

Day of the Winged Lion

Short Stories

House of Transit

Barek-el-Muftala had disappeared. I had been wandering since early morning among the stalls of the import shops that filled the marketplace and no one could tell me anything certain concerning his whereabouts. Finally, amid the confusion of rumors, an aging fruit vendor informed me that three days earlier he had seen Barek leave the city's yellow zone. The note he pressed into my hand gave an address in Malinkadassi. Setting off toward the main plaza, I made my way past yogurt vendors, sellers of bronze, and the other merchants. Stopping for a brief rest, I ordered *shá*, refusing both coffee and the hookah. Eventually I made my way to the bus station and hired a cab. After a long ride, the driver let me out in front of a large bungalow with a bronze plaque that read simply, "House of Transit."

At the door, I received the information I had been seeking. "He's inside," they told me. Making my way through the crowd, I emerged in an enormous room. A great circle of mourners surrounded an open coffin that, with its open lid supported by a wooden brace, looked almost like a grand piano.

A fat man standing next to the casket recited prayers in a loud voice; at intervals the others responded. From time to time the man extended his right hand into the coffin, as if to straighten the clothing or perhaps the shroud of the deceased. Inching forward, I soon found myself near the center of all this activity. It was only then that I realized that the officiant was attempting to calm the person I had supposed was deceased—but who I could see was even now struggling to lift his head. Groaning weakly, Berek-el-Muftala lay right in front of my nose, his head swathed in bandages. It appeared that he had suffered a grievous accident and was in the process of dying.

A boy arrived with a container, which he gave to the fat man—and events began to unfold in rapid succession. Without a trace of emotion the clergyman removed the lid and, opening Berek's mouth, poured in the contents. Then, with a movement that was not at all rough but rather soft and gentle, he closed the dying man's jaw with one hand and held his nostrils shut with the other. Gazing at the relatives, he rocked Berek's head from side to side, all the while holding him by the nose. After a time he climbed onto a chair they had brought him and, balancing precariously, he leaned far over the coffin. There he remained, examining Berek with great care, until at length he stepped down.

At this point, the clergyman, with the satisfaction of a job well done, withdrew from the room with the gravity and demeanor appropriate to the circumstances. This, in turn, signaled the bursting of the dam that had held back the outpouring of emotions that occurs upon the death of a dear friend. I stood by solemnly as the weeping spread through the assembly, and I could not help but notice how Berek's daughter's green eyes grew moist with tears. As his sole descendant, she had authorized her father's euthanasia, and of the many ways to die, she had certainly known how to choose the most refined.

The Great Silence

At noon the grape pickers rested in the shade where the vines grew thickest. Having finished their lunch they tried, futilely, to take their siesta. The 100-plus degree heat silenced the birds and the horses, drowsing in their corrals. Even the trucks and tractors that pulled the wagons sat waiting in the protection of their sheds. Only the slightest breeze rustled the vine leaves, and you could barely hear the faint murmur of the water flowing in the irrigation ditches. It was a dry, brutally hot afternoon of the kind known only to those who live under the intense blue skies of arid lands such as these. Almost suffocated by the heat, you might swear that you could hear the crackle of the sun striking the scorched surface of the earth.

I watched as, despite the heat, an unlikely figure crossed the rows of grapevines until he came to a wide lane. I saw how his faithful dog followed a few steps behind; how the man dropped his pants, exposing his flat buttocks to the sunlight; and how, squatting down, he released a thick, dark flow that mixed with the dust. I saw it instantly solidify, and watched as the dog—opening its mouth with the precision of a machine shovel—picked up a perfect, solid piece.

I felt faint; perhaps it was the heat. For whatever reason, the blood must not have reached my brain, because for a moment the sun seemed to be a transparent bubble. Suddenly, the man's buttocks gleamed and the bodies of both master and dog froze in their absurd positions. There was no breeze, not the faintest murmur of water in the ditches, not a single heartbeat, no heat, no sensation whatever. The Great Silence had suddenly erupted in the pretext of that strange disjuncture.

Enter Your Answer!

Afterwards, the lazy flow of existence once more gave life to the ants and the furtive lizard. A far-off neighing reminded me that I had returned to the world of everyday life.

Carrying my harvesting pail, I picked up my pruning shears, and with a happiness that spread outward in ever-widening circles, I began cutting one bunch of grapes after another.

Enter Your Answer!

How the computer could write poems all by itself was something that had intrigued me for quite some time. The worst of it was that it invariably happened just as I left the room. But today I've finally lined up all the clues. This is it, my friend—you've had it now, you stupid TZ-28300!

Everything had been fine until just a moment ago. Surrounded by equipment and chemicals, I had been working at my keyboard in the lab. I was sipping my coffee while Wolf, as usual, slept on his rug in the corner. To assist in my research I was using the "expert system" chemistry program I had installed on the TZ-28300. Reaching the point in the sequence where the computer asked, "Does it melt easily?" I entered "No," and it proceeded to offer suggestions and conclusions, printing them out on paper so that I could review them later.

"It is probably an ionic compound. Will it dissolve?"

"Yes," I typed.

"Measure the pH and indicate whether it is an acid, alkaline, or neutral compound. *Enter your answer!*"

"Neutral."

"It is a neutral salt. Use a flame test to determine the metal it contains. *Enter your answer.*"

In a few minutes I typed in the name of the metal.

"Determine the radicals: If a white precipitate appears when barium chloride is added, it is a sulfate radical. If it turns white when silver nitrate is added, it is a chloride. If it releases carbon dioxide when heated, it is a carbonate. Combine the metal and the radical to determine the name of the compound. *Enter your answer!*"

I walked into the other room looking for glassware to continue the experiment when, as so many times before, I heard the high-pitched whine announcing that data was being printed out. I rushed back to find the printer devouring blank paper at one end and spewing out printed text at the other.

Before my eyes, the computer was creating a sequence of characters that could not have been generated by the chemistry program I was using. TZ-28300 was combining chemical data with a variety of personal information I kept in the computer. To this it was adding fragments from an encyclopedia stored on the hard disk.

The explanation for this strange mixture was not as otherworldly as it might appear. No doubt it had been triggered by two or three areas of memory mingling because of something like an inopportune merge instruction. The only problem with this explanation is that I would still have had to enter some command—but I'd been out of the room. On top of that, it would have been necessary for the merged data to pass through a word processor with artificial intelligence capabilities, just as it did each time my chemistry program printed out its questions and instructions. Obviously this involved too many chance events all converging in precisely the same direction!

I allowed paper to continue spewing out until I was able to make out a few intelligible stanzas:

*All flowers are phanerogamous.
You, on the other hand, Marie Brigitte
(telephone 942-1318, 2317 Maple Street)
are at once exquisite and absurd—
restless, unrevealing, and cryptogrammic!*

*In the heat of the flame, I will gaze at
your copper green,
your lithium rose/red,
your strontium carmine.
Irascible and irreducible monogamist!*

*Not all metal is irreducible,
nor oxygen debt combustible.
TO DO:
Pick up iron filings at the lab supply
And dog food at the grocery*

I rushed over to the printer and turned it off. So I was to pick up “dog food at the grocery,” was I? Through its free association the machine had now begun to order me about. Again I think to myself, “This is it, my friend—you’ve had it now you stupid TZ-28300!” It’s time to take action, but I must do things carefully, step by step, avoiding any mistakes.

I begin by turning off the system. After a few moments, I turn it back on again. I hear a “click,” and the hard disk begins to whirl, as it winks at me with luminous diodes. I open the expert system chemistry program. Everything is working perfectly. I stand up and walk noisily into the adjacent room, leaving the door slightly ajar. I move around for a few moments, and then sneak back to the door of the lab, peering carefully through the crack, from which I can observe a good part of the room.

Just as I suspected! I see a form gliding stealthily toward the computer. With a bound, it’s at the keyboard. As I make my noisy entrance, Wolf slinks whimpering back to his corner, where he lies down and plays dead.

I lean over and scold the culprit. “The Phantom of the Opera—is that who you think you are? Putting your wet nose all over my keyboard! We’ll see about that!”

Wolf perks up. Like an oversized puppy he raises himself on his large German Shepherd paws. Sitting on his haunches, with ears pricked up and muzzle pointed straight ahead, he observes me unperturbed. As I continue to scold him, he begins to stare at me with an almost *human* look; disarmed, I rub his nose.

Behind me I hear a “click.” The hard disk begins to spin. What’s happening? The luminous diodes blink, and the whine of the printer fills the room. I stand up, and in two steps I’m at the computer. But the printer has stopped gobbling up paper. The diodes remain lit, but quiet. I look at Wolf, sitting in his corner, fixing me with his *human* look. I have the strange sensation that there is some kind of waiting game going on among the three of us—TZ-28300, Wolf, and me. I make the first move. Tearing off the printed sheet, I hold it up and read:

Perhaps you would like to feed your dog? Perhaps you would prefer to dissolve him in an acid, an alkaline, or a neutral substance?

ENTER YOUR ANSWER!

The Funeral Pyre

Leaning on the railing of the bridge, I scrutinized the group of people that had gathered along the river's edge. I saw them fail to find branches or logs dry enough to fuel the roaring fire, which they had somehow been able to start. They managed, after several tries, to feed the fire with rags and old copies of the *Nepal Telegraph*. The rising flames seemed to trigger a decision, and some sort of pallet was placed on the funeral pyre. Suddenly the fire blazed higher—perhaps because it had begun to consume the burlap sling fastened between the two pieces of wood, or perhaps it was fueled by the shroud in which the deceased was wrapped. Whatever the reason, the flames did not last long. As the men added wet branches and leaves, smoke engulfed the scene, and the group scattered, coughing. The wind shifted, and two men again approached the fire and began pushing the body toward the water, betraying a hint of anger and impatience as they performed this task. It was the opposite of the usual cremation that normally ends with the gathering of the ashes, which will later be scattered on the river.

The body bobbed gently along until, in the grip of some new force, it entered the main current of the river. The group looked on in silence as the corpse drifted away from them; while from my perspective, standing where I was on the bridge, it drew closer. The body was naked. Only its right side had been slightly burned, the right half of the face singed. Perched on the cadaver, a crow pecked at its left eye, the one untouched by the flames. As the corpse passed beneath the bridge, I again turned my attention to the group, still poised at the river's edge. They hadn't moved. As I leaned on the railing, waiting for them to leave, I remembered the various kinds of funerals that take place around the world—some modest and some magnificent, some immaculately clean and others less than sanitary. I thought of the burials, the cremations, the dismemberments, and the grinding of bones; of corpses left exposed to the birds and wild beasts; of those protected by rocks, placed in trees, in hollows or in caves; and of those laid to rest in magnificent mausoleums, in temples, and in gardens. I imagined ash-filled urns being launched into outer space, cryogenic suspension...

Yawning, I stretched, suddenly realizing how hungry I was.

Salt in the Eyes, Ice on the Feet

I knew Fernando from work, he was a good friend and an outstanding scientist. Inexplicably, he had abandoned his duties and left for Africa. Later I heard that he was in Alaska. Two years passed and no one knew with any certainty what had happened to him. If he is still alive he must be completely crazy by now, and I can imagine how he might have begun to come unhinged. Among the papers he left behind in our lab was a strange, scrawled note of a nature far removed from his normal research reports. Here it is.

August 26, 1980

It happened early yesterday morning, a few hours after I had finished drinking a weak infusion made from some emerald-green leaves. I was alone in the biology lab. Music wafted through the air from a small speaker in the front wall. I believe that at that moment it was a slow rhythm of vocals and percussion. Meanwhile, seated at my lab bench, I was growing annoyed not only at how cold my feet were, but especially at the sharp cramp running down my right leg. I had worked all night, and in spite of how sore my eyes were, I increased the brightness of the microscope's condenser. For the tenth time I peered through the instrument at the plant specimen, and saw the brilliant emerald green of the stomata. I increased the magnification to 500, but the focus was different in each eyepiece, perhaps because of some misalignment of

the instrument. Then I realized it wasn't due to a mechanical problem or simple eye fatigue. Without blinking, I peered through the eyepieces and noticed that the images were unconnected—my left eye saw one thing, my right eye quite another—while each image seemed to transform continuously, following the flow of the music.

The stomata had disappeared, and in the right eyepiece I saw groups of people jostling around in a cold and icy environment, at the same time the images in the left eyepiece were related to salt and heat. I understood that the salt translated my fatigue filtered through the corresponding image in my left eye, while my right eye saw images that translated the cold and the cramp in my right foot. Notwithstanding the dissociation, the images connected perfectly with an internal "voice" that seemed to ramble on about the microscope. The movements of the images that I saw varied with the music; sometimes the sound would turn into a gust of wind blowing into my face.

Stepping away from the microscope, I organized a simple chart on which I could arrange all the dissociated elements—always connecting them to the central theme, which I formalized as follows: **Through the eyepieces light colors predominated. Everything gleamed in the light focused by the microscope's condenser, but above were the lenses that intensified the light source, shining painfully, crystal-clear, into my eyes, long past the point of fatigue.**

I rambled on about the microscope in this way: **Through the eyepieces...**

In the left eye... I began to see people in colorful groups, gathered around tall stalagmites of salt—Africans of different nationalities, trading with each other. Slowly they untied their bundles in which... **(light colors predominated).**

In the right eye... *I found myself in a lonely desert of parched, cracked clay. Everything was dark, almost black. With a smooth motion, the broken surface began melting into a single slab, when suddenly...* **(light colors predominated).**

And this is how the entire sequence went:

Through the eyepieces,

I began to see people in colorful groups, gathered around tall stalagmites of salt—Africans of various nationalities, trading with each other. Slowly they untied their bundles in which...

I found myself in a lonely desert of parched, cracked clay. Everything was dark, almost black. With a smooth motion, the broken surface began melting into a single slab, when suddenly...

light colors predominated.

The human situation was extraordinary. Standing before the pointed mounds, no one seemed to be in a hurry. Various groups sang a hymn, swaying in perfect time to the rhythm. Stalagmites of salt rose like termite mounds.

