

On the Eve of Never Departing



Richard von Sturmer

Titus Books

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*Nothing needs to be done
On the eve of never departing.*

—Fernando Pessoa

SECLUSION



Seclusion

The early morning light slips through a gap in the curtains. Outside his window, the unnamed bird continues to produce its single note, without missing a beat, and he finds himself awake. At that moment, the glass on his bedside table materializes out of the darkness. Dust motes are glowing in the water, and the writer observes how the oval surface, halfway up the glass, is perfectly reflected by the curve of the rim. Two transparent lenses have formed, one of water and one of air. He blinks and clears his throat, as if he's about to speak; but there's nothing to say. The bird has fallen silent, and the sparrows are beginning to chirp.

The first thing he does, after getting out of bed, is to put on his grey jersey, the one with holes in both sleeves. This is a way of serving notice to himself that, instead of venturing outside and appearing in public, he will remain firmly indoors and work at his desk. But before this he has to feed the cat, who is already rubbing herself against his legs. The cold morning air has raised the hairs on his calves, and he notes how these hairs, pressed flat by a body of fur, spring back into place when the cats moves away.

~

Looking out his small, oval window into the infinite blackness, the astronaut feels uncomfortable. It's not a matter of his bulky suit, whose confines he is now accustomed to inhabiting, but more a question of his position in the overall arrangement of things. Unable to penetrate the depths of space, he has to remain on the periphery, on the threshold, tied by invisible apron strings to his mother planet. And even if he could cut himself loose and head off in a straight line, he would be dead – more emphatically dead than a mummified king from one of the Egyptian dynasties – before he reached a suitable destination. And what is “suitable”? Some planet that would not crush him with its gravity or poison him with its gases; a planet not too hot and not too cold, with just the right amounts of oxygen and sunlight. When he tries to imagine such a place, he always comes back to the earth.

~

A disorderly platoon of silvereyes makes its way through the paspalam and surrounds the back deck. Flying from stem to stem, the tiny birds appear to enjoy the stalks bending beneath their weight; they're able to exert a material presence while displaying their intrinsic lightness and agility. Swaying from side to side on the stems, they chirp to each other, or hang upside down and peck at the seed-heads. Paspalam, the writer would have informed him, comes from the Latin *paspale*: the finest meal, a tasty morsel. But the meditator doesn't concern himself too much with words. It's enough that one silvereye, bolder than the rest, lands beside him on the deck. He admires the green and olive-grey of its feathers, and the perfect circles of white around each of its eyes. The bird, for its part, takes note of him, dressed in his faded robe and seated on his brown meditation cushion.

His world, for the next six weeks, consists of two small huts linked by a wooden walkway. One hut, his residence, has a bed, a chair and a long shelf, which serves him as a desk; the other hut is just the smallest of kitchens with a sink and a gas stove. Connected to a water tank out the back, the kitchen has been built beside a stand of manuka; or as the meditator likes to think of it, the huts and their walkway are moored to the manuka and encircled on three sides by a sea of paspalam.

At midday he hears the heavy wing-beats of two woodpigeons who settle in a large eucalyptus tree. The tree stands alone in a nearby field. Before they land on its branches, the sound of their wings cuts through the buzzing of flies and the sizzling of cicadas. The meditator stops counting his exhalations, uncrosses his legs, and leaves the darkness of his hut. To his surprise, one of the woodpigeons, flying away across the valley, suddenly breaks and turns upwards, spreading out its wings to hover in midair, for a brief moment like an angel. Then it flips over and dives into the bush below. The woodpigeon repeats this manoeuvre several times. Each time the angel appears before him in the bright open space; each time he catches himself holding his breath.

~

From the doorway, the writer looks back at his unmade bed; the impression left by his body is still visible, right in the middle of the mattress, surrounded by the swirl of his top sheet and a pile of rumpled blankets. "The tide's gone out," he observes, as if an image were needed to express the general feeling of absence. Only after saying these words does he detect the smell of salt; a forgotten smell, the smell of aloneness. He reminds himself that it's been ages (or, more precisely, "another age") since anyone lay beside him. Does he even have an extra pillow, or would he have to go into the living room and find his partner an appropriate cushion? If he were to sleep with another person, a major adjustment would have to be made to his erratic nocturnal schedule, which has him getting up at any hour of the night to jot down a few lines, to consult a particular text, or to read a favourite passage.

After feeding the cat, he places a coffee bag in his small white teapot, pouring in the nearly boiled water while a saucepan of milk heats up on the stove. He then adds the warm milk directly to the teapot, and pours his coffee into a teacup. This somewhat perverse way of doing things gives an indication of how far he has strayed from normal conventions; both from "coffee culture" with its freshly ground beans and elegant, stainless steel percolators, and from the ancestral world of tea, for which his white pot and willow pattern cup were clearly designed. But it doesn't matter; the coffee is just right. Not bothering to sit down at the dining table, he eats a piece of toast, spread with honey, while standing beside the kitchen bench.

With the sun obscured behind a bank of clouds, the patches of daylight in his study are dull and pallid. The writer would like to close the door behind him and retrace his steps along the corridor to his bedroom, leaving the study and the patches of light to themselves. But this would be retreat, and he is determined to start his work today. In this spirit, he sits down at his desk and picks up one of his pens, which lies in the shade of a large stack of papers. The top sheet is pure white, and the metal of his pen feels cold between his fingers.

He realizes, from the very beginning of the day – from the voice of the unnamed bird, the motes of dust in his glass of water, through the image of his unmade bed and his odd approach to brewing coffee, and on to the patterning of sunlight and shadows in his study – that he’s been making an uninterrupted series of observations, providing himself with a sort of running commentary. But for what purpose? He has primed himself to begin a narrative, to craft a long piece of fiction which will encompass a number of different characters involved in intense and even dramatic situations, set against a remote, imposing landscape. And yet what captures his interest is simply the perpetual unfolding of mundane details. It’s difficult to know how to proceed when his intent and his attention are going in different directions. He feels like he has reached an impasse, in the same way that Alan, the main protagonist of his story, finds his ascent of the mountain blocked by a steep and imposing cliff. But the last thing the writer wants to do is to create some kind of allegory. “The mountain must be a real mountain,” he tells himself. At that moment, the first sentence slips out from under the nib of his pen: “The granite wall was featureless and offered no footholds.”

~

“The earth is . . .” The earth is what? The astronaut’s initial response would be to say that the earth is filled with noise, just as space is filled with silence – a vast, rich silence. Compared to the infinite emptiness of space, the earth is like the only house in this corner of the galaxy with a continuous party going on. “The earth never sleeps,” the astronaut thinks to himself, even as his capsule approaches the night side of the planet, whose curved edge is already fading into the blackness of space.

Silence makes him listen. He listens to the saliva shifting inside his mouth, to the grinding of his teeth, to the gulping of his throat, to the beating of his heart, to the pulsing of his blood. It feels as if his body has grown extremely large. One of the paradoxes of being out in space is that you become increasingly sensitive to your own inner dimensions, to the countless passageways and cavities and

recesses contained within the human form. The astronaut appreciates what a fluid and complex universe he embodies. If it were not for the tasks that he has to perform, he would be tempted to turn his attention completely inward.

What disturbs him is not the solitude, but the voices from earth which interrupt his solitude. Every day, at a specific time – and out in space time is even more arbitrarily divided into hours and minutes and seconds – these voices check on his progress by asking him a series of routine questions. The astronaut has no doubt that his responses are being carefully monitored; at mission control a team of psychologists, on the alert for any signs of instability, will be listening to each nuance, to each tone and inflection in his voice. The pressures of prolonged space travel are well-documented, and the most important thing for the success of any mission is that an astronaut performs his designated role as an astronaut. Nothing more and nothing less. So what goes on (and this is how he likes to think of it) is a “game of normality”; he solves a few mathematical problems to demonstrate that his cognitive skills are undiminished, or else he gives a precise description of some minor irregularity, either physiological or mechanical, which has occurred in the course of his day. Anything to keep the earth voices happy. If the truth be known, he would like to tell them how, in his extended state of isolation, he can move at will through his body, cell by cell, entering further into a vast unknown where molecules crack open into a scattering of atoms, and where atoms in turn dissolve into a swirl of particles, into an ever-changing, undulating, radiant net in which each square of emptiness keeps on increasing, logarithmically, to the steady beating of his heart . . . Of course, such a description would be enough to have him recalled to earth in a flash.

~

For exercise the meditator paces up and down the walkway with his eyes lowered. During one circuit, it strikes him that the gaps between the planks have widened. This is not an illusion – he knows that the planks are firmly secured – but rather a sign of how his surroundings have begun to display their unique characteristics. What he initially

took to be a simple construction made of wood – a single, undifferentiated surface over which he could walk – now reveals itself as a highly detailed collection of individual parts, at each step compelling him to acknowledge a particular knothole, a streak of discolouration, a long crack running through the timber. To go with this shift in perception, there is also an awareness of time passing; the random stalks of grass, which he pulled up when he first arrived, have now grown back between the planks. If he were to let another week go by without weeding the deck, these stalks would be tall enough to sway in the wind.

Inside the small kitchen, sunlight shines on the windowsill, illuminating two white candles sitting in a shallow tin. The candles are joined together by their melted wax. A previous occupant must have washed his or her dishes by candlelight, whereas the meditator prefers to do his housework after breakfast, when the sun is already high over the paspalam.

On the underside of one of the kitchen shelves, he notices fifty or so translucent baby spiders, grouped together in a miniature constellation. Their long-legged mother is nearby, suspended in her own orbit but ready to protect her offspring at the first sign of danger. Although he moves closer to observe the cluster of spiders, the mother remains motionless; his form is probably too big, too incomprehensible to pose a real threat (unlike the other adult spiders who are lurking in the background). The meditator can't help but compare his own situation to that of the spider; perhaps the true face of existence, which he is trying to realize through his meditation, is at the same time so immense and so close that he will never comprehend its presence.

A hawk is circling high above the walkway. Viewed from below, its whitish grey body appears as a slight vibration, a rippling on the pale grey surface of the sky. When he looks back through the pane of glass in the door, the interior of his hut glows with a warmth that rises from the faded red of the carpet and mingles with the last of the afternoon light. An inviting warmth. But before returning inside, he lingers on the walkway and listens to the voice of a pheasant.

In the evening he will write in his notebook that the pheasant's cry was like "bronze sharpened to a fine point," and that the magpies were "spilling their bright coins through the dark bush."

~

The writer has reached another impasse and is silent with anger. His words have died on the page and he feels no love for his characters or for himself. Outside his study window, the riotous mass of Busy Lizzies growing along the fence appears blood-red before his eyes, even though the profusion of petals is a complex intermingling of orange and purple and pink. He then remembers that these robust and cheerful flowers belong to a genus called *impatiens*. With this memory, the red begins to fade. There is really no need to be impatient about advancing his story; perhaps it would be better for Alan to remain where he is, isolated on a windswept plateau, and to switch the narration to his German partner, Lisel, an ethnomusicologist who is preparing to record Georgian chants at a monastery in Tbilisi. This shift of focus might introduce a little polyphony into his stark and mono-tonal prose style; and perhaps he might then discover that some life still exists in his words, just as the cold ashes of a fire, when raked with a poker, fold back to reveal a glowing bed of embers.

The writer runs his fingers through his shock of grey hair – *canus* in Latin, the whitish grey of growing old. When the impetus of storytelling leaves him, he always has his definitions (as an old dog has its bones). Getting up from his chair, he stretches, raising both hands high above his head so that his fingertips brush against one of the beams of wood in the ceiling. A snail has fixed itself to the beam, its dusty shell partially covered by the strands of a cobweb. "It must have made a considerable effort to get up there," he thinks to himself, "but why stop at such a desolate place, so far from the plants in the garden?"

~

Of all the things he misses, what the astronaut misses the most is the rain: the sound of rain drumming on a corrugated roof, or tapping

against a pane of glass; the sight of rain stippling the calm surface of a lake, or slashing its way through a stand of trees. And then there are the different varieties of rain: thick, globular rain; pencil-thin rain; bone-freezing rain; warm, enfolding rain. And how about raindrops falling into an open mouth, or clinging to a washing line? Or raindrops bouncing off asphalt, splashing into mud, vanishing into sand . . . ? More and more he feels like a small body of moisture surrounded by the absolute dryness of space. One day he may give form to his various impressions. Perhaps he will end up by writing a book. But it will not be a straightforward, factual account, and neither will it be a work of Science Fiction.

Attempting to describe the colour of the moon, one of his predecessors compared it to the concrete of his driveway back on earth. What could be more painfully mundane? And then there was that famous astronomer who described the moon as “a slag heap”. Such words only demonstrate a total failure of the imagination. When faced with the completely full, completely present, completely luminous moon, the astronaut can only gaze upon it in wonder, and also with a sense of relief. His mission requires him to gather no data about the moon, nor to analyze any details on its well-mapped surface, which is just as well because the moon is so bright that he has difficulty keeping it in focus. The familiar outlines of craters and seas have become blurred, so that its luminous form is no longer a mass of rock but a fluid entity which both shimmers before his window and flows through the intervening space. Moon ribs, moon lungs, moon heart. He reflects, and is incandescent, and keeps his distance.

From his perspective, suspended in space, the idea of anyone ever standing on the moon is plainly absurd. Those images of stiffened flags and of clumsy bodies bouncing up and down are nothing less than emblems of futility. Let the moon remain unexplored, untouched, undefiled, untainted, intact, inviolate. Let it simply endure. Let it be like nothing on earth.

~

At sunset the hawk flies in a straight line. From the clarity of dawn to

the haziness of dusk, another day is drawing to its close. The hawk underlines this ending, while the cows in the field beyond the eucalyptus tree, which were bellowing like lions in the heat of the afternoon, are now lowing to each other in soft, compliant tones, having resumed their identities as herbivores before the fall of night.

A full moon sails slowly over the tips of the pine trees. On the far ridge, the trees appear jet-black against the deep blue of the evening sky. The meditator recalls that the Japanese have a special word for the sound the wind makes in a grove of pines. But his trees are absolutely still; their collective silence sustains the path of the moon.

At midnight a dog barks on and on. He finds himself wide awake, his mind empty and clear. When thoughts do occur, they take the form of questions: "Who is this body lying inside its sleeping bag?" He is able to give a provisional answer, "Someone I'm comfortable with." "What is your original home?" He listens to a rat scampering about in the ceiling and replies, "This temporary dwelling." "And how can that farm dog keep up its barking for hours on end?" After a long pause, the meditator admits to himself, "I don't know."

~

The consonant thirds and fifths, the dissonant seconds, fourths and ninths. The gorge with its ice-cold waters, the upland peaks covered in snow. An arrow passes through the blue flowers. An empty boat is filled with moonlight. In the downstairs room, a fire blazes in a stone fireplace. The immense wooden table is arrayed with jugs of wine and plates of food. The night will be long. A thrush and a partridge. Who will win the singing competition? Who will snuff out the candles and clear away the dishes?

Before he falls asleep, the writer loosens his wristwatch and lets it drop onto the carpet. "That's the last time," he thinks to himself. A little later, in his sleep, this thought becomes "that's the lost time." In the morning, however, time is sure to return, just a ray of light will shine through the crack in the curtains, and the unnamed bird will take up its single note.

FIVE TALES FROM THE SEVENTIES



Living with a Lake

In July and August of 1972, the Surrealism Exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery broke all attendance records. I was fifteen at the time and completely captivated by my first encounter with the works of Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Yves Tanguy and René Magritte. Europe, albeit a surreal Europe, unfolded before me, and as I walked around the gallery I could sense my imagination expanding as it entered new and mysterious realms. On a mundane level, one painting in particular – “Portrait” by Magritte – confirmed my decision, taken a few months earlier, to become a vegetarian.

