort of con-man and cad. Aunt Teresa, the most gently domineering woman Marie had ever met. True, she put too much chlorine in her pool, but that was a minor vice, all things considered. For some odd reason, Parnell even seemed fascinated by the greenish tinge which came upon her hair after a swim.

Parnell was confusing most of all. So bright and so capable of making more sense?, or something anyway, of Dylan Shagari’s poems than the poet himself could have done. True, Parnell had a valid point when he claimed he understood more than the poet because he had been born later. Yet, many people seemed incapable of learning from their own experiences let alone the experiences of others. Why did Parnell sometimes obsess on the specifications for the heating systems of the World Trade Center which had ceased to exist more than a decade before Manhattan was launched dustily into the atmosphere? What were these ad-hoc renormalization procedures

he considered so inadequate for describing the physical world? Why was it so important to eliminate singularities?, whatever? they were, by translating Einstein's field equations into a geometric space in which things could never approach the infinitely small because the space was so dense with things less than infinitely small. What, in fact, meant his joke about "synthesizing a different geometry"? Not much of that made no sense to Marie who had taken no math since a freshman course nicknamed *Calculus for Poets*.

Poets?

Not Dylan Shagari, according to Parnell. The long-dead wanderer had never passed a course at the college level, but was supposedly capable of picking up a textbook and learning the material himself with just a little help from his aunt and uncle. Then, after sweating and suffering through a 900 page text on astrophysics, he would generate the slightest of poems, borrowing but a term or two from the life-story of the average star and not much more than the slightest reference to the processes by which a neutron star pulverized nearby pieces of matter, turning them mostly into X-rays. Parnell claimed that was how Dylan Shagari learned and how he created his poems. Certainly not by attending lectures or even bothering to buy the particular texts used in his courses. Yet, why was it necessary to work so hard just to cover a poem with a mere dusting of scientific knowledge?

Dylan Shagari's poetry was as obscure to her as Parnell's comments about gravitational theory or quantum mechanics. She remembered the short poem *From the Photon's Viewpoint?*

A Feynman here, a Feynman there,
 a Feynman everywhere that's possible.
 Under a rock and under your skin,
 and in Calcutta's non-existent hair.
 A singular man he was for sure,
 massively virtual and, in a shell –
 perhaps naked but never bare.

Parnell had quoted the poem in response to her question about the need to eliminate singularities from modern mathematical physics. Marie had been unable to make any counter-response, and she had feared he might have thought she understood something. Then again, if he thought she

understood, maybe he would drop the topic and stop trying to figure out where the quadzillions of virtual photons went every time he walked away from the mirror.

Marie wondered if Newton and Einstein had also spent time worrying about questions which seemed so silly to . . .

Well, maybe Parnell had a point, though she was not sure anyone would ever find all those particles that really did not exist anyway.

Or something like that.

Parnell did fascinate her to be sure. She accepted his strange desires to understand so many obscure aspects of the world, not to mention black holes in galaxies longfar agoway . . .

Strange description that.

Longfar agoway.

As if time and space were entangled in such a way as to be not truly separable.

As if speaking about time there and space then would help to forge a language in which it was nearly possible to speak in the most relatively true manner about reality.

Were her language and thoughts being changed by exposure to Parnell?

When had he used such strangely smeared modifying and qualifying words?

It came to her.

Parnell had quoted Dylan Shagari when he was trying to explain to her the way in which space and time were part of one thing. Not that she was totally ignorant of such things, having studied much about the life and times of Einstein. Yet, Parnell had felt that she, like most people – even most physicists, had filed the information in some sort of repository for abstract knowledge which had nothing to do with the world she actually inhabited. And then, as he was wont to do, he had shifted direction by saying, “That’s an oversimplification. The superstring theorists thought our Universe is embedded in a space of ten or more dimensions. I think the correct dimensionality is closer to the four dimensions we perceive but a fraction more.” He had leaned towards her as if about to confide his deepest emotion and had added, “I think it is a purely random number in the strongest sense defined by algorithmic information theory, the rawest of facts.” As if confiding a momentous secret, he had added, “Much of modern thought forces the reasonable man to conclude that John Henry Newman was on to something when he claimed the world to be more like a complex

fact than like a thing constructed from axioms.” Marie had considered it wise to nod her head knowingly and not to ask any questions.

After a short period of quiet, she had tried to get him to talk about how he had become interested in things like schematics of life support systems for space colonies that were never built. She chose not to raise any issue of gravity that day. Parnell had merely shrugged and then had said, “The neurobiologist who is of greatest concern to me since she was my grandmother, though I never met her, once said, ‘The major difference between a smart woman and a genius man is that he will develop an obsession with something, usually quite strange, while she has better things to do with her evenings.’”

Parnell was certainly like that. Obsessive, able to concentrate his intelligence on the strangest lines of thought, the silliest of things – even the chaotically jostling singularity which maybe lived in the center of a black hole, not that many physicists were likely to pass the highly charged horizon to check the situation out. And maybe Parnell could get rid of that singularity which could never be seen or investigated. Then... Parnell, ever willing to confuse her, had said the facts would be reduced back to their data constituents and then would be rebuilt into facts whenever a new theory was understood.

Whatever that meant.

One thing was clear.

The world was not a peaceful place. If it had ever been such.

26

Stirring things up it was. People and events as well. An invisible, giant kitchen egg beater was it, whipping up people's dreams and desires to a frothy foam, pounding those same creatures with the forces of nature and human history. Foam was less than not much when ground into the mud and muck. But much of many things there were. No homogeneity there to be sure.

No, not muchly like a smooth cream was it.

One big, peppery salsa it was, and it covered the surface of the Earth with the slop produced by its stirring.

Certain it was to Marie that some participated not passively. Her imagination told her that, even in the absence of verifiable facts.

Kicking as if to push himself hither and yonder, punching out at things that moved, the Overlord-General Kotic was nevertheless pulled up, spun around, thrown first in that spot and then to another.

Marie had never actually seen Kotic, but now that her mind was focusing on this image of a world in the torment of embryonic development, if not yet birth, she could think of the master of North America in no other way. He wished control; he lusted for an end to the turmoil in the vain hope that external peace might bring calm to his insides.

Not that Marie believed there was an easy distinction between inside and outside, and, thus, her image of the world as salsa having been pulverized and stirred by... it. And, so, she perceived it, however fuzzily, as it stirred things about, pounding and mixing up people and events.

As if, it was, mother-thing and embryonic-thing were part of one meta-thing being torn apart here that it might grow properly there. Parnell had told her that the human embryo grew a kidney more than adequate for the need of any fish during the early months of life only to dissolve it and build a pair of kidneys more suited to life on land. Added, had he, that it was

a mistake to think of this as a recapitulation of evolution. “Better,” he had suggested, “to think in terms of a logic of development which is often similar to evolutionary history, though never the same could it be.”

But...

What was 'it'?

The 'it' that stirred things about, that is.

Parnell had told her the 'it' of embryonic development was a complex set of processes – timing interplays between maternal genes, embryonic genes, and actual events of the lastly timed processes. And those led to such things as diffused chemicals that seduced cells to move from the wrong place to a place more appropriate.

And from such ill-defined silliness would a baby form in her womb?

No such 'it' formed her baby.

The lovely little creature was formed by... God?

Well...

Parnell believed that as well. Why was he so anxious to explore the gritty details of the world? Why did he believe God had no need to create each individual thing? He had told her there was no need for God to do much more than pour forth His love to actively sustain the existence of Creation and all the things it contained.

Even 'it' was easier to accept than that.

But...

Was? 'it'?

Who? could know what was 'it', for <it|'it'> was not.

That much Marie had pulled from Parnell's often confusing babble, though she liked to think his speech was brilliant even when the confusion threatened to overwhelm all her perceptions of the words and thoughts. No, it did not exist. Neither did 'it'. <It|'it'> was an epiphenomenon of the human language, or at least of specific manifestations of that language. Unnecessary would 'it' have been if men could percept globally, allowing them to see at least countably infinite sets at a single glance. Without such could men not see the possibilities of those quasi-stable systems dominating much of the observable world. Piece by piece maybe, but not the real thing.

“And by such systems,” had said Parnell, “God had emptied and always empties Himself to give us and Creation some measure of freedom. Thus,” had he added as if clearing up matters, “God, in an epistemological sense, made His own existence somewhat irrelevant to understanding the workings of Creation.”

That had not cleared up matters much to Marie's way of thinking, though she was beginning to understand a bit about quasi-stable systems and their importance in the world perceived by men. Yes, by indirection, by movement as much sideways as forwards, by those paths laid out in one of Parnell's bemused meanderings, traveling ungrammatically by way of words which probably did not exist, at least not in the standard dictionaries, Marie had even understood one of Parnell's examples. One orbit of the Earth could be seen and described in closed terms. A number of such orbits could be acted out by numerical methods. The infinity of pathways allowed by its actual open-ended ellipsing of the sun lay beyond the vision of men.

Still . . .

Parnell had told her that someone might yet reformulate mathematics and physics to allow complete and already re-cursed statements to be made about dynamical systems open-ended, iterative, and interactive with the surrounding environment. Marie knew not what that might have meant to Parnell, but as part of the effort to think matters through, she of some philosophical knowledge asked herself, "Perhaps the meta-principles of mathematics and physics are understood well enough to allow some anticipation of results when actual structures cannot be seen? Could this oddly inflected thing labeled |contingency> by Parnell be more friendly to human thought than the more oddly inflected <structure|?"

A matter for meditation and prayer. Not a problem to be resolved readily, if ever, by a human mind. Also not a matter of the utmost importance in a world where the beater blades were approaching. What mattered morely at the moment was the pacing of Teresa Gueverra. Starting originally at the front door, she had paced eastward along the porch which ran the width of the house set so peacefully in the vicinity of Walla-walla. Before reaching the waist-high guard rail, Teresa turned in a tight curve and paced back until she was nearly in front of the door. After slowing down, she had turned tightly once again to pace eastward. One foot in front of the other, she orbited a not-particularly-unique spot on the porch, round and round and round, and yet never repeating the same orbit twice. If only because the solar system had moved so far in spacetime as it revolved about the center of the Milky Way.

Teresa turned to grimace as Marie giggled at her own Parnell-style description of the simple act of pacing. That was actually all right when Parnell did it. Already when Marie had first met him, he had had some

rudimentary ability to see a complex act of pacing in its historical and personal context. That ability was developing and strengthening, day by day. Others, she knew well from her study of history and her observations of people, would strip the act of pacing from its context, break it down into the movements of muscles, and then be unable to re-assemble it into a coherent, smooth sequence of movements suitable for any particular context. Such silliness, to be sure, seemed necessary that the act might be understood.

When all was done, only this could perhaps be said: It seemed appropriate that the particular ranch house, whitish trim and weather-beaten siding, should be placed in the particular setting of Walla-walla. Parnell had once told her how lucky they were to be in Walla-walla at that particular time. A mere 15,000 years earlier, the house's location had very possibly been covered by a thick sheet of ice.

Though Parnell generally disliked fragmenting spacetime, he had gone on to ask, "Why is such a house to be found near Walla-walla? Nice as this area is, it is such a small part of the Universe that there seems to be not much more than a 0% probability that this particular house would be assembled here and not on some planet orbiting the star Regulus, assuming there to be such a planet. And, it be necessary to say," and he said it for sure, "for the sake of logical satiety, that, glaciers aside, similar questions remain unanswered with respect to now versus then. Perhaps it would be better to speak of now-here versus then-there, but our language can take only so much twisting before it breaks." Parnell had grinned boyishly, in that cute way she perceived in him, and then had added, "Perhaps the poet spoke with greater sense when he presented things longfar agoway for human conceptual selection processes only natural by a stretch metrically long in the common sense and temporally long in the metonymical sense."

Parnell had added his claims retained their tentative validity even if there were no such planet ellipsing the star Regulus and if now-here were actually smeared together with then-there. Marie, for her part, had wondered if some form of separation from reality were necessary for the formation and release of creative genius.

Psychosis?

Well. . .

Not necessarily that much separation.

But. . .

There was that poem Parnell wrote in tribute to his cousin, Dylan Shagari, a man whose genetic heritage was too confusing to be untangled by

all the King's screening services and all the King's geneticists.

Marie was not sure if Parnell had gotten the hang of titles yet. He had titled the poem, *Pizza or Beer?* In the context of Parnell's life – especially his interaction with his grandfather, the title probably made sense.

Yet...

Here not there, and damned if I know why.

The Atlantic's a pretty big pond, but not much compared to
sky.

My good friend Zeno protests, "Neither here nor there,
but rather a frozen forever and a day hung in dry mid-air."

Not modern me, knowing fateful random to be a boring non-
starter.

Yet brute measured factuality makes it that much harder
to understand why quantumly entangled pieces of mass
unite so charmingly in Buridan or even his divided ass.

Teresa walked on. Hernando and Phillipe had not returned. Three hours overdue were they, five hours was too long for a simple transaction with a smuggler of fine whiskeys and finer brandies. Grace Llewellyn Lopez came to the screen door to add her worried face and hands to the scene.

The sun shone brightly though his disk was hidden by the roof extending over the porch.

The grass grew thick and green, the vines could almost be seen moving over the ground and up a multitude of conveniently vertical surfaces.

On the other side of the driveway, Parnell walked up from the lake, fishing pole over his left shoulder, a string of fish dangling from his right hand.

For much of the past hour, the three women and Raul had debated the need to leave until, finally, Raul had thrown up his hands and had announced he was going to pack up the two jeeps with food and weapons.

The screen door opened as Parnell was crossing the driveway, and Marie turned to see pained expression on the face of her mother-in-law. She seemed to be fearing equally for her pregnant daughter-in-law and for her only child. That is, if her head movements could be considered a guide to the thoughts and feelings inside of her body.

Teresa had stopped pacing and was looking at Parnell as he passed through the gate of the picket fence. She turned not to her companions, choosing to move forward and block Parnell's path. He beamed and raised his catch of a dozen or so white perch for all to see.

"Parnell. . ." Teresa spoke in a voice as soft as Marie could remember hearing her use. Parnell's grin faded, and his face scrunched up as he stood, right foot on the first step, looking at his aunt. She stepped forward to place her left hand on his right forearm, but then she let her hand slide down. She grasped his hand, forcing him to drop the fish upon the steps. "I think you and Marie and your mother should leave. Raul and I will see if we can find out what has happened to Hernando and Phillipe. But you have your wife and child to think about."

His eyes rose to meet those of his mother. She nodded sadly. Before he could even look at Marie, she had risen and said, "I'll throw some clothes in the car for both of us. Raul has already packed some food and guns."

Grace Lopez descended the stairs and put her arm around Teresa's shoulders. As the crying woman broke down, Grace threw her other arm about her and looked up to tell her son, "See that there are blankets and a cookstove in the car. I've already packed and my suitcase is in the kitchen."

Letting Parnell go ahead of her, Marie turned at the door to see the two women sitting on the middle step, Teresa crying on Grace's shoulder.

27

Alicia was standing at the small beach looking across the lake to the house she called home. More than called it she did. Felt it. Lived it. Was one with it, though in the weaker sense of many embedded in a single context. In that house was warmth and Mommy-comfort. Parnell wondered if she felt safe because he was around. He had always felt safe when his father was around. After his father had gone to war and never returned, it had been his grandfather. Nice was it to feel safe, impossible to feel constantly safe.

It was God's fault as far as Parnell could see. His grandfather had claimed that God had kind of stripped Himself of His power in granting a degree of freedom to the Universe and its creatures. Accepting such a claim in part, Parnell did not see God as specifically willing either the good events or the bad of the passing days. Parnell even believed that God had created a world not complete, a world in which things would grow towards maturity. Evil could creep in through the cracks of the incomplete foundation, embed itself in those growing things open to its presence. Evil could even be chosen by conscious creatures.

God had not told Parnell why He had created such a world. James Llewellyn had preached that true freedom, for Creation as a whole and for the moral-natured creatures self-named wise-wise, allows the possibility of evil, both true and deep and also that evil which is a mere epiphenomenon of growth. Parnell did not buy it. Oh, not was he in rebellion against God. Not possessed he the arrogance to second-guess the Almighty. He simply did not understand why those millions of children had to die of influenza or the measles because some men thought to impose their will upon others. Then again, could not the world have been created in such a way that its development and growth would have been smoother and less painful? Parnell fully intended to ask God, as respectfully and humbly as possible,

why He had created such a confused world in which evil could so easily embed itself.

Alicia was screeching. "Run fast to her side," said some limbic region of his brain though in hormones and not words. "Protect her," added his forebrain in concepts directly mappable to those words. Daddy-fears and Daddy-ambitions were strongly active. Adrenaline and other substances were flowing through his bloodstream, neurochemicals were attaching themselves to certain sensitive neurons in his brain. Other neurochemicals, so calming, were still being locked out of their docking sites as he grabbed Alicia and picked her up.

With heart pounding, he sat on a nearby rock to examine her bleeding foot. A deep slice as fine as if done with a surgeon's scalpel. Taking a bandanna out of his pocket, he bound the foot to compress the cut. Such a finely etched wound could bleed a long time. Rose he to run home with a burden so much lighter than his fears. Curving slightly out of his way, he checked where she had been walking and saw the shells of freshwater mussels left by some predatory critter.

Clumsy the posture as he tried to hold her against his body, comforting her as best he could, while still holding onto the foot, squeezing it just enough to help the wound stay shut. Nearly a half-hour later, he was stumbling up the hill to the house when Donnie came running. The gentle and childish old man must have heard Alicia crying. Parnell waved his head in the direction of the house and said, "Get some bandages and some antibiotic lotion. She's all right but it's a pretty nasty cut."

Donnie ran ahead, and Marie was at the door when Parnell came up the stairs to the deck. Only minutes later, they had Alicia's foot in a tub of warm water. Cleaned and dried it only to see it still bleeding. Parnell applied the antibiotic creme, gauze, and tape. A small bandage would not work; the entire foot would need to be wrapped around to close up the wound.

By the time that Parnell finished taping her foot, Alicia had stopped crying and was watching all the frenetic activity with a look of fearful fascination. Despite the expression of fright, she looked to be a third-party observer with only a small stake, if any, in the situation. In a short while, Parnell carried her into the great room where she lay on the couch while her mother worked on a quilt for the baby expected by Raul and Lee. And it was Raul she wanted to see. To Marie, the cut looked serious enough to deserve a doctor's attention.

As he headed out on the deck for a breath of fresh air, not that the air inside the house was really stale, but. . .

The adrenaline levels were still high in his bloodstream. His heart beat fast. His senses were alert though he doubted his mind was as clear as it had even been. He had feared for Alicia as he had once feared for his wife and his mother. . .

On the run had he been. Rapidly had he departed from the ranch-house situated oddly and improbably near Walla-walla – of all places! Setting off as the sun was setting, he had pressed hard upon the gas pedal. He had pushed the car as if unaware he could add little to the tremendous velocity of the Earth about the sun, the sun about the center of the Milky Way, the Milky Way towards the Great Attractor, and possibly all matter away from, or not, the center of the Universe – a center which really did not exist in any but the most allegorical of senses.

Such considerations no longer satisfied Parnell. No! A man on the run had a more tightly focused vision. A man fearing for his wife and the child they were bringing into the world had different priorities.

A man embedded in such a situation could no longer blindly accept the agendas of other men. No longer could he surrender to contemplative urges.

Neither he, nor his mother who had driven for a short while, had hesitated to move from the ways highly respected by most members of their race. If they suspected a car might be coming, if they saw signs of other people, they moved off the road, even onto mere logging roads. Seven hours had it taken them to travel 100 miles as measured on the pathways of man. Past Pendleton, through Ukia, over the North Fork River. Tired were the three of them – Marie with greenishness masked by the dark and rippliness exaggerated by the lack of particlistic photons. The mother so worried for son, daughter, and unborn grandchild.

It was a strange path, a highly improbable route for any group of man, mother, and pregnant wife to have traveled, yet, they had eventually reached this quiet site on the banks of the Middle Fork River, not overly far off the highway.

Quiet the night.

Peaceful the rest for a man fleeing to save his wife and to assure his child a decent life, if he had no way of giving that child a decent society.

And, yet, there was always. . .

The world itself.

“On the whole, a better place to be, than not,” said the young man

words of familiar view each day, ja, even by those not Swedish. “Truly,” confessed he, “a veritable day, ja, view.”