*The ground froze and I saw myself walking on an endless sheet of ice.
Beginning in my feet, a tingling sensation spread through my body,*

**Everything gleamed in the light focused by
the microscope's condenser,**

and I asked myself how those
formations could have been created,
since this would have required heavy
downpours,

*while my face was whipped by gusts of
wind. Below, the ice cracked, opening
vast, bottomless crevasses,*

but above were the lenses

in this clear sky that could have provided no rain. In any case, some liquid must have
left behind the salt that formed these stalagmites.

So it was that these mounds arose, reaching toward the clear skies—anxious but
free, strong and without anger.

*so that I found myself beset from all
sides. Overwhelmed and nearly
defeated, I listened to the furious
roar.*

*In that awful wind, the reflection
played capriciously, shining off the
separate blocks.*

**that intensified the light source,
shining painfully, crystal-clear, into my eyes,
long past the point of fatigue.**

Tales

Kaunda

The Zambian ambassador continued to press the point all week long—his instructions were clear: he was not to leave Florence without bringing me to Lusaka.

I arrived on January 10, 1989, accompanied by Antonio and Fulvio. A reception committee greeted us at the foot of the stairs leading from the plane, where we were immediately surrounded by armed guards and escorted to three long, black limousines. Our motorcade sped along a road that skirted the periphery of the city, before it cut through the downtown. As the motorcycle escort opened a path through the crowd, I glimpsed long lines of women holding their undernourished children, as they waited for the ration centers to open.

Ten minutes later, surrounded by armored vehicles and having passed through a maze of barricades, we arrived at the presidential palace. On getting out of the limousines we were led to an ebony-paneled room where President Kaunda and his entire cabinet awaited us. The President gave a welcoming speech, emphasizing our ideological importance to the Revolution. I responded briefly, and Antonio translated for the television cameras. With haughty bearing and studied gestures, President Kaunda spoke, addressing not only us, but his wider audience as well. As his focus shifted between the two, his style ranged from sober to paternalistic. A long white handkerchief—a kind of personal trademark—could always be found clutched in his left hand. That famous handkerchief! When he spoke, he might shake it violently or slice the air with it, and everyone would understand the significance of his gesture. While listening, he might knead it at length, and those present would get the message. And if he accompanied a caress of the cloth with an occasional “I see,” it was a definite sign of approval.

It took us just two days to make all our preparations. Only our ongoing discussions with the head of the country’s sole political party ended on a sour note. In general, all the information we needed was made available to us, and the problems the country was experiencing were discussed frankly. We checked this new information against the sometimes astounding facts Fulvio was collecting and added it to the mass of data he had brought from Europe.

Kaunda showed us his pet impalas grazing peacefully in the presidential gardens. In that bucolic Eden, neither the African countryside nor the afternoon breeze kept me from imagining the situation as if it were being viewed from above: every approach under the watchful eye of men with walkie-talkies; a little farther out, the barricades and armored vehicles; and in the distance, reserve troops. Beyond this lay Lusaka, overcrowded and hungry—with parched fields and mines for copper and other strategic metals depleted at unconscionably low prices by a handful of multinational companies pulling strings that extended far beyond the shores of Africa to distant points of the globe.

These images were not just a cross-section in space, I could also see this place ten, twenty, thirty years earlier—even centuries before when there were no countries, but only tribes and kingdoms, and the strings of control extended only a short distance. I understood that sooner or later the regime would be toppled because its will to change was bound by those multicolored strings. Nonetheless, I felt something like gratitude for the support it offered the anti-apartheid movement and the struggle to liberate South Africa. For this reason, knowing all the while that

Pamphlet to the Rhythm of a Tango

our project would never come to pass, Antonio laid out a detailed plan for what needed to be done...

After dinner on the third night, we went down into a bunker through a hallway filled with paintings on both sides. The figures depicted included Mandela, Lumumba, and many other heroes of the African cause. Tito and leaders from other continents could also be seen. Suddenly I found myself before a particular painting, and I asked Kaunda about it.

"What's Belaúnde doing here?"

"That's Allende," the President responded.

"No, it's Terry Belaúnde, the Christian Socialist ex-president of Peru, a man who was not very progressive, but well-connected to the business interests of the Club Nacional of Lima."

Kaunda took the painting and, without batting an eye, smashed it on the floor. He said something about Salvador Allende, but I was looking at the empty space on the wall and the fragments of glass on the floor. For an instant, I had the impression that paintings were being hung and removed along infinite hallways at Chaplinesque speed, like scenes in a silent film; oppressors and the oppressed, heroes and villains replaced one another, until all that was left on a colorless wall was a single empty intention—the image of humanity's future.

We arrived at the bunker.

While Fulvio focused his camera and took pictures of every last detail, Antonio—elegant, almost metallic—opened his folder and coolly presented a detailed critique of the situation. As he spoke, I noticed the handkerchief at first being squeezed, then knotted, and finally, just as the presentation ended, abandoned on a side table. Antonio spoke openly and without reservation, in a way that would have shocked any politician. Nonetheless, I could see that everything he said went straight to the heart. It seemed to me that Antonio embodied a truth that both preceded him and projected into the future. Behind those cold words lay the foundation of all the causes for which humankind has struggled, and I believe everyone present understood what he said in this same way. Kaunda, obviously moved, had no recourse but to concur with his customary "I see," but the words were uttered with such sadness and in such a way that it seemed he must have been peering into the mirror of his soul.

"To conclude our analysis, which we believe faithfully reflects everything that we have seen, we would like to emphasize once again our fifth point relating to the immediate dissolution of the country's sole political party and the holding of free, multiparty elections within a year's time. This must be accompanied by the release of all political prisoners and the right of return and participation for all exiles involved in the political struggle. The existing controls over the media must be replaced with free expression in all its forms, even at the risk of allowing the shameless enemies of the Zambian people to use their considerable resources to seek some temporary advantage from this situation. We would also like to focus attention on point number eight, which touches on the feasibility of a permanent council of the seven African nations in order to set, at the international level, the minimum price of strategic metals. Also, as regards the campaign against South Africa, the seven countries should close their airspace in order to limit the freedom of movement on the part of the racist regime.

"Apart from this, if we are going to speak of a profoundly human revolution, we must begin by dismantling the apparatus of repression, which—although it was set up as a defense against foreign provocateurs and their fifth column—has led us to spy upon, control, jail, and even execute our own citizens. A revolution that loses touch with the meaning of human life is a revolution without meaning!" Antonio closed his folder, and without any show of emotion delivered it to Kaunda's secretary, along with another folder filled with reports.

The President looked at me from his enormous throne-like sofa. I gazed deep within him and said:

“Excellency, even if none of what we have said can be put into effect because the circumstances simply do not allow it, we have nonetheless spoken truly and only after conscientiously studying the situation. I trust that you and the members of your cabinet are able to forgive us for what we have said.”

Like a giant, Kaunda stood up, and to my surprise rushed to embrace me. The ministers did the same with Fulvio and Antonio; suddenly I was overwhelmed by the feeling that I had lived all this before.

We departed from Lusaka with a feeling of failure. However, we soon learned that Kaunda had begun important reforms. Gradually he freed political prisoners; he established freedom of the press; he abolished the monopoly that had been held by the nation’s sole political party; he publicly acknowledged his errors; he called general elections, and, upon being defeated, handed over power, becoming an ordinary citizen.

A newspaper in San Francisco reported the following: “After leading his country to independence from England in 1964, Kenneth Kaunda was the president of Zambia for twenty-seven years. In his favor we can say that he remained steadfast in his struggle against apartheid in South Africa, and that many advances in that country would have happened more slowly without his decisive help. In his own land he faced enormous economic difficulties, especially following the decline of world copper prices. Beginning in the early 1980s, poverty increased sharply in Zambia. Average annual per capita income dropped to just \$300, barely half what it had been two decades earlier. There were shortages and high prices for cornmeal, the principal staple. Worst of all, a significant fraction of the population was afflicted with AIDS, as the country achieved the unfortunate distinction of having among the highest infection rates in the world. Foreign aid had also been cut off in September when the World Monetary Fund demanded a \$20 million debt payment. In early November, this culminated in Kaunda’s defeat by labor leader Frederick Chiluba in the first multiparty elections held since independence. In contrast to Sese Seko Mubutu, who, after twenty-six years in power, continued to repress the opposition in Zaire, Kaunda peacefully left power.”

I have not seen Kaunda since, but I know that on some crystal-clear nights under his African sky, he continues asking the questions that I did not know how to answer:

“What will our Destiny be, after all the hardships and all the mistakes? Why, when we struggle against injustice, do we become unjust? Why is there poverty and inequality if we are all born and die between one roar of the lion and the next. Are we a branch that has broken, are we the cry of the wind, are we the river that runs to the sea? Or are we, perhaps, a dream of the branch, the wind, and the river that runs to the sea?”

Pamphlet to the Rhythm of a Tango

Pamphlet. (From the English. Contraction of *Pamphilet*, the name of a twelfth-century satirical comedy in Latin verse entitled *Pamphilus, seu de Amore*). A biting satirical opusculum that levels wide-ranging criticism without serious foundation.

Tango. (Probably onomatopoeic). Argentine dance comprising an intertwined couple, a binary musical form, and a two-four beat. Internationally known, it was used by Hindemith and Milhaud. Stravinsky introduced it into one movement of his “Histoire du Soldat” in 1918.

Andrés spent most of his time contemplating his navel. In free moments he would peek at the outside world through a keyhole. I met him in 1990 in that place in South America they call Argentina. He was—how should I put it?—an “Argentine,” a man of silver. However, since he had no money, this collective appellation only frustrated him. I remember our first meeting well, it was in a restaurant just before a class I was about to give in computational gastronomy, one of my areas of expertise. My topic on that occasion was “How to Prepare a Superb Low-Cholesterol Salad, One Leaf of Lettuce at a Time.”

It was true that Andrés appreciated fine cuisine, but because he believed that only in his country was meat eaten as it should be, he was unable to accept my teachings on the full range of ways in which beef can be prepared. This shortsightedness kept him from becoming a first-rate *sous chef*. Thus anguished at the prospect of having to choose between the only two options left to him, he wound up ruining his stomach and embittering his life.

According to Andrés, his “homeland” (as he liked to call it) was suffering an extraordinary tragedy. To me it seemed more a case of childhood measles, at a time, in terms of the life of the nation, when junk food should be avoided and dietary matters monitored most carefully. Thanks to such precautions, the peoples of the Middle East had managed to avoid trichinosis from pork. And Scandinavians imposed their blond beer on those who drank red wine, later pushing weak tea on the messed-up consumers of black coffee from Brazil and Colombia.

Be mindful of what you eat and drink! How can one compare the spirituality of Ceylonese tea (as demonstrated by such notable Theosophists as Bessant and Olcott) to coffee, a substance whose trade has never been controlled by either Victorians or naturopaths? How is it possible to equate margarine with butter and oil, those sources of cholesterol? How can one compare a simple lemon pie to the endless varieties of ham, cheese, and sausage found in Latin countries? It would be like equating the simple elegance of a little Grandma Moses with the excesses of a Goya, a Gauguin, or a Picasso. Which is why the Germans have so many problems—they are simply unable to decide once and for all between wine and beer, Hegel and Alvin Toffler, Goethe and Agatha Christie, between Bach and Cole Porter. History shows that if Roman emperors had only been more careful, they would not have suffered the decline brought on by drinking red wine from unhygienic goblets. Still, I must disagree with those who blame those vessels for both lead poisoning and a host of other diseases that left the emperors unfit to command. Indeed, computational gastronomy has demonstrated that it was filling their bellies with a mixture of wine and honey that brought about their demise—and well-deserved it was, I

might add! Had it not occurred the world would still be mired in the dark ages. We wouldn't be measuring things in gallons, inches, feet, yards, miles, and Fahrenheit. The beautiful lines of the Rolls Royce and the bowler hat would not have been invented. No one would drive on the left or wear John Lennon granny glasses. Few would use the evocative word, "shadow." Nor would the Mexican sombrero and saddle have been passed on to the Texans. American tap dancing would be confined to the feet of Andalusians. And nightclub and television performers wouldn't point at the audience with their index fingers. In such a primitive state of affairs, who would there be to perform *Singing in the Rain*? And who would chew gum, preparing the buccal enzymes and improving the flow of ptyalin for proper digestion?

Need it be said that keeping abreast of dietary matters is a matter of utmost importance? But my apprentice was unable to appreciate this, despite all my pedagogical efforts. He remained engrossed in his own little problems, peering at the world through the length of a tube of pasta. He explained to me that in earlier decades his country had been a truly extraordinary place. (I use the word "extraordinary" because Andrés, when he said it, would lift his moist, bovine eyes to the heavens and, blinking slowly, fall into a tangoesque reverie.) To be sure, there was a simple explanation for this little crisis. But he dared not admit it—because in place of the warmth and protection of his small South American community, he yearned to be part of a superpower that would make its presence felt. He couldn't accept the fact that during this period, marked by the fall of bureaucracies and the rise of globalization, national boundaries were being erased and the eighteenth-century model of the nation-state demolished. Though he didn't realize it, he was a left-wing nationalist, an *avis rara* (in the hyperbole of Juvenal) of the type found in those places where emotional and dietary factors intermingle. Of course, feelings and taste-buds go hand in hand the world around, but international cuisine adds a dash of illusion to calm the anxieties of the diners. Poor boy—what a fine *sous chef* he would have made! Unfortunately, he was unable to find inspiration in the field of gastronomy, as so many notable men have in their time. Had the great Lenin not had a taste for Swiss cuisine, we would no doubt be deprived of his exquisite definition of morality as "a fetishistic sauce for a useful meal!" This marvelously sublimated gastronomical phrase has led me to design an entire pastry program that—even though the course of world events is unfavorable to this tribute—in sacred homage I plan to patent as "Vladimir." *Noblesse oblige!*

But let us not lose our train of thought. Like all chemists of this place, Andrés was forced to choose between two options: pursuing advanced study abroad or becoming a taxi driver in Buenos Aires. Many of his friends chose the first option on the flow chart, which led to another country with good laboratories, world-class colleagues, abundant technology, and a standard of living that allowed for some untroubled leisure time. The aforementioned chart included various subroutines that brought the sequence to a "Stop," from which one could type "Go to 1" and return to Argentina. It also provided another path that led to a "Break" from which one could write "End of program," typically accompanied by a dull spouse, a couple of kids, and a pleasant group of neighbors wearing the latest style in shoes bought at a very good price. The second path, that of taxi driver, would have to be pursued amidst the ongoing conflicts of a country that seemed to be disappearing day by day. This part of the flow chart led to an "End" statement that was as final as retirement from the transport workers union.