The surface of a table is set with a glass and wine bottle, a knife and fork (side by side), and a white plate. A circular slice of pink ham lies on the plate, and in the middle of the ham a human eye stares back at the viewer. It's like the third eye on a forehead – a section of forehead which has been peeled away from the bone. The wine bottle is uncorked, and the fork has been turned over so that its tines are resting on the table. Is this a sign that the fork can be more directly employed to stab the slice of ham? Or does it mean that the diner has refused to consume his meal, and has reversed the fork in a gesture of defiance?

Battles over food were part of my childhood. But those battles had now ended, and I felt certain that I would never be forced to eat meat again. Be that as it may, it was after the exhibition, while browsing in the Art Gallery's bookshop, that my life underwent a real transformation. Among the printed work relating to the surrealists, there was a large, golden book on Salvador Dali. Opening its embossed cover, I was transfixed by the image of a young girl, naked and hovering in space, who is depicted in the act of lifting up a corner of the ocean, as you would a sheet on a bed, to reveal a piebald dog sleeping underneath in the shadows.

What is the dog dreaming about? A rock floats near his nose, its top half poking through the ocean like the chipped horn of a rhinoceros, causing ripples to spread out on an otherwise tranquil surface.

For weeks afterwards I carried that glimpse of Dali's painting with me: the line where a desert landscape meets the sea (as it does in his Catalan birthplace); the granite rocks encrusted and sparkling with mineral-like vegetation (here the canvases of Max Ernst exerted their influence); and the faithful hound sleeping on the seabed, surrounded by water as transparent as air, or by air itself in its purest form, circulating beneath the membrane of the ocean. . . . In the end I badgered my father into buying me the book. But when I got it home and opened its pages, I was disappointed to find that Dali's painting lacked the richness and depth which it had taken on in my imagination. Nevertheless, from that point on I thought of myself as a surrealist.

~

For the first twenty years of my life I lived beside Lake Pupuke on Auckland's North Shore. Some of the first sounds I remember were the voices of swans calling to each other at night, and the muffled explosions, in the early morning, of dynamite being detonated in a quarry on the other side of the lake. The clouds of dust from those explosions have long ago dispersed, and although my bedroom window no longer overlooks a heart-shaped expanse of water, I retain a museum of lake memories: of submerged trees with bone-white branches, of light reflected and rippling over shadowy banks, of broken-down boatsheds and islands of floating weed, and of dramatic sunsets, glowing red and gold, which as they faded cast luminous nets between the black tips of the waves.

The Maori name for Lake Pupuke is Pupukemoana, which can be translated as "overflowing lake". In reality what overflowed, approximately 150,000 years ago, was molten lava from an erupting volcano. After the eruption ceased, the crater gradually filled up with fresh water. On a mythic level, the origin of the lake is connected with two ancestors, Matakamokamo and his wife, Matakerepo. One day, during a bitter domestic dispute, their hearth fire went out and nothing could be done to rekindle it. In a moment of unchecked anger, Matakamokamo cursed Mahuika, the goddess of fire. Taking exception to the insult, Mahuika called upon a local deity, Mataoho,

to punish the ill-tempered husband. Mataoho pointed a giant, gnarled finger at the trembling man and caused him to sink beneath the earth. The crater that he left behind would later become Lake Pupuke. Just as in Dante's *Divine Comedy* the fall of Lucifer into the earth causes Mount Purgatory to rise up on the other side of the world, so Matakamokamo's sudden descent gave birth to the island of Rangitoto out in Waitemata Harbour. To this day there is a belief that lava tunnels run like petrified veins beneath the sea, connecting Lake Pupuke to Rangitoto.

~

Not a relation but a friend of the family, Uncle Orla came from Copenhagen in the 1950's and set up a woodworking business in Auckland. He made a leather camel-stool for my father with a small bell hanging from one end, which you could ring while sitting on the stool in the middle of our lounge. He once hit a cricket ball so hard from our back lawn that it flew high over the adjoining park and landed in Lake Pupuke. I imagined the red ball, like a globe of molten lava, sinking to the bottom of the lake where it would become an item of curiosity for the local trout and eels.

While working in his factory, a shard of metal, flung up by a lathe, removed the septum from Uncle Orla's nose. After surgery the nose appeared flattened against his face, balancing the broadness of his smile and the wild light that often shone from his eyes.

On one holiday, spent in a bach on Waiheke Island, I remember watching the rapid movements with which he cut up a slab of meat on the red and white squares of a plastic table cloth. He placed the chunks of meat inside an onion bag, knotted a piece of string around the top, and tied the other end to a long pole. In the late afternoon we walked down the main road to a nearby creek. Once there, Uncle Orla stood on the bank and lowered the bag into the water. In less time than it took to smoke one of his Dutch cigarillos, the bag was pulled up. Attached to the outside, their teeth caught in the mesh, were three or four large eels.

Uncle Orla was an expert in the skinning and smoking of eels, and

after that holiday I began to pull my own out of the Lake Pupuke, using a hook and line instead of an onion bag. But as the eels I caught had ingested too much mud, they never made for good eating. During the summer months, I lost count of how many I dispatched; what does come back is the image of a metal bucket, coated with slime and scraps of weed, a watery patch of blood glistening in the bottom.

Haloed by the blue of the lake, I would lie on my stomach at the end of the jetty and wait for a serpentine form to appear and take the piece of meat. At times a hooked eel would retreat under the jetty, wrapping its tail around a rock, and the harder I pulled, the more resolutely the eel would anchor itself. The ensuing struggle inevitably led to the hook being torn from the eel's mouth, or to the eel, exhausted, being hauled out of the water. Because I felt through my arm some of the tension, if not the panic, the eel experienced as it fought for its life, I began to tire of fishing, at first removing the hook and releasing the eel, and later abandoning my fishing tackle in favour of dropping bits of meat or bread over the edge of the jetty. In time it simply became a pleasure to lie down and observe a sinuous flickering; to watch a sleek head break the surface of the water; and to wonder what sort of world the eel's small, milky eyes saw in that brief moment before it slipped back into the reeds.

~

During my surrealist phase, I produced a series of paintings in my fifth and sixth form art class that owed much to the works of Salvador Dali and Max Ernst. In one canvas, crusaders on horseback crush to death three giant butterflies that have landed on the path in front of them. In another work, somewhat crudely depicted, a single hand bursts into blue flames. (I later came across that same image in a book of pictures painted by survivors of the atomic bomb.) But these subjects were peripheral to my vision. The scene I would return to, over and over again, was a strange landscape – a tangled, anthropomorphic forest or a rock-strewn plateau. In the background (and this was the detail I loved to add) there would always be the calm surface of a lake with a figure in a red robe, a monk or a hermit,

sitting on the bank, absorbed in solitary contemplation.

I stopped painting after I left high school, and the hooded figure by the lake's edge lost its fascination and was forgotten. Then, many years later, I read the following legend in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, a book of essays by Italo Calvino:

Late in life the emperor Charlemagne fell in love with a German girl. The barons at his court were extremely worried when they saw that the sovereign, wholly taken up with his amorous passion and unmindful of his regal dignity, was neglecting the affairs of state. When the girl suddenly died, the courtiers were greatly relieved – but not for long, because Charlemagne's love did not die with her. The emperor had the embalmed body carried to his bedchamber, where he refused to be parted from it. The Archbishop Turpin, alarmed by this macabre passion, suspected an enchantment and insisted on examining the corpse. Hidden under the girl's dead tongue he found a ring with a precious stone set in it. As soon as the ring was in Turpin's hands, Charlemagne fell passionately in love with the archbishop and hurriedly had the girl buried. In order to escape the embarrassing situation, Turpin flung the ring into Lake Constance. Charlemagne thereupon fell in love with the lake and would not leave its shores.

Calvino admits that the legend kept coming back to him “as if the spell of the ring were continuing to act through the medium of the story”. For my part, I prefer to let the ring sink to the bottom of the lake, leaving behind a series of concentric circles, which expand across the placid surface before melting away. My interest lies with the figure of Charlemagne sitting on the shore, gazing into the depths. In doing so, echoing the figure in my paintings, the emperor carries on an ancient and silent dialogue with a seductive body of water, a receptacle of sunsets and stars, beside which he no doubt wishes to spend the remaining years of his life.

Primates at Night

(Being the true story of a mysterious encounter which took place at the Auckland City Zoo in 1973.)

Like many people I have an ambivalent attitude towards zoos; I'm drawn to them because they provide contact with a wide variety of animals, and I'm equally repelled because those animals are, of course, kept in cages. One way I resolved this dilemma, when I was sixteen, was by organizing trips to the zoo at night.

Under cover of darkness, the barriers that separate humans from animals, while still there, were not so well-defined, and a trip to the zoo, as it had been in childhood, once more became a cause of excitement.

On the night of a full moon – and only when the moon was full – we would park the car in a side-street and stroll down to the dip in the main road. At this point, keeping an eye out for traffic, we would scale the zoo wall and land silently on the other side, next to the elephant enclosure.

From memory there were five of us on this particular excursion, and everything went as planned: we watched the hippopotamus surface from its dark waters, paced beside the black panther as it glided back and forth behind the bars of its cage, called over the emu and the ibex and the zebras, and listened to those piercing shrieks and cries that are often blurred in the haze of the daytime. Then we came to the chimpanzees.

That night the apes were very quiet, exhibiting none of their usual agitation at the sight of a group of shadows moving towards them down the path. This change in behaviour intrigued us, and we approached their cage.

Illuminated by the full moon, a series of hairy arms reached through the bars, and without uttering a word, to each other or to our hosts, we climbed over the guardrail and walked into those arms with the calm certainty, on looking back, of experienced swimmers walking

into the sea.

The following moments were outside time; or in those moments millennia slipped away. And we didn't question what was happening, we were simply drawn into the experience, passing through a mirror of iron and moonlight to touch a distant image of ourselves.

Four of us were satisfied with shaking hands and patting arms, but Don, who was in his twenties, old beyond his years, and something of a drifter, pressed himself against the bars and let the chimpanzees sniff his armpits and run their hands up and down his shorts.

I was watching Don talk softly to the apes as they fondled his testicles and picked through his unkempt hair, when two strong hands gripped my shoulders and spun me around, pinning my back against the bars. Completely helpless, I could only hold my breath while the brown corduroy jacket, which I wore like a second skin in those days, was pulled away from my shoulders and arms.

Stepping back from the cage, somewhat shaken, I heard the sound of a pocket being unzipped. That was fine, I told myself, they could do whatever they liked with the jacket. Then there came a clink, followed by a tinkling of metal, and I remembered the car keys.

Before we could begin to worry, stranded at midnight far from home, Don called one of the chimpanzees over and offered to make a deal: in exchange for the car keys he would give his friend something of great value – his glasses. The ape listened intently and then disappeared into the back of the cage. A minute later he returned with the sound of metal. Don handed over the glasses and received the keys.

It happened just like that. Don then explained how he was very short-sighted and needed his glasses to survive in the outside world. Once again the ape listened to his words, and when Don passed his hand into the cage, the glasses were placed with the utmost care on his open palm, their thick lenses catching the moonlight. Nothing could be added to such a gesture; all that remained was for us to say goodbye, climb over the wall, and walk back to the car.

~

For years we didn't mention this encounter, it was enough to know that it had taken place. But one night, a month or so later, we did return to the zoo, and naturally headed down the path towards the chimpanzees. This time the atmosphere had changed; the apes appeared unfocused and disturbed. They yelled and beat the bars of their cage while we stood there, on the other side of the railing, as if we were a thousand miles away.

From Egg to Flame

When Derek disappeared to Wellington for a week, he sent me a letter from the Salvation Army Hostel. It was 1975, we were both involved in a street theatre group, The Zazou Clowns, and the dramas that unfolded among ourselves were invariably more complex and intense than the material we happened to be working into shape. Occasionally it would get too much, an emotional surge sending someone into his or her own orbit, the others continuing on as best they could until that person returned. This instability, erratic as it was, did generate its own kind of energy, which flowed through our rehearsals and improvisations. Auckland City, at times so dull and drab that you would think it still existed in the 1950's, became a vast wall on which our performances burst forth like brightly coloured and transient graffiti. And when one of our group went over this wall, travelling beyond the Bombay Hills, there was always something – some incident or story – which he or she would bring back.

In his letter Derek described how he came down to breakfast one morning, passing by the faded sofa in the hallway and the stemmed ashtray overflowing with cigarette-butts, to find the dining room deserted apart from an old, bald-headed man seated at a table. Judging by his bulk, he could have been a wrestler or a heavyweight boxer in his earlier life, although the slowness of his movements and the serene expression on his face suggested someone who now inhabited another dimension, who had all the time in the world to complete a very limited number of tasks. As no one else was around, Derek remained standing and observed the old man.

A soft-boiled egg had been provided for his breakfast; an egg sitting in its egg cup. And when the old man raised his teaspoon to tap the side of the egg, Derek imagined himself armed with a huge spoon, swinging it in a horizontal arc so that he could lift the top off the smooth, human dome at the exact moment the old man lifted the top off his egg. Such an image was too good to let pass, and I quickly transformed it into a performance piece.

~

Back in Auckland, Royce had returned from England after an absence of eighteen years. Unlike us, he had grown up in the 1950's, and being gay in what was little more than a farming town at the bottom of the world compelled him to escape as soon as he could, first to Sydney and then to London. But the cold and the rain and the greyness of London finally became unbearable. He had dreams of revisiting a land of sunlight and greenery, of sailing a yacht on the Waitemata harbour, of being part of the largest Polynesian city in the world.

Although these dreams did have their corresponding realities, in terms of narrow-mindedness and insularity Auckland seemed to have undergone no real change during his years away. Therefore, to justify his return, to himself as well as to his wife (whom he had left behind in London with their two young daughters), he founded The Arts Centre in Hobson Street, in a run-down building across the road from the Central Police Station. Royce envisioned a centre whose doors "would always be open", and set about creating a number of studios out of what had formerly been offices and storage space. The Dream Factory was his alternate name for this undertaking, and to help launch it he organized a series of late-night parties. It was at one of these parties that we performed the egg piece.

The band had just completed an extended version of *All Along the Watchtower*, and the main room was filled with people holding glasses of wine or bottles of beer, which were passed over a small, improvised bar set up near the door at the top of the stairs. As the lights began to fade, Matthew and I placed a table and two chairs in the middle of the performance area. Matthew had recently shaved his head, and we had coated his baldness with gold paint and lowered a large, papier-mâché egg onto his shoulders. The top half of the shell had been designed to come apart when struck, leaving behind a jagged edge. I positioned a giant spoon in the background and gave a signal to Royce, who told everyone to be quiet as the performance was about to begin.

The lights come up on a husband and wife, Henry and Vera,

seated opposite each other at the table. Henry's head has been transformed into a large, white egg. Although Vera pleads with him, he refuses to speak or to eat his soft-boiled egg, which she has placed before him in an egg-cup. Driven to near desperation by his unresponsiveness, Vera decides to call the Egg Marketing Board. Quick as a shot, their maintenance man arrives on the scene. After measuring the circumference of Henry's shell with a large pair of calipers, he informs Vera that drastic action is called for. With a flourish, he then produces the giant spoon. Sensing a change in the atmosphere, Henry is also galvanized into action. And just as he raises his teaspoon and lops the top off his egg, the maintenance man cracks Henry's egg-head with a mighty blow, sending the upper half of the shell flying across the room. Henry's new head is revealed for all the world to see – a dazzling yellow, the colour of yolk and sunlight. Awakened from his stupour, with eyes wide-open, he lets out one loud BORK!

BORK was the title of our performance, and I'm sure that it made an impression on its audience, although I don't remember what happened next. Some poets may have stood up to read their work, or the band might have resumed with a soulful version of *No Woman No Cry*. It was late at night and people would be singing along with the chorus or pairing off to get more intimate in one of the side rooms. This may also have been the occasion when Don's brother used the toilet that was out of order and ended up by filling the pan with paper and paraffin before setting it alight.