Parnell stopped short in his musings under moonless sky. A problem had arisen in his understanding of the past few hours of his life. “Three had fled,” thought he, “or so I said, yet, later I added the unborn child developing quietly in Marie’s womb. Either three or four would seem right.”

Four of them, if only because of his selfish desire for an heir.

Though, realistically, he had little of an estate to leave behind.

A culture, to be sure. However fragmented.

A tiny piece of faith, and a slightly larger chunk of hope.

A Universe, or at least, a wee bitty of a world oddly ellipsing around a most ordinary star among trillions of balls of gas.

No stock certificates.

Little in the way of cash – a box with twenty or thirty thousand.

Lots of gold and diamonds – hidden in a spot soon to be guarded by the Collective’s soldiers, if not already guarded by them.

Of greater importance, had he not a huge library covering wide regions of human thought, nor even an extensive library specializing in works of neuroscience.

Not three of them fled, but rather four though one lived yet in the womb.

The string of perch had fallen to plop quite sloppily upon the stairs as Aunt Teresa had forced her hand into his. She had told him to flee with his pregnant wife and his mother. Four of them had fled — The decision was finalized and struck the three did he. — towards Route 11 hoping to connect to 395. Then. . .

By way of a three hour journey compressed into 30 seconds, Parnell re-turned to his rock under the moonless sky. Once more. But perhaps not for the last time. Wondered he, pleased and puzzled by the possibility, if he would find more oversights or mistakes when next he re-called the evening’s journey. “Will the enriched context, the expanded web of memories and environment, of my future selves cause changes in the re-membrances of my past selves?”

A problem for future ponderings, but, for now. . .

Bad men were likely hunting for them, even on a night so lacking in moon. Men who had enslaved and killed his grandfather. Perhaps the very same men who had killed his Uncle Hernando and his cousin Phillipe.

Well. . .

Some pieces of the narrative of his life were not yet filled in, not fully

formed of experiences – even those historical and already ended. Soft and conjectural were his speculations, yet without a doubt were the men nasty. Details might be added and edited later, but, for now, Parnell would stick with his best analysis of the situation.

Worried he muchly, to be sure. Sat he on a rock under the sky so starry. Deliberated upon a dilemma did he, under velvety blackness punctuated by so many points of light. Realizing the inconsistency in his viewpoint, Parnell wondered whether he sat under a sky quite moonless or one sprinkled densely with stars. Was it a sameness perceived differently?

“Yet,” queried Parnell in the direction of an owlish creature roosting, so big-eyed, upon a dead branch of an equally dead tree, “a starry night and a moonless night seem so backgroundly different. Dare I bias my views of an important night in my life by arbitrarily selecting between starriness and moonlessness? Of a certainty is it that a cemetery under a moonless sky is so much more frightening than a graveyard penetrated by a multitude of tiny shafts of light.” A breeze came by to create a low-pressure layer in the tiny space above Parnell’s skin, thus aiding his sweat in evaporating. Secondarily, though undoubtedly not the intent of the rather mindless drops of perspiration nor even of the wind, his skin was cooled. He shivered, though he now sat under a starry sky rather than one frighteningly moonless. Aware of the complex and turbulent events occurring so close to his skin, Parnell thought it important to point out to rather credulous parts of his brain that the relative vacuum of the breeze would not likely raise him towards the clouds, despite the lifting effect the similar phenomenon had upon a well-designed aeroplane wing. “It is difficult,” added he in a tone of voice somewhat frustrated, “to keep one’s thoughts constantly scientific and sharply honed. True it is that William lived in Occam and not in a world no longer naive, no longer thinking that realistic scientific models are necessarily muchly simple though they be somewhat less complex than the physical world itself. Else would they share fully in the physical world’s factual nature.”

And the non-physical world?

Not that Parnell believed in ghosts or spirits.

“It is sufficient,” theologized he, “that God be Absolute Being. If He had created a few angelic spirits, then I shall not complain, but clear it is that we be neither angels nor transportable computer software. True it is that dualism ever arises as an image of the spiritual fears of the ages of men, yet it is literally true, if anything is, that neither Bible nor ancient

Christian creed ever spoke of men as other than physical beings, even after their coming Resurrection.”

The owl hooted and rudely flew away while Parnell was yet working on his reply to a response never made.

And, still, he worried muchly. “Truly,” dissipated his voice into the night wind, “upon such problems are hinged the fate of our children’s children.” A wicked and sticky situation it was. There was no way to deny it. No way to avoid a future-forming confrontation.

But, first. . .

Now had it become necessary to make a choice, and, in fact, Parnell’s decision was constrained. Moonlessness was beside the point, and star-riensness was the background for the evening’s meditation. Without such a background would Parnell’s contemplations seem abstract, stripped of the richness and density of a thing-filled world, even pointless might they seem, despite the points of light coming from stars and the side-pointed nature of moonlessness in the current context.

Staring into the starry sky, and such would be embedded in his memories of this night, he had come to realize that the most rational explorations of the heavens were guided by the writers of ancient myths, by sculptors and players of the lyre, and poets and playwrights and philosophers, who had preceded Dylan Shagari on the long journey into the melted mess that lay underneath the Earth’s crust.

In an age struggling so hard to escape superstition, it seemed scandalous. Yet. . .

An astrophysicist might locate a pulsating binary star in the groin of Hercules. An astronomer labeled ‘observational’ and perhaps doing the exact same work might see a jet from a collision of galaxies so longfar agoway. And, yet, odd as it might strike him, the jet might shoot from the unsuckled left breast of Virgo, otherwise pure, though also purely otherwise.

Coincidences?

Accidental? correlations? of events and objects far apart in space-time and yet seen as one pattern? because of the peculiar viewpoints of astronomers playing with their radios in the Australian desert and other doctored men and women donning gigantic spectacles in Hawaii. The more primitive primates would have been foraging for grubs instead of constructing huge grids of steely structures. Apes of still higher intelligence would have been eating mangos and macadamia nuts. What were those scientists thinking of?

The lemurs and orangutans would not have made such a blatant error in logic. Would they? Parnell thought it unlikely they would have grouped a fifteen billion year old event signaling the birth of a galaxy in the same structure as a nearby star sending us light emitted no more than a few tens of millions of years agoway.

Absurd the situation, blatantly unSpock-like. Interstellar logicians would not have made such a terrible mistake, though they were protected from illogic by different means than those used by the average chimpanzee. Logic was the alien's logic. Syllogisms and proofs of tautological statements. That sort of stuff. The poet had said it well.

If I'm a green-pouched kangaroo
 then every goddamned thing is true.
 Beggars will horse it out to a Centauri,
 maybe alpha in a lunar poli.

It be possible
 that an abominable
 lie says rudely
 facts just crudely

stuff to be negated on next year's station
 combining green-skinned people of every nation
 over the rainbow where if A then B
 is seen as other than absolutely empty.

As for me, I'd conjecture
 a perception be gathered more sure
 and organized muchmore usefully
 if you send out the most wooly

brained dingbat our race can boast
 and let that airhead warp and coast
 about posting cards of buxom nudes
 while pointy-eared aliens are merely confused

by the mere thought that things contingent
 can come, go, even longfar agoway went
 here, there, and a bit of anywhere that
 they damned well felt like going blissfully oblivious to any pat-
 terns someone might try to impose.

Well, at least it can be said that the poet said it. Well aside. “Or,” asked Parnell of Hercules noted for cleverness as well as brawn, “should I have said that ‘well’ should be put aside?”

In any case, it was a poem, one even with a title of some silliness. *An Ode to Logicians, Alien Science Officers, and Others Who Prosper with Just Part of a Brain.*

What was Parnell to do? He had been through only a small sampling of the standard texts on subjects astrophysical. He was far from deeply learned in that field, and well aware was he of the lessons to be drawn from the life of the poet who saw so many things and enjoyed life so much despite not having highly specialized knowledge of the way in which a baboon gene for regulating growth once jumped species and caused feline leukemia.

Yet, Parnell knew a few basic facts. Without being conversant on the exact and factual details, he knew that many of the objects forming the outline of Hercules may have become irony ash billions of years before other objects on the outline had even been born.

Such silliness, and Parnell knew he had acquired the ability to see contexts without losing the ability to ask silly questions, led to a profound problem, though one beyond the saying power of human language.

“Can it be thought?” asked Parnell aloud though not sure if any creature awake and alert was near. “If so, then might it be possible to form a language capable of expressing it? Why do philosophers and scientists and too many poets, who certainly should know better, spend so much energy distorting last century’s language in efforts to say what could not be said in the last century? Why not follow Dylan Shagari’s advice and faloodle a complex stew of gibberish and brilliance? The gibberish will boil away, and the world is left with a crystal-clear explanation of something formerly unsayable. Until, that is, a different context and a differently connected neocortex associates things found only in fractal dimensions slightly greater than four. Then a new generation of scientists and poets and philosophers, maybe some painters and a handful of musicians, will realize that what was said still missed the point once more seen in its unsayable glory.” Smiling

at the very thought of such a glorious game, Parnell added, “Truly are men hitting targets awfully near the point, but closing up the last few feet will take more work than did those early miles.”

The softest of rustling sounds came to Parnell’s ears and he raised his eyes to meet those of the owl. “The situation seems clear to me even if my great-grandchildren will find a rewarding chunk of ambiguity in such an unqualifiedly true statement.”

Pothered was Parnell. Bothered was he enough to stay on the rock and stare into the heavens – starry and only coincidentally moonless. After midnight it was. A hard day of fishing for perches and fleeing from hypothetically conjectured killers had it been. Yet – no rest for the weary. Smiled Parnell as he re-remembered a poem entitled *The Dyslexic Astronomer*.

“A piece of silliness,” had claimed the grandfather, though also an uncle in that poetic context, “which barely shares in the profound whimsy of the Zodiac.”

Clear the night and dimly far the stars.
 Clear the night and strip the sky of gods.
 Blank the night under gods more melted.
 Blank the night over glossy, non-polluting cars.

Then the oddest streaks rose in the sky.
 Read he, “In the rose-red sky,”
 rode horsemen a billion more than four,
 but not, well, formed to the blind eye.

Hiroshima, AIDS, corporate farm,
 diabetic lab rat developed for
 a pale thing riding
 the sunny wind from a distant storm.

Oh, toll not the Belle for the gazing Starr
 who longer no sees a baryon hitch a ride
 upon the jets of the gal’s ax, why?,
 colliding far,

long and way ago, Bing bagged a single heir,
 it heed and hawed, but I'd
 look not in the sky,
 for the gods are no longer there.

The lines, they meet, they meet, they oddly <meet|.
 A tall man, glassy-eyed, standing on volcanic rock,
 searched for any light,
 but, at the core, ghost and not |meat>.

A related random pulse ended life at the Sunset Mall.

Certainly not coupled much heroically, that poetic fluff of flim-flammery. Yet, was heroism called for? Yes! was heroism called for.

This would be a night of mighty efforts and not a night for sleep. Hercules was up and laboring away, and Parnell Lopez would join him in plowing up the aging muck of the horse stables. No, in all good conscience, could no man rest his eyes. For a million years would eyes not rest. For 365,000,000 days, plus or minus a couple of million, would many heroes and gods stride through the skies. Until the patterns changed. And forced a re-perception of the signals sent from the Universe to Earth. That is, if any finite and discursively disoriented creatures would be around to re-percept images from arbitrarily distributed points of light. A silly exercise for sure, but how else could such creatures clumsily and indirectly deal with an objective reality?

Still. . .

Were the points of light in the heavens the real points?

Of whats?

Parnell knew not, yet he took a position.

"No," spoke he bravely towards the unseen yet well-heard river. He was smiling with joy at the sheer beauty of the sky above him, the trees moving ever so slightly to cover the edges of clusters arbitrarily formed before they could be re-formed into objects with meaning however much generated by simple correlations covering up a lack of interactions.

Well-heard the river? Yes indeedy. Water splashed against rock. Noise came as the outer, inner, and middle currents moved around a bend. Turbulence there was, preceded by, followed by, spatially surrounded by, differentiated rates of fluid movement.

Seen the river? No, of a certainty, though no more than 60 feet away. Not a hard matter to understand. Unqualified 'no' was much easier than a universal 'yes'. To be sure, this 'no' was not fully unqualified. There was an occasional flash, a collision of water droplets and extra-galactic photons. Silvery? Yes, in some sense, at least as he, merely finite and discursively disoriented Parnell, perceived matters. He smiled again as he realized how great a miracle it was that he knew so much about the river's movements. Not much data had been collected. True enough, the very term 'river' carried a host of references to other rivers seen, in person or in recordings. The concept of water draining into the oceans, technical knowledge of the physics of turbulent fluid flow, and a few images of how the Middle Fork River had looked as the sun was setting – from such was built a rationally skeptical image of the river in the dark. Wispy foundations upon which to reconstruct a complex thing more nearly a still more complex process. But not really.

Did such cogitations tell Parnell how men perceived false images in the sky?

But...

Were they truly false?

After all, they were used by the most rational of scientists.

Astrophysicists exploring the radio-wave emissions of galaxies colliding longfar agoway and men searching for asteroids or comets which might one day bring life on Earth to an end. Yes, such men of highly developed powers of reasoning and analysis moved about their conceptual and perceptual images of the Universe by the use of navigational charts drawn by ancients who knew little about the fusion processes in the core of the Sun let alone Betelgeuse.

Okay, those charts were purely for the purpose of referencing regions of the sky, and they were better than factually random streams of letters and numbers assigned by some committee meeting over a computer network. Was that sufficient to excuse a superstition playfully deployed by rational men? Which rational men had deployed the superstitions? Galileo and his followers? Or Hesiod and his?

Still, the Universe had changed little during the transition from anciently rational beliefs to modern superstitions.

Galaxies gathered. Stars shone. Mysterious, unseeable, cold, dark matter did not much of a little bit at all.

Such complex, if imaginary, models considered the theories proposed by

Zel'dovich, the data gathered by Hubble and often successfully perceived as information. Yet, there was a structure, <structure|?, provided by the playful poetry of long-dead Greek <de|mythologizers> who inhabited a differently similar world to ours.

Parnell believed both to be necessary for men to understand the Universe. Scientific theories were, at their most formal best, stripped of context and, thus, beyond the comprehension of historical creatures. Formal truths, whether absolute or contingent, must be re-contextualized for each generation of men.

And if it happened not?

If no modern poets produced words and images to re-capture truths known to nomadic desert-dwellers as well as those seen by Oresme and Galileo and their children? If the next generation of scientists have no living metaphors, metonymies, or myths to form concrete contexts for their theorizing and subsequent efforts to turn data into facts?

Superstitions.

Dogmas.

Such were the mind-stuff not of religious people but rather of people inhabiting an irrational world which must be brought under control by the efforts of men, the average village atheist as well as an occasional bishop.

No.

Formal truths, and could absolute and Universal truths be expressed other than by formal incantations? – Parnell thought not, meant nothing to the man in the streets of Los Alamos. Such truths meant little more to those who inherited Einstein's office in Princeton, nor more to those trying to speak to neutrinos, nor even more to those slicing and dicing rats's brains. A man lived not in the Universe but rather in a damned small piece of it – on the surface of an actualized planet with a particular history which had stumbled drunkenly towards a specific environment. More than that, the most abstract of thinkers was a creature of cells awash in hormones and neurotransmitters, a creature whose perceptual and conceptual possibilities were shaped by his particular life lived in the context of a particular society.

The dense concrete things of life and the relationships between those uniquely embedded things were starting to wear Parnell down. He was thinking about trying to grab some sleep after all.

Though...

Not Hercules. He was plucking something from the field formed by the Milky Way, itself a cluster of objects grouped together in contingent

associations not easily seen as patterns.

Reductively speaking, Hercules was not. At least not in the sky.

All that was, was that all? were pieces of matter and a number of fields – the trash left from the shattering of a thing so symmetrical that it had patterns not east nor west, but, then, in such a symmetrically structured thing, was there east or west?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

And, so, he moseyed on over to the jeep and settled himself down next to a sleeping figure, perhaps green, though the dark made it difficult to see colors, and of unseeable boundaries as she was buried deep down inside a plumpish sleeping bag.

It was time to fall into sleep that his mind might lose its wakeful inhibitions and freely associate between dreamy objects. . .

The dangers had been great. Greater than he had thought. The wise killer had been on their trail. Little had Parnell realized how close the killer had come to finding Parnell and his mother when they were fleeing the lodge in northern Idaho. And, after Uncle Hernando and Philippe had been found, the Overlord-General had sent his killer out. . .

No, the wise killer had been on a collision course with something since his birth in the fires of Hell which had raged through the head of a four year-old boy. . .

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Hot had been the fires inside the head of poor Donnie Blackmore. Pressure as well. His head had felt about to burst several times before that doctor had come over to put something through his skull. The heat had continued, no matter how many bags of ice they had piled against his side, no matter how many cool-water baths they had given him.

Bugs.

He had heard them say some kind of bug had gotten inside his head and now there were lots of them. No one knew how to get them out of his head. It was his own fault. He had swallowed a bug at the fireworks show, but no one would listen to him. Now they would never get the bugs out of him.

Confusing the tale of the birth of the wise killer, for the only witness had been that four year old boy, Donnie. Parnell knew not how to smooth out that tale without introducing strong presumptions of what had happened. How else to make sense of. . .

The puppy doggy comed over to get milk. I screamed, "No!", but he no hear. The rope went round his neck. He tied the firecrackers to puppy's tail. I cried but laughs comed out. He took the knife and cut off puppy's tail. He used scissors to cut off puppy's ears. He stuck a nail in puppy's eye.

What was one to say of a person whose moral sense had been so completely split from his premotor regions and other brain centers controlling the behavior of limbs and vocal chords? Had two persons come to be where once was one?

The desire to cry, to scream blasphemies at God and obscenities at his world, focused Parnell's intentions. No tears came, but came forth the title, *Filth Dropped from the Heavens*. More came forth, even forming itself into a poem so inadequate to the need to express a complex manifestation of pain several times removed. How could Parnell understand what had

happened to Donnie? How could he do other than to follow in the footsteps of the ancient Hebrews and to chance blasphemy that he might question God honestly?

One makes two and seldom three
 as regions so ordinary and cortical
 shift alliances there to there and yet there be
 no hints of the ties which lying behind the wall
 isolating a bodily person not muchly disentangled
 from a world created by a supreme act of love
 which left so many incomplete and others mangled
 with no more a sign of mercy than the shit of Noah's dove.

Parnell was not sure that 'shit' was a term appropriate to moral and theological discussions, other than exegeses of the book of Job or discussions involving pious but blunt-spoken Jesuits. Nevertheless, the poem said something which seemed beyond the reach of pietistic thinkers who thought blasphemy was best avoided even at the cost of conceding the world to Satan. Impious men were of course incapable of blasphemy. Parnell remembered one of his father's blunt-spoken Jesuit friends saying, with a smile, "Only sacramental Christians and traditionalist Jews are capable of blasphemy for only they believe in a well-formed Deity Who can take insult."

True enough was it that one could not easily insult the soft, puffy presence of the Heavenly, Bearded Marshmallow worshiped by most men.

Still . . .

In what context had the vulgarly pious Jesuit said such? Parnell remembered vaguely that the priest had been arguing, against his grandfather, that the real dividing line of the human race put those piously sacramental – Catholics, eastern Christians, traditionalist Jews, and a handful of pagans – on one side and everybody else on the other side.

The question had been simply stated by that man with a halo formed only by grizzled and misbehaving hair and a cloud of tobacco smoke expelled from surprisingly healthy lungs. No, not a trace of an otherworldly halo had that man who sprinkled his conversation with many an obscenity though he never spoke his Lord's name without crossing himself and dropping his eyes. Blasphemies, true blasphemies by a believer, that is, were to be delivered with as much humility as praise.

But, the question. . .

Could it not be sufficiently stated? Was it necessary to describe the context and the speaker as if the question did not mean itself if spoken in other contexts by other speakers?

Parnell thought that sufficiency and necessity were oddly entangled though one was not and the other certainly was trying to escape.

“If God created the physical world, then is it not reasonable to assume the brute stuff of our world sufficient to ground our beings? Morely, would not an economical thinker assume that this concrete world is necessary to the existence of us concretely embodied creatures?”

Donnie. . .

Had the wise killer really been Donnie? Or at least parts of him? Was Donnie still partly the wise killer?