His country had produced Nobel laureates in physiology, chemistry, and medicine, and it was interesting to watch the aristocratic airs of those scientists who, scorning the dignified craft of the taxi driver, opted for the first path on the flow chart. Argentina had been a world leader in other areas of cultural endeavor, but there again many opted for the first path. Those who

pursued the field of dietetics abandoned their old habit of throwing unseasoned meat onto the grill. Now they ate on neat tablecloths and used the proper silverware. The art of coexistence had begun to take hold in them, as they became more comfortable with their role as entertainers at elegant banquets. Housebroken by life, they learned to keep their thoughts to themselves, as is proper for all civilized people. In this way, they managed to free themselves of the insolence that characterizes their countrymen, and inevitably provokes irritation wherever it is displayed. The same thing was taking place among the nation's athletes. With world-class teams in various sports, individual athletes were lured away by affluent cities abroad, decimating their teams. American films popularized music written by Argentine composers, and the Soviet Union put Argentine ideologues and militants on display like interesting imported goods.

To everyone's surprise, the country had managed to turn itself into a banana republic, gaining renown for its deterioration, illiteracy, and much else of that sort. It was interesting to see how Argentina came to be defined by rock musicals like "Evita," some third-rate skirmish with England near the South Pole, and its bloody military juntas. In any event, one had to exercise caution when dealing with those irresponsible locals who were busy widening the hole in the ozone layer right over their heads as they killed flies with bug spray, and polluted Antarctica with sardine cans, wine bottles, and condoms. To complete the picture of this strange people—whose corruption nearly outdid that of the Japanese, Americans, Greeks, and Italians—consider that their senior officials wore apish sideburns and dressed in a most outlandish manner. And a number of Argentina's leading athletes turned into criminals overnight—to the amazement of the international community, who somehow couldn't seem to remember a single documented instance of doping or irregularity involving their own national sports figures. No wonder Argentine teams were always booed at the World Cup, whether it was held in Mexico or in Italy! And given the open-minded and internationalist perspective for which sporting fans are renowned, there can be no doubt the reaction of that discerning public was justified.

But things were even worse from the point of view of the psychosocial behavior of Argentina's thirty million citizens. One had only to stand out in some small way to be suspected of criminal behavior. And if one person unwittingly helped another who happened to be under suspicion, he or she, too, joined the gallery of suspects. There, they understand things as they really are. As a result, if at night someone says, "It's night," or during the day, "It's day," windows in houses and apartments will fly open, loudspeakers blare, and police bullhorns ring out in angelic chorus, repeating, "What's going on here—what's behind all this?"—this "behindism" attesting to the astuteness of the singers. How Torricelli would have loved this vast vacuum chamber, where any pair of objects—a feather and a lead pipe, a genius and an imbecile—hit bottom with the same velocity!

In Buenos Aires, that capital of Psychoanalysis, the citizenry began to recover their old spark. Not to be outdone, Andrés took his turn visiting a shrink. The good doctor had him lie on the couch, and took careful notes of his patient's existential doubts, giving him advice in much the way a father advises his son. As a result, Andrés chose the second path on the flow chart.

It was getting dark as he left the office. He entered a bar and ordered coffee. As they looked at him suspiciously, he quickly corrected his mistake by asking for tea. They brought him a cup of boiling water with a little yellow bag floating in it. He sipped the infusion with a timeless resignation. Wondering where the sound of the tango was coming from, he listened with a happiness he hadn't felt since he was a teenager in love for the first time:

“...a panorama of evil most insolent, that’s the twentieth century it can’t be denied. Here we are rolling about in a meringue. All of us bashed about, all together in the same crap. Go on, go on—don’t hesitate; come what may, we’re all bound for the oven anyway...”

I arrived just in time to hear this doleful melody and to reflect on the philosophy it implied—that the twentieth century was the worst period in history, worse than that of the Cro-Magnons, worse than that of Java man or even the Neanderthals. And as for living in a mess, a glance at anyone from the Middle Ages could illustrate the point quite nicely. Nonetheless, there was something in all of this that touched me deeply. The idea of a sticky mess made me think of the great Australian singer, Melba. They say that at a reception she slipped and fell onto an elegantly spread table, dragging down with her the peaches, bananas, cherries, and ice cream. Regaining her composure, she picked up what was left of the mess and served it to the guests out of one large bowl, in a single stroke of genius inventing the now-famous *Peach Melba*. I also thought of that misunderstood English commander who, though deficient in the art of war, was ingenious enough to place food between two slices of bread. Lord Sandwich, that admiral of gastronomy, long may his name be praised! Finally, the reference to the oven in which we are all to eventually wind up made me realize how far we still are from assimilating the situation of human convergence. In short, I had before me an example of a reactionary chemist who, having rejected the idea of microwave cooking, opted to become a taxi driver.

I had only a brief opportunity to become acquainted with the city where Andrés lived, but I imagine that out in the countryside things must be quite different. There they dance the tango among the cactus, dressed like gauchos à la Rudolph Valentino, while all the young ladies shout, “Olé! Olé!” Everyone drinks *maté*, which means sipping cold pineapple juice from a gourd, to combat the tropical heat one finds in the region of Tierra del Fuego, “Land of Fire,” as the name implies. And if I’m mistaken, it’s of no great consequence, given the fact that a certain Mr. Reagan thought that Rio de Janeiro is in Bolivia, and some northern Europeans can’t seem to find the “southern” nations on the map—overlooking the fact that there are other nations that lie even farther north than they. Beyond their geographical confusion, these windbags suffer from amnesia and are wholly lacking in any sensibility of future times. In short, my own faults pale in comparison with those of others about whom we see and hear every day. Of course, the leaders of the First World maliciously spread news of the errors committed by others so that their modest achievements might appear grander in comparison. As a result, one often hears prayers of the following sort among the less enlightened segments of the population: “I’m so thankful for our Government, which protects us from falling into the terrible state of affairs of those poor nations to the south, which we see daily on TV. Hallelujah, Amen!” All of this turns out to be good business for the government, the tabloid press, and those citizens who, in their righteous prayers, compensate for humiliations hidden in the corners of their little, post-industrial souls. But these calculated distractions should be corrected, because the civilized Western world—and that would have to include Japan—has a duty to limit its manipulation of images. It’s not as if something’s gone wrong and now we must go hat in hand and beg the savages for help.

I wanted to maintain an appropriate distance while taking my leave of the taxi driver, but invading my personal space, he came right up to me and, pinching my cheeks between his fingers and thumbs, began shaking me. Refusing to let go, he said, with his breath reeking of alcohol, “Hey fatso, aren’t you one sharp dude. This food scam of yours has got you more breads and bread than you know what to do with. Me, on the other hand—I’m just a cabby with nothing more than some shitty coffee and toast. Keep an eye out for the cops, you phony, and don’t forget to send a little something my way, you hear me?”

I understood little of his peculiar argot, but I believe he was trying to express his respect for my profession. Then he hugged me, and for some reason felt obliged to bite the shoulder pad on my jacket. I think it was an allusion to a particular phrase—the meaning of which escapes me—that he had used in referring to me, which went something like, “Get lost—you and all that fancy crap you eat!” This was not the studious and taciturn Andrés I knew so well. This was Dr. Jekyll who, upon seeing me, had turned into Mr. Hyde, trying to scandalize me with his cutting remarks. He was showing his friendship through aggression. For lack of an arm to twist, he twisted words, turning the world upside down and challenging the cultural norms I represented. Deep inside he seemed to me an aesthete who took the surrealism of Buñuel and the grotesqueness of Fellini and mixed them together in the *lunfardo* slang of Argentina’s capital. But it was over for good when that hapless boor left abruptly, calling me vile names punctuated by gestures that would make the roughest Liverpool pubmaster blush. What a horrible time, what an ordeal he put me through!

I left for the airport immediately. As I flew over the Pampas, I thought back over the last few days, trying to understand why Andrés and his countrymen had always looked on me with a certain suspicion. I knew that these fellows with their police-state mentality (Argentina, after all, invented the system for fingerprint identification) knew perfectly well what I thought of them on various occasions. I was afraid that if they regained a position of prominence—something that could happen at any time—they might be tempted to ban my recipes on the basis of some trumped-up, hygiene-related charges. Later, I managed to calm myself down by thinking about some of the pending engagements I had with people in the civilized world who were better able to appreciate my gourmet style. With a certain satisfaction I thought of the recipes of Chef Brillat-Savarin, now improved thanks to my computational gastronomy.

At a wave of my hand, the flight attendant brought me a cart overflowing with culinary delicacies. Flying among the rose-colored clouds, I settled back, ready to partake of a balanced repast. But a strange uneasiness began to grow in me, like something that would be inspired by discovering Mr. Hyde coming toward me in the rainy atmosphere of a tango. Hesitating for a moment, I asked my odalisques to bring me a bottle of red wine. I felt glass after glass rise to meet my lips as I slowly unrolled the parchments of dear old Omar Khayyám:

*Life rushes by. What of Balj? What of Baghdad?
Let us drink down the overflowing cup, whether
bitter
or sweet. Drink! Long after we are gone
The moon will stay its long-fixed course.
A glass of red wine and a book of poems,
Only the basics, half a loaf, nothing more.*

*Some say Eden is bejeweled with houris.
I say the nectar of the grape is priceless.
Though distant drums be more seductive
I say, take what is at hand,
and scorn the promise of aught else.*

The Case of Poe

*As if through a looking glass
He surrendered, alone, to his complex fate.
Inventor of nightmares.
Perhaps from the other side of death,
He devises more solitary and powerful,
Splendid and atrocious marvels still.*

“Edgar Allan Poe,” Jorge Luis Borges

I have always believed that the fantasies woven by the authors of science fiction have their origins in embryonic concepts that are simply “in the air” at a given historical moment—ideas that affect the philosopher, and the scholar, as well as the artist. It seems obvious that the realization of many such premonitions owes more to the development of those nascent ideas than to any real perception of the future. Jules Verne, for example, calculated the position of the launch site for the first lunar mission with surprising accuracy. He also imagined the *Nautilus*, an undersea vehicle propelled by an energy that would only be harnessed by science years later. I could go on about Bulwer-Lytton and electricity, as well as a host of other writers who were amazingly accurate in their predictions. In the same way, many of today’s writers will seem like visionaries when anti-gravity devices, light-powered transportation, and androids become practical realities.

I used to believe that attempting to explain these premonitions by taking the idea of precognition seriously was as ridiculous as attributing the simultaneous invention of the piano to a telepathic ability shared by Christofori and various of his contemporaries who, in 1718, were all working on developments to the clavichord. The fact that Le Verrier’s mathematical calculations agreed with Galle’s 1846 astronomical observations helped me to realize that the discovery of Neptune resulted from the combined efforts of a great many mathematicians and astronomers, all working in the same direction and guided by well-founded suspicions of the planet’s existence, rather than through some occult compulsion.

I also considered that if I were to make a list of all the predictions these authors had made, both hits and misses, the column of incorrect predictions would be substantially longer than the column of correct ones—just as among the thousands upon thousands of books these authors have written the odds are very high that at least a few of their predictions would turn out to be correct. Indeed, it would be astounding if among all these visions of the future not a single one came true. In such cases, as so often occurs in our chance-ridden lives, the tendency is for one to remember only those predictions that do in fact come true. Even in our pessimism we want to claim credit when, out of all the events taking place around us, a predictable number of disasters occur.

Until now, that has been my way of looking at the world—I have relied on the calculation of probabilities whenever some new superstition has raised its head. For this reason I was skeptical of the attempt to turn Poe into some kind of literary sorcerer. Many of his readers were impressionable types who accepted his mesmerists, his vile ravens, and the eerie, morbid atmosphere of his stories as real. I had often heard tales of his clairvoyance, his ability to foretell shipwrecks that later took place, his warnings about certain coffins that, when opened, would

reveal the desperate evidence of suffocation and premature burial just as he had foreseen. Of all his stories, it was these to which I always had the greatest aversion.

But for some time now things have been different. On certain dismal nights, in dark places lit only by the fading glow of pale moonlight, I believed I could hear him breathing in that gloomy mansion, attempting to occasion events that would coincide with what he had written. At other times, I have thought of him not as a demon but as a creature caught in the snares of time, someone who wished to break through that dark web in order to save the lives of others. Today I believe that he knew the circumstances of events that had not yet occurred—events he was powerless to alter because their unfortunate protagonists had not yet even been born! I think Poe very much wanted someone to leave a clear account of the events that are recorded here. I have responded to his urgings, and am providing a record of these events—but with that I am breaking the unhealthy bond that has heretofore united us. When two radio operators at distant points and in different time zones sign off at the end of a conversation, it is customary for them to use the phrase, “Over and out.” Well then, I say, over and out, my dear, sad Mr. Poe. I know, I can feel it distinctly, that writing out these notes has allowed me to exorcise my childish obsession. Knowing the identity of the agonized voice that has pursued me since my youth, I am sure that in the future, whenever I go into an empty house, peer down a deep well, or enter a dark forest, that never again will I hear the haunting moan that calls out my name—“Reynolds, Reynolds.” To be sure, I will try to be near Margaret when she reads this incomprehensible tale, so that she might come to understand her own actions as the pretext for someone else’s will, like a simple antenna that somehow allows communication over enormous distances in space and time.

It all began at a social gathering.

“Have you read any Poe?” Margaret asked me in passing.

“Yes, when I was a child.”

“Well, if you read him carefully, you’ll see that he talks about you.”

“What do you mean, about me?”

“Yes, about Reynolds. That *is* your name, isn’t it?”

“Come, come. He could just as well be talking about Smith. What of it?”

“I don’t know. But the name’s there.”

A few days later I consulted an index of names in a collection of the complete works of Poe. I could find no reference to the name “Reynolds.” I realized that Margaret had been mistaken, but by that time I had already obtained a number of Poe biographies and my curiosity was piqued. While agreeing on most aspects of his anguished life, the biographies differed considerably as to the circumstances of his death. In the end, I was left with four possible scenarios.