No doubt the police put in an appearance, being just across the road. And when the party eventually came to an end, people drifted away one by one or in small groups into the early morning, which even then, with the first rays of dawn aslant like planks of timber, would have seemed to be part of another time and another place.

~

In less than a year Royce watched The Arts Centre go into a rapid decline; the studios were broken into, membership fell away, and the

building became a refuge for those who had no prospect of employment or a permanent home. Finally he closed down The Dream Factory, packed up his unsold artwork, and flew back to London.

From a council house in Finchley, with a pet rabbit, boxes of toys, and shelves of overdue library books, Royce wrote his Auckland experiences into a television script, which he called *The Prodigal Son*. Its middle section focused on the rise and fall of The Arts Centre, and included our performance of the egg piece. Derek's original image of the old man and his egg thereby underwent another transformation. For many months Royce revised and reworked his script, only to have it repeatedly turned down by television producers. After four years, he once again left his wife and daughters to resettle in Australia, declaring that he would spend the rest of his days fishing off the rocks in Sydney harbour.

~

Eighteen years passed, and in the summer of 1998 I received a letter from Jean, Royce's wife. We usually kept in touch via Christmas cards, but this time she wrote to tell me that Royce was dying in Sydney from an AIDS-related illness. As it happened, I was about to visit my uncle in Sydney, and I took Royce's address with me on the plane.

When I telephoned his flat, the person on the other end informed me that Royce had been admitted to the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Newtown. Our reunion therefore took place in the white surroundings of his hospital room.

I expected him to be gaunt (which he was), but what surprised me was a silvery light which glistened in his eyes. This strange light turned out to be the result of a recent operation to reattach his retinas. During our long conversation, Royce mentioned that when he was first informed about the seriousness of his present condition, his doctor couldn't help but add, "Anyway, you're well past your use-by date."

At a certain point Royce needed to go outside and smoke a cigarette. In the lift he gave me a sly smile and said that the hospital doctors had also found a shadow on his lungs.

We sat down on a wooden bench near the main entrance. Behind us, the Victorian façade of the Royal Prince Alfred gave off a golden glow in the late afternoon sunlight. Yes, Royce observed, Sydney was still a beautiful city, and he was getting the best treatment in the world, care of the New South Wales health system. At that moment two policemen appeared carrying a tramp between them. They deposited the tramp – one of Sydney’s many homeless old men – next to us on the bench before peeling off their rubber gloves as they departed, casting them into a rubbish bin with studied disdain.

The tramp muttered what sounded like a long string of obscenities. After a pause, when he spied Royce bringing out his tobacco pouch, he asked in a croaky voice, “Give us a smoke, mate.” Royce calmly rolled a cigarette and passed it to him. Searching in his coat pockets, the tramp then produced a packet of matches, but his hands were trembling to such an extent that each match flew away before it could be struck. Royce leaned over again, lit a match, and cupped his hands so that the flame remained steady. It was a simple gesture of kindness. And once the tramp had finished his cigarette and wandered away, I said goodbye to Royce. As I turned to look back, he was still seated on the bench, eyes closed, absorbing the last rays of sunlight.

~

Two months later I received another letter from Jean, telling me that Royce had slipped into dementia a few weeks after my visit and had died at the beginning of autumn. On reading her words, the image came back of his hands cupped around a flame.

As for Derek, he and I continue to meet regularly in Auckland. Just the other day, over a cappuccino, he asked if I would be interested in doing some puppet theatre. Possibly, I thought to myself, but nothing that involved strings or gloves or papier-mâché. It would have to be something extremely fragile and transitory. Perhaps shadow puppets

– dark forms that would appear briefly against a luminous screen before being spirited away.

Without Shoes in Italy

One day, while hitchhiking on Great Barrier Island, I was picked up by a milk tanker. I sat in the cabin between the driver and his three-year-old son. As we swung along the winding road, the little boy wiggled his toes with pleasure. Looking out of the corner of his eye, his father mentioned that “this little tiger” had never worn shoes, and that there was no way to get a pair of shoes on him. After ten years of living in the United States, one thing which struck me on returning to New Zealand, even in a cosmopolitan city like Auckland, was the number of people, both young and old, who were walking around bare-footed.

The driver changed into a lower gear as the tanker rumbled down the hill and into Tryphena. Studying the boy’s small, tanned feet, I cast my mind back to Italy, that country of sophisticated and fashionable footwear.

~

Having studied Italian for two years at Auckland University, in 1977, a few months after my twentieth birthday, I travelled to Italy. This was the right time and I was the right age. Italy was to work a transformation on me – a sort of sea change would take place – and to this day I feel a debt of gratitude towards that land and its people. Because I went there, a window opened, a window onto a vibrant and chaotic way of living, one which I had never experienced while growing up in New Zealand. Italy also gave me confidence; I departed as a wide-eyed traveller and returned equally wide-eyed, but with the knowledge that there are forces operating in this world which lend you their support when you venture into the unknown.

By the time I visited Venice and Florence, making my way South by train, I had established a daily routine: first of all I would find somewhere cheap to stay (a youth hostel or *pensione*), then I would buy provisions for breakfast and lunch at a public market before setting off on foot to explore the streets and museums. And I was nourished by every sight and sound – by the marble and dust, the

pigeons and porticoes, the cries of street vendors and the whistling of trains.

Arezzo, a small town in Umbria, became one stopping place because its Church of San Francesco is the home of *The Legend of the True Cross*, a series of frescos by Piero della Francesca. While checking into the Arezzo youth hostel, which stands on the corner of a medieval square, I met two young men from Manchester, Tony and Ernie. Friends since childhood, they bore a resemblance to a younger version of the British comedians Morecambe and Wise – Tony being tall and thin, and Ernie being short and stout. Their car, a battered Ford Escort, was crammed full of supplies for two months along with a stereo system and Ernie's collection of three hundred records. Their plan was to drive to the south of Italy and start up a travelling disco. As they knew nothing about Italian culture and spoke no Italian, I ended up by acting as their guide and interpreter for the day.

That evening we dined together at a local restaurant. After a bottle of red wine and several beers, they began to berate a group of young Italian soldiers, who couldn't understand a word of their English. Somehow I managed to get them back to the youth hostel before a fight broke out.

Early the next morning, after we shook hands and they apologized, once again, for having no room to give me a lift, they jumped into the Ford Escort and drove away. This was the start of Tony and Ernie's big adventure, and I imagined them broadcasting *Saturday Night Fever* down a side-street in Calabria, far away from the punk revolution, which was sweeping through Great Britain at that time.

During my own journey South, I had been warned several times to stay clear of Naples, that it was a "crime-infested" city, worse than Cairo or Marseilles. But such warnings came from earnest American or Canadian backpackers, who preferred the efficiency and order of Germany to the chaos of southern Italy. So, after a few days in Rome, I found myself in a small hotel room, overlooking a congested and bustling Neapolitan street.

In the evening I would sit on my balcony, surveying hundreds of other balconies above and below. The street itself was so narrow that I could virtually shake hands with the young mother directly opposite, who liked to lean on her railing while drinking a cup of coffee. My next door neighbour, an Egyptian, would also be on his balcony, sitting cross-legged, either counting out lira notes from an enormous bankroll, or polishing his collection of brass vases. Behind other balconies, through open doors, I could see the flickering of television sets, and hear the clattering of plates and dishes.

In fact, Naples was so filled with life that I felt elated. As the days went by, this feeling of elation remained, and one morning I simply walked outside, bare-foot. Every person I encountered asked me why I was *senza scarpe*, without shoes, and where I had come from. My answers often formed the beginning of an animated conversation, and as well as generating considerable interest, I became aware of being entertained, of being “held among” a people who took delight in responding to each other.

On one occasion an old man invited me into a bar where I was served a brightly-coloured and bitter-tasting liqueur. He had a kindly manner, and I felt relaxed in his presence, although I understood little of what he said as he spoke, for the most part, in a thick Neapolitan dialect. After we had emptied our glasses, he took me by the hand and led me through a maze of side-streets.

Our progress was slow because of his age, but we finally arrived at a small square, stopping in front of the crumbling façade of what I imagined to be a school. My companion shouted a few words. There was a moment of silence. Then, from the third floor, a window was flung open and an ancient nun – *una vecchia suora* – looked out, breaking into a smile when she recognized the one who had summoned her. “Qualcosa da mangiare?” requested my friend. At this the nun disappeared, returning to the window a few minutes later with a basket, which she lowered down to us on a rope. Inside the basket, wrapped in a white cloth, we found half a loaf of bread and some slices of cheese.

I retain no memory of how this episode ended (although I’m sure that

the bread and cheese were gratefully consumed). What remains is the force with which the window flew open, disturbing a pigeon who was perched on a ledge beneath the roof. The pigeon circled the square once, perhaps twice, before it came to rest, ruffling its feathers. Down a side-street someone was playing an accordion, an accompaniment to the pandemonium of traffic that continued in the background.

Eros and Rodents

One afternoon during a six-week stay on Great Barrier Island, I had tea with two independent women in their late thirties. Each lived by herself, and both admitted, half-jokingly, that they would like a big, rather dumb man who could build and fix things in the daytime, and warm their beds at night. This man needed to be a combination of carpenter, electrician, and plumber; he would have to be able to pour concrete, dig ditches, and install solar power. Surprisingly, in a country renowned for its do-it-yourself ethos, such men were hard to find. They did exist on the island, but they were even more independent than the women, living by themselves in remote shacks in dense native bush, miles away from contact with other human beings. Now and then, when hiking around the island, I would come upon one of their dwellings. Looking through a dusty window, I would see a punk rock or an anarchist poster on the wall, piles of faded paperbacks on the floor, stacks of cassette tapes, heaps of old clothing, gumboots, knives, fishing rods, bits of machinery, pieces of driftwood . . . and always, in a corner, a large bag of dog biscuits. It seemed that every man or woman who chose to live alone had a dog for his or her companion. Those dogs – and I met many in the course of six weeks – were invariably intelligent, resourceful, and full of affection.

I had received a literary grant to write on Great Barrier, and my accommodation turned out to be an A-frame cabin at the bottom of a dark, manuka-covered valley. This location suited my purposes as I preferred to work in isolation, away from other people. Unfortunately I had no dog to keep me company, only the fleas that a former canine resident had left behind.

~

Waking up in the middle of a cold night, I threw extra blankets on the bed, and after sunrise I wore a jersey and shivered as I began to write. Far from being a disinterested visitor to the island, I had also become a solitary male, with no voice but my own to make comments and record thoughts. On the table before me, I placed a

photograph of my wife, Amala, coming out of the sea in Florida. The waves were greenish-brown, and the sky behind her was overcast – conditions which somehow coincided with my own, surrounded as I was by a green wash of bushes and ferns, and living through days of heavy rain.

Amala was in the United States, and in two month's time I would join her there. Having crossed the Pacific, distances would melt away, our separation would come to an end, and I would breathe in her breath and listen to the beating of her heart. But for now I missed her presence, cooking for myself on a gas burner, gathering firewood, reading by candlelight, sleeping under a mosquito net.

~

One evening, as a rat scuttled about on the roof overhead, I remembered the time in 1979 when we were living together in Auckland's Grafton Gully, occupying the bottom half of a two-storied house that overlooked the motorway. Our kitchen was long and thin, with large windows and hanging plants, which made me think of a terrarium. As for the rumble of motorway traffic, a few weeks after we moved in, it became no more unsettling than the sound of a nearby river.

It was during this period that Amala went on a tour of the North Island with our punk band, *The Plague*. I had stopped performing with the group in order to concentrate on writing, and as Amala and I had not spent a day apart for several years, it was strange at first to be alone.

While at high school I had revelled in what I thought was my role as “the odd one out”, the one who is unattended, and soulful, and filled with a longing that extended deep into the universe. At a certain point I took to wearing a red monk's robe, inspired by Roger Corman's film *The Mask of Red Death*. This was part of my Surrealist phase, but it also suggested that I was destined to be cut off from others, cloistered away in my own world. Now the opposite had happened: I had become intimately linked to another life; a true union – a fusion – had taken place; a kind of sensual osmosis was in

full-swing; and I had difficulty in distinguishing Amala as a separate person from myself. So, no doubt, a period of being apart would do us both good. And once the van had picked her up and driven away, I noted how the solitude of the present moment was different in tone from the solitude of the past, and how this new state of being, soon afterwards, began to attract a series of solitary friends and acquaintances, who appeared at regular intervals on my doorstep.

The last one to arrive was Rob. Over a cup of tea, he entered a metaphoric realm, describing how he had carefully constructed a beautiful tower on a sunlit hill, with a spiral staircase, and turrets, and expensive carpets and paintings. He had built and furnished this tower to attract his ideal partner, but although the door was always left open, nobody had climbed up the hill or set foot on the staircase. It was a sad story, told late at night, and I'm not sure that I offered Rob much solace.

After he departed, I cleared the cups away and sat down at the small round table which occupied an alcove by the kitchen. It was past midnight, and as a pervasive sadness began to recede into the surrounding shadows, I found that I had become very still and quiet; the night, and the silence of the night, held me in place.

Minutes passed. Then, from a stainless-steel toaster, which stood on the table near my left arm, I heard a distinct rustling. Keeping my head fixed in space like a statue, I watched from the corner of my eye a mouse climb out of the toaster. While it paused on top to clean the crumbs from its whiskers, three other mice materialized from below the table, scampering up the hessian cloth, which covered the alcove, to perform a dance on the wall in front of me. The mice were the same brown as the hessian, and the wall itself seemed to come alive as they gracefully circled each other, moving up and down with such ease you would have thought that the force of gravity had ceased to exist.

This uninhibited display could have been a sequence from a dream, although I was very much awake and alert, granted the status of "privileged observer" by these mice, the only prerequisite being my absolute stillness.

When they eventually tired of revolving around their hessian backcloth, the small creatures disappeared to continue their nocturnal activities somewhere else. I waited to see if they might come out again, but nothing further happened. The only sound was the ticking of the kitchen clock. And so, after allowing a few more minutes to pass, I then stood up rather stiffly and went to bed. However, my solitude had been transformed; it was no longer a feeling (of loss), or even an image (a dark cloud), but simply a space through which things could move. And as my head touched the pillow, I looked forward to telling Amala all about the mice when she returned home.

DESERT SOLO



Desert Solo

*No thoughts that stay in the memory,
just a few small pebbles
lodged in the soles of my boots.*

For a week after I returned from the south-western desert, I hardly slept at all. And when I did drift into a shallow sleep, the only thing that lay before me was a single road leading through the emptiness, and a map showing that same road with the names of a few small towns dotted along the way (names I could never recall the next morning). There was nothing more, no features to the landscape, no forms of life to encounter. I merely followed the road with a dogged determination, eventually waking up in a state of exhaustion, feeling like I had never been to sleep.

~

*After walking through
folds of
smooth rocks
and pink shadows,
the canyon behind me
is sealed off
by harsh
unbroken sunlight.*

It's not that everything disappears once you've gone; the landscape remains as it has done for millions of years. The vast emptiness of desert and mesas and sky simply awaits your return. But you can't rely upon that emptiness. Everything will soon compress you as if you were in a room that constantly fills with information. Already the radio is on. There is another war – another war in the same country, and a perpetual drought, and then the first plaintive notes of a Country and Western song.

~

Outside the window, a sparrow continues to chirp. I hold a small

white flower of jasmine and inhale its sweet perfume. The jasmine brings me back to the desert. Only a few flowers are there in late summer – the season I'm familiar with – or else the flowers are somewhat unassuming and you have to be attentive to their presence. Yet the vivid red petals of Indian paintbrush remain beside a path, a dusty path which leads through the bluish-gray expanse of sagebrush and juniper trees.