One brain, one mind? Or was it possible that one bundle of physical stuff could support two entirely different sets of relationships between its parts? Two entirely different minds in one brain, two persons in one body?

There were the years spent in various institutions and prisons, from the age of 8 until 19. In the year 1999, he was released after years of good behavior, and, to be sure, he had mostly sat in his cell quietly, watching people pass by but otherwise mostly breathing and dreaming of things which Donnie could not see. The little boy was glad he could not see the dreams of the wise killer.

The wise killer, using the name he had taken from poor, little Donnie Blackmore found employment without any great difficulty. Within days of being released, he had killed a bartender. A broken beer bottle had penetrated the man’s throat with little resistance. Not was he angry, but merely in need of the cash in the register. His needs were simple, but even the most reptilian of men had to eat once in a while before he sank into his stupor. Thrice more did he do such things before he came to the attention of mighty men of the street. Before the year was out, he had nearly a dozen more kills to his credit, mostly undercover cops or unreliable soldiers of one drug gang or another.

Donnie tried to sleep, perhaps he even tried to die, but he was there to watch each one of those killings. He was there when the killer having become wise in his trade was surrounded by six heavily armed policemen. Surprised were those men when the wise killer seemed oblivious to their very existence. As rough as they treated him, he merely went along, as if he were in a nearly catatonic state.

He cared not what happened, and the best the defense attorney could do was to keep him off the electric chair. To the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta was he sent to live out his life in isolation in his cell so near those of other men so dangerous as not to be allowed to go near another human being. Except of course when fully shackled, wrists to ankles. And there was he discovered by men working hard to restore order to public life and discipline to the citizens of the American republic.

And truly...

A weapon he was. Easily stored away and ruthlessly, amorally effective when unleashed upon a victim.

And the years had passed in much the way they would have for any other sentient being passing through space at such a high rate of speed.

Killed had he, often and with no remorse. Studied had he when not stupored. Intent to find what it was that was missing was he. Learned much of neurobiology and gravitational theory did he. Not much of either was of use in filling the wholes in his thoughts and the holes in his memories.

As far as Parnell could tell...

The wise killer remembered little. He killed amidst a flood of raw perceptions, but those never were integrated into any narrative of a life.

For reasons obscure to a man not academically trained in the brain sciences, Donnie had only partial access to those parts of the brain which might help to integrate the rawest and bloodiest of perceptions into a storyline.

The scenes of knives slitting throats from ear to ear, of children looking so surprised as the knife went under their ribcages, the old images of doggies limping in circles trying to get the scissors out of their rectums, all remained as the most incoherent of nightmares.

And so it came to be that...

He was awakened by the flashing of status lights, the clanging of bells calling men to red-alert status. He rose from the couch and walked through the door into the office of Overlord-General Kosic. The General was already on his way through the door leading into the hallway of the military sector of the Eastern Wing of the city of Washington, D.C.

Security personnel were rushing towards the engineering design unit. The integrity of the defense systems had been compromised. As the small mob of men rushed towards the site of

crisis, he heard someone tell Kovic, "Someone has managed to enter the main defense system. We've had to lock the missiles into position, so we're defenseless if the Koreans or Indians attack. We've also had to shut down the links to our intelligence and diplomatic outposts. We won't even know if someone is preparing to attack."

The Overlord-General merely pushed a grunt from the depths of his massive chest.

As absurd as it had always seemed to the wise killer, those data and the associated programs were but patterns encoded in photons and electrons spinning and moving through the fields which were their non-local selves, yet, they could be enticed to tell the personal secrets, the sexual habits and medical problems, of many important and dangerous men. But those processes were invisible to most of the soldiers, policemen, engineers, and managers running to see what the hell was the matter. Stupid they were. Not learned in the art of silent killing and not knowledgeable in the more arcane art of quantum mechanics. Not at all like the wise killer were they.

He sneered openly at the sight of that ant-like swarm of men, knowing they communed in a silent prayer that the problem would be the fault of another man.

No, the wise killer knew those men to be limited in their knowledge. Able to live in their memories, not forced to sleep or to absorb the thoughts of others, few of them understood the system in terms of process engineering. Sad to say, most of those adrenalized men were running to the nearest station where they saw only hunks of steel alloys, plastics, glass, and brushed metals. They had no problem visualizing the glass tubes, the copper wires, the conducting chips of semi- and super- varieties, the supermagnets, and the lasers which lay in regions connected tightly to those panels of instruments. What lay beyond their comprehension was the procedures and the memories which hovered, as it were, above those components of a simple materialistic nature. It was still more difficult for them to imagine that a system so well-guarded could have been entered by an invader. Most of them were convinced that it was someone on the inside of the security-cleared population who had done something to

set off the racket.

The invaded system itself seemed strongly convinced something serious had happened. Bells were ringing not only throughout the Military Headquarters of the North American Collective, but throughout the entire building of Washington, D.C. Soon, the majors and colonels were notified that red-alert messages were ringing in Anchorage and Nova Scotia, Havana and Bogota. The South Pacific fleet was steaming out of Honolulu, the great bomber fleets based north of Edmonton and in the deserts of Arizona were scrambling. Activation orders were being sent to reserve units even as the Rangers were climbing aboard troop-carrying planes to fly north from Florida to Washington, D.C. They were lightly armed and carried mostly anti-personnel missiles and grenades; they were fully prepared to fight their way through the corridors and parking levels of that great building on the banks of the Missouri River. Contained nearly half a million people did that building.

General Kosic had even been summoned from a conference call with the other Overlords of the North American Collective. No matter how many fighter planes or submarines had been scrambled, no matter how many soldiers had been sent to die, no one would have dared to disturb massively plump Buck Kosic without a damned good reason. He had been known to kill on a whim, even in the midst of a public meeting. Why should he hesitate to kill for being forced to rise and walk down the hallway?

Superficially resembling the 400-pound gorilla, but not really so gentle, this great man rolled down the hallway, preceded by several soldiers disciplined to take the hit if anyone tried to assassinate their master. Other soldiers followed ten feet behind, but the wise killer had advanced to his usual spot, but a step behind and at the right-hand of that lord of many. Bypassing the various groups gathering to secure equipment and corridors, General Kosic led the way directly towards the control station of the engineering design unit. Many an atrocity of elite security personnel, as well as some better labeled simply as killers, were converging on that same unit. It was there that the signals had originated. It was there that many men brave and loyal were

ready to stomp on the faces of the Collective's enemies. More than that, they were ready to humiliate them, to break them and show the pieces to relatives, friends, and any others who might consider being disloyal to the Collective which provided all to all, which was generous with her gifts and demanded all the devotion a man could muster – and then some.

Within minutes, the grotesquely obese leader of so many submissive and brutalized human beings had arrived in the corridor which held the engineering design unit, nearly half of whose workers were slaves. Most were untrustworthy and had demonstrated their true characters by refusing their love to the Collective which was Mother to all those lucky enough to live on the continent of North America. As Kosic sneeringly watched the confused bustle, it grew more confused as everyone realized the General was there.

Captain Savant knew Kosic often wondered just how effective those electronic and physical spying devices and lock-outs truly were. After all, they had been designed by men not to be trusted. Some of the components may have even been designed by James Llewellyn. General Kosic was far from stupid; he knew that Llewellyn had done many things considered impossible by nearly all of his colleagues. More than that, the General knew that if one man was smart enough to do something, another was smart enough to undo it.

The physical connections from the engineer's workstations had been broken. Those small systems were free-standing, and data and programs could only be brought down from the Collective's larger systems by action of security personnel at this station. Physical media had to be transferred from one slot to another opening of similar appearance but nearly ten feet away. The men performing that simple act were more trustworthy, or at least more subservient and cowardly, than most. They had been chosen from the ranks of the stupid, not that it was particularly hard to co-opt the intelligent; the General had simply decided he wanted stupid men to act as his eyes and ears in that unit. There were too many smart men as it was.

For all those efforts to secure the all-important communications lines, the Collective's main systems had detected an in-

vader from the engineering design work area. It was impossible, yet, with dozens of heavily armed and lightly fingered soldiers standing about, that team of trusted computer scientists was running traces through the various communications subsystems to see how the impossible had been brought about.

Before the day was over, many men would be questioned, some would die, as examples and from accidents of drugs and instruments. Money would exchange hands. Some slaves might even be freed. General Kotic would discover if this entire mess was the work of his colleagues, whether enemies or allies, not that the General saw any clearly defined differences between the two groups. No, men and systems would be driven to justify the General's beliefs, though he had not yet conceived the nature of this evil conspiracy against the guardians of society. More time was needed for him to construct a useful set of facts.

General Kotic certainly could foresee there would be no rest until he was satisfied that he had speculated usefully on events and then had forced the world to accept his theories. A smile-like movement agitated the rolls of fat on the lower parts of his face. Silently stood he.

As the ruler of many men kept his thoughts to himself, the engineers and computer scientists worked on. Nearly an hour after the alarms had first sounded, the fat man roused himself when he saw the technicians had discovered a fiber optic cable of a rather primitive sort. It was strung along the side of the pipeway and was not much thicker than a strand of Swedish hair. The Master of the armies and police forces of North America chose to remain nearly silent when he was told of the discovery. He merely grunted, in the manner of a bear moving towards a succulent carcass three days on the ground. Someone had managed to use the robotic moles to lay a line where one should not have been. The possibilities were narrowing. Only an insider or a man as clever as James Llewellyn could have pulled off such a trick. General Kotic made a mental note to search for allies of James Llewellyn when he unleashed his hounds to gather scents and bodies.

Captain Savant nodded to one of the General's attaches and the man, nearly as lean and hungry in appearance as the wise

killer, walked away without a word.

A few minutes more and the line was traced forward to a node of the anti-missile control system, the most highly secured of all systems other than the communications network connecting the Overlords and their personal staffs. With the top-down security design of the system, the anti-missile system could access nearly any other computer or communications system in North America. The connections between all systems were monitored by trusty security men, but the General looked about as if suspicious of all his most loyal followers.

His face tightened up still more and he turned. The wise killer knew that the cell of James Llewellyn lay in that direction. Yes, the very room quite open to public view where that man once so high and mighty would spend his remaining days on Earth. General Kotic turned and his piercing, little eyes found a closer target. The Chief Engineer, a slave but one who was supposed to be trustworthy, stood shaking. He had thought to be out of the General's sight and thus out of his mind, but his luck had run out. The poor man never had a chance to move before 400 pounds of fat and muscle powered a ham-like fist into his face. He was dead before he hit the floor.

The fat man seemed satisfied that justice had been served and an example made, and he turned to the team of computer scientists. He had not yet spoken when the lean and hungry man returned to announce, "The maintenance engineers are paying for their crimes."

General Kotic grunted his approval and asked, "What's that line connected to at the other end?"

Visibly quaking, a tall, gentle-looking man replied, "Colonel Bosch's work-station."

The Colonel, nearly as tall and gentle-looking, shook and was unable to move out of the General's reach, a difficult task in any case. Not only did the General stand six and a half feet tall, he also commanded military forces scattered across half the Earth's surface. It was difficult for Captain Savant to hold onto a single meaning of 'reach' with such a man, but that vague something was easily seen to be great indeed. Realizing he was not long for this world, the Colonel did not even try to escape

as he was grasped by the throat and lifted to stare into the eyes of the monstrous fat man.

Jowls flapped and a raspy voice emerged. "What is the goddamned meaning of that goddamned line?"

The Colonel stammered, "I didn't... I mean... I don't..."

As Colonel Bosch spittered through his puckered lips, the General tossed him headfirst into a nearby wall. The Colonel bounced back slightly and sat on the floor, legs sprawled awkwardly to the front. He was dazed and bleeding and did not bother to defend himself. Captain Savant knew his duty when he saw it and, displaying only disciplined movements and no joy, he moved behind the Colonel. After all the similar events, it was still strange to him, and, yet, it happened before his very eyes. A strong right hand reached out to grasp the Colonel's jaw. A left forearm braced itself against the Colonel's neck. An efficiently spasmodic movement later, Captain Savant stood back, still amazed by the fragility of human life. The Colonel fell to the floor, and Savant followed the bulk of human flesh as it made its way to the poor ex-man's office. In just a few seconds, General Kosic tore the workstation from the wall, revealing studs and sparking wires as well as a number of flashing cables. Information and equations were dissipating into the chaotic swirls of the atmosphere, but that was of little concern to the fat man who turned to the small group of men who had dared to follow him. Spotting a major from Eugenics Services, he said, "Every tenth man in this work group shall pay with his life. Make it slow and painful and bring all these bastards down to watch." The major saluted and had turned for the door before the General added, "Spare that sonuvabitch Llewellyn. I want him to suffer longer."

The major turned and saluted crisply before leaving to carry out his orders.

The General squeezed out the door and led his convoy back down the hallway. He set a new course at the first intersection and headed towards James Llewellyn's office. Reached his goal did he, yet he did not enter. Instead, as odd as it seemed to Savant, Kosic stopped dead in his tracks, plugging the doorway quite securely.

A few heartbeats later, stepped backed did the fat man. Turned did he. His pig eyes had narrowed further, his face had reddened. Through the partially clear doorway could be seen a dead man, yes, even the very man hated by the Overlord-General. Llewellyn's eyes were quite obscenely open, his right arm hung rigidly at an angle off to the side of the chair's arm. His mouth gaped open as if he had tried to gather the oxygen necessary to live a few miserable seconds longer.

General Kotic bellowed and then shouted, "The bastard died. The sonuvabitching coward didn't dare face me this last time."

A mighty hand reached out and slammed itself against the door-frame which came ripping out of the wall. Pieces of wood, wallboard, and insulation scattered throughout the dead man's office and jail-cell. General Kotic waddled more deeply into the small territory he had allowed his enemy to keep. With surprising and almost sensual gentleness, Kotic felt James Llewellyn's throat, hoping to find a pulse. Failing to find signs of life, he lifted his hands to the stroke victim's mouth to feel for a hint of breath. None came, and the General flipped his hand backwards in frustration. He caught James Llewellyn's corpse in the right cheek and sent it sprawling, though it moved stiffly as if it were a marionette rather than an ex-man.

A whistle came from the General's pack, now gathered outside the door to James Llewellyn's office. A corporal from Security Services came running down the corridor, and he was pointed towards the corpse, lying with arms and legs ajar in the manner of a discarded puppet. As the General backed up against a wall to survey the situation, a few more men dared to come in to do their jobs. A stocky young man of Korean appearance moved towards James Llewellyn's workstation to see that the display screen was flashing, "Gopher has entered winter den." Savant thought it odd and even a bit suspicious that the young man smiled but quickly covered his happiness with an officious frown. The fellow turned to his superior officer, a captain from Security Services and, with a dismissive shrug, said, "I'll note this, but I imagine he was playing some sort of computer game."

At that, General Kosic moved forward once more, casting aside the lesser mortals in his path. With his facial folds gathering in a manner which seemed to indicate suspicion, the fat man said, "James Llewellyn never played games, except maybe with his idiot grandson or his jungle-bunny nephew."

The computer scientist lifted his hands helplessly. Looking back at the screen, he thought for a few seconds and then typed in a command to call up the past few screens full of character. The first five verses of Genesis were followed by a poem headed by the title, *The Anecdote of the Jar*:

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall, and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

The computer scientist jerked back slightly as he came to the last lines. General Kosic merely sneered and said, "He was a damned bad poet as well. Those last lines don't even make any sense."

In the least audible of whispers, the young computer expert said, "There does seem to be some sort of an ontological double-negative there, but I think that was written by a famous poet who lived about a hundred years ago or so." Savant saw the man turn to the computer quickly to hide another smile. Suspicious was that, but of no concern to Savant. As if seeking to avoid further conversation with Kosic, the efficient young man printed out those few screens which James Llewellyn had left as his last will and testament.

By the time he had removed the documentation from the printer, three janitors – from food services of all places! – stood ready to enter the office. The screen displayed the message, “Waiting for Spring.” It then went blank. Odd that seemed to Savant. Odder still that the computer scientist, though he wore the uniform of the Collective, made no sign of having seen anything. He simply went about his job. When he checked that he had the complete printout, he locked up the workstation and left the office. At his nod, the janitors moved forward. One began cleaning the mess made by General Kovic, who had kicked over trash buckets and knocked down furniture, books, and papers. The other two lifted the corpse and took it out to place it on one of the flat carts they used for hauling trash.

Savant thought it curious that the body of a man once highly honored and muchly powerful was to be tossed into a garbage dumpster at a nearby mess-hall. Curiouser still was it that within hours, robots would be disposing of the potato peels, dirty napkins, and any stiffening corpses which happened to be in the metal container.

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The bits of narrative as related by Donnie had been circulating in Parnell's head for months before he had hardened his heart to the need to tell of his grandfather's ignoble ending.

Yet, was it really so ignoble?

Walter Sang had claimed not. "James Llewellyn had opened the possibilities of breaking Koscic's hold on power, though that power fell to a dictatorship. It was, nevertheless, a big improvement for the men of the Junta, though greedy and ambitious, are not capable of making the absolutist demands so natural to Koscic and his closest associates."

Had he been right? Or... Were Colonel Kaufman and the other members of the Junta just biding their time? They had been quite patient in working their ways into Koscic's organization while waiting for an opportunity to kill him. Parnell could not guess the future, and he did not even try. Hard enough did it seem to guess the past...

The wise killer had been accustomed to weeks, and often months, of inactivity between his missions, yet Donnie had said there had been no rest for the discombobulated. It may not have been an accurate description, but Donnie was anxious to use the word 'discombobulated', having just learned its meaning though the wise killer had often used the term in contexts not understood by the boy trapped inside.

More importantly, the Overlord-General was apparently intent to carry out his revenge on the dead engineer, the dead neurobiologist, and their dead nephew, though a mere poet and not a mature one at that. Two colonels and a number of majors and captains in the northwest security quadrant of North America were executed when it was learned that Grace Llewellyn Lopez

and her son had disappeared from James Llewellyn's hunting lodge, though nearly a mansion it had been and still was.

The senior officer among those security policemen still alive was a young lieutenant, and he was summoned to Kotic's office in the building of Washington, D.C. Questioned had that young man been for nearly an hour before the wise Killer had been summoned. . .

General Kotic stared at Lt. Kirkland for several frightening seconds before turning to Captain Savant, but the wise killer could give no hints as to what should be done. The Captain was in fact not convinced that any of James Llewellyn's relatives posed enough of a danger to justify any worry or even a cursory search. Strange it was that the Gueverras first disappeared within days of the formation of the Collective, stranger still that the old fool's daughter and idiot grandson had disappeared shortly after he was imprisoned. Maybe it was not so strange. It was likely a simple matter of rats scurrying for cover after one of their own had been killed, yet, the General's instincts seemed to be irritated. Though a pig, the General was not a fool. If he was worried, then perhaps a search should be mounted.

To buy time, Captain Savant looked at young lieutenant and asked, "Were there any clues at all?"

"No. They didn't take much from the house. As far as we could tell. A neighbor called and told us that they had driven off, but the local police found no clues when they went out to check the house. One of my men disappeared a few days ago, but. . ." The lieutenant shrugged. "He was a strong and competent officer. He certainly could have handled an old lady and an idiot boy."

Looking suddenly more suspicious, the General swiveled his chair and looked towards his own massive portrait hanging behind the desk. Smiling as if impressed by such a handsome and sturdy fellow, he drew his knife from his pocket and began to clean his fingernails before saying, "I wouldn't assume that any of your men could handle any of Llewellyn's relatives, not even his middle-aged daughter or that grandson. Idiot or not, he is a sturdily built young man in his 20s. Not a boy."

Never having heard General Kosic say anything even vaguely complimentary about any Llewellyn, Captain Savant was becoming ever more cautious. He saw Lt. Kirkland was downright nervous and nearly jumped out of his uniform when the General cleared his throat.

“I want you to go out and check things out, Savant. Take the lieutenant with you.”

The next morning, the two men were in Sandpoint confirming only that the trail was cold. After a few hours in which he mostly wandered about aimlessly, Captain Savant stood outside the police mess near Couer d’Alene grimacing at the people and security men who passed. They all stepped five feet or more out of their way.

After spitting just inches in front of a distinguished looking citizen, Captain Savant turned to Lieutenant Kirkland, who had just walked up with three of his security officers, and said, “Where was your man patrolling when he disappeared?”

“He’d gone off 95 and headed out on the backroads towards St. Joe National Forest.”