I

“On the death of his wife, Poe began to suffer attacks of *delirium tremens*, brought about by his frequent inebriation. One day in October of 1849, he was found in the throes of death, lying on the railroad tracks.”

II

“On the day when the unity of his life was shattered by the death of his wife, who had succumbed to tuberculosis, the poet found that he no longer had the strength to go on living. Bowed by the weight of mourning, his creative powers exhausted, he managed to outlive her by only two years. During a round of lectures in Baltimore, they found him by the first light of an October morning as he lay dying in the middle of the street.”

III

“By chance he found himself in Baltimore, having stopped over on a trip from Richmond to Fordham, New York, in preparation for his upcoming marriage to Sarah Elmira Royster, his childhood sweetheart, whom he was to wed after losing his first wife, Virginia Clemm.”

IV

“In September of 1849, he arrived in Baltimore en route to Philadelphia. The delay that stopped the train in this city would in the end prove fatal to him. On September 29, in a deplorable state of drunkenness, he visited a friend. Five days later—days that remain a complete mystery and a gap in his biography—another acquaintance was informed that someone ‘who might be Mr. Poe’ had been found drunk and unconscious in a tavern in a seedy section of Baltimore. Being an election year, it was customary for vote-seekers to buy free rounds for potential voters. Imbibing these electoral drinks may well have been the last thing that Poe elected to do. With his death imminent Poe was taken to the hospital.”

I continued to track down clues, hunches, and biographical references until I was able to piece together a picture of Poe’s death that was worthy of the poet himself. The truth is this. On September 29, 1849, he arrives in Baltimore. It is not certain that he visits a friend on that day, or that a political group is in any way responsible for his demise. Several days pass for which we cannot account, and then on October 3 he is found unconscious on the floor of a Lombard Street tavern. From there he is taken to Washington Hospital. Delirious to the end, he calls out on various occasions for someone named “Reynolds.” He dies at three in the morning on the seventh, at the age of forty. Perhaps to cleanse itself of some guilt of which it was unaware, the city of Baltimore erects a monument to Poe on November 17, 1875.

Among these conflicting statements, I was able to ascertain that in his final moments Poe called out repeatedly, demanding to see someone named “Reynolds.” That name, which confirmed Margaret’s vague recollection, led me to something that was more extraordinary than any of the other circumstances surrounding the author’s death.

My reasoning was elementary. Let us assume, I told myself, that this anguished request for someone apparently named Reynolds is in fact significant. Who, then, was this person? The only Reynolds to be found in relation to the life and works of Poe was the arctic explorer whose writings Poe drew on when composing part of his only novel, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Beyond that I could advance no further. I tried immersing myself in the mode of thought Poe himself had tried to communicate in that strange book he titled *Eureka*. In that most unusual work, in the midst of a discussion of Aristotle’s deductive method and Baconian induction, Poe, perhaps anticipating Bergson, opened the door to what he called “intuition.” In truth, I knew that this method could not be defended, but it did represent a definite way of thinking and feeling, no doubt the creative form that Poe himself employed. Following this

thread, I found myself in a rather dizzying position, one in which I tried to recreate Poe's own mental habits. I mulled over the events surrounding the scene in which Reynolds' name is invoked and plunged myself deeply into a study of *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*.

The most striking scene in the novel follows the wreck of the brig *Grampus*. Adrift and on the point of perishing for lack of food and water, the remaining four survivors decide to draw lots.

Peters at length took me by the hand, and I forced myself to look up, when I immediately saw by the countenance of Parker that I was safe, and that he it was who had been doomed to suffer. Gasping for breath, I fell senseless to the deck.

I recovered from my swoon in time to behold the consummation of the tragedy in the death of him who had been chiefly instrumental in bringing it about. He made no resistance whatever, and was stabbed in the back by Peters, when he fell instantly dead. I must not dwell upon the fearful repast which immediately ensued. Such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality. Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month.

Richard Parker drew the short straw and was immediately sacrificed. His three friends lived off his body for several days. Eventually the schooner *Jane Guy* rescued them. These events were set in July of 1827.

Not knowing where to turn since I didn't know what I was looking for, I continued to search for further background information, just as I had done in the matter of Reynolds. *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* had been published in New York in 1838, and I was determined to find the source for this scene. This done, I would move on to other scenes in the book, uncover still more background information, and so on until I had made my way through the entire novel.

I didn't have far to go. I found only two other accounts of cannibalism related to shipwrecks. The first occurred in 1685 on St. Christopher in the Antilles. A group of shipwreck survivors drew lots and, as a result of this little escapade, devoured one of their companions. Following their rescue, they were tried and hanged. Poe could have used this case as the inspiration for his story, but the brushstrokes seemed too broad. I forged ahead with the second case and, much to my surprise, it turned out to be not only the inspiration for the story, but a real event that he had shamelessly plagiarized.

The yacht *Mignonette* is shipwrecked. Four survivors find themselves dying of hunger and thirst. Thinking it over, they decide to draw lots, but end up changing their minds, when they realize that one of them has no dependents. And so they kill Richard Parker, living off his flesh for several days until they are rescued by the vessel *Montezuma*. Needless to say, this event takes place in the month of July. They stand trial, but their lives are spared due to the special circumstances of the case.

The source was clear, down to the tiniest details. For example, one of the survivors in the novel—our protagonist Gordon Pym—does not agree to the murder. In the real case there was a sailor named Brooks who also did not support the scheme and, though he did join in the feast, he was not tried. In the end, the symmetries—the number of participants and their attitudes,

their subsequent rescue, the month in which the events occurred, even the fact that in both cases the victim was named Richard Parker—suggested more than mere coincidence. However, although I was now certain beyond any doubt of the source Poe had used for his story, I still remained in the dark regarding the importance he seemed to attach to the name Reynolds at the hour of his death. Certainly my discovery was interesting. I had managed to track it down by following an intuition linked to that mental tendency I thought I had glimpsed in Poe's work. Still, I was unable to discover the reason for his extreme altered state in the final days of his life. What was he conveying with such anguish? It seemed to me that the key to this question was to be found in the novel. I plodded on, unable to find the answer.

Determined to get to the bottom of it, I went searching for the book in which the case of the *Mignonette* is cited. Unable to locate it in any bookstore, I finally found it in the British Museum. I searched for the date on which the event had taken place. When at last I found it, I couldn't help but experience the icy chill that so often runs up the spines of Poe's characters: July—1884! The real events had taken place thirty-five years after the poet's death, forty-four years following publication of the first edition of *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, and fifty-seven years after the date on which Poe's story is set! This made no sense at all.

I consulted the newspapers of the time and found the stories relating to the trial. I made photocopies of the *Flying Post* out of Devon from November 3 and 6, 1884, and the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* from November 7, 1884. Digging still deeper, I obtained permission to make copies of the court records in which a number of new details appeared. For example, the *Mignonette* displaced nineteen tons. It was shipwrecked some 1,600 nautical miles from Cape Town. The only surviving crew members were the captain, Thomas Dudley; the first mate, Stephens, who was thirty-one years old; and a sailor named Brooks, who was thirty-eight. With them was Richard Parker, a boy of seventeen. The latter drank seawater and became seriously ill. Finally, after three weeks they decided that one of them must die, and Dudley ran a knife through Parker. At the trial, the jury was unable to reach a verdict, and the case went before the Royal Court in London. The men were freed after paying fines of fifty and one hundred pounds respectively.

There was, of course, the possibility of a whole chain of after-the-fact falsifications, involving newspaper accounts and court records to make it seem that the real events coincided with the novel. So once again I began my search for an explanation, this time starting from the other end. I turned to the *Southern Literary Messenger* out of Richmond, Virginia, the monthly magazine managed by Poe and edited by Thomas W. White. I consulted the issues of January and February 1837 in which Poe's work had been published. Then I examined the 1838 New York edition of the novel and the many editions that followed, right up until the time of the real case in 1884. In all of them, the events and circumstances remained the same.

Once more I went over the facts. For several days before his death, all traces of the poet were lost. He then reappeared in our dimension in a state of delirium, calling out for Reynolds, in an attempt to alter the events Poe had foreseen. But this was doubly impossible, for Reynolds had predeceased him, while the protagonists of the tragedy had not yet even been born. No doubt Poe was delirious—or is it that he was desperate to give evidence of these events that had not yet transpired? If that was the case the poet chose well when he selected Margaret to communicate his message to me, a message-in-a-bottle he had launched onto the waves of time some 140 years earlier, in Baltimore, on the day of his death, October 3, 1849.

Fictions

Software and Hardware

*Oh, Newton, Newton, what would you have dreamed
had you eaten the apple instead?*

Dear Michel:

In a few minutes I will be leaving the Olympic Village in Oslo. I hope you will think of me as a good friend, even though I shocked you, as you once confessed, with my “monstrous” behavior. I am placing in your hands the fragments of this memoir, hoping that you will find in them a few of the many explanations I owe you. I do this out of gratitude for the considerable amount of time you were forced to put up with me, your most unusual and incomprehensible student.

Today I must congratulate you for having produced the greatest gymnast of all time! In the future, as you find your students unable to surpass my achievements, please try not to be too hard on them. Neither these kids nor any other gymnast will ever be able to improve upon what I’ve done—of that you can be sure—well, almost sure. *Au revoir!*

The Absurdity of Universal Gravitation

As always, there was the Law of Gravity. But I knew that there would come a time, even if it was only once, when this little formula for descent, $g = 9.78 \text{ m/s}^2$ —could be overcome. Among the laws that govern falling bodies, I was particularly interested in those related to space and velocity. The first of these laws stated: *the distance traveled is proportional to the square of the time elapsed*. The second said: *the velocity reached is proportional to the time elapsed during descent*. As a result, I spent a fair amount of time investigating this scientific absurdity—from those experiments with inclined planes and Atwood’s machines right up to modern nuclear physics. In the beginning there were dirigibles and airplanes. Next there were rockets capable of leaving the Earth’s orbit, and then Minkovsky’s ion propulsion device. Now we find ourselves with superconductors and opposing electromagnetic fields that portend the invention of an antigravity device. From Leonardo’s flying machine through the first experiments of the Wright brothers I could see a common thread that had begun in our dreams and eventually wound its way into our works of fiction. It was easy for me to understand both Saint-Exupéry’s *The Little Prince* and Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*—books by writers who were aviators in their extra-literary lives and who shared the obsession with liberating themselves from $g = 9.78 \text{ m/s}^2$.

I also came across Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. The author—citing Swift, who flew to the moon, and Cyrano, who made the island of Laputa float using a magnet—recommends “lightness” to future generations of writers. He also mentions Kundera, and claims to see the inescapable weight of living in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. In concluding, he states that while it is true that *software* cannot exercise its powers of lightness except through the weight of *hardware*, he goes on to say that nonetheless it is software that

gives the orders, acting on both the outside world and the machine. Taken to its ultimate consequences, this idea would have forced him to categorize as “de-natured” the school of thought that considers the human body as mere hardware in the employ of intelligent software. Calvino, like all intellectuals, was unfamiliar with the body in a practical sense and unaware that through work on it the body was fully capable of achieving the lightness he sought.

The Machine Begins to Work

As a child I was taken to gymnastics exhibitions and competitions, but I wasn't yet old enough to be admitted to a program. As a result, I was forced to waste countless hours doing those ridiculous Danish exercises and Swedish drill as well as calisthenics—and all of it seemed to be led by teachers perfectly suited to the task at hand. They were either fat, bald, and old, or they would show up in a T-shirt, worn-out tennis shoes, and over-sized shorts that came down to their knees. No doubt it was out of these experiences that I developed my aversion to certain kinds of sportswear: golf knickers and riding pants, along with the shorts worn by soccer players and fat-assed rugby players. This attire would eventually resurface in the form of those horrible Bermuda shorts and their cousins, the culottes. What an eye-opener it was for me years later when I met a group of Danish champions who were critical of Danish gymnastics, an American team that made fun of Bermuda shorts, and some female German gymnasts who detested culottes. “It's just common sense,” I told myself, once again reconciled with the Universe.

One day after my class in what was called “physical education,” I hid in the locker room. Sneaking down hospital-like corridors, I came to a flight of stairs, which I began to climb. Eventually I found myself on a balcony used for viewing the competitions. In the darkness I could make out a wide set of bleachers. I sat in a corner, invisible, gazing down on the main gym, which was off limits to me. What a vision of paradise! Walls lined with enormous mirrors, ropes, trapezes, uneven bars, parallel bars, side horses, rings, and springboards. It had everything—mats as far as the eye could see, trampolines to make you soar with each leap, padded pits to break your fall after a dangerous somersault. But most important of all was the top-ranked team standing around the coach, who was yelling like a madman: “The scoring system is based on strength, speed, balance, rhythm, stamina, reflexes, and style. If you haven't worked on all those things, you'll lose tenths of a point—that's right, you'll lose. You—you sack of potatoes! Gymnastics isn't like other sports where you add up goals or points or anything. Here they take away points. Points for mistakes *you* make.”

Several months went slowly by, but finally my birthday arrived. That same day, flashing my ID card at the gatekeeper, I watched the door swing open before me as I made my triumphant entrance. As if with sweet morning air I filled my lungs with the smell of wax, chalk, resin, and mats. I had barely stepped onto the shiny wood floor when a hand lifted me into the air by the seat of my pants. “Where're your stirrup pants, kid?” he barked, and in a flash I was out on the street. Later I would make them pay for that little birthday present! The next day I repeated my attempt, and this time no one noticed me.

That was the first time I began to train seriously under the guidance of a coach. He put me in the class known as the “junior beginners level.” Under his direction, our group of twenty apprentices competed with each other, trying to avoid being cut from the group. After six months, only five of the original group remained. We moved on to a new coach, and our first one got a new batch. The five of us found ourselves in a semicircle around our new tormentor, who looked us up and down, one at a time. “Where're your stirrup pants, kid?” he barked at me.

So I pulled the stirrups down from where they were tucked up inside my pants and slipped them under my shoes.

“Now give me your names. No last names. We go by first names here. Name, age, and experience.”