Further on, with a change of landscape, as if summoned by a magician's wand, clusters of prairie sunflowers are displayed in the hollows of sand dunes. Although an absolute yellow blazes forth, it's in the background that the desert also comes alive – in the pale, delicate stems of rice grass and wheat grass rattling faintly in the wind, and in the coarse leaves of the sagebrush itself. The first thing I do, on entering the desert, is to crumble a few of their leaves between my fingers. Smoke and dust and the fading of stars. Life and death. . . . Elemental fire. Elemental earth. . . . Everything is contained within the fragrance of sagebrush.

~

*Unrelenting heat,
crickets are clicking
dry raindrops
in the mesquite trees.*

Through three hundred and sixty degrees you can see for over a hundred miles. All that the horses could do, before they collapsed and died, was to stand at the far end of the plateau and wait. No humans appeared. There were chipmunks, and jack rabbits, and ravens, and hawks circling overhead. But the settlers who had herded them into the remote corral, who had left them with no food and water, failed to return. It was (and is) a long way from anywhere, but that's no excuse.

The thinness of the horses becomes the thinness of shadows. Far below, softening the landscape, the Colorado River continues on its way. At each slow curve, the margins of its banks, covered in vegetation, form pale green ribbons behind the waves of heat.

According to legend, the settlers eventually came back and were met with silence. Gazing down at the heaps of dried skin, the exposed teeth, the empty eye-sockets, they must have felt a burning shame. Perhaps they expressed that shame among themselves. And from then on this extremity of land, overlooking a labyrinth of canyons and mesas, became known as Dead Horse Point.

The wind came suddenly to the Dead Horse Point just before sunset. I had to secure the tent, using a rock to drive the aluminium pegs into the hard earth. Now, in the middle of the night, away from the camping ground, I lie down and release a long sigh. In the sky above, the constellations of the Northern Hemisphere are spread out in the most amazing and confusing array. I know that Scorpio, Sagittarius, Orion's Belt, the Big Dipper must all be up there, but I have no Southern Cross, no point of reference to act as a guide. The night sky is simply in ferment, an intoxicating mass of stars sustained by a vast, rich blackness. For a while I'm unable to close my eyes or move my limbs.

~

On the kitchen window-ledge, the early morning sunlight is caught in a clump of steel-wool. I take care placing the fork under the tap and washing off the bits of meat still clinging to its tines. In the background, the cat tucks into her breakfast. It's a good start to the day, no matter what happens next. And when I plug in the hot water jug, I can't help but exclaim, "Jug! Jug!"

The sunlight fades and a cool wind lifts up the flap of the cat-door. I retire to my desk, wishing that I had a pile of notes to wade through. In reality, there are only fragments from letters and some lines written down in a red and black notebook. But that's the way it should be; in desert country you lose your sense of identity. The Writer, the Observer, the Traveller disappear – they become a ghost, a shadow, a temporary presence who stands mesmerized by the enduring power of sand and stone. . . . When I look away from my desk, black ants are moving across the light brown of the carpet. Several of them have surrounded a lone juniper berry and are

pushing it towards their mound, manoeuvring it over a pattern of twigs and tiny pebbles.

~

Near the end of the scenic drive, sheets of metal curve above the picnic tables. They resemble the billowing sails of isolated boats, frozen in a surreal, porcelain-white landscape. Although it's early in the morning, the temperature is already high and will become unbearable by midday. I walk for an hour across the dunes, then descend into a narrow valley. The surrounding slopes of gypsum sand are now too steep for any plants to take root. What lives here is always on the move, just as the dunes themselves rise and fall during the course of the year. As I go on, I discover the tracks of two small animals preserved in the sand. Judging by the progression of elongated curves, the first is a snake. The other I imagine to be a desert fox because it has left behind a series of paw prints with the claw marks clearly visible. The strange thing is that, while distinct, these two trails overlap: the fox has positioned itself above the curves of the snake and dutifully followed its passage without straying to either side; or else the snake has carefully weaved its body right through the middle of each set of prints. But this makes no sense as there is enough room for the animals to go their own separate ways. Then I realize my mistake: the two are in fact one – what I've been examining are the impressions made by a large lizard as it crawled across the sand.

~

In the pink earth there's a hoof-print. The print is nearly heart-shaped, and the clatter of hooves rises from the slopes below as a horse makes its way down a narrow path. During the descent, dust-coloured grasshoppers fly up, emitting the sharp sound of pebbles being kicked. Small stones, for their part, frequently become dislodged and slide away, tinkling like glass. Everything here exists in relation to a mineral order: silica and quartz, iron oxide, siltstone and sandstone. . . . Everything also breathes and partakes of one great breath, one inspiration. And in the intense stillness of listening,

the heat presses itself against the eardrums, against the skin of a lizard, against the red cliffs.

At the bottom of the canyon, beyond a wire fence, a flight of steps ascends to a series of squat towers and circular ruins, carved out of sandstone and arranged along the cliff ledge as if by some giant, prehistoric child. The Anasazi, “the enemy ancestors”, abandoned these dwellings centuries ago. No one knows exactly why, and yet their empty spaces are still inhabited, not only by rattlesnakes or scorpions, but by disembodied voices that drift from room to room. These voices, conveyed from the world below, are constantly making comments and relating scraps of information.

Under a cavern ceiling, blackened by smoke, the click and whir of a camera can be heard. From behind a broken wall, an invisible hand unzips an invisible bag. Skeletal fingers hold a water-bottle, carefully unscrewing its cap. Ghost eyes blink in the harsh sunlight. . . . Do our spirits drift up to the ruins, or do the spirits of the ancients drift down? Or is there an intermingling in between?

At midday, the wing-beats of a raven.

At dusk, the rapid fluttering of small bats.

Days later, I pull into the Canton Café in Grants. Having driven for many hours without a break, I sit down at my table and instinctively reach for the seat belt. Everything inside the café is faded: the photographs of bottle-tops on the *Coca-Cola* dispenser are so faded that they appear like pearls, while the postcards on the postcard rack – the old variety featuring violently unreal colours – are now subtle and dream-like, their warped surfaces presenting miniature dioramas of misty canyons and translucent mesas. I order a plate of tofu and vegetables, only to find that the tofu is so soft it dissolves beneath my fork.

~

self-absorption as self-absorbed as a sunset

self-abuse as self-abusive as a hummingbird

self-consciousness as self-conscious as a cactus

self-determination as self-determined as a beetle
self-expression as self-expressive as an echo
self-portrait night uncertain when it will be day
self-possession as self-possessed as a cottonwood
self-reliance as self-reliant as a rainbow
self-respect as self-respecting as a scorpion
self-righteousness as self-righteous as a chipmunk
self-sufficiency as self-sufficient as a sleeping-bag

~

When I woke up, the first thing I said was, "Get out of the way". A few hours after breakfast, while pacing about the house to avoid watching television or listening to the radio, I told myself, "Get back to work". Now I raise my pen in midair and admire its horizontal form. No more words to write, nothing more to record. If I were to unscrew the middle section, instead of a cartridge of ink there would be a tube of smoke. Blue smoke from a burning log of ponderosa pine. . . . The pen drifts in its own dream. Then gravity reasserts itself, my hand begins to feel heavy, and the nib curves downwards until it touches the page.

~

On the edges of the highway
burst truck tires lie about—
torn segments
of giant, black centipedes.

Billboards drift by
offering the traveller:
fire-broiled burgers
cow skulls
moccasins for all the family . . .

The motel is just another anonymous motel. While sitting on the toilet seat, I notice that a path has been scuffed into the faded brown of the carpet. Formed by innumerable boots and shoes, the path leads from the bathroom to a double bed (a bed which dips in the middle

due to the weight of all the bodies it has had to support). It's late at night, and I'm about to fold up and fall asleep when a burst of thunder shakes the motel. Outside the bathroom window, a vast parking lot is being swept by sheets of rain. Flashes of lightning illuminate the glistening expanse of asphalt, which is deserted except for a solitary shopping cart – a small, silver cage that leaps out of the surrounding darkness at each flash of lightning. As if to advertise its function, with water flowing around its wheels, the cart is set in motion and pushed along by repeated gusts of wind.

~

In the Los Alamos supermarket, live lobsters are displayed in a glass tank, their claws kept shut with yellow tape. No doubt the lobsters have been flown in from California. I have a strong desire to buy one (the one who crawls towards me and brushes its antennae against the glass). But it would be difficult to find a place to release a lobster in the middle of New Mexico. So, with some misgivings, I leave the tank behind.

When supermarkets become oppressive, the best strategy is to pick a few basic items from the shelves and then head for the nearest check-out counter, or so I think as I move briskly down the aisle of another large supermarket, this time in Carlsbad. Up ahead, back-lit by the fluorescent lights of a freezer, an old Navajo man stands very still and smiles the most radiant of smiles. With long white hair, cowboy hat and boots, and a belt of silver and turquoise, he appears to have materialized from another age. Our eyes meet for a moment as people come and go around him, pushing their shopping carts. He continues to smile. Then a young woman, who is probably his granddaughter, approaches, takes him gently by the arm, and leads him away.

~

Nightmare of a sunrise. On July 16, 1945, just before dawn in the New Mexican desert of Jornada del Muerto, a fire-ball ascends into the sky and burns its way through the covering of clouds. Robert Oppenheimer, a professed lover of the desert, finds himself recalling

a line from the Bhagavad-Gita as he watches, from his bunker, the first explosion of an atomic weapon: "Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds."

My relation, Fred Edeskuty, has worked as a scientist at Los Alamos since 1953. He enjoys driving me around the stark mesas and their clusters of anonymous laboratories. We pass by the ski lifts on the highest slopes, the gun range halfway down the valley, and the ice rink right at the bottom, where the sun in winter fails to reach. Everything has been strategically located for work and recreation, and yet I have the sense that something is missing. Because of the highly qualified people who are attracted to Los Alamos, Fred informs me that unemployment is not a problem, as it is in nearby Santa Fe. He's travelled all over the world, and there's no place he'd rather live. At the end of our drive, we visit the Bradbury Science Museum.

Inside the museum, my eyes can only glide over the complex machinery designed for harnessing energy (solar, nuclear, geothermal), and for splitting elements (with lasers, particle beams, magnetic fields). I'm drawn to none of the exhibits, and instead of absorbing their facts so that I can eventually use the information in a piece of writing (my original intention), I end up with a strong dose of alienation. Fred points out the numerous research projects undertaken at Los Alamos to combat world pollution. But it's no good, I'm a lost cause. I can only wonder about the amount of radiation this community has produced since it was first established. Then we pause by an exhibit documenting the development of the atomic bomb. The positive way the weapon and its detonation are presented shrinks my heart and transforms our well-lit surroundings into the interior of a mausoleum.

~

*Even though the myriad things are extinguished,
there remains something that is not extinguished.
Even though everything is gone,
there is something that is not exhausted.
— Keizan Jokin (1264-1325)*

A hawk glides high above in a perfect circle. I'm standing beside a large window in the Alamogordo Space Center. Behind me there's the roar of a trident missile taking off (someone has just pressed one of the buttons on a display which lets you hear the different sounds of missiles being launched). I'm weary of space craft, and space suits, and saddened by the official photographs of those forlorn-looking chimpanzees who were first sent into orbit. For some reason, after leaving Fred and his wife in Los Alamos, I've come here. Perhaps it's to do with my desire to explore the darker aspects of the desert, or, more precisely, man's misappropriation and misuse of the desert. But because of my difficulty in penetrating the world of science and technology, I jot down only a few brief notes. Once again my research has become an investigation into blankness: my own blankness and the unearthly whiteness of my surroundings – the walls, the display cases, the sheets of painted metal. And yet it's worth visiting the Space Center to have stood before this enormous pane of glass, and to have watched the solitary hawk circling in the distance.

~

In the early evening, a thunderstorm forms over Chaco Canyon. The clouds are massed together, swollen purple-gray as if they're about to unleash a flood of darkness. You would think that night is only a few steps away. Then someone flicks a switch, the storm changes its colours, and the clouds merge into a seamless and incandescent sky. People spill out of their tents and trailers in the camping ground as the light becomes more luminous and intense. It begins to rain – a cold rain after a day of extreme heat. But this shower is not a hindrance; everyone is determined to experience the sunset.

On a plateau above the camping ground, I watch a line of figures running towards a sky of shimmering gold, which seems both to tower over them and to recede with each breath. The figures themselves are now little more than silhouettes as they follow a narrow path through the sagebrush. They must realize that the sky is about to fade, and that they'll never reach a place where they can catch a glimpse of the sun. And yet, without a word to one another,

they keep on running towards the golden light.

DESERT DUO



Krazy and Ignatz

In 1991 when my wife, Amala, and I were travelling out West, we asked a bemused French tourist to take our photograph at the edge of Monument Valley. As he pressed the shutter, he had no idea that we were recreating a frame from *Krazy Kat*, George Herriman's comic strip masterpiece.

George Herriman is one of my heroes from the first half of the 20th Century, up there with Buster Keaton and Kurt Rasmussen. From 1913 to 1944 he produced a daily comic strip set in the desert landscape of Coconino County, Arizona, which revolved around the relationship between a gentle-hearted feline, Krazy Kat, and an irascible rodent, Ignatz Mouse. The main purpose of Ignatz Mouse's life is to "bean the Katz's noodle with a brick". Krazy, who is in love with Ignatz, awaits each assault in a state of joyful expectation, considering the hurled bricks to be "missils of affection". For over three decades, under Herriman's pen, this simple drama underwent a series of marvellous permutations and embellishments.

In our recreation, Amala is Krazy Kat, lost in contemplation as she gazes skyward, while I have become Ignatz Mouse, who is summoning up all his energy to hurl the brick. Our backdrop features the Mittens, the best-known rock formation in both Monument Valley and in *Krazy Kat*. According to Navajo legend, the Mittens are big hands representing a great power once active on the earth but now lying dormant. One day the power will return to Monument Valley. Until that time the Mittens remain far apart.

A friend of Herman's recalled that he wanted to end his life near the Mittens, "lying down on a cactus leaf until he was shrivelled up and blown away by the wind". Although he died in suburban California on April 25th, 1944, his ashes were scattered over the sands of Monument Valley. And the power of that place has never gone away. It resides in the vastness of rocks and light, and in the compactness of a hand that once moved across a drawing table to dip a quilled pen into a bottle of India ink.

Cloud

While driving through Arizona, on a highway between Flagstaff and Kayenta, we observed one lone, attenuated cloud stretched out in the emptiness of the sky. It was difficult to say whether the cloud was large or small; nothing else existed above the horizon with which it could be compared. The land below lived within itself, absorbed in some deep, mineral meditation, that day being no different from any other day in the last million years. In contrast, our cloud was struggling to maintain even a temporary existence above the canyons and mesas. But instead of breaking apart and fading into the blue, it slowly gathered together its folds until a dense, pillow-shaped mass was formed. Then the unexpected occurred – the cloud released a shower of rain.

Parking our car by the side of the highway, we watched the rain descend in a pearl-grey curtain. Once this miraculous unfurling was over, the hem of the curtain swayed in mid-air for a moment, and was then swept upwards by the heat generated from the desert floor. Billowing into a graceful curve, the rain was reversed and propelled back towards the cloud, evaporating before it could return home. And although it was obvious that the rain would never touch the earth, and that the earth had no expectation of receiving a drop of moisture, the cloud continued to produce its fragile precipitation, unaware of any ambiguity as it remained suspended in the immense blue of the sky.

Rattlesnake

The rattle of a rattlesnake is made up of dry, interconnected shells. Whenever the snake sheds its skin, which it does several times a year, the thick, scaly hood covering the tip of its tail stays in place, adding another segment to the rattle. According to my *International Wildlife Encyclopaedia*, eight is the ideal number of segments as this produces the loudest sound. The shape of the number eight is also created by the two interlacing snakes on the caduceus, the emblem of Hermes.