“Mount a search for him and his car.”

“We’re really shorthanded, and we have a hell of a lot of territory to control.”

Captain Savant could feel his left eye twitching, and, almost immediately, Lt. Kirkland motioned with his head towards their cars and said, “Get on the radio, sergeant, and get the copters in the air. Get all available men out to search on foot or horseback.”

While mostly wanting to fetch the suitcase which held the eye-drops for his allergies, Captain Savant asked him, “You don’t have any cars other than the ones we’re using?”

“It’s hard times for us outside the big cities, Captain Savant. We make do with what we have, and we don’t have much.”

“Then you should be looking real hard for that missing car. Men are expendable but if you got an equipment shortage, you can’t do your job right. And the General doesn’t tolerate men who don’t do their job right.” Captain Savant felt his face drop all signs of feeling and he turned his gaze back towards the street to watch the two-legged prey move about.

It was two days before a rider came upon tire tracks at the side of the road and others leading into the woods on the opposite side of the road. The man was told not to touch anything but to keep up the search for Officer Polansky.

For the entirety of those two days, Captain Savant, as was his habit at most times, had done little but eat, sleep, and stare at movement. Lt. Kirkland found him, in fact, in the sitting area of the inn, looking into spacetime. No book or newspaper was in his hand. No conversation-partner was in sight. When told of the discovery of the car, he nodded his head as if coming out of an opium dream and said, "Likely the fool was killed by bandits or wild animals, but let's go take a look. The General is still nervous about anyone descended from Llewellyn."

"After what he did to Dylan Shagari, he..."

Lt. Kirkland stopped short at Captain Savant's shrug, but the man self-knowingly reptilian merely said, "You better learn to keep your mouth shut about some things if you want to get anywhere in life." As he walked away towards the exit of the inn, Captain Savant added, "Other than the grave."

When Lt. Kirkland caught up to him outside, the killer turned and said, "Send for a team of forensic experts from Portland. Direct them right to the car. That way, they'll be at work before we even get there." Stretching, Captain Savant turned back to the inn and said, "I think I need some breakfast. It might be a while before I eat again."

An hour later, they were on the way to the abandoned police car. While still on the road, they received word that a few human bones had been found a couple hundred yards from the road on the opposite side from the car. The policeman on sight said it looked like a bear had eaten the person. The bones had been laying near an opened burial mound of the sort grizzlies use to cover carcasses while they ripen.

Captain Savant did not even break his unfocused stare from the road ahead, merely nodding at the news. The helicopter had reached the sight just minutes before the small caravan transporting Lt. Kirkland and Captain Savant, but the forensic technicians were already hard at work. Two of them were covering the car, dusting for fingerprints and looking for any stray

bits of evidence. Another technician, a husky and plain-looking woman, was crossing back over the street carrying a plastic bag. When she handed it to the senior technician, a man fleshy and soft though not fat, he asked, "Did you check for other bones?"

She shrugged and responded, "What would be the use of it? The mound was only big enough for one corpse, so we should be able to ID it from these few bones."

The man glared at her, but rather than ordering her back, he pulled a bone from the bag and said, "Looks like the thighbone of a man, probably just shy of six feet. Husky."

In response to Captain Savant's questioning look, Lt. Kirkland said, "That certainly could be Polansky. He was a brute of a man. In more ways than one."

They both looked over to see the senior technician staring at a broken rib bone. After a moment of concentration, he looked up and said, "It was broken by a large caliber bullet. Probably a hunting rifle. Looks like a projectile designed for a bear or a bison."

Captain Savant felt his lips twitch just before he said, "I'm going to walk about. Let me know when you get results on the DNA match."

The forensic specialist sighed and said, "From here, we have to relay our signals several times. We're reading the DNA from the bone now, and we'll be transmitting in a few minutes, but it might be a while before we hear anything."

Savant nodded and walked away to the other side of the road. His trained eyes quickly noted that the ground showed evidence of rain in the recent past. It was likely any signs had been wiped out, but he walked into the field. His search proved to be largely, but not entirely, in vain. There was a place where a struggle had occurred, of sufficient violence to have broken many shafts of the grass down near the ground. Hints of footprints did not suffice for much of anything, but there was some indication that there had been at least two people, one with large, mannish feet and one with smaller feet.

He looked at the passing clouds and closed his eyes as if to pray to a god of blood, but all that came from his lips was, "Polansky and Grace Llewellyn Lopez?"

A half-hour later, he was sitting under a tree staring out into the grassy meadow when one of Lt. Kirkland's men came running towards him. Savant rose slowly and walked towards the fellow. As they were about to meet, the young policeman said, while still running, "The bone was Polansky's."

Suddenly feeling sleepy, the Captain turned towards the road as if heading to his car, but then he turned back towards Lt. Kirkland and said, "Keep up the search and widen it to all the cities and towns within 300 miles."

Shivers passed up Parnell's back as he thought how close he had come to meeting the wise killer at the peak of his wisdom. Though the danger was years past and had not been known at the time, it still. . .

No. The fear was not as intense as that felt by Parnell when Alicia had an infected foot or the many times when Jimmy had wandered away into the woods intent on finding a bear. The little fellow had quickly learned to be careful and he was good at climbing trees, but so were a surprising number of grizzlies. Maybe not the half-tonners, but many of the grizzlies were no bigger than black bears and, though their claws were shaped for digging rather than grasping, they could still make it up a tree nearly as far as a boy of the species *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*.

Still. . .

Even a re-constructed and quite removed image of such danger was nothing to sneer at, though the wise killer might have felt sleepy in his confusion at finding himself in a world in which he seemed not to belong. Nothing made sense. No matter how much knowledge he acquired about the structure of polymers or about arguments for and against the reasonableness of God's existence, the world still was not his. Parts maybe. Donnie thought the wise killer had been able to accept flows of action. He had not been made for a world such as the one he inhabited, and he never became comfortable with it.

After hearing some of Dylan Shagari's poems, Donnie had shuddered and said that the wise killer often spoke in ways so rhythmic and so confusing.

30

Curled up his lips, squinted his eyes, and charged up his slumbering mesencephalic reticular formation, did he did. Cynically, watching, and at a high state of awareness, was Captain Savant, he was. A carnivore, like many others, he inhabited a world of processes. It flowed, or it faded into grayness as his slumbering self stayed alert only for an interesting movement. Background. All became background, not of interest except as a reference point for the movements of possible prey.

But not in the midst of danger did he slumber, though perhaps parts of him. A crocodile aroused from a turgid state did he resemble though only in the weakest possible sense. Reptilian were his own self-evaluations. Shallow and weak of perception, that is, for the man handy with sharp-edges saw himself in a smoky mirror. And he knew that to be the case. Others he saw clearly, albeit through a bright, nearly blinding, glare.

Now . . .

There was only an aggregation of sensory processes. His skin was an electric membrane. Every motion in the room registered itself on his body surface. Saw he the other four people in the room at one time. Smelled fear, acrid and pungent, did he. The fear could have become smellier only if someone were to piss in his pants. Or hers. The Overlord-Communicator was in the room. Former actress, a sex kitten had she been. No more, for her claws were fully grown, though her complexion was yet a creamy desiderata, cheek-dotted with a peachy pink. Her figure was slenderly curved, her hair a uniformly light blond. Long of legs she was and as terrified as the other two overlords before their colleague – big, bad Buck Kosic. Yes, the Overlord-

General, master of all armies and police forces in the North American Collective, was as likely to see his sixteenth birthday again as he was to see 300 pounds once more.

And why were powerful people gathered for a meeting when there was important work to be done here and there?

Captain Savant himself was not sure, though he suspected that the meeting was in some way related to his recent trips. The Council of Overlords was down from eleven members to seven. Nasty work that. That is, to a man who cared.

Whatever was going on behind the scenes, the meeting was not a social gathering, to be sure. The fears were other than those of mistakes in etiquette or protocol. Lives were at stake, and not only that of the Overlord-Communicator Johnstone, though Captain Savant saw her as the most likely victim. Probably not Overlord-Comptroller Chan, though he also cowered, poker-faced, before Overlord-General Kosic. How about the lord of industrial production and construction, Overlord-Manager Baki? The reptilian man thought that Overlord to be in some danger. The problems used to justify the meeting were in the Project which was to be his responsibility until the complex was erected and the electronics were operational. Yet, more political and less technical was the major problem – disloyalty on the part of those honored and well-rewarded by the Collective.

Though it might have seemed odd to some, Chan was wasting precious energy fiddling with the watch-band on his right wrist. Captain Savant noted the man's sinister nature; such knowledge was of the utmost importance in the opening seconds of a fight. Not one for acrobatic fight-dancing, Savant ended all his fights within the minimum time necessary to land one blow or one slash to a vital region. Chan might not last long at all, though he had once been a Ranger; he was sixtiesh and soft about the middle.

Rangers had been a few of the Overlords as well as most of their high servants. Not Savant. He had been an independent contractor who had done most of his work for a secret group operating out of the White House in the last days of the American Republic. Several foreign leaders and more than one general or Senator in the U.S. had died at his hands or with a

slug from a long-range and high-velocity .22 bouncing around in his chest. Savant had packed most of his own bullets, allowing for the probable range of his shot. Yes, the slug was to have just enough momentum, after penetrating the front ribs, to rip through soft flesh and one layer of bone without being able to go through bone again. Such professional and well-practiced precision would leave the fellow's heart and lungs in quite a jumbled mess. Professional at the highest level was Savant in those few things he did well. And that was why he was so useful to a 400 pound man who was lord of the armies and police forces of North America.

Baki was not much at all in Savant's estimation. Nearly as masculinely slender as Johnstone was femininely slender, he was dark-brown of skin and elegant of manner. He even managed to wear his khaki uniform as if it were a custom-fit formal suit. The man seemed a survivor, but not in the context of Savant's style of competition. In any case, neither was a match in any way for the 400 pound gorilla who was sitting where he wanted, in front of three of his fearful fellow rulers of North America. Of the eleven Overlords, only Chan and Kotic were from the original gang of five years prior. The Overlords had power, access to harems, and a number of other perks. Thus, did many compete for the chance to be the next meal for the Overlord-General who no longer wandered far to find prey. Since he sat on top of the treasure chest, everyone wandered into his grasp.

Caught Johnstone's eyes did Captain Savant. Interested he was in the signs of a shiver passing from gut to toes, gut to head. Long ago had he seen that of Kotic she was not as scared as of Savant. Perhaps she had some weak hold over Kotic. The killer, reptilian in only certain ways, could not quite understand that, yet he knew that the Overlord-General had fallen under the spell of women before. Not Savant. He was too clever to be controlled by another person, yet. . .

He had been in the Atlanta Pen and scheduled for execution when Kotic took him onto his staff. So afraid had they been of him that Savant had not touched another human being for the 15 months he was in that facility. When they moved him, they first threw in shackles and made him chain himself. Then

with two men walking to his sides and holding the chains to the neckband, two other men walked behind, carrying shotguns constantly aimed at the back of his trunk.

Other than the few times they took him to see the warden or the daily trips to a fenced pen for outdoor exercise, he lived by himself for those 15 months. It had not mattered. He had merely slumbered away the time, largely indifferent to his own fate. Happy he had been to go to work for Kotic, then a mere general in a struggling republic. Nevertheless, it was not a happiness he would have missed if the opportunity had not materialized. Only fools had ambitions or desires for things not within reach. Captain Savant had long ago decided that to be the case.

Still, he wondered why she was so afraid of him and only somewhat afraid of Kotic. The Overlord-General killed in passion and not cold blood, and, yet, he was quite capable of killing those he cared for. The Overlord-General had throttled the neck of his favorite son. That fellow had become addicted to narcotics and then involved himself with a drug smuggling gang. Kotic had a genuine distaste for criminal activity not directed to the needs of the Collective. He wanted no He had set out to make the Collective the greatest imperial power the world had ever seen. Complications had arisen; neither the Koreans nor the Indians were to be treated lightly. Ruthless and competent were the men of the new New Delhi and those who had settled in Beijing. Some were rumored to be nearly a match for Kotic.

Something inside of Johnstone simply made her more afraid of the weapon than of the master. No matter, though somewhat interesting. No, it was not a question to worry Captain Savant. He cared not by which neurological pathways paralysis spread through the body of a deer staring eye-to-eye at the cougar. The fear was sufficient unto itself. Yet, it was a matter for contemplative enjoyment one sunny day when next he bathed in wave-like particles, stretching out, letting his muscles relax, easing his awareness of his environment, letting single, small feelings balloon up in his otherwise slumbering brain. Digesting. Meditating on fear in preparation for securing the next meal, though such could be rare occasions for certain killers

whose metabolisms slowed so much between kills. Captain Savant knew not whether he was one of those as Kotic always had a job to be done.

Perhaps she would slumber with him, though she might not again rise. He felt his lips turn up at the edges. Looking at Overlord-Communicator Johnstone, was he? was. Had he smiled. Knew he not for sure, but his alert senses caught an image of Chan watching, another of Kotic smiling as his little eyes shifted deep in those rolls of fat. Relentlessly, he gazed at. . .

Savant's attention shifted as something told him the Overlord-General had selected his victim. Fun would be this killing. She smiled back, and Captain Savant wondered if she would be a willing victim. So many of his victims had been so cooperative as if believing they deserved no better.

Cooperative or not, she was as good as dead for a crisis had appeared on the horizon and Overlord-General Kotic wanted to act fast to pull together the body politic.

What to be made of such a tale? Was it no more than a subterfuge to cover the guilt of Donnie in those crimes? How could two persons have inhabited the same body? Possession? Or was a person created by the relationships between his parts, between him and his society, between him and his physical environment? Different relationships, different person?

No.

That seemed too easy for Parnell.

And besides. . .

How did the wisest of killers become the gentlest and silliest of old men?

31

The light drew near, painfully near to the dazed man. Or did Captain Savant draw near, painfully near, to the light? As if down a corridor did he and it approach. Or was it an illusion? The light did not reach him though it seemed to be moving closer to him. Or he to it. Or maybe neither was true. Or maybe..

His eyes burned, for sure. Of that, there was no doubt. Upon that sensory perception could he stand as he struggled to return from wherever he had been.

“I am in pain, therefore I am.”

When there was no response, from himself or from others, he tried again.

“I am, therefore I am in pain.”

Carried upon a deep voice came the suggestion, “You think you are in pain, therefore you think.”

That seemed not right to his swollen and aching brain. It cared not if it had fricked or if it had been fracked. The light was the immediate source of the pain, though he feared the pain would continue even if the light were to disappear. Nice nearly as the Sun was the light with the halo and its 57 points twinkling with all the glory of a bright object partly obscured by light-absorbing gases. From where. . .

It was only parts of his brain that throbbed with pain. Other parts barely self-perceptible pulsated with a happy rhythm. His body felt warmly comfortable. His body and parts of his brain had exercised their skills. They had done as they were trained to do. Satisfaction, if not more. Certainly, not less.

Dead bodies lay about him.

Captain Savant knew that to be the case even before dropping his eyes from that bulb shining from the fixture over the desk of the Overlord-General.

Three corpses.

Surely he had killed them.

How?

A little boy inside his brain whimpered in fear.

No wonder.

Three corpses.

He, Savant was he, had killed them.

Had he not?

Of a certainty.

So he thought.

It had often happened like this, though the fog came after the danger was gone, even if that was days after the killing. Foggishly could he have never found his way out of Germany after assassinating those geneticists. In a daze could he have never come back out of the layers of security forces surrounding those other four Overlords.

He had killed three powerful people, and, yet, no danger lurked about. He trusted his instincts. Finely honed were they.

It was sad.

Even Savant could see that.

A young boy should not be exposed to things such as this. There was a bulge just below Chan's as if someone had ripped out the aorta underneath, rudely disconnecting it from the man's heart. Baki's throat was oddly flat as if someone had crushed breathing tube and voice-box. Johnstone's head was resting at the oddest angle, 45 degrees or so to her neck. Overlord-General Kosic was sitting quietly in his chair, smiling at the corpses of his former associates.

He raised his eyes to look directly at Captain Savant. "You do good work, Savant."

"I do good work, Savant. I am, that is."

"Yes, you is Savant, are you not?"

"Yes, I is Savant, are I not? Not... not."

While Captain Savant was still fighting his way through the fog engulfing his mind, Kosic's smile broadened.

Fever.

Yes, fever. For sure, it had been fever. Remembered. . . She? Yes, he, Savant. That is. Though he was not, back then. Fog there was in memories – his and someone else's. Mama and Grandma, his? or someone else's?, brought in cold, wet towels to wrap his aching body. Bags of ice to the right, bags of ice to the left. He could not turn his head.

He?

No, someone else.

Donnie?

Yes, that was once him. Or someone like him. . .

Donnie?

No more.

Only Savant. Dr. Poole said Donnie's brain, behavior, language, allergies, everything?, changed. Not for better, that. Not all at. Not all there.

Donnie still cried inside.

But no muchly more.

Even a little bit less.

Quieter.

Donnie was nearly dead.

Or maybe.

Not?

Still. . .

Savant slumbered or killed, waited or acted.

An occasional savant a genius fragged.
 Many a genius muchly lagged
 behind the acceptably comfortable normal
 and the most averagely paced hormonal.

It was not a pretty pinkish sight.
 Not even the pastiest nipple of light
 could distract the horror-stricken normal's stare
 from the critical mess of Einstein's hair.

Explosion had occurred within that brain.
 A boyish love of slower-than-c trains
 had led a tunneling visionary
 to space Blind Tom's well-timed ivory.

One – girlish brain was quite well-balanced,
 two – on average, had better things to do
 than sit imaging absurdities on either-sided head
 while grounding low society – butterflies with wings
 of lead.

A poem that was. A few words that rhymed. Something of a rhythm. Rhyming rhythm. Titled *Dead Males, Not All White and Many Retarded*. It contained a few jokes about theoretical physics and assumed a little bit of knowledge about autistically inclined geniuses and the sexually unbalanced distribution of extremely high levels of talent and of extremely damaging defects.

Yes, a poem that was. And the very one he had recited as General Kotic had beaten Dylan Shagari to death. Stuck he got had on that poem. The General smiled had. "Appropriate," grunted had the big man. "You shall be Savant. You are Savant."

"I are Savant," said had the dazed killer.

"You are Savant," agreed had his master.

Kotic had commanded. Savant had no cared. He had had no name since Donnie began dying. Savant as good as any. Dr. Corey had sneered and said had, "Appropriate." Everyone agreed had. Why?

"You are wise," volunteered the smiling Overlord-General.

"I are wise."

"Truly, sapient man are you, in any language."

"Truly, sapient man are I, in any language."

General Robert Jones, Army Chief of Staff. The knife had slid so easily from left ear to right.

Clifford Evans, Attorney General. A wire strung from one tree to another in the backyard of his Maine home. A simple snowmobiling accident.

Calvin Thompson, Baptist minister and crusader against tyranny. One by one. The minister. His wife. The three children. The two bodyguards had gone first. Crushed larynxes, those two. No cries of warning. Quiet stiletto thrusts through the eye or up the nose and, in any case, into the brain for the other five. None ever awoke.

Abraham Kott, last President of the United States. His plane had been only a few feet off the ground. Boom! Too bad that.

Others.

Many.

No, Savant no care.

“I no care.”

“Undoubtedly not,” responded the Overlord-General.

“Donnie cry, but not much loudly no more.”

“No, I’m sure Donnie is fading, year by year.”

“Little boys should kill no doggies.”

“No, that wasn’t Donnie who killed those doggies. Was it?”

“No. Donnie no kill. Donnie cry when doggies whimper.”

“Undoubtedly, poor Donnie did cry. It was lucky that men rescued you from that prison and taught you a trade.”

“Did they well? Teach? Yes. Teach.”

“Yes, taught you very well, they did, but you are a good one. So talented and requiring no reward but the chance to exercise your skills. You are a good one, Savant. Useful, as well.”

The fog was clearing from Captain Savant’s mind, but he was feeling drowsy as he looked down at the three corpses and then at his hands. Not much blood on them. Some. He looked at the corpses. No blood on Johnstone but some near the oddly concave region where the former Overlord-Manager Baki had once had a rounded throat. Blood was there as well on Chan’s abdomen as if the blow had been so violent as to rupture the skin. Hard one that.