“René, seven and a half, two years at this *stuff*.”

The teacher’s eyes opened wide. When I again called my previous experience “stuff,” refusing to call it gymnastics, it was as if his heart suddenly melted. I quickly became his favorite student, practicing twice as hard as everyone else and all too often serving as an example of what not to do. That challenge helped me more than any training. From the start, I appreciated his tough treatment, devoid of any sugar-coated hypocrisy. In the end, they wanted champions, and I wanted my body to become the plaything nearest at hand.

The Retard and the Fly

From the time I was born until the age of four I was considered retarded. My reflexes were no good. I had to do the simplest things over and over. I could never do anything until I understood it thoroughly. Let’s say that I wanted to pick up a block. No matter how many times I tried, it would always come out the same way—wrong. I had to repeat everything over and over again, as if for the first time. As a result, it took me a long time to learn to talk. I remember my parents coaxing me to say “mama” and “dada.” But I saw only their huge mouths, heard their sounds, and sensed their strange wishes.

One day a fly landed briefly on my face, and then flew away. I felt a difference between the sensation it left with me and the one the insect took away with it through the air. I saw it take off, and decided I could catch it. I did this with such speed that the nurse on duty ran to tell everyone the good news. When I began to walk at the age of three, I made such rapid progress that before long I was able to keep my balance in some of the most unlikely places. I believe that much the same thing happened with my ability to speak. Only when I was ready and sensed the anxious atmosphere around me did I set in motion the machinery of language, my speed and fluency increasing daily.

At that time the “maturation” theory of the nervous system was then in vogue. They concluded that I was normal but was a “late bloomer,” maturing at a slower rate than normal. In order to prevent me from relapsing into idiocy, I was taken to classes in diction, drama, music, and calisthenics. If the intention of these well-meaning people was to have me fit into the education system, it simply didn’t work—until my fourth birthday it hadn’t been possible because I was retarded. But by the time I was five, it was too late—I had already picked up the most important skills on my own. When I did start school I relapsed into that dreaded imbecility, because I couldn’t for the life of me figure out how “one plus one” equaled “two.” To be honest, I still don’t get it. How can you possibly say that two different representations are the same thing? It’s a total mystery to me. The situation got a little better when they explained to me that it wasn’t that they were the *same* but rather “equivalent,” and I began to understand the set of conventions they were using.

But one problem persisted. They couldn’t get me to pay attention to a lesson on national heroes, for example, if my teacher presented the material as a lecture. While supposedly studying history from the age of the mollusks through the rise of Napoleon, I was instead completely lost in the teacher’s tone of voice, gestures, movements, and emotional quirks. Some time later I managed to overcome this by teaching myself how to write with both hands.

With my left hand I would summarize the lectures, while with my right I jotted down notes on every breath and muscle movement my teacher made. Eventually, I could do this without writing anything down. With time, I was able to attend simultaneously to what an individual was expressing as well as the particularities of their situation, even though both were, of course, presented as a single whole.

Adrenaline and Greek Tragedy

At school I threw myself into all the games, pushing myself to the limit, while surrounded by plodding classmates who tired easily. Until I was seven I was interested in every sport. But when I started the “junior beginners level” class in gymnastics, I began to dismiss thoughts of the fibrous muscle of the athlete, the long, slow-twitch muscle of the swimmer, and the bulk of the boxer or weightlifter. The only thing I still had any respect for was the height that could be achieved in the pole vault and in high diving. In the former, it was a question of rising into the air with the aid of a pole. In the latter, one did twists and turns while plummeting down like a lead weight. It was clear that each sport produced different muscular development from the others, enhancing one part of the body at the expense of the others. Gymnastics was the only sport that did what I wanted, involving as it did not only a strict diet and a balance of hours of daily training with adequate sleep, but also the precision of a program for mastering the body.

With appropriate modifications it was an approach that was applicable to a wide range of activities. Yet my drama or music teachers would have thought that it was only another of my jokes if I'd told them that what I really wanted was to use a rigorous training program to turn my body into a finely-tuned instrument. They couldn't understand that even my jokes all pointed in this same direction. That's why, whether polishing a dramatic role for the stage or jumping around the staves in composing a piece of music, what I was really doing was fine-tuning my muscles and becoming conscious of each internal organ. Once, while playing Jason in Euripides' *Medea*, I delivered the following lines at the end of the play: “O Zeus, hear how I am mocked and driven hence by this savage she-lion, polluted by the blood of her own young. Yet so far as I may and can, I raise for them this lament, and do adjure the gods to witness how you have slain my sons, and now will not suffer me to bury or even touch their dead bodies.” Why did the audience applaud my performance with such enthusiasm? I'll tell you why: It was because I knew how to turn glucose, insulin, adrenaline, and other hormones into dramatic expression.

From music I gained an understanding of the inner rhythm of movement. At first, it served as a metronome to keep time for the front scissors, back scissors, and double leg circles on the horse. Then I began humming a few melodies as I did my routine on the rings. Later, I progressed to using selections from Orff for the compulsory routines in a competition. In the end, for the optional routines in my program, my body was carrying out dodecaphonic orders in which every muscle was a different instrument, harmonizing in a single symphony.

It seemed to me that the Soviets were up to something similar. Watching slow-motion videos day after day, I recognized the machine-like tempo of Prokofiev in their movements. They were still at the physical stage, using music as an objective support. They had not yet grasped the mental function that transferred the musical image into bodily movement. Simply put, I'd say they worked with perception, while day after day I was externalizing representation. Nevertheless, their team was ahead of its time in introducing dance movements into more traditional approaches. At first, their introduction of these techniques in competition met with

some resistance from Western judges, but with time the Soviets made significant inroads, until they were sweeping meet after meet. As a result of this influence, and with the arrival of artistic gymnastics for women, the Romanian female gymnasts ended up inventing the takeoff that stunned the world.

By age thirteen I was junior champion in all categories, and was already learning how to be less dependent on visual perception. Blindfolded, I would move from one apparatus to another, judging distances only by means of my internal senses—senses upon which music was already having an effect. It was around this time that I learned that the run-up used to gain speed for both the horse and floor exercises should not be done on the tips of the toes as traditionally taught. Instead, it should be performed from a flat-footed position with a forward motion, the legs describing imaginary circles that decrease in diameter as a function of the distance to the point of takeoff. And the jump itself should be done in a heel-foot-toe sequence, producing that long and suspended leap previously seen only in dancers like Nijinsky, which the ballet critics of his time had called “impossible flights.” Well, they weren’t really flights but movements involving everything from the abductors, rectals, and thigh muscles to the annular ligaments of the tarsus.

Stamina was another important factor that I managed to perfect. I built up my ability to use oxygen, eliminate carbon dioxide and lactic acid, and increase the performance of certain heavily-taxed organs such as my lungs, heart, liver, and kidneys. Based on the principle of interval and duration, I worked on my general anaerobic endurance as understood by Hegedüs. I gained an overall resistance to oxygen debt, which was useful for speed and sudden exertion, as opposed to gaining stamina limited to a particular group of muscles. After studying the behavior of various athletes, I became convinced that oxygen debt in the brain caused by poor training techniques had the effect of decreasing certain abilities. For that reason I concentrated on becoming adept at producing a type of breathing in which I let air flow in continuously through my nose and out between my teeth, like a pendulum accompanying my every movement. Nor did I allow my heart to exceed what I call “the threshold of aerobic breakdown,” which I calculated to be 180 beats per minute.

Paranoia Won't Get You Very Far!

From time to time either the National Sports Committee or my wonderful teacher Michel would ask me to speak to the gymnasts on one of the national teams. This time it was the team traveling to Brussels to compete in the divisional championship.

At the main gym, I began talking to the group of athletes who were seated in a semi-circle around me. They listened and took notes as I outlined the classical ideas for scoring high marks in what the judges call style. From this perspective, style consists of straight lines in the hands and the feet, thighs together, head up, shoulders down, entrances and exits clearly marked.

I added that this was only the outward appearance of gymnastics. The Greeks, who invented the Olympics, located the soul within the body. And so it followed that Greek philosophers developed their ideas in the gymnasia, the same place that the painters and sculptors also found their inspiration. To them, the body was not simply a natural object, as in the case of animals—it was there to be humanized. But soon I cut my talk short, noting an impatience in my young prima donnas that arose from their arrogance. Nothing I had to say was worth listening to if it didn’t speak directly to their immediate interests. And of course, all of them felt they should be acknowledged as the exceptional individuals they knew themselves to be.

So there I was with a bunch of conceited brats who saw themselves as superhuman. I knew very well that in their muddled minds the impossible dream of the champions was beginning to take shape. It went something like this: If you could only learn to produce slower falls, then you could add increasingly complex moves to any routine. Something similar took place with virtuosos in other fields. Houdini, for example, trained ever more intensively to escape confinements of every kind, in an effort to move beyond certain physical limits. In his case it was a struggle against the law of the impenetrability of solid bodies—just as in the case of our gallant friends it was a struggle against $g = 9.78 \text{ m/s}^2$. In an attempt to mitigate the effects of this paranoia, I tried to discourage them from this dream that, at least for them, was unattainable.

I gave them the following explanation: “A mass rotating in a circular motion tends to fly outward from its axis, the centrifugal force being proportional to the square of the speed of rotation. At the equator, the centrifugal force due to the Earth’s rotation is $1/289$ the size of g . Since 289 is the square of 17, then if the speed of rotation becomes 17 times faster than that of the Earth, this movement will counterbalance g . The Earth’s rotational speed is 1,665 kilometers per hour—so an additional speed of at least 28,305 kilometers per hour is required to overcome gravity sufficiently to orbit the Earth. Now then, my friends, when you do a giant swing on the horizontal bar, what average speed do you attain? Perhaps 60 kilometers per hour. That force is essentially all centrifugal, since the bar exerts almost no gravitational pull. If you weigh 75 kilos, at 60 kilometers per hour the force on the bar is equal to 300 kilos. So in the salto of your dismount, you can reach a height much greater than the bar itself, and do a triple in a tuck position or a double in a layout. Note that there’s a dead point where you’re neither rising nor falling. When does this occur? Logically, it would be in the middle of the triple tucked salto or the double in a layout. And what’s your height at that point? Of course it would be above the bar. At that instant your body weight is zero. But gravity will pull you to the floor in just over a second since you’re at a point no higher than 9.78 meters. “Well then, my beautiful cherubs, how can you ever hope to fly under these impossible conditions? To begin with, you would have to be able to do six twists in a tuck or four in a layout, and that would be possible only if you achieved a velocity of 120 kilometers per hour. On top of that, your weight would increase to 1,200 kilos, and you would have to be able to hold on to the bar without letting go too soon. And then, from a height of more than nine meters above the ground, plunging to the floor like a piano. On the second rotation, if you built up too much twist, the forces would break down—something like what happens with a gyroscope when the centrifugal force becomes equal to g . And your rotations would be at a speed that would rip off your clothes and break every last bone in your body. Then there’s the elasticity of the bar itself which, while it may help with the release, will still leave you back on the floor in little more than a second. And to make matters worse, no one’s ever been able to do more than a double twisting dismount in a layout. Consequently, the one second descent time will never be broken. So save your dreams—dreams that have haunted the world’s greatest gymnasts. Save them for when you lay your thick skulls down on your pillows at night. Forget about the myth of prolonging that moment of suspension. That’s all I have to say!”

They looked at me with hatred in their eyes—the same hatred I’ve seen in physicists when you rub their noses in the 299,792 kilometers per second limit of the speed of light. Everyone knows it. They teach it to all their students. Still, does that give anyone the right to go around pointing it out in public? No doubt a little voice inside tells them that someday that limit will be broken. Physicists, unlike gymnasts, don’t usually let anyone in on their secret desires, unless in a careless moment they reach out and take a bite out of Newton’s sparkling apple or Röemer’s

celestial ones (depending on whether the question has to do with gravitation or the speed of light).

When I finished my presentation, I took out a digital dynamometer that I had built, and hooked up the terminals to the support for the bar. I asked them to watch the meter carefully for the expected increase in weight with increasing speed. Then I hung from the bar. Rising into a vertical position, I began to perform a giant swing, and had them read the meter out loud. In unison, they recited: “280... 290... 150... 90... 50...”

My release was the usual double twisting salto, and I nailed my landing on the mat. However, according to the meter, as my rate of spin increased my weight *decreased*—which, of course, was absurd. No one said anything. It was obvious that they all thought there was something wrong with the meter. They simply adjusted the figures and wrote them down—and with that, this theoretical and practical lesson came to an end.

That Strange Vibration

For a long time I dedicated myself to turning my body into a kind of sonic image. Every cell inside me, pulsing from within, would send a vibration—first to the bar, then to the turnbuckles, from there to the floor, and finally to the walls and even the air in the gymnasium. It was a question of translating the spirit of music into the most beautiful expression of physical elegance. Like a guitar that vibrates excitedly to the pulsing strings, transmitting its voice and resonating with other objects as well as the human ear, my body became the instrument. And in transmitting the vibration to nearby bodies, the source of the emissions is pushed backwards.

Which brings us to the present point in time, in which the Olympics have become an artistic event. I won't go over everything that took place on the day that I received the highest possible scores on every apparatus. I'll just tell you how it all ended, which to my mind was the best part.