Hermes, god of the road, of journeys, of changing circumstances, of leftovers, of windfalls, of borderlines, of sleep and awakening, of night. Hermes, “the beneficial one”, “the quick one”, “the cunning”. Messenger, guide, trickster, companion.

On our travels through Arizona and New Mexico, I became obsessed with finding a snake, in particular a rattlesnake. The first time I thought I heard one, it was the sound of Amala’s hand sliding down a metal handrail. The second time I thought I heard one, it turned out to be the hissing of a garden hose, coiled behind our motel unit. The last time – and this was on a dirt road in the middle of the desert – we traced the sound back to a plastic bag flapping in a creosote bush.

Eventually I did come across a snake: a baby rattlesnake in the room of an ancient cliff dwelling near Santa Clara Pueblo. It is fast asleep, curled up in a circular depression of sand. A small infinity. A spellbinder. A protector of ruins.

Ship Rock

Driving up Route 666, through the Navajo Reservation, the most impressive geological formation on the horizon is Ship Rock (*Tsé Bit'ai*, “the rock with wings”). Its massive base appears to erupt out of the earth and progress skyward, ending in a serrated edge which threatens to cut open any cloud that might happen to stray into its domain.

We first approached Ship Rock in 1991, driving towards it on a dirt track, our rental car bumping from side to side and emitting a variety of rattles. A harsh desert wind whistled past. At a certain point, when the rattling became unbearable, we stopped the car at a respectful distance from the imposing monolith, and I took a photograph. We then ate a quick lunch, huddled together, looking through the grimy windscreen. After that, all we could do was to drive back to the main road, with Ship Rock vibrating in the rear-vision mirror like a towering piece of asteroid.

Our next journey to Ship Rock was seven years later, in 1998. We stopped the car on the same dirt track (for fear of breaking an axle), and decided to approach the volcanic outcrop on foot. The day was extremely hot, and as we walked over the dry earth, we passed several prairie dog colonies. But not a single creature was visible. After an hour, my blue shirt had turned brown and our teeth were covered in dust. Unperturbed, we pressed on until we neared the base of the outcrop, with only an arroyo between us and its sheer slopes. Although it would have been easy to cross over, our boots refused to take another step. The presence of Ship Rock is so intense that it creates a magnetic field, a psychic zone, which physically pushes back anyone who tries to get too close. It's as if a voice whispers in your ear, “You have come far enough. To go any further would be a mistake.” This is one part our planet that needs no human presence. And after acknowledging its solitude with a deep bow, we turned around and headed back to the car, walking through thick clouds of dust that would soon erase our traces from the landscape.

Holbrook

Holbrook is a railroad town now deprived of trains. Filled with the dead neon signs of closed down restaurants and hotels, its main street is unnervingly dark at night. One of the remaining hotels in operation, the Budget Host Inn, has a vacancy. After a week of camping in the mountains of southern Arizona, we feel in need of a bath and a soft bed.

On pulling into the forecourt, we are greeted by the owner, who wears a black cowboy hat. His name is Parbhu, and he turns out to be an Indian from Fiji. In this country of smiley faces, he appears unashamedly depressed, perhaps because our arrival reminds him of Auckland, where he studied chemistry, and of the laid-back culture of the South Pacific. With a wry smile, while showing us our room, he admits that he has grown to dislike the United States. "Too many rules." He apologizes for the lighting fixtures; the wrong ones were installed and you have to pound a metal plate on the wall to operate the lights. On our bedside table, covering Gideon's Bible, is a copy of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

In the morning, when we turn up at the office for our complimentary breakfast, we find that Parbhu has lit a stick of incense and placed it on the reception counter along with a pot of jasmine tea. The tea has been specially brewed for a large group of Chinese tourists who arrived in convoy from Phoenix the previous evening. When the Chinese enter, they all head straight for the coffee machine, allowing us to enjoy the tea.

Parbhu has put up nervous little signs all over the motel. After we finish packing in our room, I read the sign taped below the door handle:

Leave your key and remote
in room, turn off all equipment
and close the door
and you may go.

Once we have paid the bill, it feels good to drive out of Holbrook and

hit the open road. We wonder when Parbhu and his family will be able to leave.

Navajo Dogs

In 1997, having set up our tent in the Canyon de Chelly campground, Amala and I were adopted by a Navajo dog. He lay quietly beside the tent for hours, as if we had all been together for many years. He was still there when we returned from visiting the canyon, following us to the bathroom and later accompanying us on our evening walk. Completely faithful, at least for one day. The next morning, as we took down the tent, he simply walked away to find another campsite and another family. Yes, we had fed him scraps, and yes, he had looked up at us with adoring eyes. No one was fooled. Everyone was satisfied.

Two years later we are back in Arizona, this time at the Navajo National Monument campground. While Amala reads a novel on Geronimo (a sobering reminder of the near-genocide that took place in this country just over a century ago), I drive nine miles through the park to Black Mesa and the local Laundromat.

Inside the fluorescently-lit building, an old Navajo woman tells me that she's tired. She has just taken a dozen pairs of sneakers out of one washing machine and is beginning to empty wet clothes from another. Watching her for a while, it appears that she has loads in five more machines. As the air-conditioning unit is blasting out cold air right next to my chair, I leave our dirty clothes spinning around and go into the nearby store.

Passing by shelves of basic necessities, I find a bottle of frappuccino in one of the fridges. Sitting on the front steps of the store, in the midday heat, the contents are happily consumed. Three dun-coloured Navajo dogs are sleeping in the shade of the veranda. One wakes up, comes over, and gives me a nudge. I let her lick the remains of the sweetened coffee, her long pink tongue poking as far as it can into the glass bottle. She even takes the metal cap away, licking it thoroughly and then chewing it with gusto. Eventually she returns and sits at my feet. A Navajo man, wearing a cowboy hat and boots, comes out of the store and says, "Good dog." "Yes," I reply, "Good dog." Dust begins to blow across the yard, swirling around the

gas pumps. I go into the Laundromat and put our clothes in the dryer.

Sagebrush Lizards

In Southern Utah, between the Vermilion Cliffs and the Buckskin Mountains, lies Paria Valley, in the past a remote setting for many Westerns. Even to those of us accustomed to the geological wonders of the Southwest, Paria is nothing less than spectacular. And this landscape, unlike its depiction in the movies, is not a backdrop but a formidable presence, immediately enfolding the visitor in its heat and silence.

We set up our tent at the foot of one of Paria's multicoloured bentonite hills, close to the spreading paws of what looks like a gigantic sphinx, its head having crumbled away to leave behind a ridge of broken, red rock.

Small holes decorate the sandbank by our campsite. Amala wonders what creatures could live inside. At that moment a large moth flutters past. Instantly a lizard darts out of one hole, grabs the moth in his mouth, and climbs up a nearby pinyón pine. After a few minutes only the wings remain, quivering in the hot breeze at the base of the tree.

Beyond our primitive campsite lies an old movie set, with a dirt street leading between a saloon and hotel on one side, and a bank and jail on the other. Wind and sun have removed the lettering from these simple, wooden structures, and as a result of erosion the hitching post for horses is now far too high above the ground.

The writer Edward Abbey pointed out that Paria is the home of two ghost towns, one real and one false. The real one is the ruins of a Mormon settlement several miles up the valley. Abandoned in 1890, only a few sandstone houses have survived. Each day they absorb the harsh sunlight and cast their shadows over the dry earth.

After a long walk through the valley, photographing the houses and exploring several side-canyons, we return to our campsite. Three medium-sized lizards – sagebrush lizards – have appeared and are busy on the sandbank. Moving slowly, we seat ourselves in the shade of the pinyón. The lizards soon grow accustomed to us as

they patrol their domain, picking off black ants (from an endless supply of ants), and pushing their snouts into the sand to uncover small, white larvae.

I lie down on my stomach and one lizard comes over to inspect me. We look at each other eye-to-eye. What does he see? And what am I? Resting in a canyon a few hours earlier, I daydreamed that I was a marine fossil embedded in the rock face. The sound of the wind became the sound of the ocean. Now I am having a lizard dream even as the lizard regards me, the scales contracting on his brow. Curious, yes. Curious and endlessly fascinating.

Ant Mounds

In desert country there are ant mounds wherever you walk, each resembling a diminutive volcano, its top rounded over and its circular base, sometimes six feet or more in diameter, spread out serenely on a patch of bare ground.

Dowa Yalanne, or Corn Mountain, dominates the landscape on the Zuni reservation. In the afternoon our friend, Craig, a teacher who has lived in Zuni for many years, takes us to some unexcavated ruins, the site of one of the seven villages that once made up the Zuni nation. Beautiful shards of pottery lie scattered among the rocks and sagebrush. These fragments, ancient pieces of a mysterious jigsaw puzzle, can be admired but must remain where they are. If you are lucky, however, and keep your eyes fixed on the earth, you can pick up an arrowhead or a tiny bead, fashioned many centuries ago.

Alistair, a twelve-year-old Zuni boy in Craig's care, searches for arrowheads while Amala and I concentrate on finding beads. Craig tells us that the best place to look for beads is on an ant mound. Ants make no distinction between beads and pebbles, both forms being equally round and small and easy to roll. But to locate a bead requires considerable attention as the mounds are made up of millions of stones, all clustered together like magnified grains of sand.

At first I have difficulty keeping my eyes focused; the surface of the mound I have chosen is a shimmering expanse of coloured dots – white and brown and yellow and red. I tell myself that this is an impossible task, something out of a fairy tale; I'd be better off searching for scorpions or rattlesnakes. Then Amala, squatting down by her mound, discovers a bead, carved out of bone and about the size of a match head. Letting go of my competitive impulses, along with my desire for results, I immerse myself in the process of looking, simply looking, oblivious to anything else. . . . And there, at the base of the mound, is a perfectly carved bead with a hole drilled right through its centre.

As the sun begins to set, we come together to pick Ambassa, a yellow flower that grows close to the ground and is used by the Zuni as a condiment. It is early autumn, the Ambassa season has just begun, and Craig wants to gather the flowers for his adopted Zuni grandmother. In the twilight the earth becomes redder, and we find patches of Ambassa by the edges of the path. Sacred plants. Plants from the underworld.

Not out of a Western but out of a painting, the four of us walk side by side along the desert road, each holding a bunch of yellow flowers, which glow like torches in the gathering darkness.

CHINA MY CHINA



1.

Sima, a Buddhist pilgrim skilled in geomancy, lowered his bamboo staff and pressed it into the head monk's stomach. The head monk gave a shout. Sima shook his head and removed the staff.

"No," he said, turning to Master Baizhang, "this monk is not suitable to found a monastery on Mount Dagui."

"Should I go?" asked Baizhang.

"The Master is old and a man of bone," replied Sima. "This is a broad mountain and requires a vigorous teacher."

Baizhang then summoned Guishan, who at that time was serving as the head cook. Sima took one look at Guishan and declared, "Here is the man of flesh, a man fit for the mountain!"

That night Baizhang summoned Guishan to his quarters and told him, "My karma is to remain here, but as for remote Mount Dagui, you will go there and carry on my teaching for future generations."

When the head monk heard about the appointment he protested, saying that as leader of the assembly the position should have gone to him.

Baizhang said, "If you can demonstrate your understanding, I will make you the abbot of Mount Dagui."

Baizhang then took up a water jug, placed it on the floor, and said, "Without calling this a water jug, what would you call it?"

The head monk said, "It cannot be called a wooden sandal."

Baizhang then asked Guishan his opinion. Guishan strode forward, kicked over the water jug, and walked out.

Baizhang laughed and said, "The head monk has lost."

The next day Guishan was instructed to found the new monastery.

*temple roofs
sailing
through a sea of bamboo*

On our Buddhist pilgrimage to China in 2001, we visited Tanzhe Temple in the Western Hills of Beijing. The temple was founded in the Jin Era (265-420), several centuries before the Tang Dynasty (618-917), which is known as the Golden Age of Zen because of the many great masters who taught in that period, including Guishan.

The temple has been elaborately decorated with dragons and is imbued with legends. One series of paintings depicts the life of a virtuous monk who fell off a bridge into a swift-flowing river. The river carried him deep into the mountains and eventually washed him ashore near a cave. The monk meditated in the cave for many years and was attended by a host of animals. Among their number was a fierce-looking tiger. Later on, when the monk became abbot of Tanzhe Temple, the tiger would come into the hall and listen to his Dharma talks.

While walking through the temple grounds, we come across three sculptures of tigers: one reclining on a rock as if sun-bathing, another scowling with bared teeth, and a third guarding the entrance to a small cave. At the back of the cave, wearing a golden robe and seated in meditation, is a stone figure of the monk.

A popular saying is that “first there was Tanzhe Temple, then came Beijing”. First there were tigers in the mountains, then came the humans. And now, at the beginning of the 21st Century, tigers are rapidly vanishing from the earth. It is estimated that there are only between ten and thirty South China Tigers living in the wild, while another sixty or so exist in Chinese zoos. Continual habitat destruction, and the demand for their body-parts as an ingredient in traditional medicine, mean that the remaining tigers face a very uncertain future.

~

Back in the Tang Dynasty, after eight years of solitude on his

designated mountain, Guishan became discouraged and decided to leave. He thought to himself that Baizhang must have made a mistake in sending him to such a remote place. And so, placing his few possessions in a sack, he walked away from his grass-thatched hut.

He had descended half way down the mountain when he encountered a female tiger standing in the middle of the path. The tiger gestured with her great head that he should return to the peak. Guishan bowed and followed the tiger's instruction. A few months later, a community of monks had gathered around him and the monastery was established.

On a neighbouring mountain the head monk, who had lost the contest to Guishan, now lived by himself in a hermitage. One day a visitor asked him if he felt any regret at not having a single disciple. The monk replied that far from being alone he had two attendants who followed his every instruction. He then gave a whistle, and in response two ferocious tigers came bounding out of the forest. The visitor froze in terror, but at a word from the monk, the wild creatures settled down at his feet like two domestic cats. One was called Dai Kung, "Big Emptiness", and the other Xiao Kung, "Small Emptiness".

~

In the densely-forested mountains of Hunan province, high up on the trunk of a tree, you can still see a set of claw marks. But as the bark expands, the claw marks are beginning to fade.

When the last tiger has gone, will this be "small emptiness" or "big emptiness"? Or will it just be emptiness, plain and simple, without a name – an absence absorbed into the depths of the forest, an absence flowing along with the valley streams.

2.

*on the top steps
of the Temple of Heaven
mortals speak on cell phones*

The Temple of Heaven is in the centre of Beijing. On our first day in China we stroll past Echo Wall, a long, circular rampart surrounding the Celestial Warehouse. By the wall a sign has been posted, advising visitors that “Calls and responses or asks and answers constitute a wonderful conversation”. Leaning over the railings, people have their ears pressed against the stones as they shout out their messages. There is such a cacophony of voices – in Mandarin and Cantonese and Korean and Dutch and German and English – that no one can be understood.

In the courtyard outside, an old man holds a long-handled brush and writes characters in water on the paving stones. A crowd gathers to watch the characters evaporate in the heat. It’s a day when all words, either spoken or written, are disappearing into the stones, into the air, into the haze of exhaust fumes that hangs about the city.

A spacious park surrounds the Temple of Heaven, and in one enclosure we come upon a gathering of large, white boulders. From a distance they resemble a herd of grazing sheep. The rough surface of each boulder has been carved into wave patterns to give the impression of a mountain range. On drawing nearer, the outlines of a classic Chinese landscape are unmistakable, with each mountain range separated from the others not by a sea of clouds, as you would expect in a painting, but by an urban expanse of grass.

~

I’ve always been attracted to strange rocks, and one of my favourite stories from the Tang Dynasty takes the form of a dialogue between Zen Master Yunyan and an itinerant monk:

Yunyan asked the monk what he was doing.

The monk replied, "I've been talking to a rock."

Yunyan asked, "Did it nod to you?"