Captain Savant moved to the chair he had occupied only minutes? before. Sat he down and tried to stay awake. Kotic bellowed at someone. Disturbance arose about him. Savant started to rise. Awareness was returning when Kotic said, “Sit

down and sleep, Savant. You're among friends now, not surrounded by enemies. You can slumber while the men haul away your playmates. When you awake, you will remember all that you did and you won't care."

"I won't care."

"No, you won't, will you?"

"Will I?"

Kosic smiled and sat back, releasing Savant from the echolalic game which could run forever no matter how aware Savant and Donnie were of what was happening. No matter how much they might have wanted the game to stop. Meanwhile, men worked to haul away the three corpses.

32

Not long more was to pass before on the prowl was Savant, fully aroused now that there was a trail. A cousin of Carlos Lopez had been found. Yes, a cousin and his son. Near Spokane had they been found, in Spokane were they being held.

Up, up towards the heavens, looked the killer who knew he was wise, though in such a limited sphere of activity. Up there, where men had often looked for help from the gods or the demons or even the God, up there, up there where shone the massive stars so longfar agoway, up there, yes up there, the rotor blade spun so fast as to blur, yet not block the vision of blue striped by white clouds.

A flock of birds flew by.

Savant's eyes lit up, his mouth turned up at the edges.

"Amazing," said he loud enough for the pilot to hear. "Though I cannot see through solid masses standing still, I can peer through the path carved out by rapidly moving matter."

The pilot said nothing.

The wisest of killers sat back and watched the landing pad approach. Near Spokane it was. Vanishingly still was it and virtually non-existent it was. Not with the invisible grace of a rapid process did it move. Yes, could it not be denied that he, Captain Savant and none other, was a latter-day Einstein, understanding the ultimate equivalence of dense, recalcitrant matter to translucent process.

A perfect planet it was for a predator on the prowl.

Even the most solid piece of matter was but a node point in a process.

Or else it was not.

The trained killer let his face burst forth in a death's head grin as he told himself that it was up to another to inflect such a negation into stable meaning. A predator wished for no such peace. The copter was on the ground, and the members of the welcoming committee, which had been double-stepping forward, stopped dead in their tracks as the smirk came upon his face.

Lt. Kirkland moved forward again, after a pause of a few heartbeats. The wise man, the wise killer, stepped from the copter to pass his eyes quickly over the five men with the lieutenant. Three were sergeants from the Collective's police force. One was pudgy, a younger, darker Santa Claus though his beard was graying. He had the dead eyes of a man who had had to kill his conscience in the course of killing too many innocent people. He and Savant exchanged quick looks of empathy and of cynical evaluation. The other two were lean and hard characters with friendly eyes. No, they had not had much of a struggle against either a conscience or a rational will. Kill, they would, only under orders, and then without any hesitation. The other two men, were not policemen. Rather they wore the Collective's standard uniform, insignia designated them as members of the Provost-General's staff. "Bureaucrats!" he sneered not quite under his breath. Almost pretty were their uniforms – well-tailored, sharpest of seams, and yet the effect was tarnished by the blandness of the Collective's chosen green.

Savant refreshed his grin and strode briskly past the two bureaucrats, pointedly ignoring the slender, bewhiskered fellow with the open hand and the outreaching mouth. Clearly making an effort to suppress his emotions, perhaps disgust more than fear – Savant did not care, Lt. Kirkland followed in the wake of the man who had come to initiate a feeding frenzy. The killer, about his business and in no mood for silliness, assumed the sergeants had also fallen in line. He cared little what the bureaucrats did.

He was on the job, and that was his way.

Such a way it was.

Oh truly was it a way like that of few men.

Indeed.

It did not matter if there were only a dozen such men or hundreds.

Savant, himself a man not without insight into the suchly ways of men, and even other ways as well, asked himself if a poor, little, four year-old boy had withered inside himself to create each of the highly skilled killers in the world.

Not that he thought the world in all its confusion made it muchly easy for men to gain such deeper insights from the few bits of data perceived by the sharpest-eyed observer of men. The poet had not been able to help him see more deeply into his nature. Not for lack of study. In his more energetic phases, the wiser killer, as one among so many, had read and re-read his small pile of books by Dylan Shagari. By his side for those night-time efforts had sat a pile of hardbacked copies of Feynman's *Lectures on Physics*, one of Dirac's *Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, and two encyclopedias of science, one specializing in neurosciences and edited by Morgan Llewellyn, the woman hated by Kosic so muchly, though she was long in the grave. For a while, the killer, not muchly dumb and knew it well he did, had thought he was coming to some true insights, but his crystal-clear vision had returned and no answers had he found in either the poems or the books. Insight could not be found in verses about rats's brains and likely not in the bloody item itself.

Black holes?

The theorists said that matter disappeared inside a black hole, taking nearly all its information with it.

Its meaning?

Likely did that disappear as well, though many theorists had struggled to find a way around that violation of a conservation law so dear to the hearts of men.

There was some information left, but Savant cared not much about the total mass – it being impossible to say if it had come from baryons or leptons or those complexes of particles called little boys. Angular momentum? Big deal. Net electrical charge meant nothing to him neither.

He needed to know how things were swallowed as they came to their ultimate destruction.

He needed to know what would happen to his soul. And that of poor, little Donnie Blackmore.

Did they each have a soul?

Or only one of them?

Or...

Maybe they shared a soul?

What was a soul?

A hardheaded Jesuit, foul of mouth but learned and of an orthodox reputation, had told him that men had no souls separable from their bodies. Savant had asked him if that meant their souls and bodies were one thing. The old man had grunted in exasperation and had replied, "How the fuck am I supposed to know? God didn't tell the Apostles or the saints everything, and I'm not going up the mountain to ask. There are safer ways to get to heaven. Commit your cowardly sins, confess, and receive the Body of Christ."

Savant had lashed out at such blasphemy, shattering the man's voice box. He had turned for one last look, and the fool was writhing on the floor, not able to swear at God or man. In lieu of breathing, he was frantically fingering his Rosary beads.

The jeep stopped.

Savant got out and followed Lt. Kirkland into the police station. Past the security checkpoints, down a hall, and into another wing.

It stunk.

Smells familiar to a man not a stranger to interrogation rooms.

Urine from scared men not muchly concerned with social niceties.

Fecal matter from men in pain which would be unbearable, except...

What could such a statement mean?

Men, women more often, bore pain inflicted upon them so long as they lived. Insanity was sometimes a refuge, but not muchly secure, and many never entered.

Not that Savant was interested in studying such matters.

Such studies were of little practical use, and he got little pleasure from the pain or even the deaths of others.

It was just...

Something he did because it was in his nature to do such things.

No, sadistic methods of gathering information were for the pleasure of the interrogator and not muchly useful for men more interested in simply getting the job done. He had learned enough of the infliction of pain in his youth and in the early phases of his career to know when it was useful and when not. Experimentation was necessary, but a man of good scientific sense did not continuously re-open settled questions. Nonetheless were such methods commonly used by idiots and by cowards who liked to lord it over people in chains and leather straps.

Drugs were more effective, made less of a mess, and produced truer answers. Torture most men, and they will say what they think you want to hear. Perhaps useful to the politicians, but Savant concerned himself as little as possible with politics. He was a true killer, a man who merely exercised his highly developed, if largely innate, talent. He needed not to see others in pain but only needed good data to find his quarry. Others could produce *True Confessions from the Dank Dungeon*. Such did not interest Savant.

Such was not his way.

Prevent a man from sleeping. That could work nearly as well as drugs. Induce psychosis and then go in and pick out the parts of his mind which might be of interest.

Neither kind nor sadistic was Savant, but merely...

About his job.

He entered the chamber and snorted at the sight of the mess. There was not much left of the older man. Most of the fingers on his right hand had been torn out. He had burn marks over his entire body, and his face had been badly smashed up. He had a bloody, toothless hole where his mouth had once been. The younger one was sitting up. Drooling. Not caring that he was peeing into the air in front of his naked body. Rocking back and forth. Staring out at the world with eyes that had not been able to intelligently percept what had happened to his father and to him. And they would never intelligently percept

anything again. Though they would always be working. His eyelids were among his missing body parts.

The killer sneered at Lt. Kirkland and the two policemen standing in the chamber. One was in a bloody white smock. Both had been smiling as if proud of their ability to take apart two men not able to defend themselves. The smiles on the faces of the two idiots died and were replaced by looks of fear. They must have heard of Captain Savant, of his special relationship to Overlord-General Kotic, of his highly developed talents. Lt. Kirkland shrugged his shoulders and said, "I got back as soon as I could, but it was too late."

With one last look of disgust at each of the victims and then at each of the interrogators, Savant turned and left the chamber. He stood in the hallway and waited for Lt. Kirkland to join him.

"Did the morons find out anything of interest before butchering our only sources of information?"

"Not much. We have some rumors about the area they were living in."

"Obtained in a more intelligent way, I suppose?"

"We bought the information from one of the local smugglers, but Gueverra had been careful, as far as we can tell, to hide his tracks."

"That's why we needed him and his son. Get the Gueverras to a doctor. See if he can get anything out of them."

"They aren't in any shape for drugs. . ."

"That's not what I meant." Savant shot the lieutenant a look which made the young man fear for his life as well. "Get the doctor to try to patch them up and get an interrogator who knows what he's doing. And. . ." He scratched his chin and looked back in the direction of the chamber before saying, "Shoot them. It'll be good for discipline, and it might raise the average intelligence level of your group."

Lt. Kirkland looked as if to protest, but he did not. Savant knew he would do as ordered. Few men were in a position to disobey a direct order from Kotic's personal killer.

Savant returned to being an observer for several minutes. Men came and led away the two idiots in handcuffs. Other men

came and took away the Gueverras on stretchers. Still another man came and handed Lt. Kirkland a small pile of papers.

Comings and goings. Not the way of Savant. No. He did one thing, and he did it very well. The paperwork could be damned. He had no interest in commanding men. Talking to strangers long enough to give them orders was hard enough for him.

It was much easier to kill someone. He knew so many ways, and it was nearly always possible to kill a man one way or another, no matter how many guards he had, no matter how well he had hidden himself, no matter how well-practiced he was in prancing about like a spastic Chinaman.

But not torture.

He had never forgotten how Donnie had cried when those dogs...

He snapped back and asked Lt. Kirkland, "Is there a place to get some coffee around here?"

"If you can wait just a second, I'll take you. I need some myself."

Captain Savant merely nodded. He was as mellow as he ever got, except, of course, when the doctors gave him his physical every...

Year?

No, it seemed to be more often than that.

Why?

Every month?

Maybe not quite, but close to that.

Why?

This was a matter to worry...

What was...

Suddenly, he was getting as mellow as he did after the doctors gave him his shot. Lt. Kirkland turned and started walking back into the main wing of the building. Captain Savant followed, seeing the world, and his own self, as if in a fog. In a fog, but something had just bothered him.

What?

It did not seem all that important.

33

And came it to pass that the fleeing creatures were seen, and the wisest of killers knew where to set his traps.

Captain Savant turned from the road to examine the Silvie River flowing towards Malheur Lake. From the Malheur Forest, it flowed forever less a day. Beneath the surface, moved fish for the hawks. On the shore, slaking their thirst were many a four-legged chunk of cougar food. Perhaps the river had passed his quarry working their way towards his giant snare, made of too many Collective policemen and a handful of skilled Rangers. Of a near certainty was it that Parnell Lopez and his mother were heading south. Spawn of a once-mighty engineer, cousins to a fallen poet, though it was far from clear whether he had fallen to or from grace.

Not just the river, the river flowing from Eden, but also the road, exiting from the gate guarded by nasty, mean-tempered angelic characters.

Forever less a day.

Not even the wisest of killers could do a thing about it.

But he could set traps.

Non-lethal.

Kosic wanted the game brought back before the killing commenced.

Simple was the trap, though non-lethal.

A straight, quick kill was nearly always simpler, yet, this time they could manage simplicity and live capture.

Best that way.

Simple was usually wise, and, often enough, the wise were simple.

The side-roads were sealed off for miles up the highway, which was itself blocked no more than 25 yards in front of Captain Savant and Lt. Kirkland.

Savant waited.

Donnie Blackmore was no where to be seen or heard.

The sun shone brightly and it was hot.

The men were bored, though the Rangers were too disciplined to fidget as the policemen were doing.

None were as entranced by the heat waves above the asphalt as was Savant. Movement it was. Ripply. And, so, he was in a trance. Silently, he laughed, though it took an effort to keep his mouth from moving.

Why did he bother?

What would it have mattered if he had laughed out loud?

Bad for business when a killer showed a sense of humor – made sense.

Most of what Savant said to himself made sense. Maybe that was why he was so wise? Made sense.

But the world outside of him did not always make sense. Why did movement make air visible and rotor blades translucent? Truly, this was a wonderful world for a predator, but more than a bit confusing. Better than not. After all, everyone knew that predators were smarter than their prey. The more confusing the world, the more brains it took to figure things out, the better for predators. Made sense.

Savant smiled and looked to the side to see a large, black man almost run into him. The man, wearing master sergeant stripes twisted his face into a look of fear he saw that it was the killer he had almost collided into. A master sergeant from the Rangers, not from Kirkland's band of fools most talented at kicking wounded men in the face or at raping women – so long as they were strapped down. Captain Savant would have expected the policemen to be deathly afraid of him. But... A master sergeant from the Rangers? Truly, the wise killer had gained a reputation to be envied.

A soldier manning the radio receiver in the jeep parked over to the side of the road, stepped out of the vehicle and gave a slow wave.

Waved he, but not in a manner as interesting as the hot air coming up from the asphalt.

Still. . .

It was the signal.

Clearly. That much could be seen from the way the fellow moved his hand above his head, so slowly, so damned slowly by the standards of an aroused predator. From above his head, the hand moved down to a spot parallel with his shoulders. Back up moved the hand. And the policeman repeated the motion once more, though Lt. Kirkland had started to move before the fellow's hand was even above his head the first time. The young police commander gave his own signal, less stylized, a mere wave forward as if he were telling the wagon train to move. Nearly two dozen policemen moved into position as the detail of five Rangers watched with expressions of amused disbelief, probably wanting to tell one another they could conquer half the world with this many men and guns. Professional courtesy, though extended from professionals to clowns in Savant's wise and considered opinion, held. No laughter was heard. No overt gestures were seen.

Parnell Lopez and his mother approached. And one other woman not known to the man of one talent. Maybe the Collective's intelligence services had identified her by now. Maybe not. The matter was of little concern to him. As were most matters.

An army of policemen were now arrayed against one young man labeled a 'retard' by the Overlord-General. The young man also had support. A middle-aged lady and an unknown young lady. Though he showed no surprise at Kirkland's display of force, Savant agreed with the Rangers. If the police had simply blocked the road, he and they could have managed to handle a young man and two women.

In any case, he, the Rangers, and the prisoners would soon be on the copters heading southeast to meet the Overlord-General at the James Llewellyn Symbiosis Research Center, built near a bend in a mighty river. A marsh had once been there. While he could not argue against Koscic's claim that the Center was more useful than a swamp full of frogs and turtles, something about

the very idea of such a large center set up to study symbiosis upset the wise killer. He was not stupid. He knew they were not about to study the organisms which resided in termites's stomachs and helped them to break down the toughest fibers of cellulose. They were looking into hookups between men and machines, but...

He had thought about the situation before, but at his last annual checkup, and they seemed to be coming too often, he had told the doctor that he was blacking out whenever he started getting nervous about something or the other. Not that he ever grew nervous when he was about his work, for then his well-drilled habits took over and he functioned as a smooth integrated organism. No worries. No uncertainties. Just action.

But, sometimes when he worried about some matter or the other...

The other matter...

And, what's the matter with that?

What is...

He shook his head the slightest bit to clear out the flimsiest of webby things.

The sun continued to shine brightly, and it remained hot.

The men were tense and ready for action.

Two dozen policemen, ten fully automatic rifles, another ten semi-automatics, and the other four policemen, plus Lt. Kirkland, had no more than semi-automatic handguns to deal with the approaching threat.

A motor could be heard in the distance. Only a few seconds later, a jeep came into view. Down the road it came. In the distance could be seen the police cars that had blocked the side exits to the road. Savant smiled at the sight of those reinforcements coming for the heavily armed policemen. When dealing with a retarded youth and two women, it was best to be safe. It was too bad there were no tanks or attack copters in the area.

He watched intently as the jeep stopped. The driver must have noticed the roadblock ahead of him, but then he must have seen the cars coming up behind him. The jeep advanced once more. Soon, the three dangerous criminals would be in the hands of Captain Savant and the five Rangers. That is,

after the growing force of the Collective's finest had carried out their mission. No doubt would they toast each other that night. Brave men having survived trial by fire. Captain Savant looked over to see four of the Rangers crouching and quietly laughing as one or another pointed towards the setting of the coming battle. The sergeant was looking a bit bored, more than a bit annoyed, and not at all amused.

The wise killer returned his attention to the battle as the jeep pulled close enough that a dozen policemen moved forward, dropped to one knee did they, rifles pointed at the jeep were they. And at each other. Captain Savant turned to look knowingly in the direction of the Rangers. The young corporal with the rearing lion tattooed into his cheek understood and met his glance without fear. The other four, even the sergeant with rows of campaign medals, looked nervous. That was how much they feared their enemy. The sergeant had come dressed as if going to the office to order supplies and fill out personnel forms. Brave though the man might have been, he failed in his attempt to smile back at the renowned killer.

The wise killer understood his place on the Earth, a wonderful place for a predator, and was satisfied to find an occasional kindred soul. He looked back towards the jeep to see the young man standing, hands raised in the air, while a chunky policeman struggled to bend over and complete his task of frisking for weapons. The two women were already being led to Savant, who was he? was who, and that for sure.

This was no time for an interview, but as they drew near. . .

As the young woman advanced over the asphalt so refractorily ripply, it seemed to the wise killer that her hair, mostly blondish, had a greenish tinge. He stared at her wondering if women were once more adopting strange fashions, despite the lack of general prosperity. It was mostly her feet that were ripply and mostly her hair that was greenish, yet. . .

She seemed to be surrounded by the most enchanting aura.

When they had reached Savant, it was the older woman who planted herself in front of him and asked, courteously but firmly, "You are the man called Savant?" When he merely nodded, she scrunched up her eyes and examined him more carefully. With

the courteous tones still dominating over the suspiciousness, she remarked, "I had not expected you to be so...old. As old as me?"

Puzzled, the wise killer reached up and plucked a few strands of hair from the right side of his own head. His hair had grown as wise as he. He wondered when that could have happened. Judging by his annual physicals, the years were passing pretty quickly, but...

Savant looked up and examined the woman more closely. More broad of face than James Llewellyn had been, she had few wrinkles except for those at the corners of her eyes. Yet, her hair also had grown wise, and her eyes had the look of one submissive not to those about her but to the need to carry some unseen burden. Her eyes were green, though like unto the ocean on a cloudy day and not much like the greenishness of blond hair on a sunny day.

But not all blond hair.

In fact, not very much blond hair.

He wondered again why the young woman's hair had a greenish tinge.

The young man had come up and positioned himself as if to protect the two women. Savant turned to him. The confrontation occurred, young man not looking overly retarded and a wise killer who, truth to tell, did not feel much his cold-bloodedly vicious self.

What was the matter?

Matter?

An illusion in a Universe of processes?

A pleasant place to ply the profession of predator.

Why did he not feel like...

Captain Savant looked up to see a crowd of dozens of people, some in uniform and a bit standoffish, some near him. A middle-aged woman with pain in her oceanic eyes. A young man looking at him as if he could empathize with a killer risen from the ashes of a young boy who had lived four happy years. There was also a young woman...

Why was her hair greenish?

As if to answer his silent question, Lt. Kirkland stepped forward cautiously and said, "Teresa Gueverra has also been arrested, Captain Savant. And her son Raul."

The world was as ripply as the air just above the asphalt. Trees danced, bending halfway up their trunks, as if they had suddenly developed hips. The tree line a hundred yards down the road drew his attention. It was so...so...

"Sir? Should I send for the Gueverras?"

Still somewhat shaky of intent, the wise killer sneered and turned towards the Rangers. A mere motion of his head and the sergeant walked towards the helicopter to dispatch an army unit to pick up the Gueverras.

