

Gaia is my Goddess

Gaia is life

Gaia is my Earth

—Joan Smith

Space One

Einstein discovered, that, if you fly nearly up to the speed of light; then a spaceship becomes a time machine. I've got five and a half years to fly, alone. I'll be in my spaceship for five and a half years, but I'll return to Earth two hundred years from now—more or less. That's relativity.

Inside my spaceship, the quarters are tight. The bins are bulging with ship supplies. From the sleeping deck, I climb up the ladder to the pilot deck. It's time to see how this thing flies.

Navigational instruments display my flight path and other objects flying around the Earth. A little blue earth floats above the binnacle. Tiny holographic spaceships fly around that globe.

I walk around the navigation

hologram.

I walk around the world

—ships sail in and out of orbit.

A ship flies through my

outstretched

hand. I watch my Lockheed-Vern Speedster sail slowly through the stratosphere. Traffic is fairly light.

Stepping away from the navigation hologram, I turn to the only window. Outside, I look to Earth—Mother Earth. I look toward home—as Western North America rotates away from tan to green to clouds over the blue Pacific. A stylish Mitsu Spacemaster flies a few hundred meters below. Its coppery gold thruster nozzles reflect old Sol's rays. Under sunlight, Pacific clouds are bright. High clouds leave long shadows on the blue ocean. I leave my window and step back to the nav hologram.

I call my Speedster, “Vern, prepare to launch out of orbit.”

“Ready to launch,” Vern replies.

“Radio on—tower,” I say. “Central Control, this is X-27-AX quantum class, do you read me?”

“X-27-AX, Joan Smith, we hear you.”

“Central Control, requesting clearance for interstellar launch.”

“X-27-AX, we’re feeding your pilot. Joan, you may proceed when ready. Central Control wishes you a pleasant journey and a better future. See you in two hundred years.”

“Thank you, Central Control. Radio off. Goodbye,” I whisper.

I take my seat. As my hands fasten webbing, I say, “Vern; direct to launch, three gees.”

“Direct to launch, three gees,” Vern replies.

I sink back into the cushions as the thrusters fire and launch me out of orbit. Before me, I watch my holographic Speedster leave the holographic planet. In the rear view mirror, I see, Earth recedes as the short hand moves on the clock.

I can’t think ahead. Ahead lies too much. My mind wanders back in time. I remember when I was a very little girl. I think of Mom.

Bye, Mom.

Mom

Mommy talked to herself all through the days. She talked to the people who were not there. When she paused, Mom listened to voices I could not hear. Sometimes I didn't know what she was talking about. Sometimes she scared me and made me cry.

That morning we were happy. It was my sixth birthday. Daddy sent me a pretty new dress and a Barbie Ferrari. Mommy was taking me to get my ears pierced and to buy me diamond earrings; if she'd ever find our Buick's keys. I found the keys by the cookie jar and we left.

Mommy put on her red lipstick. In the rearview mirror, she checked her lips. She tossed her hair with finger tips. Mommy was beautiful.

She ran a stop sign on the way to Strawberry Mall.

"Mom, it said stop."

"There were no other cars at the intersection," she said.

Later, I ducked as my school bus drove by.

"That's good," Mom said, "don't signal anybody here. The spies are everywhere."

I thought I saw that tattler Jerome. I hoped he didn't see me.

We pulled up to the curb in front of a small purple gingerbread house. Across the street, the huge Strawberry parking lot was nearly empty.

"Mom, how come we have to walk so far?"

She told me, "If we have to escape, they won't think we're driving. They'll think we're walking home."

"Why?" I pouted.

"Because we will walk past all the other people's cars."

"How come those people aren't escaping?" I pointed to those few cars, parked so far away.

"We don't talk about people like that," she spoke earnestly. Her eyes were serious. Then she looked all around. First she was alert and tense, then she relaxed with smiles and hugs for me.

"Are you ready, Joanie?" she asked.

I was ready, I was ecstatic. None of my friends wore earrings, I would wear diamonds.

The parking lot was getting hot under the rising summer sun. But once inside the mall, the air was cool.

A lady pierced my ears. It hardly hurt at all. She put gold studs through my lobes. Her skin was lovely dark shades of brown. In each ear she wore six gold and turquoise earrings. The lady told me that she had her ears pierced when she was a baby. She used to live in a small town in Africa.

“Africa is far away,” she said.

Mom looked on pensively, biting her lip. She stood with her feet wide apart and hiked up her navy skirt. When we were ready to pick out my earrings, Mom looked funny.

There was a big plastic diamond slowly turning above a jewelry case. In the case I saw butterflies, and flowers, and tiny birds. The lady showed me their diamond eyes.

I pointed to the birds, “I want those on my ears.”

Serious, Mom asked the lady, “Where are the gold earwigs that you used to pierce Joanie’s ears?”

The lady looked at Mom, then she looked aside. She straightened the display and toyed with her bracelet. Finally she said, “Only the earrings in this case are included in our special price.”

Mom looked back and forth between me and the lady. “We only want the gold studs in her ears,” Mom said.

Mom kept writing checks and handing them to the lady. Then the lady would hand Mom her checks back. Mom crumpled the checks into balls and threw them on the floor. The lady finally dropped one into the cash register. Mom took my hand and we left in a hurry. We left without the pretty birds. I was sobbing wet.

“They tried to take you away from me,” Mom said as we ran away.

I fell three times in the parking lot. I scraped my knees.

“Mommy, you’re going too fast!”

She picked me up and carried me across the street. She opened my door and buckled me into my seat. Then Mom drove us back into our neighborhood. She was jabbering mad: crazy, crazy, crazy. And suspicious of strangers walking past on that sunny morning as we barreled along in our Buick Skylark. I tightened my seat belt.

“That man’s not rubbing his nose and those birds that chatter like that, they talk with the man about me. Then they signal the spy in the hat,” Mom said.

She drove frighteningly swervingly wide around the corner, passing an oncoming pickup on the wrong side. The woman in the passenger seat looked down at me—eyes wide, mouth open. We hurled up and over the curb, then we careened down the sidewalk, sideswiping parked cars. I ducked a Mazda’s side mirror that came through my open window and broke off on the pillar behind me. It fell into our back seat. A plastic garbage can bounced up and over the Skylark’s fender. An empty box of Corn Flakes and a nudie girl fold-out got stuck on the windshield. Clickity clackity we clipped a picket fence. The bumper squarely smacked somebody’s cat. Mom spun the wheel and skidded out of a driveway between two parked cars, then she drove really really slow. Our Skylark wobbled swimmingly down the street. Thopp, thopp, thopp, thopp . . . both front tires were flat. Some old fat man was running behind our car.

Mom rambled, “They beam mind rays into my skull. They beam in pictures of open carnal life.”

I thought of spacemen beaming light rays on clowns and bareback riders. Mom was lost in her own jibble jabbering. She rolled through a stop sign, then came to a stop at the end of the block. The light was green.

“We’re here!” I exclaimed.

Mom looked at me surprised, then she turned off the engine.

“I don’t know why they’re going to take you away,” she said to me. “Maybe it’s because you look so scared. The black lady hid the gold earwig earrings that pierced your ears. She put plain gold studs in their place. But I don’t know why they’re going to take you away from me.”

Mom took her skirt by the hem and pulled it up to her chin. Her panties were blood soaked and blood was smeared on her thighs. She muttered, “Oh damn,” then opened her purse.

The old fat man stopped at her car door. He pushed Mom back in her seat, leaned through her open window, and pulled out the car keys. Gasping and wheezing, he looked right at me until Mom began to scream and hit him. The man ducked out and stumble-trotted across the street where he leaned against a yellow Beetle.

Hysterical Mom got out of the car.

Mom took off her skirt. She threw her panties in the old man’s face. Her bottom was naked.

Gawkers gathered on the sidewalk.

Black and whites with blue and red lights stopped in the street.

Momma’s rising anguished pleas; her arms flapped aimlessly about her sides. A cop took Mom by the wrists and cuffed her arms behind.

At the top of my voice I wailed, “Help Mommy, she’s bleeding!”

As they took Mommy away, she convulsively sobbed, “Don’t hurt my baby, she didn’t do it. Joanie, they’ve got me, I love you, goodbye.”

“Mommy,” I cried and I cried.

That was the last time I saw my mother.
She hung herself in the state hospital.

space too

This journey will cover a lot of miles. At the apex of my looping trajectory, I will pass among the stars of Alpha Centauri. It'll be a quick fly-by at nearly top speed. The speed limit is light speed.

“Vern, pull up starboard view—full scale. Indicate known spacecraft.”

I draw a stray ship into close-up. A Packer 37 Lino flies before my eyes. It's an elegant ivory Lino with Phillips ram rockets and Nassas fusion drive. I drop the Lino back into its spec in the full nav display.

Grandpa gets me.

On the floor, I sat wrapped in a fluffy quilt. White pumps, white stockings, and a white dress—a woman sat talking at her desk. The phone disappeared into her cloud of white hair. Her gentle voice drifted over me, “. . . mother has died . . . father’s out of the country . . . Lyle Smith . . . looking for her grandfather, Jose Esteban . . . E-s-t-e-b-a-n. . . .”

I waited all night and all day and all night and all day. Finally, Grandpa walked into the shelter. His great big self, his big round face. I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my nose into his smelly shirt.

Grandpa picked up my bag and we left. Parked at the curb was the really old GMC dump truck. Grandpa opened the looming door and lifted me up. Everything inside was metal, except for the seat. It was torn with the springs poking out. Grandpa climbed in and I scooted over beside him. We sat on lumpy and itchy old blankets.

“Where is Jeepster?”

Grandpa smiled wearily. “It’s fine, at the mine. I’m sorry it took so long to get here. I was in Arizona buying mine car rail,” his voice cracked. “I came straight away, as soon as I heard.” We squeeze up tight. Tears rolled down Grandpa’s face and mine.

Grandpa turned the key, a chatter, a rumble, and whining gear sounds—we drove away. There was a tool box and some bottles and a chain on the floor. The Jimmy had a dusty, greasy, gasoline, and body odor.

We sat at a red light.

Grandpa said, “You know your daddy wanted to come right away, but he can’t come right now.”

“I know, Daddy’s in Israel.”

“We can phone your dad from the apartment.” Grandpa checked his watch. “Damn,” he thumped his palm on the steering wheel of the truck. “Lyle’s already left for work. We’ll phone Dad tomorrow.”

The light turned green.

We ate at McDonald’s.

Then we went to Momma’s house.

I held my bag tight when we stepped across the threshold. We sat on the big soft flower couch. I cried in Grandpa’s arms, he held me tight. That night I slept in my room, in my bed. Grandpa slept in his sleeping bag on the floor by my side.

It was pitch dark.

“Grandpa, wake up. Grandpa, wake up.”

“Huh, what?” Gravel and phlegm, he woke up.

“I’ve got to pee.”

“Yeah?”

“Really bad.”

“Okay.”

“Come on.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m scared.”

“Oh.”

“Hurry, I got to go bad.”

Slowly, Grandpa crawled from his bag and stood up. He turned on the light and plodded down the hall. I held onto his pajamas. We checked the bathroom. I squeezed my legs together.