When the monk made no response, Yunyan answered for him,

"It nodded to you even before you spoke a word."

In this age of internet connections and information technology, the idea of rocks communicating seems absurd. But the minerals that keep my laptop functioning, that enable me to open my emails each morning, were once embedded in the earth.

Yunyan's dialogue with the monk brings to mind a legend about Daosheng, who was one of the first translators of the Mahayana Buddhist sutras into Chinese. Daosheng was involved in a great controversy when he declared that all beings have the Buddha-nature, even *icchantikas*, who were regarded as outcasts from the path of enlightenment, completely devoid of Buddha-nature and therefore incapable of self-realization. A modern equivalent of an *icchantika* would be Hitler or Stalin or Mao Zedong. This declaration was a direct challenge to the accepted Buddhist doctrine of the time, and in 430 AD Daosheng was sent into exile.

~

When my uncle returned from serving in World War II, the New Zealand government gave him a subsidy to buy some land. He had recently married my aunt, and together they found a suitable section on Auckland's North Shore. As they were assembling their building materials, another family started to clear the property next door. My uncle ended up helping his new neighbour, Eric, move a collection of heavy rocks off the land. They toiled together for several days and their friendship has lasted over sixty years.

As I write these words, my uncle is in a hospice unit, dying of liver cancer. When the ambulance crew arrived to take him to the hospice, they had to strap my uncle to a stretcher and carry him vertically through the front door. Eric was standing outside, tears streaming down his face. Although my uncle was sedated with

morphine, he looked directly at his old neighbour and said, “Eric, we’ve still got a few rocks to shift.”

~

While in exile, Daosheng proclaimed that even inanimate things are not without this intrinsically enlightened Buddha-nature. As he had no disciples to address, he gave his teaching in a clearing to an audience of rocks. It is said that the rocks nodded their heads in approval.

A year later *The Nirvana Sutra* was translated from Sanskrit into Chinese. In the sutra it clearly states that all beings have the Buddha-nature. Daosheng was vindicated and returned from exile to become a great teacher. The rocks he preached to may still exist to this day, along with the rocks that Eric and my Uncle moved by hand after the war. Perhaps those New Zealand rocks now form part of a garden or a wall; or perhaps they have been covered over, continuing their mineral existence beneath the surface of the earth.

3.

A monk asked Zhaozhou, “For a long time I have heard of the widely renowned stone bridge of Zhaozhou, but now I have come here I just see a simple log bridge.”

Zhaozhou said, “You just see the log bridge; you don’t see the stone bridge.”

The monk asked, “What is the stone bridge?”

Zhaozhou said, “It lets donkeys cross, it lets horses cross.”

Zhaozhou was one of the greatest Chinese Zen masters, and his dates are 778 to 879 AD. Only at the age of eighty did he settle down and begin to teach.

The monk in our story paid a visit to Zhaozhou, who at that time may have been over a hundred years old, ancient and no doubt extremely frail. The monk, for his part, appeared to be expecting a strong and impressive teacher, one who would give a dynamic, sword-like response to his opening gambit. And yet Zhaozhou is more than a match for this newcomer. His bridge, which allows donkeys and horses to cross, takes away the arrogance of the monk and reveals a dimension that is all-inclusive and liberating.

~

While walking along a deserted beach, it’s just me and a couple of seagulls picking up shells. In my search for something eye-catching, I tend to ignore the usual scattering of disk shells on the sand. But today, for some reason, I bend down to examine one. Turning over its yellowed exterior, I find a mysterious landscape on the inside, made up of grey clouds swirling around the peak of a bone-white mountain. The grey is an opaque, Yves Tanguy grey, otherworldly and impenetrable, like polished smoke.

A second shell contains a miniature thunderstorm, with bolts of black lightning, and a dark band of night that curves around the outer rim, divided from the luminous sky at the centre by a line of indigo. And

then, on a third concave surface, I can make out the blurred head of a dragon poking through a layer of clouds, its whiskers zigzagging down to the rocks below.

Waves are breaking in the background. As I continue to walk along the beach, my mind goes back to ancient China. There is an essential wisdom from that time, easy to overlook or to take for granted. And as a light rain begins to fall on the sand, I tell myself that something of Zhaozhou's spirit resides within these ordinary shells.

~

*so many cypresses
in Zhaozhou's courtyard—*

which one would he choose?

A monk once asked Zhaozhou, "What is the fundamental teaching of Buddhism?"

Zhaozhou replied, "The cypress tree in the courtyard."

On our 2001 pilgrimage, the first thing that greets us when we pass through the gates of Bailin Temple in the town of Zhaoxian is a profusion of green cypress trees. Towering above the trees and the temple buildings stands a grey stone stupa, built in the 14th Century to contain the ashes of Master Zhaozhou.

In 1988, after centuries of neglect and the destruction wrought by the Cultural Revolution, all that remained of Bailin Temple were a few ancient cypresses and the stone stupa. Four years later the temple was completely reconstructed and is now a flourishing Zen monastery with 130 monks.

While sitting in the temple courtyard, we encounter a novice monk, Ming, who speaks a little English. He becomes our guide for the day, and to communicate more effectively produces a giant Chinese/English dictionary.

We ask Ming about koans – those encounter-dialogues which contain the essence of Zen – and he is clearly familiar with the main ones that feature Zhaozhou. These koans are coming alive again in China, and the three of us stand together in silence for a moment to admire the cypress trees. Ming then invites us into a reception room by the Abbot's quarters. He wants us to sit down, relax and recite in English Zhaozhou's "have a cup of tea".

Zhaozhou asked a travelling monk, "Have you been here before?"

The monk replied, "Yes, I have."

Zhaozhou said, "Have a cup of tea."

Zhaozhou asked another visiting monk, "Have you been here before?"

The monk said, "No, I haven't."

Zhaozhou said, "Have a cup of tea."

The head monk asked Zhaozhou, "Why do you say 'Have a cup of tea' to one who has visited before and the same thing to one who has come to see you for the first time?"

Zhaozhou replied, "Head Monk."

"Yes?"

"Have a cup of tea."

~

After the storm, each wave pushes a long, thick roll of foam up the beach. The roll remains quivering for a moment, then, as the tide withdraws, it flattens itself over the gleaming sand, breaking up into mats and carpets of foam. These coverings, in turn, begin to dissolve. Gashes and gaping holes appear in their fabric, allowing for more complex patterns to emerge: islands and continents and constellations of foam. All glide silently away towards the ocean, until the next wave washes over them and the process begins again.

I walk to the point where a meandering stream enters the open sea. Swollen by last night's heavy rain, the flowing water speeds up as it approaches the incoming tide, forming a series of ridges – liquid mountain ranges that ripple onward while remaining in the same place. The sand banks are crumbling before my gaze, and the stream itself is too deep to cross.

Apart from seagulls and oystercatchers, the only signs of life are the small silhouettes of fishermen in the distance. And for now it's fine to go nowhere; to stay on this side of the stream and listen to the sound of the waves.

~

When we mention to monk Ming that we want to visit Zhaozhou's bridge, he offers to take us there. The bridge predates Master Zhaozhou by several centuries and is a brief taxi ride from the temple. Ming brings with him his large dictionary, and our taxi speeds down the streets of Zhaoxian.

I imagined Zhaozhou's bridge to be at the centre of a bustling township with carts and wagons clattering over its paved surface. But we find that the bridge has been fenced off and sits in the middle of a rundown park. A sign outside states that its freestanding stone arch "was chosen as the 12th International Relic of the World by the American Civil Engineers Institute in 1991".

After walking across the bridge, we enter a small museum at the back of the park. Casting our eyes over the historical displays, we come upon a faded photograph from the 1950's of Communist officials, dressed in heavy overcoats, crossing the newly restored bridge. Accompanying them is Rewi Alley. It pleases us to know that this famous New Zealander, who lived in China and took an active role in its renewal after the Communist Revolution, also walked over Zhaozhou's stone bridge.

Horses cross. Donkeys cross. Monks and lay people cross. Even Rewi Alley crosses. The sun shines on the stones in the daytime. The moon shines at night. And Zhaozhou's bridge is still there.

Back at Bailin Temple, we offer incense and circumambulate the stupa three times. Ming then sees us to the front gate and waves goodbye as we board a minibus. Our time in China is flowing onward; there are other temples to visit, and a train ride that will take us across the Gobi Desert. But there also remains the invisible curve of Zhaozhou's bridge, which stretches over the centuries and provides us with a direct connection to the wisdom of the old masters.

A bright pearl rolling on a tray. Wind in the cypress trees.

NORTHERN LANDSCAPES



Northern Landscapes

“Nothing is secondary in a picture, everything inevitably belongs to the whole and can never be disregarded.” —Caspar David Friedrich

Mid-winter in the countryside outside of Stockholm, just before five in the evening. A distant car with its headlights on crosses the broad plain. The sound of its engine is barely audible, and the birds in a nearby forest have fallen silent. I'm standing at the edge of the road, my left hand holding a metal rod, which has been hammered into the hard earth. My prospect is simply the dark brown, ploughed fields, a line of leafless birch trees, and the beetroot-red disk of the setting sun. I feel as though I'm part of the landscape – a solitary observer, supporting himself with the metal rod and steeped in contemplation. At that moment, I am overtaken (as a dreamer is overtaken) by a nostalgia for something beyond my comprehension, a nostalgia that was last evoked when I stood before a painting by Caspar David Friedrich, *A Walk at Dusk*, in which an elderly gentleman folds his arms and bows his head before a megalithic tomb. Through this act of stillness, he attains the same age as the tomb's large, slab-like boulder, balanced firmly but with a certain grace on three smaller stones. In the background, a violet-shaded mist rises into the evening sky and is illuminated by the waxing moon.

~

*the stronger the wind
the whiter the trees*

At night, the white trunks of the birch trees appear like flag poles at the edge of the forest. Once in a while the hooting of an owl comes out of the darkness. The wayfarer sits huddled in the shadow of an old barn; he has been compressed and rounded over by the cold night air, just as the Ice Age, retreating down the valley, long ago extracted and fashioned what are now enormous granite boulders. Covered in moss, they lie scattered throughout the forest. When he first saw them, hidden among the pine trees, the wayfarer imagined that they were thatched cottages.

In the village behind the trees, the moon shines on the long paths of ice. Everything is so frozen and solidified that life would seem to be impossible inside the rows of wooden houses (although their occupants are no doubt fast asleep). As for the wayfarer, his thick body has merged into a single, massive shoulder, hunched and defiant against the surrounding darkness and the passage of time.

~

From the platform at Hamburg railway station, I watch a man and a woman carry a push-chair as though it were a stretcher down the long flight of concrete stairs. Nadia lives somewhere in this city, with her German husband and baby daughter. But she's back in Italy for the winter, and I'm about to catch a train to Sweden, heading North, away from the vault of iron girders overhead, and the discoloured panes of glass, and the fluttering of pigeons.

A voice from a loud-speaker warns passengers that pickpockets are operating in the station. At the same time, an old tramp approaches the public telephone next to where I'm sitting and sticks a grimy finger into the coin return slot. When he finds it empty, he grumbles to himself and moves on.

Someone with a beautifully pale face (a Swedish face!) leans against the window of a departing train. The face continues to float above the tracks after the train has gone. Between the lips, which are slightly parted – perhaps in anticipation of the journey – I hear whispered a verse by Rainer Maria Rilke:

*No one ever self-destructs,
no matter how abandoned,
and those who menace us
are gods now unemployed.*

~

The wayfarer also finds himself in Hamburg. As if wearing leg-irons, he shuffles past the shop windows with their displays of consumer goods and finely-dressed mannequins. In one doorway a drunk looks up at him in disbelief. Further on, growing tired of gazing through the

sheets of glass, he turns around to face the traffic, his arms extended in a gesture of helplessness. At that moment someone presses a few banknotes into his open palm.

At breakfast the next morning, the restaurant's large, marmalade cat suddenly claws its way up a wooden pillar and stares down at the wayfarer, who has squeezed himself into one of the small booths and is smoking a cigarette while he waits for his meal to arrive.

An hour later, having downed several cups of black coffee, he takes a walk along a gray and subdued Reeperbahn. It's too cold for people to stand still, except for two prostitutes who are talking to each other on the corner, ignoring the passersby. The wayfarer is drawn towards the red lights around the doorway of a sex shop, although he knows that the promise of warmth and comfort is a hollow one. When he steps inside, his eyes are confused by the brightly-lit shelves of fragmented flesh, printed on glossy paper and splayed out in hyperactive colours. Behind a glass counter, in which enlarged sexual organs, made of rubber, are arranged on black satin, the store owner stands with his arms folded, impassive and somewhat bored, like a magician who has just performed his most rudimentary trick.

The silence of the store is broken by the rhythmic groans of a woman, her voice issuing from beyond a partly drawn curtain. Through the gap, an aisle of video booths is visible in the semi-darkness. The wayfarer glances up at the store owner, who remains behind the counter, his head now turned to one side so that he can watch a soap opera on a small, black and white television screen.

~

While walking beneath the white dome of Hamburg's Kunsthalle, I come across another of Caspar David Friedrich's paintings, *The Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*. Once again the artist has chosen as his subject a solitary traveller: a man with wind-tossed hair, dressed in a suit of green velvet, who rests his cane on an outcrop of rocks and surveys the jagged peaks of nearby mountains as they rise out of the mist.

There is something absorbing about this depiction of a nineteenth century gentleman on the edge of the world, facing not just the unknown, but the unknowable. As I stand in front of the painting, following the contours of the mountains and the wisps of fog, I have the distinct impression that someone is looking over my shoulder. When I turn around, the circular room is deserted, except for a museum guard seated on a wooden chair beside a door marked *Kein Ausgang*.

My German is virtually non-existent, although there is one word, now part of the English vocabulary, which has stayed with me since I first began my trip through northern Europe – *doppelgänger*, or ghostly double. While travelling alone, I have the recurring sensation that I'm being accompanied by an invisible counterpart. He shares the same itinerary as I do, stopping in the cities where I stop, and yet our experiences are completely different. He sleeps in the open, while I enjoy the comfort of a hotel bed; he suffers hunger and deprivation, while I eat regular meals and dress warmly; he explores the darker sides of city life, the sailor's taverns and the red-light districts, while I spend my time in art galleries and museums. But through all these contrasting circumstances, we remain deeply connected. He is somehow with me, just as I am with him. I think of my counterpart before falling asleep each night, and upon waking up each morning, although I'm certain that he spares no thought for me. He can only continue on his journey by moving in isolation, circling in his own orbit like a battered asteroid.

~

The wayfarer is attempting to maintain his balance as he wades through the icy waters of a mountain river. He has decided to cross the river at a bend where the waters form a series of shallow rapids. In front of him, a line of large, glistening rocks stretches towards the other shore. The gaps between these rocks are larger than he first thought, and the white, rushing water is more powerful than it appeared when he stood on the bank. Nevertheless, he has committed himself to the crossing, and now, at the mid-way point, he can only move forward, his body shaking and his steps uncertain as

he tries to steady himself. In his left hand he holds the iridescent feather of a forest magpie. While the river surges around him, he can feel the small blue feather vibrating in the breeze. If he were to let it go, he could slip into the rapids and grasp the rocks for support. But this would be an act of clumsiness, whereas the weight of the feather keeps the wayfarer upright, and invests him with a certain dignity.

The current tugs at his trouser-legs and at the bottom of his overcoat. It feels as though his bones are frozen. The wayfarer has no idea how long he has been standing in the river; perhaps he has always been there, and it is the river, coming down from the mountains above, which is the recent arrival. Such thoughts pass through him and slip away, leaving only the sound of the water. . . .

At a certain point, to his surprise, he finds that his body has moved forward, and that the other bank is now within his reach. Patches of dark ferns are visible against a subdued carpet of pine-needles. Night is falling. In the forest there is nothing but a deep and penetrating silence.