Facing the silent crowd, the expectant judges, the other gymnasts, and the attention of millions of television viewers, I walked slowly to the bar. I ran my foot over a block of resin, so that my shoes wouldn't slip as they left the mat. I rubbed chalk on my hands to absorb any perspiration. Marking my starting point and taking a deep breath, I hung from the bar and began. Within a few seconds I had run through the set of exercises and was coming to the end of my routine. From a vertical position I started the giant swing. By the ninety-degree mark I was already fully in tune. At 180 degrees, waves began to emanate from deep within me out to all my muscles. At 270 degrees, the bar began to quiver following my internal representation. At 360 degrees I was vertical again, and a wave expanded through the turnbuckles to the floor of the gymnasium. I began the second turn at a tremendous rate of speed while *inverting* my mental mechanisms as follows: “*ecrof lagufirt nec ym htiw emocrevo I taht eno eht si stnuoc that ecrof lanoitativarg ylno eht dna ,sixa ym si rab eht ecnis eltil srettam ,(l²nis 99170500.0 + 75520199.0) x2 = g ,l ,edutital eht fo enis eht fo erauqs eht ot noitaler ni elop eht ot rotauge s'htraE eht morf sesaercni hcihw ,g noitarelecca ni egnahc ehT .²(R/a + 1) g =²(R/a + 1) / g = 'g hcihw morf ,²(a + R) :²R :: g : 'g—sesaerced thgiew ym elihw deeps ym esaercni I ;drawkcab sevom egami ym elihw drawrof sevom ydob ym seerged ytenin tA”*

At 180 degrees, I had already begun the symphony selected for the occasion. I knew it would be easily recognizable to the audience. “A small concession,” I thought. “But it's good that everyone can enjoy themselves.” At that moment, as I was performing my calculations, I had already rapidly previewed the third movement of the symphony and was approaching the fourth, having moved ahead of the baritone and the four voices. The bar trembled. The turnbuckles, the

floor, and the walls began to amplify the signal, which explains why I replaced the chorus with brasses after the long pause in this mental score. Changing to F major, Beethoven's *Choral* exploded with a luminous sound in which it was impossible to recognize either chorus or conventional brasses. The entire space was flooded with music. The audience leaped to their feet as if their seats were spring-loaded. The judges' papers flew into the air and several gymnasts fell over backwards, banging their rear ends on the mats, the floor, and the chalk containers. I passed through the 360 degree position for the second time, rejoicing in Schiller's ridiculous "Ode to Joy," which Beethoven had set to music: "*The cherub stands in the presence of God! But even to the miserable worm ecstasy is granted.*" However, the syntax in the original German is completely different: "*Wollust ward dem Wurm gegeben und der Cherub steht vor Gott.*" The beautiful cherubs were strewn across the floor like miserable little worms, their asses powdered with chalk.

Finally, at 270 degrees into the second rotation I released and, spinning like a top in a rapid series of twists, somersaulted in a layout, repeating the move three times, until I reached the dead point more than ten meters above the ground. Then I began to descend like one of those space capsules floating gently down to the surface of the moon. It took five long seconds for my feet to land on the mat and my routine to end. Taking advantage of the astonishment of the crowd, I quickly slipped out, as someone cried, "Turn down that music! You've ruined a perfectly incredible performance with those speakers blasting away! What idiots!"

Now I'm back in my room, finishing this letter with my right hand while I attempt to penetrate the wooden surface of the desk with the index finger of my left hand. I ask myself: Must I accept the law of impenetrability simply because perception tells me that one body cannot occupy the same space as another?

The Huntress

The Radio Telescope on Monte Tlapán

It was 9:00 p.m., and the alarm in her watch beeped softly as Shoko Satiru, the director of the observatory, finished her work for the day. Changing out of her work clothes, she remembered that Pedro would be arriving shortly. For almost two years now she had repeated the same routine every Tuesday. She finished entering the settings for the radio telescope, and like a creature shedding its bright yellow skin, slipped out of her overalls. Fixing her hair, she compared her Asian features with those in the photo she had carefully placed in one corner of the mirror. She never ceased to admire that Aztec face, so like her own.

The image of *The Huntress*, as the archeologists called her, had been sculpted into solid stone some seven hundred years earlier. The figure was female, viewed in profile. In one hand she held a rectangular object, from which protruded a thin rod. Scholars had identified it as a hunting dagger. As for the other details, no one could provide any reasonable explanation for her strange clothing. However they did note that the plumed headdress was like those worn by the ancient Aztecs—though to the untrained eye it merely resembled windblown hair.

Shoko had first met Pedro at the site of the archeological dig. Presenting her with a photograph of *The Huntress*, he had murmured slowly, “Now I know who you are.” That phrase was the beginning of a wonderful relationship.

Shoko prepared herself for another evening in town with her companion. In a moment she would hear the crunching of tires on gravel as the car strained up the final hill that ended in the observatory’s parking lot. The security guard would watch on closed-circuit TV as Pedro approached the entrance. Pedro would chat briefly with him through the speaker, and soon Pedro and Shoko would be together below, enveloped in the warm, starry night.

But this time their Tuesday ritual was disrupted. Skipping his usual small-talk with the guard, Pedro climbed directly up the steps to the dome. The metal door opened and he entered quickly.

“You’ve got to fix this, Shoko. If we send it to the city, it will take them days to get it working right. You’ve got all the tools you need here and you know how to do it. Without this remote control we’ll have to open and close the gate at the dig by hand.”

“Sure,” she said, “of course.” Turning down the sound coming from the telescope’s monitors, she took the remote to a workbench. Instinctively, she took her yellow overalls down off the hook and in a few seconds was back in them. Pushing her hair out the way, she began working on the piece of equipment.

“It’s a short circuit,” she muttered. The defect was obvious in the waveform visible on the oscilloscope. As she changed the damaged transistor, Pedro’s fantasy wandered from lips and breath to skin and the burning depths of bodies meeting.

“We’re going to have to readjust the transmission frequencies so it will operate at four meters, two centimeters, and five millimeters.” A brilliant telecommunications engineer, she worked with that singular focus that had made her so valued by the company back in Japan. “Imagine, this primitive toy is made out of transistors, without even a single chip. It works only up to a distance of a couple of meters, while our radio telescopes receive signals from thousands of light years away. Four meters, two centimeters, five millimeters. Just over 168 megahertz—there. Done!”

Extending the antenna on the remote control, she pushed the “on” button. Immediately, the lights in the laboratory flickered. A dull thud could be heard coming from the dome’s motors, and the parabolic antenna of the radio telescope began to rotate slowly, searching for a message from the distant stars. The lights in the dome grew dim as the monitors suddenly brightened. Perhaps because of these contrasting effects, Pedro had the sensation that he was losing Shoko down a stroboscopic tunnel. Caught up in an electric blue wind, she seemed to be moving away into the distance, with the remote control still in her hand. At that moment, all twenty monitors came back to life, each displaying the profile of *The Huntress*.

The people brought rushing into the dome by the power failure were stopped short and stood dumbfounded in front of the screens. Eventually they turned their attention to regaining control of the radio telescope, but with the main power out it was impossible to move the telescope. Telephones rang, and with the help of the other observatories they were eventually able to confirm that the transmission of the human figure had originated right there—at the radio telescope of Monte Tlapán itself. The network of observatories around the world was connected so that an image detected at one location was simultaneously displayed at all other points in the network. Despite the brownout, Monte Tlapán had continued transmitting to its sister stations. But what was unclear was the original source of the image of *The Huntress*. Eight minutes after the initial disturbance, the normal flow of electricity was restored, and with it the image vanished. Once again the twenty monitors bore the traces of stellar objects arriving from the other radio telescopes.

After Shoko changed out of her overalls, Pedro followed her as she walked quickly down to the parking lot. As they drove off, her grip tightened nervously on the remote and the photograph she had retrieved from the dome. In the warm, starry night, the vehicle began its descent toward the distant lights of the town.

Fragile Memory

They didn’t speak until they had entered the large, rambling house. “I saw a series of flashing lights, like the strobe lights in dance clubs that make the dancers’ movements seem to jerk in a series of freeze frames. But in this case, it was your silhouette that seemed to be moving quickly away from me into the distance, to the rhythm of blue flashing lights.” “How can that be, Pedro? The frequency was almost sixteen cycles per second. Our monitors can’t display a signal in that range.”

“Maybe. But I do know that I smelled a strong odor of ozone at the same time that I was feeling myself being pushed away from you by some kind of wind.”

“You’re not making any sense. I can’t understand what you’re saying,” cried Shoko, almost hysterical. Pedro gently put his arm around her and slowly continued, “You were moving away from me down a long tunnel. It didn’t last more than two or three seconds, but when you came back and I saw you with the remote in your hand, I could tell that you were *The Huntress*. It’s not just a cute phrase anymore, like it was in the beginning. For two years we haven’t spoken about this, and now it’s just blown up in our faces.” She let out a sob, but quickly regained her composure, interrupting Pedro.

“Let’s start at the beginning. I know something happened, but I have no idea how much time passed. It’s like waking up from a dream and not being able to remember anything. For me, time was suspended. For you, seconds passed that you experienced without any interruption. Then there was that eight minutes with the image frozen on the monitors.”

Pedro suggested that they write everything down and not worry about it until the next day. After a while, they collapsed on the bed, exhausted, distressed, and confused. A short time later, Pedro was sound asleep.

Shoko tossed and turned, rehashing it all in her troubled dreams. At the summit of Monte Tlapán, there was no observatory. Instead, she found herself facing the dazzling figure of a man dressed in the style of the ancient Aztecs. In a flash, this luminous sculptor had translated her features onto a block of stone. Her clothing, the remote control, and her windblown hair were all carved into the rock, but while the images were now etched there they nonetheless moved as if alive. Then, without words he explained something about the balance of the Earth and how it would be reestablished through a device that he would leave hidden for a period of centuries.

Unintentionally, she would accelerate the process, putting the entire project at risk. It would be necessary to turn part of the excess energy back on itself, contracting it until it became matter. This process would return her to the original point in time, and the same would be true of everything related to the moment of the accident. It was a way of reordering things without setting off a chain of events that would affect larger systems. Shoko thought she grasped how her own deep memory of time would also remain enchained to a time centuries before her own birth, through an event that would only take place in the future. But then this luminous being opened his hands wide, and she was thrown once again into her own world.

They jumped out of bed as the floor started to move and the furniture began to creak. It was an earthquake, but by the time they got outside onto the large patio it had subsided. Day was breaking, and a gentle breeze blew in the direction of Tlapán.

The Aztec Calendar

Around the year 1300, the region of Tlapán was an important center of the Aztec empire. Guarded there was the illustrated record recounting the story of the long journey through the darkness of those who had first arrived and established the original people. Not far from here was the mountain on which the god Quetzalcoatl had descended, and from which he had visited different regions of the Earth. It was also there that, for a time, he taught everything-that-is. But one morning, other gods, riding an enormous plumed serpent, came seeking him. Before departing he left behind a gift, the enormous flying ship in which he had arrived, but he hid it in a place known only to a wise few. The descendants of these learned ones would know what to do when the appropriate moment arrived, because he left instructions for them engraved on a stone disk. But if anyone made a mistake, the flying ship would fly away and return to its master. Thus, Quetzalcoatl and the other gods drew away from the mortals, flying toward the morning star.

A century later, Montezuma II found that this troublesome story was spreading throughout his kingdom. He traveled to Tlapán and summoned the wise ones so that they would reveal the secret of Quetzalcoatl to him. The emperor's learned subjects explained to him that the significance of the stone disk had been greatly exaggerated. In truth, it was a calendar so useful that it served equally well to predict the astronomical cycles and to determine the right time to plant and to harvest. With the emperor's blessing, Tlapán was designated as the favored location from which to observe the stars and the fates. In any case, with the arrival of the white man the region was abandoned.

But these climatic and geographical truths, long distorted in legend, were reestablished centuries later when one of the worldwide network of radio telescopes was constructed on a

high point in the region known as Monte Tlapán. Otherwise, the region was noteworthy only for its history, in particular the archeological dig located near the observatory. The staff from both sites would often cross paths in the sleepy little town, where they would trade stories of distant stars and fabulous kingdoms. It was not surprising, then, that the head of the archeological team should meet a Japanese expatriate at the site. After all, she was working only a short distance away and was curious about the history of the area.

Time and Rock

Leaving the house, they headed toward the foothills. But first they stopped at the dig. It was early and even the work crews had not yet arrived. There was a hint of alarm in the voices of the security guards who came out to meet them.

“Don Pedrito, there was a big quake last night, and then a wind that nearly sent us flying. We wanted to go into the compound, but we were afraid something would fall on us.”

“Don’t worry, Juan. We’ll go check it out.”

To one side, the stepped faces of the pyramid rose to a truncated apex. They began climbing the pyramid, finally reaching the terrace and the door that guarded the entrance. Pedro extended the antenna on the remote. When he pushed the button, the motor responded, and the heavy metal gate slowly opened. He gave Shoko a gentle pat on the back, “Good job!”

Entering the site, Pedro unlocked a shed and turned on the lights. It was filled with sawhorses, work tables, chests, and shelves covered with artifacts. In a dimly lit corner, a stone tablet revealed the true dimensions of *The Huntress*. The visitors stood enthralled for a moment as they contemplated the figure. In a soft voice Shoko asked about the place where it had been found. Pedro told her how the stone had been uncovered when excavation began on Monte Tlapán to supply building material for the observatory’s foundation. Later on, the figure had been brought down to the main dig site, and finally moved to its present location.

A new earthquake drowned out Pedro’s voice. The noise of ceramic objects clattering against each other, the cracking of stone walls, and the banging of the metal door accompanied the swaying of the lights that hung from long cables. At that moment they stood paralyzed, unable to flee, watching as the image of *The Huntress* appeared to move, almost stretching, as a soft phosphorescent glow bathed the tablet. It seemed to them that the relief of the carving had lost some of its flawless detail, as if it were suddenly showing the effects of the passage of time. Shoko felt that something was beginning to awaken deep in her memory.

Meanwhile, the crew of workers had arrived with their usual commotion. A short time later, at the base of the pyramid, Pedro gave instructions for measures to reinforce the site, in case of further earthquakes.

Pedro and Shoko left the dig and set off for the mountain. On the way, it was apparent that the wind was picking up and starting to blow toward Tlapán from every direction. Before long, they arrived at the observatory. Shoko rushed in, while Pedro waited patiently in the car. Finally, she came out again. Leaning back against the seat, Shoko sighed and began to talk about how things were getting more and more messed up, how after every little tremor the circuits would overload—and now the wind, which had been blowing nonstop since last night, had created a cloud of dust in the air that was interfering with signal reception by the radio telescope. She had changed two voltage regulators herself and needed to go back to town to order replacements. Not wanting to go by helicopter, she would take her car or one of the observatory’s vans. They kissed, promising to meet that evening back at the house.

The Sierra Madre Is to Blame

“Report of the Investigating Committee Regarding the Incident Referred to as the Case of ‘Echo Retransmission.’ Field team directed by Dr. M. Pri and Prof. A. Gort.