“Grandpa, you stand here.” I led him to just outside, in the hall. “Now turn around,” away from the door. I left the door open just enough to see Grandpa’s back. Then I peed on the floor. I couldn’t hold it any more.

In the morning, I put on my pretty new dress. We ate peanut butter sandwiches, dry and gummy sandwiches. We packed up my clothes and my toys and all my stuff. Grandpa packed a box of Momma’s stuff and photo albums, some papers, and not much. Except for the great big huge flower couch. Grandpa got it outside all by himself. He pulled some rails from the dump and pushing, grunting, shoved the flower couch way up onto the top of the load. Grandpa put my boxes on the flower couch and the rails. He loaded my dresser, he left my bed. I wanted my bed.

Grandpa phoned Dad.

“Hi, Dad.” We didn’t talk long.

Under the hood of the truck, Grandpa added oil and water and stuff. He checked the tires. Grandpa locked up. He left the key on the molding over the door. We rumbled away forever.

Grandpa parked downtown. He touched my thigh, then he gently held my shoulder. We were at the funeral parlor.

Grandpa got out, walked around, opened my door and helped me down.

Mommy was dead. We cried our goodbyes. Then we left.

At the gas station, Grandpa added air to the tires. He bought me a Pepsi and candy. In the late hot morning, we rolled up and slowly chug-chugged around the ramp and onto the freeway. We didn't say much. We left for the mine.

Sol burned through the windows. Heat radiated up through the metal cab. Hot wind buffeted and roared around me. My own beating hair whipped me and stung. The grassy California hills were baked golden by the sun.

Grandpa made me drink a lot of warm water. I felt sick.

Grandpa stopped a lot. Every stop the hood popped that hot greasy smell.

The highway was black with new pavement and shiny oil. It smelled bad. On the twisty part, I threw up beside the road.

Grandpa stood beside me and patted my back. "Dear, dear," he said.

The road sign said, the town ahead was Cascade. Our truck slowly rumbled through the little town. We passed folks talking and standing around. We passed a shabby old gas station, a stripy poled barbershop, and the Cascade Saloon.

Grandpa turned off the asphalt and headed up a broad winding gravel road. Out in the valley beside the road, there were massive rows of river rocks—neat and orderly rocks.

"Grandpa, why are the rocks all piled like that?"

"Those streams were dredged for placers. Placer miners piled those rocks like that."

"Oh." Placer? "Hmm," is that platinum?

Gravelly crunch and rumbly bump, we lumbered up through the narrowing valley. It seemed like miles before the ugly piled rocks yielded to the forest. Slowly the big old truck crept up the rutted road. A little creek wound beside my open window. Tires raised dust in the big side mirror. The bottom was thick with berry bushes and millions of ladybugs. Some ladybugs drifted in on me. They were the fattest and brightest red ladybugs.

“Grandpa, look at all these ladybugs.”

Grandpa smiled.

Trees shaded the bumpy trail. A pine bough brushed up over the cab. The air was cooler. It smelled of antifreeze.

Grandpa stopped where the trees hung low and the road dipped to the stream. He left Jimmy idling. The radiator steamed. Stream water gurgle called us. Grandpa knelt and dipped his bucket in. I took off my shoes. The water was nice and cool. My feet on slippery rocks sent tadpoles scurrying away. I sat on a mossy bank covered with fine road dust. My big toe made circles like the water bug. Ladybugs were thick about the laden bush.

Grandpa stooped beside me to refill the bucket.

“Grandpa, what kind of berries are those?”

“Blackberries.”

“Can I eat some?”

“Sure.”

He walked back to the truck.

The berries were plump and ripe with juice that was sweet and delicious.

Jimmy’s engine rumble stopped. There was a buzz in the air. Little tan and red birds sang delightful halting ditties. Grandpa sat down on the bank beside me. He cut two slices of hard salami with his pocketknife and offered them to me. I took one. It was salty, it was greasy, it was chewy good. Above the trees, the sky was endless blue.

“Well now, Joanie,” he gave me a squeeze, “honey, it’s me and you. We’re all that’s left of your momma’s family.”

“And Daddy.”

“Yes, Daddy too.”

Snot dripped from my nose. It dribbled to the water.

The shadows had deepened.

Grandpa's great big hand twisted Jimmy's key and we banged on. The road was long.

Through the velvet twilight, we drove across the scary slide area. The steep and barren slide loomed above and below us. Below us was a far far fall. Slide heaps of dirt and rocks narrowed the path. Jimmy crawled around the heaps—skirting the cliff below, way below. Rocks clattered under the tires—some tumbled over the edge! I didn't say a word.

When the worst was behind us, I asked, "How come it slides here?"

"The landslides?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Joanie, it was clear cut in the nineteen fifties and it never recovered."

"Oh. What's clear cut?"

"All the trees were cut down—and they didn't grow back."

Later I learned that placer was gold, gold washed from the earth and captured by miners.

Queen Gaia

Outside the window, Earth is far away. There isn't much to see, a little earthshine.

“Vern, pull up the whole earth onto the central nav.

”Virtual Gaia, now, graces the cabin. She wears her lovely veil of atmosphere.

Under a hazy maze of clouds, there lies a bit of West Africa and bits of the ocean. Clouds cover most of the land and sea below. It's a wet hemisphere dawning.

The cool moonlit clouds of night thin beyond the mid-Atlantic. The sky is clear over Eastern Brazil. White light glitters along the coastline.

My mind wanders.

Dad

Dad came to see me at Grandpa's mine. He stayed three days, then he went back to Israel.

au

Looking out the rear window, I can see what an astronomical unit really is.
One a.u.—the distance from the Earth to the sun. I can but barely see Earth.

Blue Jays

The men all walked down the road to work in the mine. Aunt Angie dried the breakfast dishes and put them away. I drew a rocketship on paper cut from a grocery sack. Grandpa let me use some of his oil pastels. The colors were smooth and thick. My bright orange rocket flew through a dark purple sky with yellow stars. I colored yellow stars until the yellow Cray-pa just made purple.

“Look, Aunt Angie.”

“Oh, Joanie, you’re an artist just like your grandpa and you make rockets like your dad.”

Aunt Angie tacked my rocket to the tall lodge pole in the center of the cabin. Then she stepped outside.

Aunt Angie brought in two plastic buckets from the woodshed.

“Joanie,” she said, “we’re gonna pick blackberries.”

We walked down toward the mine. The ruts were deep. With wings as wide as a door, the bluest pointy headed blue jays flew from tree to tree across the steep and winding road.

We stopped at a mine with a big padlocked door.

“That’s the powder magazine.”

“Powder magazine?” I asked about the mine that sounds like Vogue.

“That’s where they keep the dynamite. Don’t ever go in there.”

“Okay.”

Across from the mine were piled peeled logs and rusting junk.

“Come on Joanie, we’ve gotta keep moving.”

Here, the narrow road cut deep into the cliff side. An engine ran ahead. If a truck came up around the corner, there was no place to go.

“Is somebody driving up?” I asked.

Aunt Angie said, “No, I don’t think so.”

Around the corner, the mountain was not so steep and the road ran past a tin shed. There was no truck. An old orange trailer rumbled like a truck. Then there was a loud rattle tatt tatt, much louder than the trailer’s smoke stack. The deafening rattle came from a hole dug into the side of the mountain. The sound

hurt. Aunt Angie pantomimed, put your fingers in your ears. Inside the hole, Grandpa and the other guy grappled with the iron noise maker. They were dirty and wet. Aunt Angie led me away.

“That’s the mine?” I asked.

“What?”

“Is that the mine?”

“Yes, that’s the mine.”

We walked on down the twisting rutted road. Forest tangle darkened denser. Mine sounds faded to the gurgle and shushing of a creek. Here, the slope was gentle. Berry thickets choked the bottom of the gulch. Aunt Angie stepped over the berm and lifted me down to the bushes.

“Here’s your bucket. There’s the berries. Mind the stickers. Watch for snakes.”

The softest, blackest berries were the sweetest. Berries with red spots were sour. The juice made our fingers purple. We drank stream water. It was good. We picked a long time. Sometimes I sat on the berm and watched Aunt Angie pick.

We heard a hiss from above.

“That’s the compressor,” said Aunt Angie. “They’re done drilling.”

Aunt Angie took my bucket and we walked up and up. It was a long walk. Sometimes we stopped to rest.

Just ahead, the mine was quiet. Grandpa and the man walked out of the hole. They walked down to us. Grandpa smiled and winked at me.

“The fuses are lit,” he said and hugged me beside him. “Watch the tunnel.”

Rapid were the booms: boom, boom, boom. The ground rumbled through me. Rocks the size of watermelons shot out of the tunnel like cannonballs.

“Wow,” I said, “wow.”

Space out

I watch a lot of movies. Right now I'm watching Roy Rogers and the singing cowboys. Yippie-i-o, yippie-i-a, yippie yeah right.

It's only been five months. I'm going crazy. How am I going to live through the next five years?

I look out my window and what do I see—
nothing ever changes in the infinity.
Infinite stars in infinite space—
infinitely boring, turns my mine to waste.

I'm crazy, I'm crazy, I'm crazy, in space.

I moved to Reno, Nevada

In October, Dad and I moved to a new house in Reno. I started a new school.

space is boring

space is boring

yellow pencil, white paper

When the classroom was boring, I would draw.

art in space

Digital art and writing are my only really engrossing activities. Virtual bronze patina is my latest obsession.

Friday

I walked home alone after school. The shoving wind gusted and cut through my dress and through my tights. The cords of my hood were pulled snugly. Sparse freezing rain sporadically drummed on my nylon coat. The shoving wind blew trash and tumble weeds down the road. The houses were all big and all new. The trees were little and few. Snot and ice stuck on my fuzzy mittens.

Walking past a new dirt yard, a whirlwind twisted up from behind. It knocked me down. It blew dirt in my eyes. Standing up, I dusted off. I walked on for long blocks and blocks.

The hills were bleak and barren all around; no trees, just brown. Dense gray clouds blotted out all the blue sky. I walked down the sidewalk curb cut and crossed another river street. Beyond the crest of Mississippi Row, Reno spread out, filling the valley below. I slipped and caught myself. I did not fall.

Our house was gray and blue. The lawn was quilted fresh sod. Green grass was dusted with snow. I took out my key and opened the door. Nobody was ever there when I got home from school. I turned on the lights. I turned up the heat. I heated chocolate milk in the microwave. My fingers tingled on the warm cup. Star Trek was on TV. Counselor Troi sensed some sadness; did she sense me?

At five to five, Dad walked though the door.

“Joan, are you ready? Did you use the bathroom?”

“Yes.” I grabbed my bag from my bedroom.

We left in the Wagoneer. We left the desert on highway 80: west over the towering snowy Sierras, Burger King in Roseville—through sprawling Sacramento, across the wide wide Central Valley, and north and north into the coastal forests, and the long muddy road to Grandpa’s mine. We pulled into the yard way past midnight.

ICARUS

I knew I'd be losing my earth visual soon.

Looking at the central nav, I can see earth's orbit disappearing behind the sun.

Gaia burns into Sol as she fades from view.

The nav display is empty.

I could fill the display with Saturn, Alpha Centauri, or Degas' bronze ballerina.