~

*in the bleakness of mid-winter
in the ever-present cold
a filament of seagulls
an afterthought of church bells*

While I'm in Stockholm, a friend takes me by ferry to the zoo at Skansen. Parents and children are crowded into the information centre and the primate house, but outside there is little activity. We follow a gently curving path up the hill, past a series of empty cages and enclosures. The animals that should be on display are either hibernating or kept indoors for the winter. Their absence, however, does not disappoint us; in fact, nothing could be better than spending the afternoon in the stillness of a nearly deserted zoo.

My friend takes pleasure in showing me his special silver coin, a gift he received long ago, when he was a child. If you press its rim at a certain point, the coin changes from having a head and a tail to

having two heads. We are about to toss it into the air to decide whether we should continue on our walk or turn back for a cup of coffee, when a flurry of movement in a nearby cage catches our attention. Beneath a wooden platform, a strange, wild-looking creature is hanging upside down, its black eyes staring directly at us. On top of the platform, the curved ends of its claws can be seen protruding through the gaps between the planks of wood. What we have just encountered, I learn later on, is an animal distinct from any other, a legendary animal of great ferocity and intelligence. A sign fixed to the front of the cage spells out its name in blue letters: **Wolverine**. This one, a male, may have originated in the far North, above the Arctic Circle. But as the wolverine studies us, from his upside down position, it is we who appear to be in the wrong place.

The next day I'm on my own again. Having strolled through the old part of Stockholm for several hours, I find myself at the edge of a small, concrete quay, contemplating the elegant configuration of a stone bridge. A rope has been suspended below one of the arches of the bridge, just above the water-line. In the sunlight, an orange buoy, attached to the middle of the rope, silently slides over slabs of ice that are drifting downstream. There is something hypnotic in the way the angular pieces of whiteness slip beneath the orange sphere, which then bobs about on the surface of the water until another slab of ice picks it up and passes underneath. Throughout the day, as the ice continues to float towards the sea, the buoy will remain where it is, like a miniature sun, providing a little warmth for any wanderer who has the good fortune to stop and notice its presence.

~

After nightfall the wayfarer finds himself at the base of a large, uprooted tree. Scooping out a hollow in the earth – which is surprisingly soft – he lies down to sleep, pulling a covering of branches and foliage over his body. He knows that he will survive the cold of the night (he has survived worse), and that he will get up at dawn, somewhat stiffly, and walk to the nearest village for something to eat. The challenge will come when he reaches the permafrost, for he is travelling to the far North, and eventually the ground will

become as hard as rock. Nowhere to bed down then, he tells himself, automatically rubbing his right hip further into the damp and compressed earth.

The trees above his head creak like the masts of a ship. He drifts further into sleep, cradled in wood, with moss hanging from the rigging and small ferns spread across the deck . . . Cold, green flames encircle his heart. And the sails, vast and unfurled, are as white and heavy as sheets of ice. In the darkness they begin to crack . . . A membrane of light flashes before his eyes, then fades. He has difficulty breathing. There is a great weight, and a dull, nearly forgotten pain . . . At each crack his lungs become more brittle and ancient. At each crack the circle of green flames tightens around his heart.

~

That night the temperature suddenly drops far below zero. The cold passes without effort through the double-glazed windows, sending me away from the dying warmth of my bed in search of extra blankets. After a series of hotel rooms, I have ended up in an old schoolhouse, the summer residence of my friend back in Stockholm. But it is winter now, and the house, especially at night, seems to begrudge my solitary presence. The lampshades, the furniture, the curtains hanging in the moonlight – everything is perfectly still –while my own movements, in contrast, take on a frantic quality as I hunt through drawers and open wardrobes.

Back in bed, under the weight of an eiderdown and layers of blankets, I finally fall asleep. But the heaviness stays with me through a progression of dreams. In one dream there is a sunrise, or a sunset, and the heaviness is of the earth itself – a patch of barren ground, at the edge of the ocean, on which two children are playing with a small flag. Their mother sits nearby, leaning towards them, while their father remains upright, turning to confront an elderly man who wears a grey cape and supports himself with a walking-stick. The man's face is hidden, while the father's expression is a mixture of anger and anxiety. He points directly at the intruder – for this is

what the man must be – perhaps telling him, in no uncertain terms, to keep his distance. The children, however, continue to play, oblivious to any disturbance, and to the massive shapes of three sailing ships that have appeared over the horizon. The ships set their course silently to the shore, although the waves around their keels neither rise nor fall. And the sky overhead is a pale, luminous yellow.

~

This morning I am filled with a strange restlessness. Leaving the blackened coffee pot on top of the unlit stove, I put on my coat and boots and step outside. Although the sun must be well above the horizon, the light is dim, and the cold so intense that I instinctively contract my nostrils, inhaling just the smallest amount of air in case a sliver of ice were to slip down my throat and lodge in my lungs.

“Become transparent,” I tell myself. As if in response, the darkness that I have carried with me since I began my journey now seems to flow out of my body and merge with the darkness of the forest. I decide to take a long walk, away from the schoolhouse and the novel I should be working on. This piece of writing – part art history and part detective fiction – can wait; something compels me to enter the cold of the morning and follow a narrow path between the trees.

An hour later I find myself back inside, telephoning for an ambulance. But there is no sense of urgency; when I came upon him at the base of a fallen tree, his body was stiff and lifeless, and his lips had turned blue. What else do I remember? And what should I tell the police, who will soon arrive along with the ambulance? He was a tramp, no doubt about that. He was an old, homeless man who wandered into a forest, found a place to rest, and then froze to death during the course of a long night. It can happen like that in mid-winter. Nothing exceptional. A private and self-contained ending, with no one to contact, no relative who could identify the body.

And yet, having removed the leaves and branches from his bulk, I bowed my head. The seams of his dark overcoat, split around the shoulders, were laced with crystals of ice, and a pale scar ran down the left side of his face, from the temple to the jaw (the other side

was turned away, pressed into the earth). I recognized him in a way that was both remote and intimate, as if we were in the cabin of a ship, lit only by a flickering candle; as if my hands, like his, were large and callused from hauling ropes. Perhaps we had once played a game of cards together, a serious game, or shared the same bottle, passing it back and forth between us (a bottle that now lies on the bottom of the ocean).

Of course, none of this will be related to the police. I can barely admit to myself that he was, and still is, my intimate companion. The one who went before me. My accomplice and my ancestor.

PAINTING WITH DE CHIRICO



Painting with de Chirico

“What shall I love if not the enigma?” —Giorgio de Chirico

Eight Preliminary Sketches

At a certain point in the course of that long, unproductive year, the clouds went out of his canvases. Only the terse and empty sky of autumn remained.

It's five to three. No need to check your watch. The light of the setting sun crosses the corner of a fountain. Behind the fountain, the rain-speckled earth is now in shadow, and beyond the earth there lies the deeper shadow of the arcade.

Sand covers your shoes as you meditate at the edge of a giant chessboard, at the point where the black and white squares come to an end and the desert begins.

Flags flutter in an empty sky. Surrounded by false perspectives, she lays down her large body at the centre of a labyrinth. Each thought has its own vanishing point. Thin wires, stretched between balconies, vibrate in the wind. And the hills in the background burst like green bubbles on the surface of a pond.

When did I lose my sight? I recall a large eye floating above a water tower. I recall my two dear sisters who resembled each other like the figure eight placed beside the figure eight. But one sister was bald while the other always wore a wig. A long, black wig. Perhaps it was then that I lost my sight.

His dream of iron artichokes gave birth to a cloud filled with powdered snails, and to an eel-blue train, which cut through the countryside on razor-sharp wheels.

A broken biscuit, the shadow of a toothbrush, the way the floor meets the wall. After contemplating infinity for so long, you return to the dimensions of your bedroom. And it's all exactly as you imagined; nothing is out of place.

When finally transformed into stone, he believed that he would be greeted warmly by the other statues of that prosperous city. However, after the transformation had taken place, he found himself standing on a low pedestal, at the end of a side street, without a horse or a sword or a cannonball.

Three Studies

The stone babies spill out of two large crocks. They cover the rugged ledge below the silent and muscular figure of their progenitor. It's an afternoon in mid-winter and the babies are exposed to the cold. Except for one who rubs his eyes and appears to be crying, the others remain fast asleep. A massive water tower, which rises up behind the abandoned fountain, casts its shadow across what is an otherwise featureless square on the outskirts of Ferrara. The people of this city are considered to be somewhat lazy by their neighbours, the industrious Bolognesi. During one period in their collective history, they also had the reputation of being deranged; the fumes from macerating vats of hemp were blamed for giving rise to abnormal mental states and emotional instability among many of the inhabitants.

Water no longer sparkles in the empty basin that curves around the bottom of the fountain, and weeds, poking through the cracks in the stone, reinforce the general atmosphere of neglect. The dominating statue of the giant, naked male belongs to another time (and to another period of madness). A small plaque identifies him as the embodiment of the River Po. But there is nothing fluid about this athletic superman who holds the crocks at his hips like truncated canons while releasing two streams of male babies into the world. Such a prodigious and unnatural birth has made no impression on the young father; instead of regarding his offspring with affection, he ignores them completely and turns a proud, shaven head to scan the horizon.

~

Last night, in a dream, the sight of heavy rain falling on the blue and white awnings of a fish market made me think of lying in a warm bath with my wife. On returning to my apartment, I picked up a book at random – one by a well-known filmmaker – and on flicking through the pages discovered a detailed account of the scene I had just witnessed: A torrent of rain descends from the heavens to strike two parallel lines of dark canopies; silver fish glisten in their trays as if on

the verge of coming back to life; fish mongers hurry to and fro with large plastic sheets; people run for cover and take shelter in doorways. . . . For the filmmaker, this downpour also triggered the image of him lying in a hot bath with his mistress, entering her in a languid fashion while wisps of steam curled above their heads. Still in the dream, I invited my friends around so that I could tell them about this extraordinary coincidence. However, even as they gathered at the foot of my bed, wide-eyed with expectation, the memory of the fish market and the account of the filmmaker began to fade. I became lost for words and eventually woke up, jotting down what little I could recall in the early morning light.

After breakfast, I devoted the rest of the day to exploring the old part of the city, wandering down its medieval side streets and alleyways. But nothing I came across could compare with the complex sensations that I had experienced in the dream; in fact, the reality around me seemed uniformly flat and uninteresting. Overhead the clouds had fused into a single expanse of white, which afforded no view of the sun and held out no prospect of rain. Unable to go back to sleep, my mind flickering with random thoughts, I merely continued to place one foot in front of the other.

~

On my first visit to Ferrara, near the Cathedral in the centre of the city, I encountered a hooded figure. He had both arms outstretched, and his cloaked body, seen from below, appeared to be pierced by power-lines. This was the statue of Savonarola, who stands defiantly on a platform of logs, symbolizing the fire that would eventually claim his life. At the base of the statue I read the following inscription: "Girolamo Savonarola. Born in Ferrara. Burnt in Florence. The scourge of vices and tyrants in a corrupt and decadent age."

A feeling of unease grew as I contemplated the right hand of this rebellious priest, raised to the heavens, summoning down the power of Almighty God to destroy the sodomites and the adulterers, the gamblers and the heretics. Among that considerable number could be counted his executioner, who is reported to have cried out while stoking the fire, "The one who wanted to burn me is now himself put

to the flames!”

In 1497, a year before his own incineration, Savonarola and his followers carried out the Bonfire of Vanities. A legion of young boys was dispatched to collect objects of depravity and vice from the citizens of Florence. Mirrors, cosmetics, expensive dresses, dice, playing cards, pagan books, lewd pictures, immoral poems, and even musical instruments were heaped together into a great pile and then set ablaze. Among the many objects of fine art consumed by the flames was a small, metaphysical painting by an anonymous Greek artist. Inside a large bubble – one that could have been produced from a child’s bubble-pipe – floated a broken wheel of fortune, a shattered looking glass, a leper’s rattle, and a burning heart. To whom did the heart belong? Did Savonarola witness this canvas being thrown onto the bonfire? And if so, did he have a presentment of his own fate? We’ll never know. Once the pyrotechnics were over, the crowd of onlookers drifted away.

The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon

Although it is not mentioned in any of the guide books on Rome, in the park of Villa Doria Pamphili you will find a simple yet puzzling monument near the Villa itself: a slender column supporting a large stone egg. The whiteness of the egg, set against a blue sky with a palm tree in the background, suggests an image of Egypt. The Orphic mysteries may also come to mind, or the egg laid by Leda after her coupling with the swan; the egg that produced Castor and Pollux. But in the end such associations fall away, and the egg remains on top of its column, solid and impenetrable.

Further on, the park provides other surprises, the principal one being a colony of muskrats. These plump rodents, over a foot-long, are a close relative of the beaver, lacking only the beaver's paddle-shaped tail. They swim up and down a stream which runs through the western section of the park, clambering onto the banks to receive offerings of bread and vegetables. The Latin name for beaver is *castor*, and if the inhabitants of the park were in fact beavers, as many people believe them to be, then a connection could be made between them and the statue of the egg. But the muskrats are no other than muskrats, *ondata obscura*, while the citizens of the capital, although a little confused about what to call these creatures, appear content to stroll beside the stream and feed them by hand.

An old man sits on a park bench in front of a crumbling orange wall and reads *Il Corriere della Sera*. A woman in a woollen coat bends down, her handbag trailing on the grass, and holds out a piece of bread. Two small boys break open a lettuce. Soon it will be dusk.

Walking downhill, you enter an expanse of open ground which tapers away towards the city. Large dogs are let off their leads and lope about, almost beside themselves at being so unrestrained. They vanish over a rise, or into a clump of bushes, only to reappear with a burst of speed. Their owners stand motionless, casting elongated shadows, and you decide to retrace your steps.

Sparrows flicker overhead, specks of iron drawn into the wild,

magnetic patterns of the palm fronds. And the egg on its column, so austere at noon, begins to glow with the light of the setting sun.

The Child's Brain

The green shutters have been securely fastened. From the darkness of his room, he hears the sound of a coin falling on the street outside. He feels irritated and on edge, as if someone were standing behind his back, eating a fig, each seed being audibly cracked between two rows of perfect teeth.

Perhaps he should wear a pair of headphones like the elderly chemist in the room next door. In an hour or so he will be forced to listen to the evening ritual on the other side of the wall: bandaged hands scraping the contents of a plate into a rubbish bin; the plate and cutlery being washed in a small sink; and then, to mark the conclusion of the meal, the painful sound of vomiting. Try as he might, the chemist can no longer digest his daily servings of meat and vegetables. And each time he makes an appearance in the corridor, headphones clamped to his head, he seems a little less solid, a little more spectral.

The face in the mirror is neither young nor old, neither handsome nor ugly; the sort of face you would take for granted in a crowd or pass by unnoticed in the street. The moustache is neatly clipped, the complexion pale but not unhealthy, and the hair well-combed and uniformly black, without a single strand of grey. For a man in his late-forties, the hair is so black that you might suspect it has been dyed. But you would be mistaken. All in all, the face of a station master, or an accountant, or a minor official.

Lowering his eyes, he raises his right hand to his bare chest and touches an invisible medal that has been pinned there, just above the nipple. "I deserve some recognition," he thinks to himself, "some acknowledgement of all the fine work that I've accomplished." But what has he accomplished? At that moment, the bridges and the aqueducts, the railway stations and the arcades, slowly fade from sight. They become no more substantial than arabesques – faint tracings of a remarkable and yet unrealized city.

In the semi-darkness, he turns away from the mirror and looks at the

yellow book lying on his bedside table. The book is a *giallo*, an Italian crime novel. A bookmark, made of red fabric, extends from its closed pages like the forked tongue of a snake. He has reached the point in the story where the detective, returning from a fruitless search of a muddy field, removes his boots and socks, lights a cigarette, and slumps down in a chair, holding his head in his hands. To amuse himself, he takes a long drag on his cigarette and releases a cloud of smoke between his legs. The smoke swirls over the wooden floorboards and his naked feet. It's already past midnight, and the branches of a tree can be heard scraping against the kitchen window.