Wondering why the young man was looking at him with hints of understanding in his eyes, Captain Savant turned this time to the young woman of greenish hair, though mostly blond. He wondered why her feet were somewhat ripply, but then much of the world seemed to be ripply. He ignored the evidence that the ontological foundations of man's world, no! it was the epistemological foundations was it not, not, or not,. Shaking his head once more to clear out something?, knew he not what?, he announced, mostly to the young woman, "We're taking you down to the James Llewellyn Symbiosis Research Center." Somehow happy that they seemed as confused as he at the name, he noticed that, with a delay of just a few seconds, the middle-aged lady showed fear and the young man adopted a look of determination as if he were just assigned a difficult task.

Odd that.

Odd?...that!

That?

...

What?

Paralyzed by doubt for the first time since Donnie Blackmore had begun to fade, the wise killer looked from empathy to greenish confusion to greenish pain.

Wondered he, for just a second, if the young man was also greenish, in one way, if not the other.

A flood...

Of something...

Poured?

Through him.

Savant, wise as he was, regained control of himself and turned to lead the way to the helicopter, nearly tripping, right foot over left, during the maneuver which seemed so. . .

Donnie's father had started the boy ice skating only a month after he could walk steady. Those skates were so alien at first, refusing to position themselves properly. For a short while, but it was so hard to remember that time. Skates were a natural extension of his feet whenever he put them on. But, at first, they had been as great a burden as feet had been when learning to walk.

Why were his feet a burden once more?

No. They were not no more. Left foot was placing itself in front of right foot was placing itself in front of left. . .

Savant put out his hand, left? he thought so, to keep himself from running into the helicopter.

As he steadied himself and prepared to climb into the helicopter, he heard the young man, was he really Parnell Lopez?, say in a whisper, "They didn't match up his toupee very well." Silence reigned among prisoners, Rangers, and the handful of policemen who had wandered over to the copter. The wise killer froze with one foot upon the ladder. He lifted right hand and plucked a few strands of hair which was firmly planted in his scalp. He then lifted. . . Nothing. His left hand was locked in its grip upon the copter's door frame and refused to move to sample from the left side of his scalp.

The world grew fuzzy again though he heard the young man whisper once more. "That must be where the connections are implanted." In a tone of confused wonder, Parnell Lopez, if that was who he was, added, "You'd think they would have done a better job of hiding such an abomination."

Odd. . . that.

The Overlord-General used to talk about someone else who used words like. . .

Abomination?

Why would someone use such a nasty and insulting word?

34

The poet was to be honored. Less than 36 years dead, and Dylan Shagari was to be given a monument. In San Francisco? So far as Parnell knew, the poet had never even passed through the City by the Bay. Yet, some bureaucrat had figured it appropriate to honor a man so hated by the late Overlord-General Kasic. San Francisco was as good a place as any. Or perhaps it had been chosen on a whim.

To be honored was his lot in death, a sad lot for a poet to endure, but if any urn full of ashes was up to it, likely was it the urn of ashes associated with the departed person of Dylan Shagari. The complex of memories which resided in Parnell and those taking up mental space in one or two others was another matter completely. Not completely perhaps. After all, the complex of memories was largely a set of associations and relationships based, however loosely and third-hand, upon that departed person. More than that? Parnell thought so but at least that much. And besides, there was that strange concatenation of words not muchly entitled to much, but titled, just the same, *Even to a Ph'nt, Grayin Ain't the Same as Grayin*.

A faloodling and doodling man am I.
A pissing away my life and don't ask why.
Not muchly entrancin, I'm sorry to say.
The words they's a'dancing raggy Shakespeare away.

The syntax's a'strangling the fine man with a sketch.
With an infinity of branches, up which you cannae catch.
But never did I hear him poetically waxing
like that man wheeling through grave subjects mostly a'taxing.

And is a wheeling man always a wheeler?
 Is stacky ever the cards falling hands away the dealer?
 Poorly phrased the question, the curvature unknown.
 Though in a trillion years, the hole from the black be stolen.

What means that I cannot say,
 and furthermore doubts I to see the day
 when arcky all evaporates to become things agin,
 and Big Push hits the wheel for another good spin.

But, still. . .

Is a single mug bestly seen
 playing with toys on a vator machine
 falling, falling, down, and ever quick,
 seeking to, gee, oh!, zero a desic.

A line, a line, my world for a minimal line,
 a line drawn by worldly men mostly fine
 and lusting after Sophie and hoping to see her hairy light. . .
 No!, for but a kiss before she slips into the night.

I didnae fall with entrancin g
 cuz it be not the same as the other parts to me.
 And besides it's an ele-hangin I want
 to frontly stick my not grayin g-ph'nt.

Not in he be, no, not muchly a star.
 Not neither ing with be he marred.
 Though once was a burg where lived a man a'knowing
 where the thought behind this poem shouldnae been a'going.

What was one to make of such a weak attempt to wed 20th century physics to the Scottish dialectical contributions to inner city slang? And that commentary on those parts of Gaelic-tinted English not selected during those centuries of incubation in the West Indies? And what about that distinction between adjectives and verbs of any sort? Was that a hint that Dylan Shagari had some sympathy for the questions raised by the work

of Whitehead and Hartshorne? Was that a partial cause of the tension between the nephew and uncle who loved each other so strongly. Without a doubt did Parnell re-member James Llewellyn telling him, “If the world’s a process, then my breakfast this morning was an eating and not a bowl of oatmeal.” Interestin was it?, maybe not, that his grandfather had said ‘eating’ and not ‘eatin’. Well... Anyway... Maybe it was interesting. Or interestin. Or...

In any case, the poet was a man who often gravitated to extremes as if he had no floor under his feet to make him feel his weight.

Deceleration was a heavy subject for sure. Parnell had heard of the train crash just the day before. People aiming for Los Angeles had decelerated a hundred miles short when-where someone had oddly parked a freight train. Dangerous as well as odd. Sad. Fewer deaths than the Great Nuclear War, but that meant not necessarily that the disaster was a million times less sad. At least, that was Parnell’s theory.

Parnell picked up Alicia and carried her onto the helicopter so kindly sent by Colonel Kaufman, often considered a member of the Junta, but known to Parnell as a nephew of a communicating woman killed by the wisest of killers. Parnell placed Alicia down and strapped the belt over her lap. Settled himself as well before he smiled over at Donnie so lucky that he had not paid the penalty for at least one of Savant’s crimes.

But...

Had he been truly a different person than Savant? Had...

Parnell decided to avoid circling forever that field. Looked he around at the inside of the flying vehicle, amazed that his brain adjusted even its silliest analogies to its current context. Perhaps he was as great a linguistic genius as twelve year-old Jimmy, though likely was it that six year-old Alicia still retained a bit of her superchildish genius.

Parnell turned to Marie in the seat behind him and said, “Truly has peace fallen upon the land, even if the Junta is not the best of all possible governments.”

She merely shot him a warning as if to say, “We are surrounded by servants of the Junta, Hubbie Dearest.” Otherwise, she seemed not overly impressed by his observation.

Only minutes later, the airplane was taxiing down the runway. The flight would be but an hour, not long much, but perhaps long enough to complete the integration of the tale of that man nearing his final disintegration. How was that tale to be approached? Donnie’s memories of that time had grown

as fragmented as they had been as a young boy. Gopher had been hard at work, though in a way perhaps unanticipated by the grandfatherly engineer.

Then again, it was easy to understand some confusion, for Parnell also had only confusing memories of that short period between capture and freedom regained. Frightening had that period been. Interesting as well, but Parnell had tried to keep his attention on the danger for the sake of his mother and his pregnant wife.

Not always successful had Parnell been. After all, he was from a family of concentrated men, and he did sometimes roll along the tracks of a specific line of thought.

To be sure.

Still. . .

Captive they had been.

Not bound were they, but surrounded by Rangers, some in their helicopter and some in helicopters flying escort. If the Rangers were not enough, the wise killer was also present. He seemed to be in some sort of coma to be sure. Occasionally he stared up as if watching the clouds through the rotors. Otherwise he just closed his eyes and sat deathly still.

Parnell could tell his mother and Marie were both scared. His mother had known of Captain Savant, Kasic's killer-dog. Marie had heard stories. So had Parnell, but he was confused by something about the man. The way he had become so dazed, so thoroughly outofit after completing the capture. He tried to figure out what his grandmother would have thought of the situation, but that got him nowhere.

Clearly the man had organic brain problems. It was clear his reticular formation, though not at all a formation nor even a single thing, was not operating within the normal range for human beings. Crocodilian was the man, capable of arousing himself to intense levels when he received appropriate sensory signals and then collapsing into a state of stupor until it was time to hunt again.

An interesting problem that. Parnell's brain was aroused and working at a high level as he passed through his meager store of knowledge of neuronal formations. Of a certainty was it that a network of such formations, neurotransmitters, hormones, glia cells, and likely non-neurological components of the man's body was not functioning properly.

Why was the male brain so unstable? The female brain could be damaged for sure, but the male brain could rarely be pushed towards genius, often towards derangement of peculiar and violent types. As if barely bal-

anced at best, the disturbance of neurological development in the male could unleash demonic forces, though, to be sure, male genius often did such things as well. Beethoven was not exactly a well-balanced man. Nor was he even decent towards most human beings. Mozart, from most reports, was more likable, but also deranged, irresponsible, and egocentric in his hardy partying way.

Was Savant the product of a female reproductive system casting the die, taking a chance with a son that her female children might be more stable and more certain to reproduce? Why did the human genome seem to operate in that way at all? Why was a single Einstein worth a thousand brain-damaged boys?

Still, the poet, as was his wont, put the case forward, tossing out a few tidbits of scientific knowledge in such a way as to thoroughly confuse matters. *The Selfish Ovary* had he called it, simultaneously rebelling against the reductionism of Chromosomal Idolatry and also admitting that that general line of reasoning had much to say about something if only the entire organism were taken into account, but most especially those female organisms which contributed the egg cell and the initial load of genetic material to steer the embryo during its early development.

Not was it the case that Parnell really understood Dylan Shagari's piece of flim-flammery, but by tossing out a few scientific terms amidst the sheer silliness, the poet had once again made a point, though he almost certainly had not himself known what that point was.

Still . . .

Not one of the herd, the bull wandered forth.
 This way and that across the march so parched,
 marched the crazed and lonely beast.
 Lurched he east and west, lurched he up the hill.

Eyes of red, horns aroused and engorged,
 forged he onward, marginalized Darwinistically.
 Starved he, gorged he, as he lunged ever onward
 ever towards the surging sun huging land to land.

Strange for surely that manner of behaving.
 Why not live he, strive he, to spread his seed?
 Why hove he sand with non-cloven foot?
 Why clove he at all, together if not split asunder.

Oh, the ways of beasts not always reduce
 we deduce lucidly, though not transcendently,
 but rather more translucently not at all.
 The question comes around to that cell, that cell, that eggish
 cell.

Regulating robustly, that oo-oo-istic thang,
 from one generation to another, it brang
 a pre-set setting, a step-step choreographed so lang
 a life as non-existing fate it stang

the soul of the bull, goading him onward.
 Go-go-go into the night gawkish gonads begotten
 to serve the needs of the girls of the species,
 glaringly extreme that they might be at ease.

Still. . .

Might? it have been a simple disease. In a paper in one of the volumes edited by his grandmother, Parnell had read, and that he had for sure, that sexually equitable forms of brain disease could produce a proportionate share of females of unusual profiles of ability. It was just that the so-called normal paths of development as well as most brain disturbances hit males disproportionately.

Was this slumbering killer a prime example? Or did Parnell simply not know enough of the man's history to see a clear truth of male neurological damage not brought about by the reproductive needs of his mother?

What reproductive needs?

Or was it the needs of her DNA?

Parnell was damned if he knew.

Furthermore. . .

His grandfather, devout Presbyterian that he was, as accepting of God's Creation as he was, would have criticized Parnell for using language implying a purpose from inside the process. Thomistic proofs of the lack of

necessary conflict between free will and divine omniscience, more modern versions of modal logic, and certainly the redefinition of 'fact' and 'random' by the founders of algorithmic number theory all argued that Darwin and Newman could well both be right, though the less radical thinkers of modern times were likely neither here nor there. Besides, Newman's vision of Creation could include Darwin's basic theories, as Newman himself noted. Not many of Darwin's philosophical assumptions were easily reconciled with a more pious view of Creation, to be sure, but those were unnecessary and distorting add-ons to the true accomplishments of the <Victorian gentleman|radical thinker>. In the end, it was Darwin's vision which was too narrow to include other thoughts proposed for selection by comparison against a well-given reality.

Parnell's contemplations were interrupted – the helicopter was landing one place if not another. He looked up. Clouds could be seen through the rapidly rotating blades. . .

Still somewhat dulled of perception and thought, Captain Savant blinked at the nice young lady who seemed to be expecting a response of some sort. After a few awkward seconds, she asked, as if not for the first time, "Would you like something to drink? We just brewed a fresh pot of coffee." Not sure why he was seated on a green naugahyde chair in a windowless room, Captain Savant nodded and said, "Black, if you please."

Looking relieved, she smiled at him and moved on to query the three people sitting on the matching green couch. The young man, though looking Hispanic of a European-Indian mixture, brought James Llewellyn to mind. The older woman had the dead man's eyes, though Savant knew not how she had obtained them. The young woman, frightened and huddled up to the young man, meant little to the wise killer, though there had once been a baby-sitter with slightly frizzy blond hair – without so much of a greenish tinge. Donnie had liked her.

Most people feared him. . .

Donnie?

No, Savant.

Yet. . .

The young man looked at him, politely but openly.

For some reason, the fellow remarked, “I was only four when a book fell, hitting me in the head. I wasn’t particularly bothered by it, but everyone else panicked when they came in and saw the blood dripping all over the place.” Both women looked surprised as if not sure why their companion had said such a thing. Savant knew not neither, but he focused his attention on the source of the confusion who chose to add, “I must have lost a lot of blood. I was having trouble tracing through the connections to the central controllers which took the information on pitch and yaw and roll and forward speed and wind condition and projectile characteristics. Actually, I didn’t know that was what those things were. I knew nothing about ballistics at that time. I knew it was calculating something, but it was nearly 14 months later, when I was reading a book on the engineering aspects of ballistics and artillery design, that I put it all together and figured out what those electronic systems really did. I think I remembered the schematics so clearly because it really bothered me so much.”

Savant was not sure why a four year-old boy would have been so disturbed by his lack of understanding of ballistics, but he listened with his full concentration. Fascinated was he. Disappeared to do did threaten the time.

“I mean, the drawings seemed to be for something important, though I didn’t really know what a battleship was or why there was a need for such complicated electronics to control the firing of its big guns. And the way everyone reacted to the blood convinced me those schematics were really important. But, I couldn’t speak well enough to ask any good questions. In fact, I was better at reading formulas and schematics than I was at reading words. Or speaking them.”

The fellow finished his rather strange tale and looked down at the middle-aged woman as if expecting confirmation. Sure enough, she nodded and the young man returned his gaze to meet that of Savant who suddenly realized he was fragged and not much of a pretty pinkish sight.

Which one of them?

The young man who did not really look particularly retarded or the wise killer?

The choice of words was also odd.

Why had something inside his skull made such odd choices?

“Fragged”?

“Pretty pinkish sight”?

Had an explosion occurred inside his brain?, he merely a wise killer and not understanding much about ballistics.

A fire had burned for sure.

No.

That had been Donnie’s brain.

Four years old?

What a coincidence.

Why were four year-old brains so likely to be banged around or burned up?

Or were they simply so likely to suffer damage when they were banged around or burned up?

Seeking guidance, hoping to find a way out of a tough spot, Savant turned to the young man and asked, “What’s a yaw?”

“A deviation from a straight-line course.”

“Oh. Why?”

Seeming to understand the question so oddly hard to complete, the young man said, “The battleships in the last century used artillery that shot projectiles not capable of locking in on a target and steering themselves.”

Certain was Savant that that explained something.

He smiled and settled back in the chair just as the three people in white smocks came through the door. One, a balding man of about 40, peered into Savant’s eyes as if he were an object and not a person. Shaking his head, the man said, though Savant merely overheard, “The wrong patterns are being reinforced. He must be suffering seizures all over his damned brain.”

Another of the white-smocked people pricked Savant’s upper arm with something. Dazed, Savant turned to look at the place where his skin still stung. As the world was darkening, he heard the young man suggest, “Why not reinforce the chaotic background noise of his brain and get all that gadgetry out of him?”

Gadgetry?

Where?

Near his hair so strangely grown wise?
Why would he think...

35

Clouds. So insubstantial and so dangerous. The rotor seemed even more insubstantial, yet it was not. Still was it dangerous. Moving, it seemed never to be in any particular spot. A process did it nearly seem, though it was a thing. A thing moving through a time-like region of spacetime. Was that all a man was? A thing moving through time-like regions, wishing to be unified in a reality with a new geometry – with time stabilized into a space-like dimension?

The words, the very concepts, eluded all attempts to grasp and control. Away flew they, into the clouds so much more mass-like, so much denser. Passed through did they, glancing off worldlines more lightly than did the least of neutrinos.

As was the case many a time in Parnell's life, flimsy were the most tightly constructed phrases available. Yes, such a sticky spot it had been. . .

Yet there was no time to ponder such strange agglomerations of concrete metaphors and abstract pointers. More important was it for Parnell to protect Marie and to somehow free her. His mother as well. The path to freedom was easily identified. If ever seen. That was the problem – Parnell had not the slightest idea where to even look.

His last hope was Gopher. But when-where was the furry little beast? In fact, was he? Parnell knew not, and he knew no more about the computer systems of the Collective, not that he would be able to get past all the well-armed goons. He looked about, wondering if prisons were always so comfortable. Luxurious it was not, but pristinely clean. The walls looked to have been painted white recently. The linoleum floors had not a water spot, not a speck of dust.

It was clear to Parnell. There was no doubt at all. The massive brick buildings, the green-green grounds, the khaki-clad soldiers and the white-smocked scientists rushing about. . .

This was what they had done to the marshlands of the poet's dream. Parnell flopped on the plastic covered couch in the living-room he shared with his fellow prisoners, though mostly he thought of them as wife and mother.

What to do?

He could not just sit and wait for Gopher to burrow his way out of his hibernation cave. If Gopher still existed.

Something was to be done. Parnell was not about to let a 400 pound man sit on him or any member of his dwindling family. Not that he was sure that Uncle Hernando or Philippe had come to a bad ending, but... And he did not know what had happened to Aunt Teresa or Raul, but...

Too many open possibilities remained... open. The worried young man was struggling to keep alive his hope that at least some good would come out of this mess. Mostly he prayed for the courage to hope his wife and his unborn child would make it through safely.

Stuck in the midst of an half-formed prayer was Parnell when the door opened and Marie and his mother returned to the living-room of this suite stolen out of a cheap motel. His mother's eyes were still red. Worried was she and perhaps in premature mourning for a handful of people scattered throughout the northwest of what used to be the United States.

A sad, sad world had it become again.

And would become again and again.

Spin would the solar system on its way to no when-where in particular.

Spin the Milky Way, dragging the solar system along.

Spin the local cluster of galaxies and those of a host of locals linked one to the nother.

All free-floating towards the Great Attractor which probably fell some when-where else.

And in an obscure corner of all that falling, spun a mote of dust called the Earth.

By some was it called, though perhaps there were other critters elsewhere who used a different name for that admittedly pretty little speck of iron and hydrogen and oxygen.

A bit of nitrogen and carbon.

Traces of other elements.

Without purpose was it?

Not really.

Unless men had been so thoroughly Enlightened as to gain purpose, to

find meaning, in their geographic position.

Or their economic status.

The poet had questioned why philosophers and theologians and scientists spent so much time debating an agenda set by an age of physical exploration.

And of fantastic economic growth.

The poet had left an unfinished poem titled, *The Legacy of an Era of Big and Costly Ships*.

An age of strangely happenings it was.
 Gold was a'flowing, ice cubes retreating.
 Men knew they were destined to be in command,
 and never knew they that the Earth was a'heating.

And so it was and came to be
 Columbus sailed the ocean blue,
 seeking islands with nice bars and beaches
 and killed off a tribe of cannibals too.

An evil man quite obviously,
 though never clear was it as to why
 the neighboring tribes would have mourned the loss
 so much as they wanted to keep their thighs.

Evil he was, yet, it cannot be denied,
 he helped to set the modern agenda.
 Travel here and travel there,
 a'hitching rides with the Flying Wallendas.