But empty is how I feel and empty is the space before the forward bulkhead.

The bulkhead is gray, the carpet is gray, and the ceiling is white:

gray, gray, white.

peeling pine

We peeled timbers in the warming morning of a flowering spring day. Aunt Angie peeled beside me with a short handled adz. I peeled with a great big chisel. The sap was up and the bark split clean down the long timber. It was slippery between the wood and the bark. The inner bark tasted sugary. The air was sweet with pine. I was already on my second log. Aunt Angie was on her fourth or fifth.

We handled and peeled a big stack of logs. We peeled into the afternoon.

The men showed up.

We ate an ice chest picnic, sandwiches and stuff. I sat on a stump in the clearing. It was toasty warm in the sun. Shasta strawberry soda was cold and delicious. Dirt stuck to the mayonnaise on my thumb.

After lunch, Grandpa and Sam tossed peeled timbers down the dusty log skid to the road below. On the road, Dad bundled up logs in a chain. Chained to the old chartreuse tote-goat, Briggs and Stratton laboring, he dragged those logs away to the mine—down the road and around outta sight.

My hands hurt and had cuts. Aunt Angie and I peeled until we began to lose daylight. I was cold and tired. We walked back along the shadowed trail. There was no sound but the crunch of our steps. Then an owl hooted in the distance, the brush nearby rustled and a twig snapped. I heard my heart beat.

“Here take my hand,” Aunt Angie smiled. I held her hand, she was not afraid. “We’ve got to get you warmed up.” I was shivering.

The trail again narrowed and she let go. There was the cabin below. The windows glowed lamplight, the little chimney smoked.

Inside the cabin, Grandpa was reading at the table—he had a ruby glass and a jug of Gallo Burgundy. I put my coat on. Aunt Angie put the stew on. Static and squawk, the CB was on. Grandpa looked over his glasses, he reached up and turned down the squelch. Over by the stove, it was getting warm. I plopped into the big soft flower couch. Aunt Angie made me some hot cocoa.

It took forever for dinner.
We waited for Sam and Dad.
Sam rode up on the goat. He said, "Lyle's walking up now."
"Joanie worked hard today," Sam winked to me.
"She sure did," said Aunt Angie.
When Dad walked in, Aunt Angie said, "Soup's on."
Then I didn't eat much. The outhouse trip was a blur. Then I was in my
sleeping bag. Good night.

PHOENIX

Gaia rises from the ashes like the Phoenix.

“Happy New Year,” sort of. I welcome earth from behind the sun.

There's not much to do in interstellar space.

playground news

“Reno is so close to Hell, you can see Sparks.”

On cloudy nights, the sky over Reno glowed red with casino lights.

Star dust

What are we? Star dust, wonder. . . .

I am awake twenty to thirty hours at a stretch. Then I sleep for about twelve hours. These are my days. Time is luxuriant in space.

I haven't menstruated since leaving Earth's orbit.

Earth is too distant to image on the nav. No sun, no earth, no moon. Sol is a star that is far away.

Empty space is everywhere.

burb girls

The sky was the deepest brightest blue. Birds sang, old Sol felt warm and good.

Alaina Stranberg lived on my street. Broad green lawns and perfect concrete sidewalks bordered the black tarmac. We peddled past a shiny Cadillac that reflected our zoomcycles as we rolled past.

Alaina said, “Yesterday, Mother bought a new robomaid.”

“I wish we had a new robo. Our robo goes too slow.”

“We always have to get new things.”

“Grandpa says, old things are better.”

“Well, he is old.” Alaina made a face. “Old things are yucky — except people.” She added, “They can be yucky too. Great Nanna has a funky smell.” She pinched her nose.

It was garbage day. All the green plastic trashcarts neatly lined the curbs.

We coasted down Amazon Way to McDonald’s golden arches.

I ordered a MooMack and fries. Alaina wouldn’t eat meat. She got a McJuicy on a strawberry bun. We sat outside at the picnic tables and watched the McDonald’s Show on the billboard. I opened up the HappyTarts so we could listen to the show. Alaina turned up the volume on the HappyTart carton.

Swish, woosh, sweep, shoosh — the cars past by.

A gentle breeze blew our napkins off the table. The napkins willy-nillied away like a litter of white kittens. Alaina went in and got more. She also bought her own HappyTarts.

Alaina was my dearest friend. We always rode our bikes together.

Alaina moved. Her mom got transferred to Sedona, Arizona. They drove off in their new Chevy Nomad.

It was a very sad day. Whenever I got some friends, they would move away.

eating

The only thing more boring than space is the food.

I pop my pills: vitamins, an antidepressant, and an appetite stimulant. Two appetite stimulants today.

Oh joy. Yumm yumm. What a surprise. Freeze dried food, again.

“Vern, let’s dine out tonight.”

window

We drove down the dirty side of town. Outside the window, torn coats and pill balled knit hats, usually a bundle or a bag. I saw plenty of leather faces, men and women, usually walking alone.

We stopped at the light.

A pale white man lay like a corpse till the cops came and roused him.

The light turned green.

On the sidewalk walked two dirty children, carrying bundles and bags.

We stopped at the light.

Their mom pushed a wobbling cart of aluminum cans and plastic bags and stuff. She had dark circles under her eyes. They all were glazed and grim.

The light turned green.

Dad drove out of Reno to Sparks' little factory sprawl. We picked up some batteries. 'Azcat aerospace gold-hydrogen banks,' that's what Dad called them. The pickup hunkered down under the weight.

BOX

There is a body and a box
just a body with no mind
There's a brain inside the box
but its thoughts are trapped inside

Although the lid is only paper
it might as well be lead
because a brain's without a body
and a body's without a head

The mind is lost and wandering
in the space inside the box
and the body's at a distance
and in time they both are caught

There is a body with a box
staid and useless with no mind
And the body's only purpose
is to drag the box behind

Jillianne's Corona

It was a long and boring Friday at school. When the bell rang, I was outta there. Across the street was Jillianne's new Corona. Jillianne worked for Dad. She drove me out of the city and over to Lockheed's engine lab. I sat in Dad's office for twenty minutes, then Dad and I left for the mine.

If the weather was good, it took seven hours to reach Grandpa's mine. Seven hours over and seven hours back. Dad and I didn't talk much on our long weekend drives.

Sometimes Dad would talk about the hull materials lab or about quantum engine design. I knew Dad was designing spaceships that could go really fast. But I really couldn't follow what he was saying—especially the quantum stuff.

Sometimes I would talk. Dad would say uh huh and yes but he really wasn't listening. Sometimes he'd growl, "Be quiet, I'm driving." Then I would seethe.

Mostly we didn't say anything. The trips back and forth to the mine were not our quality time.

marijuana

All the cabin lights are off. I look out the window. Clouds of stars are bright against the blackness of space. Old Sol lies about the center of those stars. There Sol rides Pegasus through the clouds.

This is my first major discovery in space. That's a good reason to celebrate. I reach over to the bunk drawers and pull out a stash of fine Thailand hash. In the same drawer, there lay a flat silver case of smoking paraphernalia. Under mirror polish and filigree, ritual instruments lay in their velvet padded places. Take one pipe, add a pinch of herbs, then char with flame.

I like the briar pipe.

OLD MINE

I was twelve in Grandpa's gold mine. Dad and Sam worked in the tunnel, pounding at the hard rock face with a jackhammer that stood on a steel leg. I had my fingers in my ears against the percussion roar of the drill's staccato beats. They were boring a top hole into the face.

The other four bores
disappeared through the rock
in a five card pattern that widened at the bottom.

They could've been little model train tunnels, but they weren't.

I stood in the shadows of the timbers and watched men work under bare electric lights. Water and mud were everywhere. Mud had splattered on their aluminum hard-hats, Sam's glasses, Dad's red T-shirt, his jeans, and Sam's green coveralls. From the knees down they were soaking wet; pooled muddy water sloshed over their boots.

Then the drilling stopped, and the roar was just a hiss of compressed air. I pulled my fingers from my ears. Dad pulled his hearing protectors down to around his neck. Sam dropped the jack leg, then they pulled the jack and the drill steel.

"Are you going to blast before lunch?" I asked nobody in particular.

"Are you going to blast before lunch?" I asked again.

"Yeah, I think so," Sam said, and they hoisted the drill to their shoulders. As they splashed past, I stepped between two timber sets—back against rough lagging planks and the cold hard rock. Those miners trudged straight off into blackness to the nearest tunnel Y. The lights behind me reflected in the black water between track ties. Walking back out of the darkness, they carried the iron muck sheet and dropped it to the floor at the face. Dad turned to coiling air hose while Sam gathered picks and drill steel.

Dad said to me, "Tell Jose we're done drilling."

I stepped out on the track ties toward the portal. I walked in even strides through the dark between lights. Straight track ran to a sharp left. In the abandoned drift to the right, the jackhammer lay under a dim electric light bulb. I walked past the air pressure reservoir tank—it looked like a yellow

submarine in a green sea of treated timbers. Here the timbers were three sets deep, the oldest were punky with wet rot. Six sets of paired A-frame timbers, Sam's teepee timbers, braced up the tunnel under diagonally fractured rock. It was over 500 feet from the portal to the face. In the next spur, to the left, was stored the core drill, mine car track, and lots of junk. I could now just barely hear the air compressor running outside. Following the track around an easy bend, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. I could also see the track ties and skipped out across the boards. Drill water ran high in the ditch between the track and the base of the timbers. Above my head and right shoulder, the clear plastic vent hose lay collapsed in wire hangers that ran along under the header timbers. Drill hoses hung along the other side of the tall and wide tunnel. Here, the ground between the tracks was nearly dry. The air was warmer.

I hung my hard-hat on a nail inside the portal lagging walls and walked out into the bright summer heat. The old Air Plus compressor was not quiet.

"They're done drilling," I shouted with the respect due the dynamite man.

Grandpa walked up to the compressor and turned it off. He then threw the valve that dumped the compressor tank. Four seconds the air blasted, louder than the jackhammer, then the compressor was quiet. The Briggs and Stratton powered generator pattered on by the mine shed. We could talk without hollering.

Grandpa walked back to the timber stack where he was preparing the dynamite. The fuses were cut to length and the caps were crimped in place.

"Grandpa, what if your cigarette blew up the dynamite?"

"Joanie, that reminds me of a miner my grandpa once knew. Those old timers worked in a pit out in Nevada. The powderman was a serious smoker. This was back when they used the old sawdust and nitroglycerin sticks. That sawdust was pretty unstable." While he talked, Grandpa dug through a dynamite stick with the reamer on his pocket knife. Then he fed the fuse through the holes and wrapped it up with electrical tape. He tapped off the ashes of his burning cigarette and said, "The old timer blew up, along with the powder wagon."

Dad and Sam walked out. “Kill the generator,” Dad said to me. So I killed it. And then it was quiet—just the humm in the air of the forest and the dirt crunch under steel toed boots.

The men talked about, I don’t know what.

When the dynamite was ready, we walked back into the tunnel. The yellow beams of our flashlights peered through the dark. Back at the face, a carbide lamp glowed. It hung from a nail driven into a timber. The electric cords and lights were coiled and tucked safely away in the dark. I held a flashlight for Grandpa as he fed the sticks into the jackhammer holes. Each hole got one fused stick and a couple or more without fuses. With a broomstick handle, he firmly packed sawdust and mud behind each charge.