“At 9:12 p.m. on March 15, 1990, the observatory at Monte Tlapán ceased retransmission of radio astronomical signals. A video signal transmitted from the affected observatory was detected on the network, which at that time included stations in Costa Rica, Sydney, Xining, and Osaka. For a period of eight minutes the image of a human figure was observed in place of the usual non-terrestrial signals. In the initial investigation, the technicians reported that the automatic tracking system had accidentally focused on NGC-132, receiving signals from this radio source, some 352 light years away. Dr. Shoko Satiru stated that the seventeen staff members under her supervision concurred that there had been a brownout lasting eight minutes, after which system function was restored. Under these conditions, the Monte Tlapán transmitter should simply have stopped feeding data to the network. However, the transmission of a video image from that point forces us to consider the possibility that an echo from a commercial television transmitter may have interfered with Tlapán, with this television signal overriding the non-terrestrial source. Phenomena of this type have been reported previously and may be attributed to television signals bouncing off the Sierra Madre del Sur.

“With nothing further to report, we send our regards,

“M. Pri and A. Gort

“Mexico City, March 20, 1990”

Five days had passed since the event at the observatory. Earth tremors were occurring with greater frequency and intensity. At first the seismologists from Mexico City also blamed the Sierra Madre. There was a known fault where tectonic plates met that from time to time produced sizable earthquakes. But then things changed.

A large area around Tlapán was covered with seismographs and other devices. Curious onlookers were arriving from all over, and the army had cordoned off the area to prevent them from getting too close to the danger zone. By now the scientists felt that they were registering underground volcanic activity of some kind, and they were sure that if the situation continued it would end in some kind of eruption. The graphs of the instruments were following a curve that was growing nearly exponentially. At first the tremors occurred at twelve-hour intervals, then every eight hours, and so on. The observatory and the dig site were evacuated. Someone with binoculars looking around from a safe distance would not have discovered much—only a few stealthy television reporters foolishly risking their lives by venturing into the restricted area.

In the late afternoon, Shoko and Pedro arrived at the gate that led up to the observatory. They showed their credentials, and after being given the runaround were finally allowed through. They were still several kilometers from Tlapán when they were forced to pull off the road, stopping in a dry riverbed to seek shelter from the wind, which at times reached hurricane force.

Return to the Heavens

Toward midnight the wind and tremors ceased. Pedro tried to start the car, but the engine wouldn't turn over. The warm, beautiful night enticed them into walking back up to the road. The moon and the stars gave enough light for them to see without stumbling. Suddenly, they

stopped. The high-tension wires that carried electricity to the area began to buzz loudly, giving off a bluish glow along their entire length. Ahead they could see Monte Tlapán bathed in light. Had they been far to the north, they would have sworn this was the aurora borealis, dancing in ever-changing colors, descending to earth.

They sat down on some rocks to watch the spectacle. Soon they noticed that the lights in town were flickering to the rhythm of the resplendent light show taking place on Tlapán. Finally, as the lights on the mountain grew even brighter, the town was left in total darkness.

They tried to organize their confused thoughts. Somehow the remote control for the gate had produced a harmonic effect that had activated the motors of the radio telescope. Sweeping past other signals, the telescope had stopped exactly on NGC-132, some 352 light years away, yet somehow captured images produced 704 years earlier at this very spot. These two points had entered into a resonance that lasted until the rotation of the Earth shifted the radio telescope's field of reception eight minutes later. But for this to happen, it would have been necessary to somehow have been present on the mountain 704 years earlier. It was all too unbelievable. But it might have been possible if, for example, the remote had activated an enormous amplifier, either in the observatory or nearby. If this were the case, the microvoltages of a person's cerebral activity at sixteen cycles per second might have been amplified, producing the stroboscopic effects that were observed. That is to say, the amplifier might have had the ability to project images captured from a nearby nervous system, say, of someone thinking of the photograph of *The Huntress*. Of course, that doesn't explain how these amplified images could have interfered with the radio telescope. Such an amplifier may also have caused a phenomenon of ionic absorption, displacing layers of air and producing the unusual gusts of wind.

As for the rest, the electrical disturbance that led to this absorption could have broken down the ohmic resistance between the tectonic plates, increasing their conductivity and allowing them to move; thus the earth tremors. All right, but this amplifier, which is at the heart of the explanation, is something that couldn't even exist. Similarly, the leap into the past was something completely impossible, unthinkable as a hypothesis. And so all of this was filled with contradictions from start to finish.

The glow from Tlapán increased as dawn approached. As Venus rose above the horizon, they could hear a roar that grew louder until it was almost unbearable. The high-tension towers began swaying, and many were torn right off their bases. Pedro and Shoko clutched one another tightly on the ground as they felt the beginnings of another powerful earthquake. Lightning bolts struck Tlapán with increasing intensity, until suddenly, as if it had been dynamited, the top of the mountain was blown completely off—the observatory was gone, and a short time later the mountain cracked open like an egg. Enormous pieces fell all around, and then there was silence.

A huge metallic form began rising slowly from what had been Monte Tlapán. Glowing in flames of changing color, it rose higher and higher until it appeared to be an enormous disk. It began moving toward the terrified observers. For a time, the ship hovered over them, and they could clearly see the symbol of Quetzalcoatl on its side. Finally it took off abruptly in the direction of the morning star. At that moment Shoko's deep memory was liberated, and she knew that *The Huntress* had been forever freed from her stone prison.

Day of the Winged Lion

To Danny

Every kind of virtual reality hardware and software was selling well. No doubt these technologies were of great benefit to students of history and the natural sciences. There was also growing demand from that large sector of the public who, for their daily dose of entertainment, looked forward to leisurely walks among the Egyptian pyramids or the flora and fauna of the Amazon jungle. One could go on these trips alone or with others, and with or without a guide. However, many preferred that old standby—a menu of options that could be called up at the touch of a finger. Catalogs overflowed with possibilities that ranged from adaptations of old movies in which the user became the protagonist, to video games that allowed one to engage in combat in outer space, or affairs with the icons of the age made flesh. It was like living in a comic book or a science fiction adventure, but one filled with stimuli realistic enough to cause heart attacks in some thrill-seekers, who were so unwise as to use programs that were not recommended by the Committee for the Defense of the Weak Nervous System. Even personal computers were capable of running the most extraordinary software and, taking advantage of this situation, hackers began to introduce virtual viruses capable of producing everything from dissociation to psychosomatic illnesses. It was so easy to put on a helmet and gloves, turn on the computer, and select a program—even children had time especially set aside for them to travel into these realms.

A Subcommittee of the Committee for the Defense of the Weak Nervous System

As a precautionary measure, everyone in the subcommittee used a *nom de guerre*. Alpa set the agenda and supervised the Project, coordinating the activities of a team that had been put together over several years. She had been recruited because of the unusual method she had developed to train topflight Alpine skiers. While other teachers stressed sustained physical training, her method brought students together in a large room where images of events such as the giant slalom or the ski jump were projected over and over again. Once the scenery and the course for that event had been presented, the room would go totally dark, and participants were asked to imagine repeatedly every twist and turn of the run. Sometimes soft music would accompany these practice sessions, and later while the subjects slept the same music would waft through their quarters. As a result, there was more than one athlete who, though they had never set foot on a particular course before the competition, nonetheless performed as if they were skiing on their own home slopes.

Teneter III had first learned of Alpa from a video on winter sports. Intrigued, he went to Sils Maria to look her up.

The very last member recruited was Seguidor, who was placed in charge of the advanced technology group. Along with Huron and Faro, he formed part of a group that could only have been held together by the special talent of the ineffable Jalina, with her gift for creating cohesive human environments. Alpa would set the goals and timetables, and, as communications specialist, Teneter III would serve as the nerve center for their activities. The team itself was set up as a subcommittee of the Committee for the Defense of the Weak Nervous System, and since Teneter was the director of that institution, the group managed to function without too many difficulties.

The Project

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Toward the end of the twentieth century, a group of scientists led by an obscure official at UNESCO had come to the conclusion that within a few decades some eighty-five percent of the world's population would be functionally illiterate. They also calculated that primary literacy would soon be eliminated as great masses of people moved from books, magazines, and newspapers to TV, videos, computers, and holographic projections. In itself this was nothing to be alarmed about, since information already flowed in greater quantities than in any previous period, and that flow was only going to increase. But they foresaw that the increase in *unstructured information* would have an impact not only on isolated individuals, it would end up affecting the framework of the entire social system. From a specialist's point of view these studies were interesting, utilizing as they did an analytical approach that followed a computer-generated scheme. However, in the end it was the *inability to establish coherent overall relationships* that would have the greatest impact.

By this time, a mistrust of anything but the analytical approach had grown to the point that any conversation about generalities lasting longer than three minutes was pejoratively labeled "ideological." In fact, people found any attempt at all to reach general truths quite distressing, and were able to maintain their attention only on topics that were very specific—a habit that was reinforced in both the workplace and educational institutions. Historians studied the metallurgy of Etrurian rings in attempting to explain how that society functioned. Anthropologists, psychologists, and philosophers were reduced to such activities as computing grammatical analyses.

The focus on externalities and formalism in both thinking and feeling reached such a pitch that the only way citizens could find to be different or original was to vary some small detail of their dress or appearance. While medicine and sports continued to progress, everything else became secondary—as secondary as the fate of those peoples and communities that declined because they did not adapt to the new world order; as secondary as the lives of the new generations bled dry in ruthless competition to achieve short-term goals. On top of everything, it had been decades since the capacity to formulate general scientific theories had been rendered sterile. Everything had been reduced to applying technologies that were, in any case, racing off in all directions.

It was in this context that the UNESCO official presented the report and appealed for help in studying this social pathology and its near-term tendencies. A sizeable budget was immediately allocated for research, perhaps because the decision-makers believed the effort would help to improve efficiency. Thanks to this misunderstanding, work on the project continued for a number of years. In this way, the Committee was constituted as an authorized para-cultural organization charged with disseminating information and making recommendations to those countries that supported UNESCO through the United Nations.

Even decades after UNESCO had disappeared, the Committee continued to function, although its source of support was unclear. In any event, it was seen as an institution that served the public good and that drew on the support of individuals of good will from all over the world. The Committee produced annual reports that no one took seriously, but more than this it continued to direct its research efforts toward developing a model of human behavior that would be free from the kinds of problems that were clearly on the rise. By then the Committee had come to believe that the combination of a particular type of unstructured information and a certain form of education was blocking certain areas of the brain, causing the initial symptoms of a mental epidemic that would eventually become uncontrollable. The "Project," as it was called by its directors, was doing research on developing an "antidote" that would be capable of

unblocking this frozen mental activity. But at the time it was not even clear to them whether what was needed was to develop procedures for physiological training, or whether it was a matter of synthesizing beneficial chemical substances, or whether the goal would be better achieved by channeling their resources into designing some kind of electronic device. What was certain was that these millions of mentally blocked beings were causing growing disruption in our collective life. These individuals, who were increasingly lost in narrow specialization and less and less able to reason about their own lives, would eventually wind up displacing the rest of society, which, lacking any goals, would be left struggling with suicide, neurosis, and growing pessimism.

Before his death, that obscure official took the name Tenetor I, and he left the Project in the hands of his closest collaborators.

Cosmic Clay

When the surface of the planet began to cool, a precursor arrived and chose the model for what was intended as a self-sustaining process. The precursor's greatest interest was in preparing a matrix of n progressively diverging possibilities, thus creating the conditions for life. With time, the yellowish wisps of the primitive atmosphere began to turn blue and its protective shield began functioning within acceptable limits.

Later, the visitor observed the behavior of various species. A few made the move to dry land and hesitantly began to adapt to these new conditions. Others retreated once again to the seas. The multitudes arising in these varied environments either succumbed or survived to continue their transformations unchecked. Everything that chance brought was respected, until finally there arose a creature of medium size, capable of being highly discerning, and able to transfer information and store memory outside of its own immediate circuitry.

This new monster had followed one of the evolutionary patterns suited to the blue planet: a pair of arms, a pair of eyes, and a brain divided into two hemispheres. Almost everything in this creature was symmetrical in a fundamental way, including its thoughts, feelings, and actions—which were, after all, encoded in its neurochemical system. Still, the expansion of its temporal horizon and the formation of layers of register in its internal space would require some time. As things stood, it was barely capable of deferring responses or recognizing the difference between perceptions, dreams, and hallucinations. Its attention span was erratic and, of course, it was unable to reflect upon its own actions since it was not quite able to grasp the nature of the objects with which it was interacting. It viewed its own actions in reference to the objects immediately at hand, and as long as it continued to see itself as a mere reflection of the external world, could not make way for its deeper intention—which was the only way to produce the necessary mutation of its own mind. The acts of capturing and fleeing had shaped its primary feelings, expressed as attraction and repulsion. Slowly, the clumsy, symmetrical bipolarity that marked this protospecies began to change. For the moment its behavior was all too predictable, but there would come a moment when it would transform itself, making a leap toward indeterminacy and chance.

So it was that the visitor looked forward to a new birth in this species, in which he had recognized both fear in the face of death and the vertigo of destructive fury. He had witnessed how these beings trembled with hallucinations of love, how they anguished over their imagined future in the solitude of the empty Universe, and how they struggled to decipher the traces of their own beginnings in this world into which they had been thrown. At some point, this species

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formed of cosmic clay would set out along unforeseeable paths on the way to discovering its own origins.

Pure Virtual Space

On that particular day, Tenetor III would test the new material provided by Seguidor. He entered the anechoic chamber, observing the gleaming test seat in the center of the empty room. With his close-fitting clothes, his helmet, gloves, and boots, he felt like an old-time biker encased in aluminum. He lay down, ready to begin, and as he changed position the seat immediately adjusted itself to him, tilting back like an easy chair. At last he would experience this new phenomenon directly, without relying on the artifice of preprogrammed images. His body would provide the impulses and signals that would, without any mediation, populate an entire environment. If everything worked properly he would be able to view a translation of his mental world through the technology of virtual reality, and the Project would have found a way to realize its goals.