Dis oriental rug it is, without a doubt,
 And perhaps that explains the modern desire
 to have all things circle about ourselves
 when most be content to gather around the fire.

A wanderer wants all roads to lead to his home
 though still it remains quietly unclear
 why this modern mostly fascination
 should be seen in men of a long-ago year.

Parnell had asked his grandfather about the reference to the Flying Wallendas and had been told they were a traveling circus act. That had cleared that matter up, but he still suspected there was some deeper meaning in the references to the nice bars and beaches of the Caribbean. To be sure, he had enjoyed swimming off the sand-bars on his trips down there with his parents, but something hinted of a deeper and darker message. Hoped he that some scholar would one day penetrate to the unfertilized egg of that mystery.

The astronomical references were more clear. They had once been made embarrassingly clear to a psychologist who had sneered at the benighted people of longfar agoway. "The superstitious fools had constructed their views of the solar system to make the Earth the center of the Universe." If he had stopped there, James Llewellyn might have held his tongue, but he ranted on about how pre-modern men needed to feel important, and how he, as an oh-so modern man, thought it liberating to live on an insignificant speck of dust in the middle of nowhere. Parnell, though but a lad of ten, had been about to point out that though the stream of thoughts was incoherent; it could have been somewhat improved by the more accurate term 'nowhenwhere'. He had not the chance for James Llewellyn had exploded.

"Ptolemy knew of reasons to picture the sun as the center of the solar system, but he thought the sun was about 20 million miles from the Earth and he had a reasonably accurate idea of the Earth's circumference. At 20 million miles..." The engineer retreated inside himself for just a few seconds before adding, "the Earth would be revolving around the sun at about 14,000 miles an hour. Assuming a circumference of only 20,000 miles to allow for an underestimate..." Once more retreated he before saying, "the Earth would be spinning about its own axis at more than 800 miles an hour. If you are so much smarter than Ptolemy and the other ancient scientists, then you tell me how we can stay on a globe spinning around at 800 miles an hour and moving about the sun at 14,000 miles an hour. A modern man might be inclined to think we would go flying off into space, unless he had some knowledge of physics to go along with his sneering prejudices." The poor man stood in red-faced silence for a few seconds before James Llewellyn leaned forward, putting his own face within inches of his victim's face. "That is the problem the Hellenic scientists and early Medieval scientists could not solve. If you do not know the answer even though it's in a host of modern books, you should not sneer at men who had a much better excuse for their ignorance than you have for yours."

Still. . .

Parnell looked about and saw Marie was seated in the chair next to his mother's chair. Full of comfort was she, and full of embarrassment was he at realizing he was taking up the entire couch when the two women wished to be in close, even whispery, proximity. Jumped he to his feet. Waved he weakly at the couch, full of shame to be sure. A mother full of sorrow and a wife full of comfort needed the couch much morely than his slumbering, introspective self.

Marie just shook her head and returned to whispering with the worried mother. And it was certainly of some relevance to the situation that she was also an expectant grandmother.

Parnell returned to his thoughts. Suspected he, and that for sure, that his predicament was not unrelated to this whole business of the expansion into the New World and the way that modern men treated the past as a way to morally justify themselves by always looking down their noses at other people less Enlightened. . .

The helicopter was landing and Parnell aroused himself from his thoughts. Looked he upon several massive brick buildings. One storage area and landing strip had been torn out, to be sure, allowing a fraction of the adult male bullfrogs to move back into their old bellowing grounds. . .

As the noise of the rotors halted, Parnell concluded, "Hubris moderated was still hubris and still qualitatively different from true pride of place, sometimes distasteful but always fully human and almost allowable by the loosest and most bodily based of moral systems."

Marie shot him a strange look and motioned for him to help Alicia from her seat. Unbuckled he the belt. Released the little girl did he, though he had not the power to give his daughter true freedom. After all, he had not yet found such for himself. Not so silly was he as to assume the end of the Little Ice Age proved the superiority of modern men who were able to feed themselves so much easier and thus to free their time for the exploration of the newest spiritual and intellectual realms. Or not, depending on the inclinations of the individual members of the race.

A corporal and a private awaited to assist Parnell and his family. After helping Alicia into the car, he stood and stared. It

was still so massive, dominating even the other large buildings clustered around it. . .

The guards marched Parnell and his mother and his wife towards the largest building he had ever seen. Advanced did they, though only in one manner of speaking. The soldiers were not unkind and they slowed their pace after just a few steps when they saw Grace Llewellyn Lopez and Marie Leveque Lopez trotting to keep up with them. And, so, slowly moved they towards the great building. Something told Parnell that the 400 pound man awaited them. Not a big believer in psychic mysteries, though he did have a fondness for the obscurities once found in Chinese fortune cookies, Parnell paid little heed to premonitions, except. . . Sometimes, a conclusion almost, but not quite, fell out by the logic of the situation. With the reasoning a bit open, beyond words and perhaps even beyond established, well-ordered concepts, such a conclusion would feel like a foreshadowing. And then there were the raw concrete facts which pointed in a general direction yet did not correspond to any words or concepts which were readily spoken.

All reason, verbalized or not, and all facts, however raw and bloody, however brutish and hairy, suggested the big man wished to see the pitiful remnant of James Llewellyn's family.

"Be singular be the concentrated man," said he aloud, drawing the attention of all about him. "Truly is Buck Kosic the concentrated man whether he be Aristide or not."

To Parnell's surprise, the sergeant of the detail of soldiers smiled sardonically, as if to agree with the commentary, though it was not at all clear the man had read the poetry of Dylan Shagari. Yet, the sergeant seemed to understand the statement not muchly complimentary towards the Overlord-General Kosic. Odd that the same comment in other contexts was a shaded compliment. Yet, without knowing the specific references, perhaps without even knowing much of the geometry and hairless nature of a black hole, the grizzled man with a razor cleaned head seemed to agree.

Odd, that.

Perhaps, there was some hope?

Why would a man so close to the horizon of the blackest of holes show so much hair? Speaking, that is, as a metaphorist of general invariance theory, for the fellow had no hair at all, except near his eyes. Even his arms had been shaved clean.

Perhaps there was a way to escape?

Perhaps the rockets were soon to be ignited?

Perhaps the moon was made of green cheese?

Not likely. Men had visited a number of times and the colonists had remained there for several years. No mention had been made of greenness nor of slightly rotted dairy products.

The party had reached the front entrance to the building. Engraved into the stone was the name of the place: THE JAMES LLEWELLYN MEMORIAL SYMBIOSIS RESEARCH CENTER. Grace Llewellyn Lopez gasped and asked, "Will Koscic not even let him rest in his grave? Will he follow him through eternity, hounding him and tormenting him?"

The sergeant smiled sardonically again. A couple of the soldiers also broke their faces to grin nervously.

"Up is something, if not another thing," predicted one region of Parnell's brain.

Most other parts of him had to agree, though it was not a region with a good reputation for accurate projections.

Quickly did they pass through two security checkpoints. Entered they a hallway, and Parnell gasped with horror. White and sterile was it. Not cleaned as if to prepare for the growth of sensitive life-forms was it. Freed of life entire was it.

"What," asked Parnell in his state of fear, "are we doing here? We still live, and this is a place not for those alive nor for that which has ever lived."

The words seemed to resonate in the beings of those soldiers who had already shown fear. The sergeant took a deep breath, he squared his shoulders, he steeled himself for what was to happen. For good or bad, they had entered a place of danger and only risktaking courage could get them out again.

Down the corridor passed they. Through two checkpoints, yea, even through space vacated by sliding steel doors. The white smocks became more common than the khakis, though some of those scientists and technicians seemed to be wearing collars that flashed regularly. Parnell wondered if they were for keeping track of those men or if they were actually some sort of pain-inflicting devices. Before his imagination could run away with him, Parnell saw two metal doors, more distorting to spacetime than the previous two sets, and they slid away and into the wall, as unreasonable as that seemed under the circumstances. The guards led them forward and in a huge room were they. As long as a football field was it, half that wide and three stories high. On the opposite wall hung a high resolution screen

a good 30 feet high and 50 feet wide. An operating room it showed. The surgeons were working on the left side of someone's head. Wires lay all about, some coming from the head of the man.

A platform raised nearly five feet high stood in front of the screen. Seven steps led up to the top where stood a massive chair occupied by a man still more massive. His attention was upon the screen. His head moved not to the right nor to the left.

To the left were tables covered with maps or mock-ups of buildings or terrain. See-through screens stood here and there, many of them having outlines – geodesics they were for sure. If there was one thing, or many things to be accurate, that Parnell knew, it was schematics of all sorts. “To be sure,” claimed a neural region of some common sense, “only one of us is a Platonist looking for an Idea, and we always outvote that fellow.”

Parnell silently agreed and noticed that his mother was staring at the big man on the platform. He had never seen a person hate another person's back so intensely, but likely was it that the hatred was intended for the entire man. And if any man deserved to be hated, then... Parnell figured that was God's business. As for he and him, so humbly and simply Parnell Lopez complexly bundled from so many a component grown from one fertilized egg, he was mainly interested in getting his mother and his childbearing wife out of this mess.

Still...

What were the surgeons doing up there on the screen? Not that they were really on the screen, but Parnell trusted it was a scene of something happening really for real someplace real. Not a simulation, assumed he.

Turned he to the sergeant and asked he, “Is that Savant on that table?” When the man simply stared at him, though not in a hostile manner to be sure, Parnell added, “If so, that might explain some of the problems he was having keeping his attention on things about him. Unwise is it to play with the brain of a living human being.”

In the gruffest voice Parnell had ever heard, the man replied, “There ain't much human about Savant.”

Not knowing Savant muchly well, Parnell could not argue with such a statement, but it did revive his memories of his grandfather's fears. Hoping that he had found a source of information, Parnell asked, “Where is the operating room?”

The sergeant gestured with his head back through the entranceway. “Down the hall a few doors. All the long-hairs work down this hallway.”

“What is the rest of the building for?”

“Engineers and security people.”

Interesting was that revelation. The man distinguished quite clearly between engineers and scientists. James Llewellyn would have been a man to confuse him, a man with one foot in each world. That was still another matter to ponder – the difference between engineers and scientists, that is. Parnell had a biased view of the matter because of the grandfather who had been both to one extent or another. His grandfather’s inclinations for building hospitals and churches in Africa seemed not at issue under the circumstances.

Parnell looked about and saw the sergeant was staring at him. Almost worried was the expression on his face. He cast a worried look about and then seemed to come to a decision. “Don’t worry too much. And don’t do anything stupid. There are a lot of friends of James Llewellyn in here.”

Confused was Parnell by such a warning. Rarely did he set out to do something stupid, though humanly often did he do something which turned out to be stupid. Set off-balance by the danger to his wife and mother, Parnell just was not able to make sense of a warning which seemed to imply he could live his life in retrospect.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Parnell noticed that many of the engineers and scientists and technicians were watching the captives. Was it curiosity? Or were they the friends of James Llewellyn, worried for the dead man’s daughter and grandson? Unlikely was it they knew anything of James Llewellyn’s unborn great-grandchild.

A face. A huge face came to Parnell’s attention. One of the surgeons had come close to the camera, perhaps to speak... Yes, the mask over his face waggled like a floppy drum surface and her voice emerged – disconcerting as that was for just a fraction of a second. “There are all sorts of things going on that we don’t understand, General Kosic. It’s as if the computer is ignoring our instructions and doing... We don’t really know what’s happening but some of our hard work has been undone.”

Rose the mountain that might have terrified even God-fearing Mohamed. Shook his frame, shook the platform, though it looked to be of solid construction. Parnell imagined he felt an aftershock, but that was probably just a perceptual illusion, though the fellow was pretty big and quitely used to shaking things up. Stood he with right fist raised to the heavens. Shook he some more and then he roared. A might roar was it. A mighty set of lungs drove that horrible and piercing sound. Truly, this was a man who

would be king of the jungle, though this peculiar and entangled mess had concrete pillars for trees and wires and optical cables for vines.

Parnell felt oddly like a zebra in the middle of the Serengeti Plain. Smelled a pride of lions did he. Saw the jackals and hyenas in the background did he.

And, yet, he was apparently surrounded by a small group of his grandfather's friends. He had never understood politics, but of a sudden was he glad that his grandfather had played such games with skill and integrity. Somewhat assured, he reached out and held Marie's hand for just a second. She smiled at him. Nervous was her smile, but she seemed to be mostly in control of herself. Useful would that composure be when all hell broke loose, as Parnell thought it might.

His eyes panned the room. A young man standing near a control panel winked at him. A fellow of Korean appearance. As if to reinforce the wink, he gave a thumb's up.

A roar came forth again from mighty lungs. "I want to know what's happening to my Savant."

Parnell looked at the screen to see the surgeon gesturing helplessly. He looked back to the Korean fellow to see him smiling broadly, and it came to him. Gopher was on the loose and was wreaking havoc, though he was not sure how much more havoc could be wreaked upon the brain of that poor Savant fellow. Was it destroying the nervous system of that killer most wise? What a terrible fate, to be stuck inside one's own head as parts of the brain were destroyed one after the other.

The surgeon spoke, or at least Parnell thought he did. His lips were hidden, but the mask moved this way and that as a woman's voice said, "We just don't know what's happening. We're trying to take him off the computer, but it's not letting go. We'd kill him if we tried to disconnect him."

The big man bellowed as if in pain and turned towards the mission control people. Roared he, "Dawcht-terr Sang."

The young fellow who looked Korean winked in Parnell's direction and then walked towards the big man, though he stopped a good ten feet short of the platform, well out of reach. He stood almost at attention, or at least as close as the average scientist could get to that military position. Not that Parnell was experienced in observing scientists under such circumstances, but he had heard plenty from his grandfather. And he had read of the young Feynman working on the Manhattan Project and denied access to

some of the secret research papers. That fellow who never suffered G-men lightly simply learned how to pick locks.

But that was of little importance. A mere chunk of thoughts trying to make its way in a world of 400 pound men, nuclear bombs, and monstrous computer systems. And who. . .

“What is the meaning of this, Sang?”

The young fellow gestured helplessly and said, “We don’t know. There is a population of software creatures. They’ve spread throughout the entire system and one of them has gained control of the programs written to modify Savant’s brain patterns.”

“What the hell is it doing to my Savant? And what about all the other people about to undergo surgery?”

“I think the software things are in control. We won’t get rid of them without shutting down the whole system and rebuilding it from scratch.”

Dr. Sang had spoken clearly but in a deferential tone of voice, but it seemed to Parnell that the fellow was fighting to suppress a smile. It also seemed to him that several of the soldiers had scattered about the room, as if encircling the 400 pound beast. A thin man in a colonel’s uniform had come over from the far left of the room. He nodded in the direction of. . . Parnell? No, he had nodded at the sergeant who stood next to Parnell. Something was about to come off, when suddenly did bells go off. Waved its way into Parnell’s inner self did the sensation, but then again the sensation was initiated by a physical wave passing through the air, though. . .

All hell was breaking loose. Even the surgeons had stepped away from their work to stare at the cameras. The right half of the room. . .

Well, the right half of the room looked like one of those mission control centers in old NASA films of disasters occurring and being handled by competent and well-trained persons. Yes, were the men and women at the panels calm, cool, and collected, for sure and without muchly doubting. Parnell and most of the people about him, even the red-faced man immense of power, watched the exhibition of highly drilled persons tracking down a problem that it might be solved. Not quite an opportunity was that problem, but in retrospect – perhaps.

Impressive it was. Even a display. It brought warmth to the heart of Parnell for he realized that those people assembled to serve the needs of a totalitarian war machine might be the ones who could get those engineers and planetologists to Mars, the unmanned satellites to the dark and possibly gaseous regions outside of the solar system.

All things possible to men were once again possible.

Yes, impressive was that team of people expert in one thing if not another. Of a certainty was that statement of the utmost undeniability.

Except for the occasional obscenity, they spoke only when necessary. Except for making the rare Sicilian salute, they kept their fingers on their control panels. Parnell was sure those men and women were scientists and engineers. Maybe one or two security plants monitoring the activity about them, but otherwise persons of the highest technical training.

The men on the military side were generally going about their work, but some were staring over at their counterparts on the far side of the immense room. Clearly, the alarms concerned technical systems and the uniforms had only a vague idea, if any at all, what was a' happening.

The big man had risen. He cast one last glance at the screen and turned to pass his gaze over the mission control area. Then he was facing his captives. A burning sensation passed into Parnell's head, but the big man's hateful stare pivoted a little more to meet one that returned the hatred. He lifted his massive fist above his head and let forth a grunt. His chest and stomach were heaving in rhythm with the turmoil within his twisted soul. Or, so Parnell imagined, though it was hard to guess what a man was thinking if you barely knew him. But, still was it true that emotions and the emotional control centers of the brain. . .

The young man's thoughts were interrupted by a bellow. Filled the immense room it did. All the military people turned and stared. Some were shaking. The mission control people, yea! even they, responded to the sound of a man who sought to become more evil than a finite creature could become. Or so Parnell imagined, though it was hard to put limits on even the most finite of men. And it was still true that emotions and the emotional control centers of the brain. . .

"If that bastard did this, you'll pay for his crimes."

Oh boy, that big man had a voice. Should have been an opera singer, should he have? Well, he would have caused less damage to his own soul and to the people and things about him. Maybe a warehouse full of broken glass over the course of his career. Perhaps an occasional diva would have been thrown into the seventeenth row if he forgot his own strength and bulk, but. . .

The panic had spread to the uniformed men on the left side of the room. Two soldiers were left unscattered from the detail of soldiers who had escorted Parnell and his mother and his pregnant wife to this room. Those

two men stepped in the path of the big man and leveled their automatic rifles.

The big man looked surprised but he continued to advance, and Parnell re-remembered how he had beat Dylan Shagari to death. Shattered his jaw, punched most of the poet's teeth down his throat. Broke his ribs, even the left side of his pelvis. Parnell thought it best that this beast-man not be allowed near his mother and his pregnant wife. He turned to look for a weapon, but all rifles in the area seemed already to be aimed at the supreme commander who was not muchly beloved by his own soldiers. At least not this particular group. A few of the staff officers to the left moved as if to protect Kotic but drew back, though Parnell saw one of them go to a microphone, perhaps to signal for help. A shot rang out and that man fell. The shot came from the slender man in the colonel's uniform. A good shot. Sixty feet with a handgun. Not an excellent shot. It hit the fellow in the right side of his chest. Not fatal was that shot, but quitely damaging at that.

Parnell's attention returned to the center of the action. Shocked was he to see his mother was moving towards the two-legged behemoth.

She was blocking the shots of the soldiers closest to Kotic, but an enraged and protective grandmother was she. No less would Morgan Llewellyn have done. Taking his protective arm from the shoulder of Marie so beloved, he started to move forward, but the sergeant was two steps ahead of him.

The Overlord-General was surprised at this little woman advancing his way. He hesitated, and Grace Llewellyn Lopez turned her head to shout, "Get Marie out of here, Parnell." The sergeant had nearly caught up to her before she turned to move once more towards the mightiest man in the world. Kotic was over his surprise. He raised his fist, so slowly did it go up. The sergeant raised his handgun, having apparently decided it best to shoot even if he had to put the bullet over the woman's shoulder, but before he could fire, the fist came down, down, down upon the head of Grace Llewellyn Lopez. Two cracking sounds came and she crumpled with her neck and her backbone bent at angles not at all natural. A spot had appeared just below Kotic's left shoulder. Red it was. Spread it did. Surprise him even more it did. He looked up and snarled at the assassins all around.

Before Grace Llewellyn Lopez's body had even hit the floor, Parnell was at her side. As he bent, several shots sounded, though it was possible the sergeant's shot was a fatal wound. Still, Parnell was happy to see Kotic step

back and raise his unfisted hand to his chest. Red spots were spreading at the center of his breast and at his throat. Nasty the man and nasty the wounds.

On the other side of the Overlord-General, Parnell saw the slender and well-ribboned colonel come forward. He stepped around the Overlord-General and looked him in the face as he raised his handgun. Kotic was certainly already dying, but a ceremony was being enacted. Yes, the gun was coming up towards the hateful face with its teeth bared. Up, up it came. Fired the gun, and a red spot appeared on the forehead of the Overlord-General. His head jerked backward and his body forward in a way that made Parnell happy, as little as he liked to see his fellow-creatures suffer. An explosion had occurred in that head with the bulldog jowls, and the Overlord-General's skull had bulged out in a way that boded not well for its contents.