They were loading the lifters when I asked, “Why are they called the lifters?”

Sam pointed to the upper holes and said, “Those charges blow up first and fracture the rock. Then the bottom lifters go off. They lift up the broken rocks and dump them out onto the muck sheet. Then the rocks are easier to muck into the ore car.”

Sam lit the fuses with the carbide lamp. Then he hooked the lamp to his old hard-hat. My heart beat faster, but I remained as casual as the miners when we walked out.

Rocks the size of watermelons no longer shot out of the tunnel like cannon balls. The air no longer clapped like thunder or smelled of powder. Now the blasts were muffled thumps, still felt as much as heard, from deep inside the mountain. The heavy lifters went off last.

As I began my walk up that steep hill, I heard somebody tug at the blower motor rope. It sputtered to life as I rounded the bend in the road.

Up at the cabin, Aunt Angie shuffled across the floor and handed me a box of Ding Dongs. Aunt Angie laid out quite a lunch spread. Every summer lunch she laid out the great sandwich buffet. There were three kinds of bread and three kinds of mustard. Peanut butter, jam, pickles, cookies, paper plates, knives and forks, and piles of lunch meat were heaped down the center of the table. I had kippers and tuna on rye with mayonnaise, and relish, and

lettuce and tomatoes. I had baked beans, and potato chips, and Del Monte hot peppers.

The men talked about mining and about the new rusty old Allis-Chalmers cat. Dad talked about rocket engines and rocket hull designs. He talked about rockets that would go so fast that they'd leap forward through time.

No one was in any hurry here. It would take time to blow the powder fumes out of the tunnel. Lunch was great.

After lunch, Dad and Sam walked back down the hill. Grandpa worked on Alice Chalmers—across the yard, beside the big tool shed. I watched him clamp new rock guards for her tracks. I left when he started up the noisy gas powered arc welder.

I scrambled up the tree swing trail over gnarled old roots and past the squawking blue jays. The July sun painted dappled patterns on the steep and tangled forest floor. Prehistoric dragonflies, striped woolly bees, and tiny no-see-ums flew through the air. I struggled through some brush to a sunny logged out patch where I sat on a stump and watched the ants. Some were black and some were red, and they all were rather large. It was hot and lazy. An ant crawled up my ankle, I brushed her off and moved. I chased a blue belly lizard, but it was too quick for me.

The ground was bare by the prospect trenches. Big gray steel Russian drums were scattered around heaps of raw earth. Unreadable words with backward looking letters were stenciled in white paint on the dirt filled drums. Some of that dirt was gold ore. I slid on my butt and my heels down a long log skid to the road below. Then I sat on the bank and dumped the rocks out of my shoes. A small engine growled at the mine around the bend.

The clear plastic ventilation hose stretched across the road and was full and round with air. It disappeared into the black tunnel. Yellow jackets buzzed around the water from the mine. Sam was working on the little chain saw. In the mine shed, Dad worked at the forge, building up a worn drill bit.

“Want me to do something?” I asked, knowing there was rarely much for me to do.

“Clean up those two lamps and fill them with carbide.”

“Oh, okay.”

I unscrewed the brass bowls and started digging out the caked old carbide.

Sam started up the generator and rolled the big orange mine car into the rocky maw.

“Bring in the lamps when you’re done,” Dad said, and he turned and followed Sam in.

There were some pins on the bench to clean the nozzles. With a screwdriver I popped the carbide tin and then filled the lamps with fresh carbide. Next, I screwed the lamps back together and filled the tops with water. Finally, I opened the drippers and lit the lamps with a pink BIC lighter.

Inside the mine was cool. Yellow lamplight reflected along the long steel rails. The tunnel was five feet deeper than this morning. The timbers had fresh rock cuts from the blast. Dad was muck shoveling rock into the two ton car. Sam stood on the muck pile—picking and squaring the jagged hole.

A big rock glanced off Sam’s hard-hat.

Sam moved back beside me under the lagging and said, “Look at the dent in my hat.”

“Are you all right?” Dad asked.

Sam rubbed his bald head and then he said, “I’m okay.” The dent was a beauty. Sam knocked out the dent with a single jack. He put on his hard-hat and went back to picking.

Back outside, I ducked under the vent hose; then followed a big blue and yellow butterfly down around the narrow rutted road. Iridescent velvet wings flew through the shade into the sunlight. A cicada buzzed and clicked on its skipping flight.

The mine droned its mechanical drone from above and across the bend. I looked to the Briggs and Stratton duet but couldn’t see the mine through the trees.

Sitting on the berm of the road, I took out the pink BIC lighter and smoked a little pot.

I scooted down the steep bank: sliding shoes, slowed by tree trunks and bush limbs to grab like ropes; down to where the sound of water trickled in a stream. I climbed around small stony cliffs to a little clearing where I took off all my clothes and peed. Naked I lay on a smooth flat topped boulder. It was warm and felt good. I sunbathed on that luxurious rock. I touched myself.

I wished I had some dynamite. I could've fit the caps and fuses, then thrown them down the hill and hid behind my rock.

“Dynamite Girl!” I jumped off the boulder.

At the bottom of the gulch there flowed a creek in a rocky yellowed bed. I waded and swished about in the ice cold water. A stick of dynamite would've made a nice pool.

The generator pattered somewhere from above. Through the trees I saw a hill of disemboweled mountain. Excitedly, I climbed up the base of the mine dump. Big stumbly rocks lay heaped upon each other. Bark and wood on trees were chopped by their sharp raw edges. Further up the bleak bright dump were buried and dead trees. Bare, I sweated on the hot bare slope.

Then there was the squeaky and rumbly roll of a loaded up mine car. I froze for an instant then lightly afoot I ran down the dump. ‘Dad can't see me naked!’

The rumbling stopped, Dad was chaining the car.

Stumble, umph, my shin. There was a tree just ahead.

The tilt bed groaned, the dumper door creaked open, and rock poured out down after me. I could see tumbling rocks in my periphery. I pressed my back against the tree, shielding myself. Big rocks rolled and crashed—jarring the trunk. I was drawn up tight. Rocks slid by and bounced. One hit my arm!

The tilt bed slammed down and as the car rumbled off, the rocks began to settle. Peering around my dearest dead tree, there was nobody up at the top of the dump.

“Shit, I'm bleeding.”

I scampered off the dump, back into the cover of the forest.

At sun boulder, I tore a long sleeve off my blouse. With my teeth and my good arm, I tied the bloody slice up. I thought it still might've been bleeding, but only just a bit. I didn't want to lose my arm in a tourniquet. The bandage seemed to be tied up about right. My shin hurt. It was scraped and red. The skin was smeared with blood. Gingerly, I dressed.

"Ouch." My right arm couldn't help much as I clambered up the steep bank. My left arm pulled the branches good enough most of the time. Then slip and fall and, "Ouch!"

It was an achy hike, a gimpy hike—past the tunnel; Dad and Sam must have been inside. Up the hill; walk, walk, walk. Above and ahead, through a gap in the trees, I saw the cabin roof.

Grandpa sat smoking on Alice's track. He looked so worried. Standing, he shut off the welder engine and followed me into the cabin.

"Sam got hit in the head with a big rock. It put a big dent in his hat but he says he's okay."

"A rock fell and hit you in the tunnel?" asked Grandpa.

"No. I fell down, off a cliff—a little one."

"Are you okay?" asked Aunt Angie.

"I got a little cut," I almost cried.

"Let's take a look," said Grandpa.

"Come on honey." Angie held me close to her side and led me to the sink.

Grandpa asked, "Is Sam okay?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Huh."

Together, they cleaned up my wounds and rebandaged the cut. Everyone agreed, it was quite a cut. Grandpa said it would heal without stitches.

Grandpa looked at my blood stained sleeve. He asked, "How come your sleeve's not cut?"

An engine roared up the canyon. Up came Tom's dad's Dodge. Steam and water sprayed out from behind a new dent in the grill. Tom rode shotgun. His sister Dawn was driving. They skidded to a stop in the yard and got out.

Dawn said, “A bear shit on the seat when he crashed into a tree.” She sounded frightened.

“No way,” I said.

“No!?”

“You mean a bear drove your truck?” I meant, really, what was she talking about.

“I left the keys in the ignition. There was an open box of Fig Newtons wedged between the steering column and the dashboard.”

Handsome Tom nodded right along and proudly said, “I put them there.”

One headlight was shattered and bent in. The hood was buckled, and there was a big, half round, tree-looking dent in the front. The windshield was cracked in a circular pattern on the driver’s side. Neither Dawn or Tom looked hurt. Dawn wasn’t amused, I tried to look serious.

Dawn said, “Tom was off picking blackberries. I was reading in a hammock hung between two trees in front of the truck. The trees were real close together, so the hammock was cinched up short.”

Something smelled like bear shit.

Grandpa pulled a tuft of course black hairs from the windshield and sniffed it.

He asked, “A bear crashed your truck?”

“Yes!” She said, “Down by the lake. When I saw the bear come, I climbed the tree. The bear climbed in and sat in the seat. It started digging around the cookies, and the truck started up. The truck lurched forward between the trees. It tore off the hammock and broke the mirrors off. The whole tree shook; I thought I was going to fall.” She was still shaking.

I could see the mirrors were broken off, and both sides of the truck were scraped up. Grandpa marveled, his gap tooth mouth hung open.

“He must have knocked it into drive,” Grandpa said.

“I don’t know! The engine roared and the truck shot off across the field. It went down a bank and bang it crashes into a tree. I couldn’t see the truck but I saw the tree shake. It was over where Tom was picking berries.”

Grinning, Tom said, “I couldn’t believe there was a bear driving the truck—right at me! When he hit that tree he was right in front of me. That bear cracked the windshield.”

Sure enough.

“I jumped up and climbed the nearest pine tree. That bear started climbing up after me. He climbed pretty good, that bear. I climbed to nearly the very top. I hung on for my life while the tree swayed and creaked. But the bear couldn’t reach me. After a long time, the bear shimmied down and went away. I got down and locked myself into the smelly truck. Then I drove back over to where Dawn’s hammock was.”

Aunt Angie led Dawn and Tom off to clean up.

Grandpa pried open and propped up the hood. It was really bent badly, so he put blocks between the hood and the windshield and then unbolted it from the hinges. He lifted that heavy old hood and dropped it into the pickup bed. Aunt Angie came out with a bucket and cleaned the seat. Grandpa took a stout steel bar and pried out the front of the truck. The fan had just nicked the core and a radiator hose had been pulled loose. Grandpa retightened the hose clamp and poured some glitter stuff into the radiator. I brought him the garden hose and we filled the radiator up. He started the engine. After a while, no water leaked out.

Dawn and Tom came out in somebody else’s sweats. Tom’s red hair was wet. Grandpa talked to Dawn, then he put a jerry can of water in the bed. Dawn and Tom O’Mally left.

After the bear in the truck, nobody bothered me about my cuts and bruises. Dad told me to be more careful.

Most of the time nothing much happened at the mine. Most of the time it was slow and peaceful.

ventillation fan

Tinkering on this ship isn't so different from fixing cars. Except on those cars, I never needed a hacksaw to reach the wires. I push a plug into a socket that clicks. That must be the one.