The elderly chemist begins to clean his plate and cutlery. The blade of his knife and the tines of his fork are corroded, as if the residue of acid in his body has somehow been transmitted to the metal.

"A thin partition separates us," he thinks to himself. "If I were to knock it down, I would find him standing there, eyes lowered, pale and ashamed. That son-of-a-bitch architect who never completed a single building, he can melt into the shadows for all I care."

Outside his door, the landlady's cat is clawing the carpet. But the chemist hears no sound because of his headphones. And in the other room the shutters remain firmly closed, blocking out an oily sky along with its confusion of warehouses and factory chimneys.

The Departure of the Argonauts

As the sun lowers itself to the horizon, the sand glows with a soft, pink light. I take his note out of my coat pocket and read it one more time:

“It would not surprise me to find a sphinx on my doorstep, or to encounter a cyclops coming out of his cave down by the beach. As a matter of fact, the Argonauts are preparing to set sail this very afternoon, and I have decided to join them.”

He sent me this message a week ago, and no one has seen him since then. I suspect that he has taken the train to Milan, away from our small, coastal town, which has virtually shut down now that winter is approaching. The rows of bathing sheds remain closed, and the gates to the funfair have been padlocked. Turning my head to the left, I can see seagulls circling above the stationary Ferris wheel, which appears like a giant, skeletal moon against the pale grey of the sky.

His ambition is to become a famous painter. Of course, his real goal is Paris, and Milan will simply be a stopping-off place. He has a wealthy aunt there who will act as his patron and provide for his every need during the dismal, fog-bound months of winter.

Before his disappearance, he completed a series of canvases, each one depicting a particular wooden horse from the funfair’s merry-go-round. These “horse portraits”, which he decided to call them, are remarkably disturbing, and I doubt if he will show them to his aunt. Although the horses retain their gaudy trappings, each head is portrayed with immense, flaring nostrils, bulging eyes, and slab-like teeth. Slightly blurred as if set in motion, they possess such a ravenous intensity that no parent would dare place a precious girl or boy on one of their empty saddles. And as far as I’m concerned, these demonic beasts remain too closely linked to their fairground counterparts. I prefer his earlier paintings of centaurs, even when the centaurs were engaged in killing each other with boulders and tree stumps. Ignoring the bloodshed, you still had the comfort of finding

yourself in a mythological landscape.

Drifting along the beach, I approach an outcrop of rocks, which defines the entrance to a small, secluded cove. In a town of drab squares and narrow, dusty streets, this is the place where our journeys would end, and over the years we spent many afternoons in its silent compass, sitting on the sand and watching the waves.

Upon walking around the rocks, to my surprise I discover that a long mirror has been placed in the middle of the cove. Standing vertically in a wooden frame, the mirror is tilted slightly upward so that it reflects a square section of the ocean with a pillar of sky above. From where I am – as it is clearly intended to do – the reflection takes on the form of a bright exclamation mark.

Years ago he gave me a drawing of the same mirror in the same location. Now he has recreated that very scene before my eyes and, in doing so, has left behind a second message. Once again, and with emphasis, he is telling me that he has travelled far beyond the ordinary and into the unknown, and that my role is to be a spectator, a shadow from his past, who simply stands on the shore and gazes into the distance. Perhaps I have entered one of his paintings and will be fated to remain within its confines, frozen in time and space.

For a moment, faraway in the mirror, I catch sight of a sailing ship. But when I turn towards the sea, there is only a single expanse of unbroken water extending to the horizon. Will the light begin to fade on the surface of the mirror before it fades on the ocean, or will the ocean darken while its reflection retains a flicker of brightness? Or will both ocean and mirror grow dark together? The sun has already set. If I stay here, in this semi-circle of rocks, I will soon know the answer.

ANTONELLO'S ANGEL



Part One

To explain the secrets of oil painting, the Flemish master Jan van Eyke took Antonello da Messina rowing on a tranquil river near his native town of Bruges. It was early in the morning, swallows were darting overhead, and behind them the thin spires of St Sauveur and Notre-Dame appeared a dark purple against the pale yellow of the sky. "Remember," said Jan van Eyke, "we're in a landscape, always in a landscape. But just as I'm here in the bow and you're sitting in the stern, so in painting there must also be a balance; between the infinite and the infinitesimal, or if you like, between the faraway and the close-at-hand. And look, as you gaze over the side of the boat, how everything is composed of layers: the thick mud on the bottom of the river, the gleaming weeds undulating like a woman's long hair (an image he was sure would appeal to his Italian friend); and how the smart fish glide to and fro above the weeds, and how in turn the noble ducks propel themselves above the fish, and how the ripples spread out from the breasts of these ducks, from their feathers; and then notice the small insects being picked off by the swallows in the air, while still higher up a solitary seagull, ever-watchful, circles above the river as he would above the sea. But more to the point, observe how all the levels of air and water are penetrated, illuminated, and unified by the light that falls from the sky. Oil is our light, the light of our paintings, and with a series of glazes we fashion our work, layer by layer, so that it comes to resemble the very substance of this world."

It is not known whether Jan van Eyke and Antonello da Messina communicated in Italian or French; perhaps it was a mixture of both, with Latin phrases interspersed. In fact, despite what Vasari has written, it seems improbable that Antonello ever travelled to Flanders, and his trip down the river with Jan van Eyke remains a matter of conjecture. But even in later paintings, such as his *Saint Sebastian* with its Italianate modelling of limbs and architecture, the lessons Antonello learnt from the Northern School are clearly to be seen.

Saint Sebastian

The sky is a steamy blue, as if the whole countryside has been placed under a glass dome. Within the fortified walls of the city, people walk towards the main square, away from their humid, stifling rooms and into the slightly less oppressive heat of the sirocco.

A woman holds a baby to her breast, her belly swelling with another child, while high up on the building opposite, like a small bell or a faded pearl, a water-bottle hangs outside a window.

Between the child contained in the womb and the water stored in the bottle, a few inches of wood – the shaft of an arrow – protrude from the upper thigh of the martyred saint. His naked feet have been carefully positioned on the smooth tiles, several paces away from one of his tormentors, who lies stretched out in a drunken stupor. A certain coolness is being conveyed through the curve of the saint's upright body, and he seems somewhat detached from his suffering, pinned to his slender tree as though stapled to a mast. Always departing from the same place. And no waves slap against a hull; there's only a long sigh, released from a balcony, and the wind that drapes itself around the turrets and the colonnades.

A round shrub sits in its pot like a blurred canon-ball. Also in the background, to the left and the right of a cloth, drawn tight across the groin of the saint, two oriental carpets have been laid out for display. Above each carpet leans a pair of figures: a mother and her daughter on the left, a pair of lovers on the right, with both of the young women gazing towards the man transfixed in the middle of the square. Or perhaps they look beyond him to a landscape where the lines of perspective pass into a clear sky, and with the stars at night into a thousand vanishing points.

~

In January of 1460 Antonello da Messina returned to Italy from a journey "about which nothing else is known". Some believed that he had travelled to the Netherlands. During the same year, although this

date is also a source of contention, he painted *Saint Jerome in his Study*, a work so resembling the Northern School that it was once attributed to Jan van Eyke. But whatever connections can be established between these two men – and it is known that at least one of Jan van Eyke’s paintings found its way to the Court of Naples while Antonello was there – the Italian painter grew so intimate with his Flemish counterpart that, to borrow an image from another tradition, their eyebrows became entwined.

Saint Jerome in his Study

In the half-light of the colonnade, a miniature lion, like a shaggy dog returning from a swim, pads across the marble floor. And at the bottom of the painting, arrayed along a honey-coloured ledge, we find a partridge, a peacock, and a golden dish.

But these are just marginal notes, small images from the writings of Saint Jerome. The saint himself sits in his study (which resembles nothing less than a stage set, wheeled into the nave of a cathedral and flood-lit by the rising or the setting sun). In this warm light, which seems to emanate from the surrounding wooden panels, he remains the centre of attention, dressed in his red cardinal's robe (loosened to reveal a hair shirt), his slender hands parting the pages of a book so that his eyes can linger on the black, cursive script. While he holds himself erect in his half-moon chair, the other books around his shelves – his tracts and his translations – are left open, somewhat casually, to remind him that he belongs, and always will belong, in the realm of words.

Unlike a Saint Anthony, he remains untempted, canonized for services rendered to the church (as one commentator has remarked), and not for his innate saintliness. And just because, over the centuries, his gaze has never left the page, the wonders he ignores around him become all the more intense: the lion in the shadows; the plants in their ceramic pots; the grey cat curled up, faded, nearly transparent; and outside the left-hand window, two figures (the painter from Sicily and his Flemish master?) together in a row-boat, unmindful of any grand or historic undertaking as they ply the smooth, viridescent waters of a river flowing gently through a green landscape.

Part Two

Frost lay on the weeds along the railway line, while ice crystals began to fall at Cremona station. We were heading South to escape the first onslaught of winter, having stopped briefly in Cremona (for its square and cathedral), and then in Piacenza (because its name reminded me of *piacevole*, the Italian word for “pleasant”). But the streets of Piacenza turned out to be grey and depressing. And as we walked past anonymous shop fronts and office buildings, a series of electronic signs kept reminding us that the temperature had dropped below zero.

On the edge of town, we huddled together at a bus stop. Sparrows were flitting overhead, having built their nests in the thick grating which covered the windows of an apartment building behind us. After half an hour of listening to their chirping, and of resisting the welcoming lights of a bar across the road, the bus arrived that would take us to Saint Lazarus.

The Alberoni Gallery, part of the Seminary of Saint Lazarus, displays a collection of 16th and 17th century tapestries along with a number of Renaissance paintings, including a portrait of Christ, *Ecce Homo*, by Antonello. This is what we had come to see. And although permission to visit the gallery had to be applied for a day in advance, we pleaded with the elderly woman who met us on the front steps, telling her that we had come all the way from the southern hemisphere to view the work of Antonello, and that we were in Piacenza for only one day.

She furrowed her brow at first, and then motioned for us to come inside while she called the director of the Seminary by phone. He took several minutes to arrive, and we imagined him being drawn away from some important work. But upon entering the portico, he immediately offered to be our guide, leading us down marbled hallways, grey-green in the afternoon light, and through glass-panelled doors to the gallery’s modest collection of tapestries and canvases.

Among subdued landscapes, and depictions of pious virgins with their hands clasped, and lumpy, voluminous figures wielding swords or being beheaded, we were guided to Antonello's *Ecce Homo*. The director – a compact man in his mid-forties who was clearly well-suited for the diverse roles of priest, administrator and teacher – nodded as we stood before the painting. Then, not wishing to disturb our concentration, he withdrew into the background.

Ecce Homo

A melting has taken place, a loosening of bonds, a dissolving of blocks that comes with the intensity of great suffering. The face of Christ hovers inside the layers of varnish as if inside an ancient Polaroid, his features sensitive to the vibrations of whoever is standing before his gaze.

The branches of thorns have been tightly entwined around his forehead, and although a trickle of blood escapes from beneath the strands of hair, it's the eyes which inform the viewer, with a piercing directness, that the act of ignoring suffering is no less barbaric than the act of causing it.

The downward curve of his mouth complements the downward curve of his shoulders, both acknowledging the absolute weight of the world. And there, just below the knotted rope placed around his neck, I discover a detail that I've never noticed in any reproduction: a single teardrop, precisely translucent.

All of humanity is present within one portrait. And this depiction of sorrow is so raw that it renders unnecessary any whip or spear or cross. I find it hard to turn away. There is nowhere to go. Nothing to transcend.

~

First image of Sicily: oranges lying between the railway tracks. Passing by cliffs covered in cacti (*fichi d'India*) and the high-rise catacombes of Catania, our train arrived in Syracuse where would spend five days exploring its Greek and Roman ruins.

One afternoon, while walking around the Latomia del Paradiso, an ancient limestone quarry, we were adopted by a friendly dentist who showed us several other archaeological sites before taking us back to his apartment for a meal. Recently divorced, he admitted that he often felt lonely and in need of company.

Over servings of pasta, and a detailed exposition on the history of

Syracuse (which boiled down to a series of invasions), he explained how the Mafia had been slowly moving East across the island from its base in Palermo. Syracuse had yet to fall under the influence of the Mafia bosses, and dentists in the city did not have to pay protection money. “Ma il giorno arriverà,” he added. “But the day will come.”

Our host became a little nervous at this point, and to change the subject he pushed our empty plates aside and showed us his collection of books on mushrooms and mushroom hunting. “The mushroom is already dead,” he told us. “The underground fungus-body has done its work once the mushroom has pushed its way through the soil. So, when you take its stem between your thumb and finger and pull it up, it feels nothing.”

During moments of silence in our conversation, you could hear the hum of a generator coming from his tank of tropical fish. Although the light caught the electric blue and red stripes of the small, neon tetras as they flickered about in their tank, there was a pervasive atmosphere of sadness in the dentist’s apartment. And at nine o’clock, not wishing to be out too late, we decided that it was time for us to return to our hotel.

The next morning our spirits needed a lift, so we headed for the National Museum and *The Annunciation*, which even in its damaged state is perhaps the most spellbinding of all Antonello’s paintings.

The Annunciation

Kept in a room with an angel for too long, you fly out the window to a road on which a man of some importance is riding on a donkey. The donkey is being guided by a black dog, and behind, a woman carries a basket on her head, followed by a small child who wears a red cap and trails a stick along the ground. Then a breeze, perhaps from the shifting of wings, fans the pages of an open book, and you come back to the room with eyes lowered, your hands folded gently across your breasts, as if a great expanse were being concentrated somewhere inside your heart. And it doesn't matter that all life outside appears to be diminishing; the light keeps falling on your face. The panes of glass are well-positioned.

As for the angel, you would not call him impatient; he simply returns to you as you return to yourself. All things are immanent – this is his message; all things are of the moment and will remain that way. But he cannot speak to you directly because a pillar blocks his path, dividing the space into two sections. His is the more constrained, and he stands there pale, uncertain, amazed.

In the angel's dream you come forth as pure energy; an emanation of such sweetness that for human eyes your halo would appear like a honeycomb. And your body is so tenderly defined that the angel, although attuned to higher vibrations, might be tempted to slip on a human hand, as we would a glove, to touch the curve of your neck. But this is saying too much.

Right now a team of experts may be working on cleaning and repainting, so that one day a voice will announce how Antonello's damaged canvas has been carefully restored. But nothing was ever lost. This is also the angel's message, one you have known from the beginning and acknowledge with a smile. And no brush will reawaken you from the past, for you have always been awake. The window keeps you in the present moment, a window that continues to dream both ways.

Illustrations

Front Cover: still from *26 Tanka Films* by Richard von Sturmer

Foundations of the zendo at Chapin Mill, Batavia, New York
Photograph by Richard von Sturmer

Detail of *Dali, at the Age of Six When He Believed Himself to be a Young Girl, Lifting the Skin of the Water to Observe a Dog Sleeping in the Shadow of the Sea*, private collection, France

Yuka plants in White Sands National Monument, New Mexico
Photograph by Richard von Sturmer

Amala Wrightson as Krazy Kat and Richard von Sturmer as Ignatz Mouse, Monument Valley, Arizona
Photograph by an anonymous French tourist

Tiger sculpture at Tanzhe Temple, Beijing
Photograph by Richard von Sturmer

A Walk at Dusk by Caspar David Friedrich, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

The Awakening of the Child's Mind: a retouched photograph of Giorgio de Chirico's *The Child's Mind*, which appeared in the *Surrealist Almanac* of 1950

Detail of *The Annunciation* by Antonello da Messina, National Museum, Syracuse

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