Parnell decided he preferred the type of explosion that had occurred in the head of Einstein. Messy hair and nonconformist views of reality was much to be preferred over a messy skull and messier cortex.

The slender officer turned from his dead master and came to stand in front of Parnell. He stared for a few seconds but then turned away to say to one of the soldiers, "Take the pig's body out of here. The woman is James Llewellyn's daughter. Treat her corpse with respect."

Before he had finished speaking, Marie had joined Parnell at his mother's side. The sergeant whose name he knew not, came over and patted Parnell's shoulder in sympathy. Out of the corner of his eye, Parnell saw a fellow walk over from the control center where they ran what? mission. Knew he not, but when he looked up, the young man who looked Korean was standing with head bowed near his mother's body. A few seconds later, he raised his eyes and said, "I'm sorry. If things had gone well, the Overlord-General would have been dead before he had gotten near you."

"Was it all a set-up?"

The fellow nodded his head sadly. "We were using his hatred for your grandfather as our shield, knowing he would be less careful. And it helped much that he sent Savant out to find you. We did not have to fear the stiletto between the ribs or the hands which could so easily rip human flesh. So... We were able to sneak soldiers loyal to us into his bodyguard and into the detail sent to get you." He licked his lips and looked away for a few seconds. "I'm Walter Sang. I was a friend of James Llewellyn."

"And a member of the conspiracy that killed Kotic, whether Aristide or

merely Buck?"

The fellow looked at him strangely before asking, "And you are most certainly Parnell." Parnell nodded his head. Walter Sang was still looking at him strangely as he said, "Your grandfather used to talk about you."

Parnell was not sure what to make of the comment and no reply emerged from his mouth. After an uncomfortable moment of silence, Walter Sang turned to the slender officer and suggested, "Maybe these people..."

Parnell did not raise his eyes again from his mother's body as he said, "She is my wife, Marie Leveque Lopez."

He heard Walter talk once more. "Maybe Parnell and his wife should be taken to comfortable quarters while the mortician prepares Grace Llewellyn Lopez's body."

In the dulcimer tones of the northern Appalachians came a response. "When they are ready, Sergeant Atkins will take them to their quarters."

Respectful silence fell down upon the sad couple as Parnell cradled his mother's body in his arms and Marie joined him in silently shedding tears.

Sad day it was.

Bad day it was.

Such a sad, bad day had it become.

The suffering had struck home once more, and Parnell seemed to be all that was left of the Llewellyns and the Lopezes.

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That evening, Parnell woke up with Marie pushed up against his side. He had a fraction of an inch to spare before he would go over the side, but rather than wake her, he rose and took a shower. Cleaned he well. Scrubbed for a number of minutes. Cried he in the shower. The water washed away the tears as it washed away so much else. Remarkable stuff. And so unlikely. The elements with a multiple of four nucleons, above helium of course, were so unstable and oxygen formed by the slenderest of margins. . .

Parnell slumped on the edge of the bathtub, not able to distract himself by even the simplest and most straightforward of thoughts. He was still sitting there a while later when a knock came gently upon the outside door. He threw on a bathrobe and went to answer the door, checking on his way out that Marie was still sleeping peacefully.

Walter Sang was in the doorway along with a balding, bewhiskered man in his 40s. Trying to smile, and he believed his effort bore little fruit, Parnell opened the door and waved the two men into the living room. The balding man was Professor Nim Quantos of MIT. He offered as many loose-ended expressions of heartfelt sympathy as did Walter.

Sad the man, sad his companions.

For his sake.

And in memory of their friend, James Llewellyn.

And in memory of a woman they had not known though she had been mentioned as the sweetest and most loving of creatures in the gossip of her father.

And, so, Walter exchanged conspiratorial glances with Nim. Conspiratorial. Parnell was sure of that, and it worried him. He was not a political animal, not muchly like his grandfather was he. Not good at those games, he was uncomfortable even thinking about them. They scrambled the semblance of order which occasionally existed in his emotional life.

The young computer scientist looked Parnell directly in the eyes, only to drop his gaze to the floor, and then to meet Parnell's suspicious stare once more. Oh boy, was Parnell worried, though he knew not what to worry about. Still, he worried, however vaguely.

Words came for several minutes. Important words uttered in tones foreboding, acoustic energy envelopes presaging danger and excitement and high rewards.

Parnell understood not a word.

He soaked it none at all in, and, then, Walter Sang, nice man he, leaned forward and whispered a great confidence, "The Society is almost entirely made of scientists. We are pious but extremely rational men."

Parnell smiled. He understood. "Just like James Llewellyn, my grandfather in many a context."

Nim Quantos smiled even more broadly than Walter or Parnell. Truly did he seem an openhearted man interested in Parnell, hoping that such a humble and merely person could be made to understand matters so far outside of his expertise. Parnell smiled more broadly. Now he was having fun.

And he had understood the words.

By word, that is.

He was not quite sure why the Society, and sure he was of the capital letter, contained mostly scientists. But he was happy they were pious as well as rational. He would wish them the best so long as they did not return to the design of systems to deliver the fires of Hell to lands far over the oceans.

But then clear it became that they expected something from him.

What in the world. . .

Was that it? was, probably, at least.

He needed to set the record straight.

"I have the technical skills of James Llewellyn but the political skills of Dylan Shagari." Considered, had he, the possibility of comparing his political skills to those of Nudra, but likely they would have thought, "Surely a grandson of James Llewellyn can deal with conspiracies better than an adolescent gorilla." He shook his head sadly to relieve them of such silly ideas.

They still looked at him, anticipating some sort of response. A moment later, Walter, he seemed to be such a nice man, asked, "Are you in?"

Parnell wrinkled his brow and twisted his head slightly as he asked,

“In?” Truth to tell, he was afraid he knew what he was being asked to do.

“In with us. To help to bring James Llewellyn’s ideals to reality.”

“Would we perhaps be better to bring into reality the skeptical moral vision of a nervy biologist?”

“What?”

Both men looked confused. Parnell thought it safest to join them. The state of confusion was not always the worst place to be. Not that he was unwilling to help find the way to coherence. Suggested he, though merely and humbly Parnell, “Is it perhaps best to tend our own gardens that we may avoid the corruptions which ate away the soul of the Overlord-General Kosic. To be morely precise, I use the term ‘soul’ in the sense of Aristotle or Aquinas. A blueprint, as it were – though that be an inadequate analogy – of the corporeal body.” Still looked they confused, and he, ever willing to be helpful, added, “It is perhaps best to think of it in a Pauline sense. Soul is both body and soul, in modern and imprecise terminology, but only is a true soul when body and modern soul work together in unity. Body is the man fragmented though he be mystically and spiritually inclined, and still it be a problem to say what it is that exists when the body’s form begins to separate from liver and pituitary gland. And, last of all, is it flesh which is left when the soul no longer forms the body. It is flesh that is placed beneath the sod, it is body that was Kosic and might be your average pietist, and it is soul that is most of us but a fraction of the time.” Pursing his lips and shaking his head sadly, Parnell noted, “All of us descend from embodied soul to fragmented man-like creature far too often.”

The two good doctors of the physical world, even the very Walter Sang and Nim Quantos, stared at Parnell as if not sure what relevance had such matters to politics, conspiratorial or not. It came to Parnell why Plato had become a Fascist 2,300 years after his death. An odd conversion that, but...

More confused than ever about one matter, Parnell was forced to ask, “What sort of a scientist are you, Dr. Quantos?”

The poor fellow, clearly as confused as ever was Parnell, managed with great effort to stammer out, “A neurobiologist.”

Smiled did Parnell and joyfully did he ejaculate, “Just as was the nervy biologist Morgan Llewellyn, in other contexts the mother of my mother, though she never found herself in the context of being a grandmother in other than my re-construction of my family’s history, whether conscious or implicit in the brain structures of the infant genius that I once was.” In

all humbleness was he forced to add, "As are all the sons and daughters of Adam and that Eve who likely did not deserve her reputation as a slut."

As if not sure what to say, Walter Sang repeated, "Are you in?"

Once more did Parnell ask, "In?" Afraid that they had entered some sort of stable orbit of the type not usually healthy for dynamically changing organisms, he plowed in more deeply. "What were they trying to do to the wise killer's brain?"

"Wise killer?" Walter looked confused for just a second before he asked, "Savant?"

"Is that not the meaning, half implicit and half explicit, of his name?"

"Yes, and it was a name which came from a Dylan Shagari poem." Parnell's face brightened before Walter added, "Savant read the poetry of Shagari aloud while Kosic beat the poor fellow to death." Parnell's face fell.

Nim Quantos leaned forward, squinty-faced perhaps in imitation of a ruthless man. "Can you help us or not?"

Parnell thought for a moment before he volunteered, "I know more than most men about geometrodynamics and I can design ion-drives to send unmanned explorers to the outer regions of the solar system." After a brief pause, he added, "And I could redesign the lunar colonies. Or, if you wish, I could just duplicate the original designs."

Nim sat back with a disappointed expression on his face. Without looking directly at Parnell, he asked, "So you know none of your grandfather's banker or industrialist friends?" Suddenly shifting his eyes suspiciously down at Parnell, he asked, "Or are you reluctant to share your contacts with us? For sure are those men gone far away or at least deeply underground."

Parnell shook his head in honest innocence. "I have none of my grandfather's political skills nor his contacts. I can also not design missile launching systems, though I have a good understanding of fire-control systems for the artillery on 20th century battleships." Hoping to lighten the mood, he smiled and pointed out, "A single gun system on a battleship weighed more than an entire destroyer, which was not a tiny ship."

With a face hovering between shock and disbelief, Nim Quantos rose and took a single step towards the door before stopping uncertainly to look at Walter Sang still in his seat. The young computer scientist seemed to think for a minute before rising and patting Parnell on the shoulder. "I am truly sorry about your mother. If there is anything we can do for you. Or, if any

of your grandfather's friends contact you, please let us know. We will..." He stared off into the distance... Well, he must have looked distantly as Parnell turned and saw only blank walls where pointed Walter's eyes. He took a deep breath and he said, "We will overthrow this dictatorship as we helped overthrow the last. Democracy will rise from the ashes."

Parnell smiled his good wishes at the two men and asked, "Is the wise killer dead?"

Walter's face lost all its expressed certainty. He looked away for a few seconds and then said, "We don't really know. His body is alive, and, if we can believe his testimony, the four year-old boy has once more come to the fore."

Looking as if he were suddenly happier, Nim Quantos stepped forward and said, "You see, Donnie Blackmore had some sort of brain disease at four. When he came out of his coma, his personality had changed from that of a nice, normal boy into that of a bad seed. Kosic had his scientists and the computer system working to reinforce the violent and apathetic traits dominating Savant's brain, but Gopher entered the picture and, using theories traceable to your grandmother, he destroyed the seizure-like activity in Savant's brain by re-establishing the chaotic base-lines in various parts of the Savant's brain, and now it seems Savant is gone and Donnie Blackmore is back."

Parnell asked, "Can I meet the poor fellow?"

The two scientists looked at each other and shrugged in unison. It was Nim Quantos who replied, "I don't see why not."

Joy filled the heart of a fellow who was to meet a boy who had miraculously reappeared where was once only the shards of a human person. Mattered it little that the boy reappeared in the body of a man in his 40s. No, not muchly at all.

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Entubed was the fellow no longer wise, no longer a killer, as if part he were of the computer monitoring his vital signs. Most especially was the machine watching the signals from the regions of his brain so recently subject to seizures. Too orderly had they become, and lucky was it that arbitrary and seemingly erratic movement, within boundaries of course, had been re-established in the brain once shared by Captain Savant and Donnie Blackmore. Not no more did more than one exist where legion should have been partly united.

The doctor at the bedside, a kindly grandmother did she seem to be, smiled kindly down at the body which had ruthlessly killed so many innocent people.

And the brain?

For sure had it participated in, even directed, those cold-blooded murders.

And the mind?

Whose mind?

Did the mind matter?

Was the mind matter?

No matter.

So long as man was part of God's Creation, Parnell saw no way, no reason to distinguish ghostly souls from relationships between things. Still, however defined, at least one thing labeled 'mind' had been in that body.

The wise killer's mind with the seizures focusing it on thoughts so perverse?

The poor boy's mind watching the doggies being mutilated. No signals of horror could he send to show in the eyes for those belonged to the young fellow who would become so wise a killer.

But...

Parnell looked down upon the face so lined and drawn. Passed he several glances over the machines registering the electrochemical activity in various regions of the inert body. The hypothalamus, the adrenal gland, and the pituitary gland showed patterns yet too regular for a complex organism functioning in a complex world drawing forth sophisticated and rapid responses. Occasionally did irregular spikes appear on those screens and Parnell was happy for Donnie. Soon might he be as quasi-stable as a man should be. Only time would tell if he would be more quasi or more stable.

They were the same person.

Of that was Parnell sure.

Captain Savant was simply Donnie Blackmore stuck in a mental and emotional rut. Parnell could not prove such was the case, but he was sure of it. As sure as he was of any contingently factual thing. Even those relationish things not really things but merely traced by the empty term.

Was a person responsible for all his parts?

If so, the little boy was responsible for the acts of that most ruthless and most wise of killers.

There was only one thing to do.

Turned Parnell towards the kindly doctor.

Suggested he, "If he has no home, he can come live with us."

Her smile widened for just a second before that grandmotherly face tightened and admonished Parnell for his planned behavior.

"You were to be his next victim!"

Parnell looked to the man gasping for air as if he were nearly ready to try breathing without the aid of pumps and circuitry. Pondered he such a wonder. He, merely and humbly Parnell, had merited the attentions of a wise-haired man who had killed the last President of the United States. What a marvelous and confusing world was it? was.

Of course. . .

There was the matter which would have greatly annoyed the 400 pound man who had never the chance to sit upon Parnell, however much it might have pleased.

Kosic, that is.

It would not have pleased Parnell muchly.

It did please him to think of returning to Walla-walla, however unlikely a place it was, with his pregnant wife. A life could they build together. And Raul had sent word. His mother was dead – heart attack when she had seen her husband and her son Philippe. Mercifully, Hernando had died

shortly afterward, never having recognized his wife, alive or dead. Philippe was in an institution. He was capable of little. No words came from his mouth, only babblings and gurglings. He had been quite happy to see Raul but given little indication had he of a conscious or rational conception of 'brother'. That made Raul not less his brother, to be sure, and Philippe, never a philosopher, had treated Raul as a beloved and well-loved entity of a vague sort.

Walter Sang had told Parnell that Captain Savant had not been involved in the torture of Hernando and Philippe. In fact, for reasons not quite clear to anyone, he had ordered the executions of the men who had performed the atrocities.

Raul would not mind the presence of a middle-aged man with some personality and cognitive traits of a four year-old. Nim Quantos, human brain expert that he was, had said that Donnie Blackmore would evermore be a confused mixture of adult and four year-old. He had passed by some crucial windows of development and such times could not be regained.

Parnell turned to Marie who smiled sadly and nodded her head. Then he smiled once more upon the kindly doctor and said, "He can come with us. He can help me to catch perch and panfish and the rare largemouth over four pounds." Though it seemed unnecessary, he added, "Not that the big ones are as good to eat as the young'uns. Still will he be a big help. And someday can he help me dig for treasure and perhaps fend off a grizzly defending its winter cave. Not that they do often, but they are so ornery and unpredictable as to appear, at times, nearly as wise-wise as men."

The doctor smiled uncertainly, even in a confused manner, but for sure did she show gratitude that a grandson of a man who had built churches, hospitals, and missile launching systems was so unimportant as to take a homeless and damaged person under his care. Such as it was...

Parnell wondered why Marie and the doctor were looking at him so strangely. Of a certain had he done nothing untoward, not that one should be embarrassed when gases passed irresistibly out of an orifice or the other, or if...

Dropping that line of thought, he walked over to the side of the man whose healed brain was still struggling to regain control of the attached body. Smiled Parnell an offer of friendship. Though his eyes were shut, the poor fellow's lips twitched as if he were fighting with all his might to return the gesture. Parnell patted the man's free hand, and it moved quickly and strongly to grasp Parnell's wrist with the strength of a trained killer so wise

and so practiced. The doctor gasped and Marie's right hand rose to her mouth. Fear showed they, but Donnie grasped for but a second and then let his hand move down to hold Parnell's hand for just a few seconds.

For sure would they be friends. Not sure was Parnell what they would discuss. Not likely was it that Donnie Blackmore knew much about string theory or even the way in which the wisest of killers had simply been him stuck in those ruts. Perhaps Donnie would be interested in a trip to Mars, but Parnell thought it unrealistic to hope he could discuss the use of the moon's gravitational field as a sling.

Still...

For sure would they be friends.

Parnell was accustomed to being alone in his attempts to find unique solutions to Einstein's field equations. Hoped he to find a geometrical setting to more discretely describe gravity. Longed he to one day build an ion-drive propulsion unit to send an unmanned explorer into the dark region where comets were nursed. Not dared he to think of one day helping to send a team of explorers and settlers to Mars.

Well...

Just by thinking that, he had sort of dared to think it...

Joy of joys.

Perhaps men would regain their sanity and start building useful things like space ships and gravity-wave telescopes.

He could hope, anyway...

"It's time to go. Donnie needs his rest."

Parnell smiled at the doctor. He knew that Donnie would be going to Walla-walla, though it was as tiny and improbable a part of the Universe as any small region of Ganymede or even the tiniest region on that poor radiation fried companion of Cygnus X-1. The details could be taken care of later.

As he was about to step out the door, Parnell froze in confusion. Forgot he if his thought had referred to details of Donnie's move to Walla-walla or details of the X-ray outbursts of that strange entity labeled Cygnus X-1 though, hairless as it was, it was likely indistinguishable from a multitude of black holes with about ten solar masses. Odd did seem human moving arrangements when considered alongside of massive gravitational engines for converting matter into some X-rays and some more black holey... Stuff?

Marie pushed him forward and then steered him towards the <elehangin|g-ph'nt>..., that is, elevators. Parnell smiled in appreciation of

the poet's ability to break a man out of set ways of think and speak.

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Float did they on that lake in northern Idaho. So peaceful. So relaxing. The sun shone down from a sky mostly blue. The few clouds wafting by did not at alter Parnell's mood. Stared he into the waters as the magic of quantum effects played such squiggly-organized patterns to not much of a depth. Rose his vision to the evergreens ringing the lake. Truly was Autumn a wonderful time of year. Yes, such a time was it, and such was not to be denied, though time could always be criticized in a world in which space was so intertwined with the more dynamic dimension.

Still. . .

A wonderful world was it, and a wonderful time of year. Not that Parnell was greatly opposed to any time of the year. Buzzed something about the head of Alicia working so hard to splash water with her paddle. Eventually would she learn that she should be working hard to move the canoe, but there was a time and a place for everything in the life of such an ingenious creature who was so complexly contexted in a world not overly simple in and of itself. More importantly, did he gently steer a bee away from the canoe. Settled down did he to stare at the diamonds dancing across the lake so fractionally inch-high ripply calm. This was the life. Better could it not be. . .

Well, Walter Sang had written to ask him if he would be willing to join the team analyzing the feasibility of rebuilding the lunar colonies. That might take him away from his family for fairly long periods of time, but it was such interesting and difficult work.

Nevertheless, he was content and his happiness could only be increased if the rockets were to lift off with the pieces of the L-5 stations.

Joy filled his warm heart.

Having nothing useful to do. . .

Poetized did he, and so he did, composing a saga of a man contented

with his lot. . .

Water-filtered wavy things
Hovered buzzing the wingèd stings
like undulating waxy cells.
as ringed the watery warning bells.
But evergreen the short-lived tree
Calm the knee-deep inner sea.
over the browning, sowing weeds.
No more than man, no more the needs.

Smiled he, content to be no more than a man, content with a day like that, and such a day it truly was. Laid he back as Jimmy, so much like his great-grandfather, put paddle into water on mostly one side, driving the canoe in a poorly defined orbit around a poorly defined quadzillionth of a pointsecond in the middle of the lake. Raised his head, did Parnell do, as Alicia, ever the genius at learning words and physical movements, splashed the water with little purpose but with such wonderful expected effects for the rest of her life.

Appendices

Colophon

This book was typeset using the LaTeX typesetting system created by Leslie Lamport and the memoir class written by Peter Wilson.

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