“Okay Vern, open the circuit on panel 26B.”

The fan whirrs. It's fixed. That was easy.

mine stuff

After dinner Grandpa liked to talk. Sometimes Grandpa talked about his long gone Alfa Romeo roadster. Sometimes he talked about logging blimps, acrobats, lightning strikes, or the standard poodle who only drank Budweiser.

He told the story of the great gold nugget, as large as an ostrich egg. The dredging barge dug it up and then lost it over the discharge belt. It splashed back into the dredging pond. They dredged and dredged but never did dredge it up again.

These were a few of the stories he told.

Grandpa often told the story of the bear who drove a truck—so did I. I was telling Grandpa, “. . . a bear turned the key and drove the truck. Yeah Joan, sure, so Frankie says.”

Grandpa says, “I know what you mean, I won’t tell the bear story anymore.” Yeah sure.

Grandpa loved art. He loved to visit museums and galleries.

“The Mary Cassatt in the Denver museum is worth the trip all by its self. All the brilliance of Cassatt in psychedelic color with unpainted canvas around the edges. It’s a kind of Mary Cassatt, Gilbert Stewart, Andy Warhol,” Grandpa would go on.

At night he retired to his art magazines.

When the nights turned cold, Grandpa laid an oak log on the fire before he slept. In the morning, the stove would still be hot.

Frogs chanted in the rain.

On the narrow trail, up a wooded hill, green and red pebbles glowed in the drizzle. Dancing rivulets, twisted in shimmering crystal braids, ran to the stream

twin paradox

“If we placed a living organism in a box . . . one could arrange that the organism, after an arbitrary lengthy flight, could be returned to its original spot in a scarcely altered condition while corresponding organisms which had remained in their original positions had long since given way to new generations. For the moving organism the lengthy time of the journey was a mere instant, provided the motion took place with approximately the speed of light.”

Albert Einstein, 1911

about time²

Grandpa and I.
We talked of Professor Rock's ether vision.
We talked of Bali's theory of quantum gravity.
We talked of Einstein and relativity.
We talked of the twin travel paradox.

It was warm that night.

Parts of the main cabin were salvaged from a Sacramento gas station. The cabin had naked timbers under the bare steel roof. From one pole hung a hissing Coleman gas lamp. The light was stark and glaring. We sat at the table by one huge gas station window. Its many window panes were propped up for the summer. A great collection of moths and other flying forest insects clung to and fluttered about the window screen. The air was as fresh as Grandpa's cigarettes. The smoke followed me.

Grandpa said, "If Earth and the sun sat in opposite corners of this cabin, then the nearest star would be two thousand miles away: Alpha Centauri, Chicago, Illinois."

Our star was the Texaco Star.

Grandpa talked of Einstein and of space-time.
I wanted to fly away with the future quest twin.

Stumbling across round river rocks, I splashed upstream through cold mountain water. Mossy boulders and ferns climbed the banks. A great fir tree lay fallen across the narrow gorge. I climbed the roots tangled ball like a ladder up and over to the other side. That tree was huge. Beyond the tree there was a sandy bar. On tiny beach, I lay back, lolling against a mossy rock incline. The sun warmed my legs. I rested my eyes. Phantom lights flashed behind my lids. I felt snoozy.

I did dream off into a cosmic place. There butterflies flew near light speed. Their wings were beating back time. A red butterfly shimmered up and away out of the forest and off into space. Her blue twin stayed home in the lush warm forest. He grew old and when winter came, he died alone. Next Spring, red rocket wings flew back to the gorge. She was as fresh as that morning when she had left.

I opened my eyes to see two deer and a skunk were looking at me. The deer stepped uneasily away. But not the skunk. He dipped to drink—occasionally laying eye on me. Skunk drank his fill, then ambled off. A lithe and lovely band of butterflies drank upon the quiet shore. Those orange and black monarchs elegantly opened and closed their wings. Mindful of animate sunlight and shadow, I scooted across the sand and lay prone to suck the tasty water.

Outside the tunnel, Grandpa chopped the header timber notches. Wood chips sprung from his hatchet.

I told Grandpa about my dream.

“It’s an omen,” Grandpa said.

Mother lode

Grandpa's gold mine struck it rich, a real mother lode of gold.
They spent every penny on Dad's rocketships.

space

nothing

What I know about love is not much.

I loved Mr. Hunk. He taught Literature and Art, no kidding, my second and third period class. We had oil paint and stretched our own canvas. He liked my paintings.

Mr. Hunk was so smart he could teach anything, I don't know what he was doing at my middle school. His name was Michael Hunk and he was a young looking teacher. His chiseled face was chiseled just right. He had long blond hair and a tight butt and everything.

I read 1984 for his class. I did a personal oral report while the rest of the class quietly painted or read. He asked if I liked Ms. Dakaw's history class—of course I did. Mr. Hunk admired my sense of time.

“It runs in the family,” I said.

Mr. Hunk explained abstract expressionism. The next day, he took us on a field trip to the Nevada Museum of Art. It was a show of Franz Kline, William de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock.

I stood and stared into the pulsing tangle of veins; blue and red and black and white and a footprint.

Also featured was Arnaldo Roche-Rabell.

Oh my heart beat for Michael Hunk. But soon I was in high school and Michael Hunk was breaking other girl's hearts.

At Reno High, I was afraid of boys, I don't know why. I was embarrassed of what? My dead mother's ghost. Those boys couldn't see how Momma died. Was I like my mother? Would I go insane?

When a boy of my dreams might say hello, fear struck me dumb, I'd stammer something like, “I've gotta go.” Then I'd go away. That night I'd sweat and shiver embarrassment and shame.

Somehow I missed out on love. I've never really had a boyfriend.

Now I'm up in space. Nobody's here but me and Vern. I yearn for a man's touch. I've only known my fingers. Fingers feel pretty good.

“Vern, play Beethoven's ninth symphony—the one with the Angel chorus.”

reruns

I'm watching Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, again. Yah hoo, yeah right.

BLAST OFF

In a Denver hotel room, I watched old rocket footage. Sputnik was the first satellite launched into orbit. Soon people flew through space in Vostok and Mercury. Little black hot rod Mercury. And then comes along Apollo and the Saturn 5. Moon landing. Doing the moon walk and driving the moon buggy. We take our cars to the moon. Then came more rockets and space shuttles launching space stations and more satellites. And then came fusion drive, and Mars Ranger. Those Mars Rangers were gone four and one half years. They just got back last May. They were ten times lucky to be alive.

Yesterday, I took a cab to the art museum. I got to see Grandpa's Mary Cassatt. And some other things, like Remington's bronze action heros.

I was in Denver with Dad because he was speaking at a rocket science conference. As soon as Dad got back to our hotel room, we left to see his own rockets take off. Denver was foggy and we were late. I didn't think Denver would be foggy. San Francisco was clear, I know, I checked. Finally, we flew up out of the fog in a Learjet. We went supersonic over the Rockies.

Above Vandenberg California, we flew in over the crowd. It looked like a million people and a zillion cars.

Excitement lit the air and everywhere.

Jullianne met us on the runway. There were lots of people milling around. Most of them wore plastic badges. Jullianne clipped my badge on. Everybody knew Lyle Smith—Daddy didn't need any badges. The PA counted, "Tee minus one fifty-five and counting. Tee minus one. . . ." on and on and we had to hurry. Jullianne drove us off in a Cushman. We were squeezed in tight. Dad was all hard, Jullianne was soft. We got out at the observation building. At the entrance, the guard waved us by. We ran up three flights of stairs, "Tee minus thirty-four and counting." The stairs opened on the observation room. The windows were at least six stories high. The carpet was red. Everybody looked like engineers in suits, even Mars Rangers, Bonner and Linda. Dad nodded some quick hellos and we took our places at the window rail. Then it was 3, 2, 1, lift off. The windows rattled, the air roared—even inside. Two rockets brilliant arcs blasted up through the sky—bound for Mars.

Dad said, “His-to-ry. I think we’ll see a lot more like these, huh-Joan-ie.”

“Huh? I don’t know.” Thrusting plumes plunged through the sky. “Will we see the fusion light?”

“No,” Dad said, “they’ll be out of sight by then. Then the boosters are cast apart from the Earth.”

I knew that. “Then there is only fusion,” I said.

He said, “What else.” He probably rolled his eyes.

The great white plumes grew tall and wide. The blinding lights grew smaller. The windows rattled less.

Dad invented Vernaline for this Lockheed-Mars Express — the ‘Red-eye.’ The Red-eye was made out of Red Vernaline. Dad also directed the hull design. Dad put his hand on my shoulder, I looked up at him, he looked into my eyes and he said, “If I had made those shells a little thicker, those ships could handle the stresses of flying near light speed.”

“Dad, could your quantum anti-quanta drive make them go that fast?”

Dad growled real low, “Not here, don’t talk about that.” He looked around to see if anybody was listening.

Like Mom did.

deep space

El Dorado

They called it El Dorado. It was the richest high grade lode ever.

Grandpa started buying art.

I've eaten my way back to Grandpa's paintings

It's a squeeze through the dark and tightly packed hold. In the flashlight beam, the passage ends at the crates. On one label, it's written: Andy Warhol, Campbell's Soup Cans — from the collection of Jose Esteban. There, Wayne Thiebaud, that's the one. There isn't enough room to pull the painting out. Blocking the way are boxes of freeze dried food. I shove and carry the boxes up to the sleeping deck, then pile them on the bed. It takes several trips. Back down in the hold, the Thiebaud crate scrapes along the deck to the ladder. Woody creaks come from the first few twists of each screw loosened by the screwdriver. So carefully, I ease the painting out. The uncrated canvas just barely threads up through the hatches. On the pilot deck, the painting leans against the gray bulkhead.

I look upon a luscious highway winding through confections of farmland. The candied land is tilted up for display.

my first car was a Ford hot rod

tune-up day

I drove an ancient land rocket through the desert. Sagebrush landscape blurred rapidly by. That old Ford cruised at one twenty-five. The windows were down. Raucous wind, buffeting, roared. Heart in throat, I nearly launched off a rolling hill. Then it was pedal to the metal, swooping down the hillside and across the broad flat valley. At one hundred and forty-eight, the big Ford danced lightly over the fleeting road. With loose wrists and a firm grip, I made quick corrections at the wheel. My ears hurt. I steered with one hand while I pushed up on all four electric window switches. The speedometer climbed: one fifty-two, one fifty-three, one fifty-four, one fifty-five. The windows didn't seal. They bowed out to a howling draft. One hundred and fifty-six miles per hour, that was flat out. An oncoming car crested the suddenly looming hill at the end of the valley. I let off the gas and feathered the brakes. My heart beat in my breast. I felt alive.

A rocket

A

rocket

I'm hauling ass.

Nearing light speed.

Hey baby, we're flying now.

“Vern, give me a progress report.”

Big Tom O'Mally

My old friend Tom, moved to Reno for astronaut training.

That summer, he taught a class on self defense.

Hey, why not, I signed up.

I remember him throwing the other men to the mat. Tom's sinewy muscles rippled across his bare chest.