He lowered his visor and found himself in total darkness. Touching a button on the helmet, he logged onto the system. Gradually, the illuminated contours framing the inside of the visor began to appear. The screen was located some twenty centimeters in front of his eyes. Suddenly his body appeared, suspended in a spherical, mirrored room. The monitor responded with great precision as he tried directing his gaze in every direction. This did not seem particularly noteworthy, for he knew that his optic nerves were transmitting signals to the interface connected to the central processing unit. As he moved his eyes to the right, the images ran in the opposite direction until they occupied the center of his line of sight. Looking up, the projection moved down, and so on in every direction he tried. He looked at the tip of his right boot and, with only the slightest effort, adjusted the focus to see finer detail, zooming in on the object until it filled the entire screen. Then, disengaging, he zoomed out until he appeared to be only a tiny point, glittering in the center of the mirrored space. The optical program had the magnification and definition of the best electron microscopes and the power of the largest telescopes. The latter, however, had previously been useless, because until now it had not been possible to view the astronomical world from within confines as small as the helmet's projection area.

Today would mark an important advance if the probes Seguidor had placed on the internal surface of the sensor clothing worked properly. Information corresponding to the nerve signals that were activating various parts of his body should appear on the screen. He touched the second button on the helmet, and an alphanumeric column immediately lit up and began to scroll down the left side of the visor, as a small display on the right showed his right hand touching the helmet. As he lowered his arm slowly, the information displayed in the column began to change, while the small display on the right showed the outline of his arm as it was being lowered. He swallowed, and fresh data was again listed in the column. The display showed the inside of his mouth, and then his esophagus moving gently. As a test, he thought of Jalina, and the small display showed his heart beating at an abnormally fast rate. Then it showed his lungs expanding slightly and his penis turning a light reddish color. At the same time, the scrolling column displayed information on a number of other phenomena within his body: blood pressure, temperature, acidity and alkalinity, blood electrolyte concentration, and the flow of signals in his nervous system.

Focusing his gaze straight ahead, once more he saw his image appear on the screen, suspended in the spherical space. It was obvious that he was looking at himself from outside, and from this external point of view the image looked somewhat deformed, as if seen in a concave mirror. He began breathing slowly and deeply. Soon, the probes began to function. A moment later he slowed the rhythm of his breathing to something like that of deep sleep and watched as his image gradually approached, until it seemed to be just outside the screen. It moved closer and closer to his eyes, until finally it was touching them and, in transparent fusion, disappeared. Then everything went black, as if someone had pulled the system's plug. Reaching out an arm seemed to tear open the blackness, allowing a distant light to penetrate. In these images, he drew near the light, while the column and small display at the edges of his visor showed the physical changes corresponding to his mental process. With efforts of this kind he felt he was making headway through the twists and turns of virtual reality.

In the dim light that suffused the cave, the feeling of strangeness began to dissipate. He recognized the vivid outlines of the caves tunneled into the hills, the humid odors awakening memories of pleasant emotions, the strength of the rock, and the distance and texture of various objects. In the small display he saw a slow walking motion and a succession of various parts of his body as each was put in motion. A hooded figure appeared before him, but soon he noticed in the display that this image was the translation of tiny movements of his tongue muscle inside the cavity of his mouth. Through half-closed eyes he saw lights all around, but realized that these were simply the amplified signals of the nerves stimulating the muscles of his eyelids. The sensor clothing was doing a good job of detecting the infinitesimal body movements that corresponded to his mental images, creating a situation that was truly hallucinatory.

The hooded figure offered him a vessel. Taking it in his hands, he drank the contents, which went down his throat with the same reality as a drink of cool water in a parched desert. He felt ready to cross the cavern and make his way to external space.

The Committee Is Organized

Following the death of Tenetor I, there was a serious crisis in the Committee. All of its members were in agreement that human behavior was in many respects suffering a progressive deterioration, and they also recognized that with each passing day the explosion of technology offered a host of new possibilities. But when it came to interpreting these events, there were two positions that were in conflict. On the one hand, the "scientificists" claimed that recurrent social behavior modified the work of certain areas of the human brain, generating a particular sensibility and way of perceiving phenomena. According to this view, the management of major companies and their public relations professionals simply guided the social process following the behavioral codes in which they themselves had been formed. In a similar vicious circle, pedagogues developed systems of teaching and education that merely reinforced their own personal beliefs. The "scientificists" claimed that it would be impossible to make any change in the direction of this mechanical process that they called the "System." They held fast to the old Einsteinian dictum that said: *For any system in uniform motion, no phenomenon within that system can give evidence of that system's movement.* They always used the old master's example of the traveler on a train going 120 kilometers per hour: If the traveler jumped, he would not come down in a different car of the train. In any inertial system, whether prehistoric train or space vehicle, the jump would have essentially no effect on that system. One would

have to take control of the train or spaceship in order to change the direction of that moving body.

To this the “historicists” responded by saying that those who took control of the train would change course according to the ground rules in which they had been formed. They asked: *“What difference is there between the leaders of the past and those of the present if all behave in accordance with the landscapes in which they were formed, in accordance with the areas of their brains that are most active? There would be no difference beyond the particular interests of those concerned with driving the train.”* As a result, the “historicists” put their faith in larger processes, finding inspiration in those historical moments in which living beings, for reasons of survival, had modified their habits and been able to change. But they also recognized that many species had disappeared due to their inability to adapt.

It was a debate that was endless. And it was at this time that Tenetor II came to head the Committee, elected because he held a position equidistant between the two contending positions.

Tenetor II oriented the Project toward research on outstanding human achievements, a topic on which the “scientificists” and “historicists” could agree. The result was a vast compilation of scientific and artistic knowledge that had improved the human process, expanding the possibilities for overcoming pain and suffering. As head of the Committee, he played an important role in selecting the personnel who would be training new recruits in the ideas of the Project. He personally took on the arduous task of seeking out individuals capable of breaking out of the mold and the old beliefs imposed by the System and orienting their lives in favor of values and conduct that were highly atypical when judged by the unquestioned belief in efficiency then in vogue. When that singular group was finally assembled, he named it the “Committee for the Defense of the Weak Nervous System,” defining its mission as an institution dedicated to the rescue and protection of individuals who were intellectually inept at adapting to the System. In addition, he divided the Committee into specialized subcommittees, asking one of them to produce educational material suitable for the “unadapted” from every region of the planet. At the same time, he worked to develop security software and anti-virus programs for those software companies who were battling the information pirates.

Tenetor II settled in Mesopotamia, and from there carried out his field expeditions. He remained in continuous contact with Committee headquarters, but one fine day, as he was traveling between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, his signals ceased. A few hours later, a rescue team comprised of Faro and Huron arrived at the spot. They found only his vehicle, his survey equipment, and an information crystal. The explorer was never heard from again.

The Living Characters

Tenetor III paused at the mouth of the cave, preparing to step into the external space. “But what external space?” he asked himself. Were he to remove his helmet he would find himself seated in the anechoic chamber. Troubled by this question, he remembered the disappearance of Tenetor II and the incoherent data recovered from the crystal when it was activated: a monotonous holograph in which the explorer appeared, singing a long, plaintive song. That was all.

But he also remembered the voice of his teacher. He remembered the poetry that in times past had flowed from his instructor like a sea breeze. He heard the music of strings and the sound of synthesizers. He saw phosphorescent canvases and paintings growing on the flexible

manganese walls. Once again his skin brushed against the sensitive sculptures. From his teacher he had received an understanding of that art which touches the deepest reaches of being, as deep as Jalina's black eyes, as deep as that mysterious tunnel. He took a deep breath and started toward the exit to the cave.

It was a beautiful afternoon, resplendent with color. The low sun outlined the mountains in red, and the two rivers in the distance followed their serpentine paths of silver and gold. Then Tenetor III was witnessing the scene that the holograph had partially shown.

There sat his predecessor, singing toward Mesopotamia:

*Oh, Father, call up the sacred letters from the depths.
Bring near that fount in which I could always see
The spreading branches of the future!*

As the song multiplied in distant echoes, there appeared in the sky a tiny point, approaching rapidly. Tenetor adjusted his zoom to the appropriate distance, and could clearly see the wings and head of an eagle, the body and tail of a lion, the flight of a majestic ship—living metal, poetry and myth in motion, reflecting the rays of the setting sun. The song continued as the winged figure displayed its profile, extending its powerful lion's paws. Then there was silence, and the celestial griffin opened its enormous ivory beak, answering with a shriek that echoed throughout the valley, awakening the power of the serpent beneath the earth. Large boulders broke loose, raising clouds of dust and sand with their fall. But everything was suddenly calm as the animal gently descended. Before long a rider leaped down before the man, who was thankful for the long-awaited presence of his father.

From a saddlebag on the griffin, the rider brought out a huge tome, as old as the world. Later, seated on the multi-colored rocks, father and son breathed in the air of the late afternoon. Having passed a long time in contemplation, they were thus prepared, and opened the ancient volume. On each page the cosmos was made visible. In a single letter they saw the movement of spiral galaxies, of open and globular clusters. In the dance of characters on the ancient parchment they could read the motions of the cosmos.

In time, the two men (if indeed they were men) rose to their feet. The elder, with flowing, rumpled, wind-blown clothing, smiled as no one else in this world could ever have smiled. In his heart, Tenetor III heard the following words: *"A new species will open to the Universe. Our visit has come to an end!"* That was all.

Nothing more.

Tenetor watched as the serpentine gold and silver rivers that lay before his eyes were transformed into the arteries and veins running through his body. His lungs appeared on the small display in his visor, bearing witness to his heavy breathing. From this he began to understand the source of the griffin's beating wings, and he knew that in some region of his memory he could find the mythic images he had seen take shape with such striking reality.

As he decided to return to the cave, he observed the stream of alphanumeric information scrolling down the edge of his visor. Immediately, the small display showed the infinitesimal movements his images were inducing in his legs, and with this he entered the cavern. "I know what I'm doing," he thought. "I know what I'm doing!" But these words, which he spoke to himself, resounded outside of him, reaching his ears from the outside. As he looked at the rock wall, he heard words referring to it. He was breaking through the barrier of naming, in which all the senses mix. Perhaps for this reason he remembered the poem his teacher used to recite:

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*“A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu:
voyelles Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes.”¹*

Then he saw a rock whose edges opened, blossoming like colored flowers. And in that kaleidoscope of hues he realized that he was breaking through the barrier of vision. He moved beyond each of his senses, as when profound art touches the very limits of the space of existence.

Pulling off his helmet, he found himself in the anechoic chamber, but he was not alone. For some reason, the entire subcommittee was present. As Jalina kissed him softly he could sense the group's impatience.

“I'm not saying a word!” were Tenetor's shocking first words. But then he added that he would document everything in a report that should not be shown to the other members of the group until everyone had had their turn. Thus it was decided that all the members should make their own journeys into pure virtual space. In the end, this would allow them to process data that would be free of any influence from the others. Only then would it be appropriate to begin the discussion, because if it turned out that everyone in fact recognized the same landscape in pure virtual space, this would mean that the Project could be realized.

But even then how could it possibly extend its reach throughout the world? Perhaps the answer was the same as for any new technology. Besides, there were distribution channels that already existed thanks to this network of exceptional people who were so much more than the empty husks that much of humanity had been reduced to. He knew now that he did indeed exist, that all the others existed, and that this was the most important point on a long list of priorities.

No Support for Planetary Colonies!

“Good morning, Mrs. Walker.”

“Good morning, Mr. Ho.”

“I imagine you've seen this morning's report. And if you have, then I suppose you noticed in checking the bulletins that there has been a decision to intervene in the question of planetary colonies.”

“That's right, Mr. Ho. You're absolutely right. No one on Earth is going to support an effort of that kind until there's an end to the monstrous situation where even a single human being lives below the standard of living that the rest of us enjoy.

“I'm glad to hear that, Mrs. Walker. Very glad indeed! But tell me, exactly when did everything begin to change? When did we first realize that we exist and, therefore, that the others exist as well? Right now, I know that I exist. It sounds pretty silly, doesn't it, Mrs. Walker?”

“It's not silly at all. I exist because you exist, and vice versa. That's the reality, and it's everything else that's silly. I think the guys from the—what's it called?—‘The Deficient Intelligence’ or something like that?”

“The Committee for the Defense of the Weak Nervous System. No one remembers them. Which is why I've dedicated a poem to them.”

¹ The opening lines of the poem by Rimbaud: “A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue; / Someday I'll tell your latent birth O vowels.”

“Good. Very good. Well, they certainly managed to straighten things out. I don’t really know how they did it, but they did. If it wasn’t for them, we’d all have become ants or bees or *trifinus melancolicus*! There’s no way we could have known what was about to happen. At least not for a long time. And we might not have experienced what we’re experiencing right now. I’m only sorry that Clotilde and Damian and so many others didn’t make it to see the changes. They were really desperate, and the worst part was that they didn’t know why. But let’s look to the future.”

“That’s it—you’re right, of course. The entire social organization, if you can call it that, is collapsing. It’s come undone in such a short time. Amazing! But this crisis is definitely worth it. Some are afraid because they think they’re going to lose something. But what have they got to lose? We’ve already started to give shape to a new society. And as soon as we get our house in order, we’ll make another leap forward. That’s when we’ll see planetary colonies, galaxies, and immortality. I’m not worried about us falling into some new kind of idiocy in the future, because by then we’ll have grown. It seems that it’s in the most difficult moments that our species is able to get it together.”

“They started with those virtual reality programs. They designed them so that everyone wanted to play, and soon people were realizing that they weren’t cardboard cutouts themselves. They discovered that they existed. The kids were the ones who got things going, but it would have happened in any event, though maybe not as fast. People took things into their own hands. Did they ever! The end of history was spectacular—eighty-five percent of the people in the world either saw or dreamed the winged lion and heard the words of the visitors when they returned to their world. I saw it. What about you?”

“I dreamed it.”

“It’s the same. I know this is the first time we’ve talked, but could I ask you a big favor?”

“Of course, Mrs. Walker. We’re living in a new world, and it can still be hard for us to find ways to communicate openly with each other.”

“Would you read me your poems? I imagine they’re inefficient, arbitrary, and above all, comforting.”

“That’s right, Mrs. Walker. They’re inefficient and comforting. I’d be glad to read them to you any time. Have a marvelous day.”