Blue Jupiter

Reno was warm that summer night. I was with Mary. Mary's a friend from the university. We were both taking ceramic sculpture, three.

Blue Jupiter's neon light reflected across the hood. Over the gravel back lot, old Ford rolled into a parking spot. Band music wafted from the nightclub.

Mary's macaw perched on her shoulder. His name was Charlie. Charlie was his majesty of radiant primary colors; yellow, blue, and red. He was really big. When Charlie opened his wings, I'd flinch. He seemed to think that was funny.

I pulled my stash from under the dash.

I said, "I'm driving to Southern California tomorrow."

"Really?"

Mary burned the green bud.

"I'll be taking an astronaut to Vandenberg."

"ere," she passed the pipe.

Smoke filled the car.

"A guy?" Mary raised a brow.

"Yes, a guy." Tom O'Mally.

"When are you coming back?"

"Saturday."

Charlie said, "Smoke da ganja. Smoke da ganja."

Charlie loved the contact high. I could see it in his eyes and the way he would relax. Good parrot.

Police sirens waxed and waned.

"Shall we go in?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Lock it up. You have to hold the button in when you close the door."

We came in through the back. The joint was hoppin'. The music was happening. A small table was open. We sat down.

At five foot two and one hundred eighty pounds, Mary was no Barbie Doll. Charlie was the hit of the party. Charlie bobbed to the beat.

Over beers, between bird gawkers, we talked of rain forests and clay.

"I love the feel of Martin's clay."

“I need a whiter body for the glaze I used today.”

“Where is the lady’s room?”

Mary said, “Over by the restaurant.”

I was surprised to see Tom O’Mally. We met near the restrooms.

“Hi Tom,” I said, well more like shouted over the band.

“Ready for tomorrow?” he asked.

“I’ll be gassed and ready to go.”

“You look half gassed already,” he said.

“Ha, ha. You’ll be ready at ten?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Do you still drive the Galaxy Starliner?”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s parked out back.”

“Well, cool.”

“See ya, Tom.”

“See ya, Joan.”

All these guys kept asking me to dance. Mostly I’d look down and shake my head. “No,” is what I said. I’d say no even though I loved to dance.

Some guys were sweet. Sometimes I’d say yes. Then my heart would really beat. My armpits were wet.

I danced with a guy who had the rhythm in his feet. His soft brown eyes probed my soul. Warm feeling emanations, I felt a flush. I probably blushed. When the song was through, I thanked him and asked to be excused.

When I sat down, Mary said, “That guy is cute.”

I nodded yes. I was a fluster fool. I tried to play it cool.

Charlie eyed me skeptically.

Later I saw sweet dancer leave. He left alone.

And, well, the other guy—he danced okay. The band was really on, they sounded great. My body moved to the sound. I moved around and around. We danced till the band took a break.

“Join me for a drink?” he asked.

I said, “No, I’m with her.” I pointed to Mary. I implied she was my lover. Around the guys, I was too shy.

Charlie said, “Smoke da ganja.”

Charlie was right, so we left. It smelled like piss in the parking lot. We sat in the car. An airliner flew overhead.

Packing the bowl, I said, “I think I’ll go to Pyramid Lake this Sunday, you want to come?”

“To the nude beach?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know.”

We toked the cherry glow.

We drifted back to Jupiter. I was reeling on pot and alcohol.

Mary and I sat at the bar. She waved over the bar tender.

“I’ll have a Dos Equis and my parrot would like an orange juice.”

“Guinness,” I ordered.

Across the u-shaped counter, Tom talked to a pretty girl. She was the last girl he was dancing with.

“See the Adonis over there, he’s talking to the blond,” Mary nodded across the bar at Tom. “He’s danced with twenty gals at least.”

Those two had been making time. She looked like his type. “He’ll take her home tonight.”

Mary said, “Yeah right.”

“Just watch.”

“Here you are,” my foamy beer. I took a long pull through the head, then licked foam from my lip.

There were cigarette burns on the oak bar rail. Smoke got in my eyes.

More parrot gawkers stopped by. Charlie did his telephone ring. Charlie played a ding-a-ling. “Hello.”

Tom and the blond walked out together.

Mary looked at me, impressed.

“He’s an old friend. I know his style.”

Mary smirked.

“No, not like that.”

“Did I ever tell you about the bear that drove a truck?”

The band struck a cord.

Careless at the wheel, hurling two tons of Starliner steel—I drove home drunk. I don’t remember much.

I was hung over when it was time to pick Tom up. I drove up to his apartment around noon. I rang his bell. Tom opened the door. She was still there.

We carried boxes to the curb and loaded the trunk.

A cab pulled up.

Tom kissed the blond and locked the door. She took the cab. I followed Tom’s Porsche to Dad’s warehouse. Tom put his car in storage.

Tom sat in the Ford beside me. I gassed the throttle and laid rubber out of there.

“Easy Joan,” Tom grinned.

“Like you’re easy on that Porsche?”

“So did you break another heart?”

“I guess,” incorrigibly he said, incorrigible blue eyes. Any woman might have wanted to swim in those iris pools. His skin was tanned and smooth.

“You’re a pretty girl, sweet Joan.”

“Tom,” please.

“Why aren’t you out breaking hearts?”

“I’m looking for love, not just sex.”

“You’re avoiding love, I’d guess.”

“What do you know about love?”

“All the arts of the Kama Sutra.”

“Yeah right. You’re not charming me out of my panties.”

“You’re not wearing any panties.”

“Stop that,” he embarrassed me.

We barreled up out of the desert into the mountain forests.

I say, “So Daddy’s sending you to Vandenberg. What has he got in mind for you?”

“We’ll see. It helps to know rich daddy rocketsmith.”

“I’d have to agree with that.” There were worse things than money, I thought.

A strange cloud hung over the horizon. The air smelled of wood stoves and forest fires. Slurry bombers flew by through the sky. From our high mountain road, we looked across the vast forest. Billowing off a distant volcano, smoke rose into the stratosphere—like an eruption. The smoke was brilliant white in the blue summer sky.

Tom said, “That’s Green Mountain. That mountain is a tangled jungle of underbrush.”

“So much for fire management.”

“Yeah.”

Smoke turned old Sol vibrant orange.

We drove past.

The great plume receded in the rearview mirrors.

Over miles and miles of gray pavement, we sped along the dashing white line.

Freeway traffic crawled through Fresno city sprawl.

We drove into the evening.

“Time to get gas.” I pulled into a GasMart. We both got out.

In the setting sky, charcoal briquette clouds glowed red around their margins. Tom stood before the sun that lit red-gold his tousled hair.

I pumped in twenty-six gallons.
Across the street, we stopped to eat.
Over pizza and soda's Tom said, "I'm leaving for Mars."
"Then what?"
"I don't know."
"I'll miss you."
"I'll miss you too."

Our Galaxy cruised across the San Joaquin Valley. We passed cities and suburbs and farmland and headlights.

We drove over the Coastal Range, then through San Luis Obispo.

From the Pacific Highway, I saw the moon light phosphorous foam on the breaking surf.

It was late when I dropped Tom off at the space complex. We shook hands goodbye. As I drove off alone, a tear rolled from my eye.

In a lonely grove on the base, I threw my sleeping bag out under the stars.

The highway twisted up through the western Sierra foothills.
I came upon a Dodge Charger smashed around a mighty oak.
One hand on the wheel, his eyes fell to her nylons, his brains were dashed.
They both were dead. Horror rigormortis bound her face.
I waved down a trucker. She set out flares. There was nothing else to do but
wait.

Tom ago

Tom left for Mars. We lost touch after that.

Mars man

Light buoys shadowed Mars around the sun. They swung light strings between Mars and Earth.

The buoy ahead was the anchor buoy. The anchor had lost its laser transponder. Communications with Mars were down to radio transmissions.

Tom O'Mally piloted the rescue ship.

Captain Bob said, "We have a picture window view of our buoy."

I saw the buoy on television.

Captain said, "Crew, stand by for docking."

Tom said, "Firing retrorockets. Stand by. 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, docking. We have docked with MarsCom."

Bob said, "Trish?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"Are you ready with the big band-aid?"

"Yes, Captain. Switching on laser link. Initializing communication bridge. You've got your band-aid."

"Pilot report," said Bob.

Tom said, "All systems normal. Everything looks a-okay."

"Mars," said Bob, "you've got an open line."

"This is Mars Space Central contacting Houston Space Control. Requesting levels check."

"Mars Space Central, this is Houston Space Control. Levels are positive. You're open for class 5 communications."

"At Capital Ford-Mercury, it's our annual inventory clearance extravaganza." Channel 92 rolled commercials during the transmission delay. Tom was nearer to Mars than to me.

On Mars, Tom flew local shuttles between terraforming outposts.

stupid fan

That stupid fan is out again.

Tom's run

Tom O'Mally was chosen to be the first astronaut to fly through time.

Dad's original Vern Speedster, the X-25-AX, was nearing Mars. It cruised through a flawless shake down run. Soon, Tom would take the helm, then he and Vern One would be gone.

terminal velocity

The stars recede in tunnel vision. Ahead, they spectral shift to blue. I feel weak at the thrill of blue stars. Beautiful blue stars.

A day is a year as the Earth turns. Approaching terminal velocity.

Cancer

Grandpa got cancer. He got it pretty bad.

next valley

I drove alone. I drove over the pass, across the Central Valley, and to familiar, unfamiliar mountain. June, two pm.

Broad roads, deep cuts, concrete and planted seedlings grew up the mountainside of the unscary slide area. Aluminum power transmission towers drew up the East Canyon to Walsh Gulch and Grandpa's gold mine. Ore trucks, pick-ups, miners cars; a tailgating Toyota followed impatiently. I drove into the noisy industrial zone that was once a forest with a tunnel. The guard at the gate passed me on—past the receiving dock, the office building, and the parking lot. The road rose over the mine. From there I could see the mine dump filled the gulch below. Aunt Angie's creek was obliterated. Maybe that's what stopped Aunt Angie's heart.

At the back, behind the towering timber stacks, I stepped out of Dad's Jeep and unlocked the gate. I drove through, walked back, pulled the chain and clasped the hasp. Me and the old blue Jeep, we crept down a steep and narrow road, and banged around and rose up out of Walsh Gulch. We dropped back down into Deer Valley and banged over to Deer Creek.

Minnows scattered under my toe swish and soft sole pat splash ripple rings on clear water—spreading shadows over sand and stones. I pulled petals from a wild rose. Through the air the petals lit upon the drink, and they floated away. So then, I gathered and rolled my skirt up to my thighs—off the bank, I slid—in the cool creek, I waded and sighed. Gentle current, dappled shade—lingering, I picked my way. Long silky fronds drifted and waved from yonder bank and tickled my shins. Out of the creek I dropped my hem. Cattle grazed across the glen. The grass was green as it was high, the butterflies; I sauntered my own path under the languid sky.

“Be free, Aunt Angie,” I hoped. I blew a hanky.

I saw plenty of cattle but not any deer.

night class

The police reverend, I forget his name, was waiting outside — when I got out of Cellular Biology 365.

“Joan Smith?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

“Your father is Lyle Smith?”

“Yes.”

My life was changed.

This is what the reverend told me, “Your father was driving down into Reno on highway 80. Just this side of Truckee, your father was following a gas tanker through the winding canyon. The tanker blew up.”

I felt vertigo on solid ground. “Tell me straight, what has happened to my daddy?”

“Okay, you want it straight, your daddy crashed hard and was burned up. I’m so sorry child. Your daddy’s dead.”

I let out a shriek in the hallway reverberation. All the life drained from me. I knelt down and choked a sob. ‘This isn’t happening. This is happening.’ I caught my breath. Officer rookie pastor helped me up. Then I walked out a zombie.

Police Reverend Tact. God sent an idiot.

The reverend was a kind heart, really, I think. He drove me in my own car to Washoe Med. That night, I ‘slept’ in a chair beside Grandpa’s bed.

Damn it, Dad, did you have to die before we could sort things out.

I don’t hate you.

I’m sorry I was such a bitch. You asshole. I hate you. You died.

headache

I have a headache.

Washoe Med hospital bed

“I leave you with good blessings. I trust now that my blessings, along with my trespasses, will continue after me. Some good will come, unforeseen. Be wizedened in peace. All will be joined in legacy.”

Jose Esteban, Grandpa.

Grandpa

Grandpa's cancer got a lot worse. He lost both legs, but that didn't stop the cancer.

His breathing was labored and irregular.

In a big private hospital room. So there we were, friends and his only family, me, gathered in sad muted harmony. We stood around and shuffled and sighed.

Grandpa opened his eyes.

I held his hands.

After a while, he whispered to me, "You can fly ahead of time."

Then he died. Right then. Grandpa died.

hyperspace

It's too God damned quiet out here.

Traffic noise, air planes landing, lawn mowers, and stuff—there's always some noise in the suburban home. There was plenty of noise in my neighborhood.

Good old faces are fading from my memory. But not the sadness and the grieving.

Centauri C

Far off the port bow, there is a red dwarf star. Little Proxima Centauri glows like a campfire in the wilderness. On the nav, Proxima flairs beautiful orange, fabulous.

Proximal Proxima is between Sol and me.

I can detect no planets. It doesn't matter. Proxima can't support life.

Ahead lay Alpha A and Alpha B.

Alpha Centauri

Through a tunnel of blue stars, we zap straight at Alpha Centauri. Centauri planets race around their suns.

There are no giant planets in this binary solar system.

We fly between the brilliant suns. A and B are Sol and Son. They remind me of our radiant one. Pale yellow like our Sun is Alpha A. A swings with partner Alpha B. B burns bright pale orange.

At this speed, space-time distortion squeezes the suns, like lemons. I zoom in on the display and see space-time also squeezes the planets.

Alpha A has seven planets. The fifth planet orbits 1.2 astronomical units away. Planet Cinco has white clouds, snowy poles, dark continents, and blue oceans. Cinco has a thin oxygen atmosphere.

Alpha B has just two planets. At .72 a.u. is planet Water. Big water, only water, no land; Water is a one ocean planet. Water's neighbor orbits at 2.9 a.u.—it is a luminous mini jupiter. Blue swirling gas spins a stormy red eye. Blue Jupiter.

Vern records all this as we whiz by.

Well, that's it. That's as close as we get.

I don't know what the data means.

Maybe humans could live on Nabhar Cinco. There's a little oxygen and the temperature's about right.

Then there's this stuff here, I don't know.

replay

I see I missed two planets. They orbit both suns. Those chilly rocks swing at double Pluto's distance, 69 and 72 a.u..

home star

Vern's slowing down. We're going home. Our home star shines brightly on the nav.

PANIC

Trajectory is fine. Hull wear is high, I think. The quanta thruster nozzle is reading fissures on some of the array instruments. I don't ask Vern if we're going to make it anymore. Vern's probabilities drive me crazy. "Stupid fucking robot head." I don't know if I'm going to make it back at all. I don't want to panic out here. I've been panicking ever since I learned about the fracturing. I try not to think about it anymore.

I'm going home and that's the right direction. And Alpha Centauri, analyzing the chemistry—just looking at all that stuff, wow. I think Water is carbon and oxygen cycle stuff. But what is this whatsogen and I don't get this ecosystem. I don't get it at all. My spectro-chem mosaic is as obtuse as awe inspiring. I've already logged 67 tera-terabytes of Water alone.

Can I make it back, without the thruster? I don't see how.

“Emergency! Wake up!”

Bang. I hit my head on the beam over my bed. “Ouch. What! Vern?” My heart is pounding.

“The quanta thruster nozzle has broken apart. Quantum reaction is in auto shutdown.”

“Hull damage?”

“No damage to capsule integrity detected. Still processing hull data.”

“I feel light. What’s that, Vern? We’re slowing down. I mean not slowing down—because the braking thrust is gone.”

Vern, “Quanta anti-quanta thrust is off. Gravity is .88 gees and falling.”

I think, we’re flying along at seven tenths light speed without any brakes—in vacuous space.

“How’s the trajectory?” I ask.

“The trajectory is stable and on course.”

Show me the thruster nozzle.”

The nozzle is projected on the holostage. Some of the top and bottom of the cone remain. The top of the nozzle is now a jagged spear. The sides of the cone have blown out. I’m surprised it hasn’t damaged the hull.

“Okay, Vern, I see what’s left of the cone. Can you restart the quantum cell?”

“Yes, but quanta anti-quanta thrust might further damage the ship.”

“I want sensory reports. Is there anything else wrong with the ship?”

Vern, “Not of any unusual concern.”

“I want a report on those too. If we don’t use the quanta drive, how long will it take to slow this thing down and park on Earth?”

“Landing speed would be achieved in 99 years.”

Great, I’ve got 99 years to life.

Gavel bang.

There's nothing, really, that I can do. I can't go outside and fix it. I can't wait 99 years. I'll have to start it up broken. Maybe we don't need a nozzle cone.

In eerie quiet. I float around the cabin for a month.

I float and think.

I keep coming to the same conclusion.

"Vern, restart the quanta reaction. Ramp up thrust, program 6.6. On initialization, switch to 6.7 dynamic vector pilot. Hold virtual manual in quick reserve."

Vern replies, "Quick reserve now set. Quantum is critical. Restarting quanta anti-quanta thrust map 6.6. Initializing. Switching to 6.7 dynamic vector pilot."

The subtle vibrations of spaceship animation returns. I watch the jagged nozzle on the holostage.

"Thrust now," Vern says.

I feel the gentle push that pulls my body down. I am heavy.

"Vern, what is your structural integrity?"

"Sensors indicate no additional deterioration of the nozzle cone. Hull integrity is holding at the adjusted norm. The structural integrity is stable."

“Vern, show the propulsion flow in infrared.”

The display shows a split horizontal tail out of the broken thruster nozzle. The blaze burns steadily.

It sure doesn't look right. “What's our thrust efficiency?”

“Ninety-two percent.”

“Display message board. Auto warn any significant changes in status.”

“Auto warn on.”

The flow of thrust was a pointed sable brush. Now the brush has split in two, what's the next thing I should do?

I check the instruments. Cone integrity does look stable for now. Only the tip of the spear shows any sign of heating up. The model dynamics look good. I hope this holds.

The broken cone doesn't seem to have hurt anything. Everything is fine. The brakes are on, we're slowing for Gaia.

Nabhar Cinco and Water remain glorious enigmas.

B-17

The nav is a look through the nose windows of a soaring B-17 bomber. On a clear and moonless night I ride a Flying Fortress to Pegasus. The night rider becomes ever more mysterious as time slips askew between us.

On the third child of Sol, my memories did grow.

Bleak and lifeless empty space. I hope Vern doesn't break down.

I play electric reruns. Hollywood and the Butthole Surfers try to entertain me.

If I die, will Vern deliver me home?

“Vern, if I die here in space — will you deliver me home?”

Vern, “I'll take your corpse back into Earth's orbit.”

“Thanks Vern. Very graphically described I might add.”

“You're welcome.”

life goes on again

life

refrain:

uh life goes on again
and again and again
and life goes on for anything
no matter what it is
and life goes on and on
and again and again
and life goes on for any old thing
life goes on for any old thing
and life goes on again
and again and again
and life goes on and on
and again and again
and life goes on for anything
no matter what it is
and life goes on and on
and again and again
and life goes on for any old thing
life goes on for any old thing
and life goes on again
and again and again . . .

ad nauseam

no moon

I still haven't menstruated.

Space in

“Vern?”

“Yes?”

“I’m lonely. Well?”

“Yes?”

“Curl up beside me and feel warm against my skin.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know. Never mind.”

Blank, blank, nothing, nothing.

Old video: old, old video—I’ve seen too much cold screen video.

Restless mind, I cannot read—that focus on pages of words strung on endlessly. Black and white, end to end, top to bottom: words, words, nothing.

Empty, empty, nothing: nothing, lonely nothing. I am alone. I am the most alone.

My muscles ache from inactivity. Both knees pop when I stand up. I stretch and walk—step, one, two, three. I start to jog on the treadmill.

“Vern?”

“Yes?”

“Decelerate to two gees.”

“Decelerating to two gees.”

My heart pounds. The weight drags on me. I break sweat and my knee starts to turn. I slow down.

“Two gees and steady.”

I trudge, trudge, beneath the weight. My trudging grind: step, step—a steady pace—walking on. I'm walking home, I'm walking home.

dinky

I've got Earth back on the nav. From here, it looks more like a dinky dot. I feel like celebrating. I wish I had some pot.

Lonely years pass slowly.

astral ruins

Yesterday, the quanta cone ruins lost another brick when the weakened top spear disintegrated. The flow of thrust is now remarkably symmetrical. Instruments look great. There are no hot spots and efficiency is at one hundred and six percent. This thing flies better broken.

News from Earth

“Vern, can’t you decipher any of these bandwidths?”

Incompatible technology.

I can get some things okay. Some things czartz blurry kratzz pop make no sense. These might be analog holographic broadcasts. Vern is unable to configure a workable analog to digital link.

This broadcast media, it’s already old history. And it’s too much, already. Gaia was dying, will she be DOA? Everyday the tale is told. Everyday the news is worse.

What’s left is on life support. Air making machines prop up the atmosphere. Most of the land is barren desert. It’s hot. In many places it’s too hot to live. The Middle East is a radioactive sand box. East meets West.

hello

“We are receiving a communication from Earth,” says Vern.

My heart races. I hear a woman’s voice, not my own.

“. . . Speedster. Joan Smith, greetings from Earth. X-27-AX, Lockheed-Vern
Speedster. Joan Smith, greetings from Earth. X-27-AX. . . .”

“Whee! Somebody is talking to me!” I dance a sort of jig. “Yahoo!”

She says, “My name is Hester Ferrari. On behalf of the World Counsel of
Cities and the human tribe, we are welcoming you back to Earth.”

I cry with joy.

“Joan Smith, can you hear us? Please respond.”

“Radio on. People! Hester! It’s me, Joan Smith! I’m coming home!”

There’s an eight month transmission delay.

Downloading Alpha Centauri

Downloading Alpha Centauri—uploading global information. Always
uploading global information.

see Momma

Earth on the nav is looking pretty dry. I'm getting some unambiguous images off the visual array. Forget about clouds. The air is clear. The land is tan, the water is blue. Blue—tan, tan—blue; in stark contrast.

Where is Gaia?

Instruments read overall lower oxygen and lower atmospheric toxin levels, thin but wholesome soup.

Sensory readings show more plant life than the visual display—which shows next to nothing.

It that Gaia or Gaia's ghost?

The continents have lost ground to the sea. Florida is gone.

More water, shouldn't that mean more clouds? I guess not, I don't know.

California's Central Valley is protected by coastal ocean dams. But for those dams, Grandpa's mountain would be an island.

To survive the heat, Reno has moved underground. Lots of cities have.

I gather that cities are the nations now, but it doesn't mean the same thing.

and closer

“Vern, is that a ship in the nav display?”

“Yes.”

“Pull it up, let me look at it.”

A beautiful cruiseliner motors stately off our bow. It sports an aqua metallic sheen. With its Coke bottle curves and its graceful tail fins, it’s a Cadillac of rocketships.

“Vern, identify craft.”

“It is a Sharm 403.”

“Really. How do you know that?”

“It’s written on the side.”

“Oh. What’s the transmission delay—to that ship?”

“Six weeks.”

“Oh, that long. Is that the closest ship?”

“Yes it is.”

“Okay.”

Could the Sharm 403 be a pirate lying in wait for me?

Pacific time

Reno looks like a good place to land.

Time to start day-night pattern synchronization.

The slowly rising morning lights dawn around the cabin. Oh, it's too early to get up.

“Vern, lights off.”

I'll start tomorrow.

Home

Landing approaching

Landed

SUBMARENO

Only Hester's curly gray hair belies her girlish face. She is charming and she is my guide into the future.

We step from a labyrinth of hallways into a wide cavern corridor. See the people drift across the open end of our tunnel view on a perpendicular avenue. Along the corridor are doors with numbers. We walk past number 18, Beetle Inc. Must be some kind of business.

Looking down the avenue, stone arches stretch away like trees. The arches frame vistas on a vast carved landscape. With elbows propped, I lean across the wide smooth sill on the wall beneath an arch. I look out over a sculpted canyon fork under a sky of vaulted stone.

"Reno," Hester simply says.

"Submareno," I offer back.

A patter of passing conversations drift by behind us. The midday bustle hum of the busy city thrums up from the canyon floor and from the canyon walls. People mill about below in tiers of shifting stipple swirls. Long lanes stacked like floors of skyscrapers line the canyon walls. Across the canyon from us, one lane opens on a grassy terraced park. Trickling waterfalls run down mossy cliff faces above and below park lawns. From here it's hard to see but I do believe that the people in that park are naked.

"Ready?" Hester asks, ready to leave.

"I guess so," I answer as we turn to join the patter on the avenue. We walk under a smooth ceiling carved through native rock; rock encased in a kind of clear plastic—or something. The colors in all the stone around me are polished into vibrance. Mud seams run their patterns between faults. All around lay bare horizontal stripes of polished strata. Distant through the arches, I see broader bands of eons past. A red monolith strikes across our path. This hall of stripes is now solid red—patterns of earth, fashions of man.

What fashions. Everyone is dressed differently than me. There's a little bit of everything and a lot I've never seen. Short robes seem to be popular with both women and men. Many walk by in various stages of undress. That man wears only a vest and a glove fitted jock in matching black leather. A teenage

boy walks up quickly through the crowd. His loincloth flap hangs aside his penis. He's hard as horn over small swinging balls. A pretty girl, with well budded breasts, roller skates around him. Skimpy swimsuit straps and string, she wears hardly anything. As they sweep past, she twirls before him. They're bald as babies. It feels hot in here.

Some people smile as we catch each other's eyes. There is a somber couple. They look at me blankly as they walk by. Some people stare at me. Maybe it's my clothes.

I'm startled by a woman's strolling head and arms. Her long dress is the colors and patterns of the rock wall behind her.

"That dress is striking."

"Do you like it?" Hester asks.

"Oh yes."

Alcoves open off along the wall into somberly elegant establishments. I follow Hester off into an atrium with benches and lemon trees. We've arrived at World Union Financial. We go in and take a seat with a broker.

I guess I got lucky. The Esteban Collection is in demand. We put the Langston up on the open market and in less than ten minutes it sells for a fortune. I open an account.

"Time to walk back up to the rocket hanger where we can finish these deals?"

"Sure," Hester simply says with a wry mischievous smile.

"What?" I ask.

"You seem very smug."

"What, for someone just back from an antique era? Why not? I made it. People are here, this is Earth. And I'm not poor. Are you kidding, I'm scared to death. Thanks for helping me, the place has changed."

So we talk and we avenue walk. We walk all the way back up to Vern. Hester looks a bit concerned.

"I'm okay. Five years in space—have left me winded. It feels great—to walk around again."

We check the final rocket storage and move the paintings and such to a vault. Hester handles most of the procedural stuff and she shows me how to do it.

Langstone's sweet bronze Felicity goes off to the auction broker.

I send my bags to some ritz hotel.

Hester says, "My stomach's talking to me. It's pushing two-a-clock, are you hungry?"

"I'm starving."

We stop at the strike apex of a pink granite intrusion, the Schliern Cafe. Inside the cafe, the pink ceiling peaks high above my head.

What is it about this place? Maybe it's too many folks look too long at me. I follow Hester's feet. She leads the way down a sweeping ramp, past diners and tables.

We sit at a table with a cliff side view. A passing wave of vertigo leaves me wobble headed. Hester is serene.

Is this menu in English?

Hester asks, "Does the beddidor have hot peppers?"

"Just a dash of cayenne."

Who said that?

"I'll have the beddidor," she tells the menu.

"Beddidor, very good." Hester's menu, I think.

I order into my menu, "Chicken salad number one." Whatever that is.

"Chicken salad number one, anything else?" It's my menu. I shrug.

Hester orders us some drinks, I think.

"I feel strange. I haven't gone crazy, have I?"

"Joan Smith crazy? No, only crazy enough to jump out of time."

"Well yeah, except for that." I am so relieved. I am so so relieved. I really didn't go crazy. I'm free.

My eyes were dry, I blink back tears. I sit up straight and look out on the great inside. Those tears are soothing my eyes. I feel a flush arise. And fall as on a napkin I dab and blow away old fears.

Hester places her hand on mine.

Here is our young waiter, with food and drinks. “Thank you,” says Hester. He leaves.

“That was as quick as a burger joint drive through,” I say.

She is serene but quizzical.

My drink is sweet and cool.

Now, the chicken, yeah, I guess. But the salad? I don’t know any of this stuff.

“I don’t know this chicken salad from sea slugs to clouds.” It’s strange. I’m strange too.

Beddidor, apparently is a flower blossom soup.

“Whatever this chicken salad really is, it’s delicious.”

The Schliern Cafe is a nice place, I’d recommend it.

Leaving the cafe, we head off to buy some clothes. We hop the tube downtown. The streets are full of people. Dodging across a current of shoppers, bodies brush my body in the press. People, I love you. Hester beckons toward a posh boutique; clothes hang like art in the tall gallery windows.

Inside the show room, as the door closes behind me, plush quiet settles like snow. Lovely dresses, pants, and skirts are frozen in a mannequin dance. Blouses like Monet’s water lilies float upon a wall. A lithe young lady asks if we’d like assistance. She is wearing little more than a sheer hologram of, well she looks stunning.

“Do you have Chameleon fabric clothes?” I ask.

“Ah yes,” her eyes twinkle. She leads us to an adjoining room. She shows me a Chameleon chemise. The fabric is the nappy image of the room behind it. It’s not invisible but it’s like invisible.

“The fabric has a crisp linen drape and a soft natural fiber feel.”

“Ah yes, it feels great. Is it washable?”

To Parkers for sandals and Sparks Biopods for shoes. They'll deliver the shoes later, It takes time for the leather to grow, really.

We stroll along a cavern pond. Bathers walk and lie on sandy beaches under artificial sun. Some are tossing beautifully colored iridescent frisbees. Just before crashing into a tree trunk, one of the frisbees opens its wings and flies lightly to the ground. The frisbees are alive.

“What are those, Hester?”

“Beetles—pets.”

Hester drapes her robe across a boulder. She has dimples on her bottom. She sits on her robe and swishes her feet through the quiet water. I take off my little sand white thing and wade in for a swim. The water is cool but not cold, the bottom is smooth stones and sand. I do a lazy sidestroke and watch the people on the beach. There are sunbathers alone and in pairs. There are teenagers with their beetles and beer. Some folks are naked and some wear bright bikinis and loincloths.

Cleaving up the back wall are the many peopled ledges. The water is deep here. Floating on my back, I gaze up at a painted sky.

I freestyle back and get out between some kids and Hester. I stand under a panel of sun. I miss my Sol. A young man offers a fluffy towel and I dry off. He stands there, naked and gorgious. I admire his pet frisbee. He holds it near for me to see. It lifts a wing and startles me.

“It’s okay,” he says, “it’s harmless. You can touch it if you want to.”

I do, it feels like silk and bamboo. “It’s beautiful.”

He asks me if I’m from around here. I say, “Yeah but before you or your parents were born.”

“You’re a time jumper?” he asks.

“Yes,” I am. More than a jump.

“Been back long?”

“Got here this morning. I am two hundred and twenty-seven years old.”

“You don’t look a day over twenty-two.”

“Twenty-seven.”

“Joan Smith, I presume?”

He knows my name. “Yes. You’ve heard of me?”

“Joan Smith, time traveler from the past to our time. The buzz said that you were coming back. But I didn’t guess right now, right here. Joan Smith, welcome home.”

I sit back on the warm sand.

“My name is Oorup.”

“Oorup, I am Joan.” Oorup, you’re quite a hunk.

And meet his friends.

Feels good.

But after awhile, all these people, asking me more questions and stuff. I’ve done enough today. “It’s been nice to meet you all, I must excuse myself.”

Damn it, I can’t find my little thing! I walk bent over exposed, looking for invisible clothes. I pull out a lily pad skirt from my shopping bag, and the top, and get dressed.

“There you are,” Hester finds the little chameleon. “In the bag you go.”

We walk to the tube station, Sparks, Lincoln 38. We look at the readers, that’s how you pay. My stop is Reno, Main 25.

“You’re on your own tomorrow. Call me if you’re in a jam.” Hester writes her number on the back of a pamphlet and tucks it in a packet. “Here are your papers.”

Next stop, Main 25. We bid goodbye. Hester wishes me well.

It’s a short walk across the downtown canyon floor to the blue and red neon light facade of the Palace Casino Hotel. Inside, where’s the casino? I stop at the hotel lobby desk. My bags have been checked in.

“Are there any rooms above the ground?” I ask.

“Not usually, but if you’ll wait just a moment, I’ll go check.” The clerk goes into a room behind the desk.

I wonder if there is a casino, or if it’s just a name. This lobby is real familiar: red carpeting, wood paneling, a bell on the desk. It’s probably quaint and old timey.

The clerk returns and shakes his head, “I’m sorry, it doesn’t look like we’ve got anything up top.”

“Oh,” I am so disappointed.

“I’ll tell you what, if anything comes up, I’ll give you a call.”

“Anytime, day or night?”

“Okay, whatever you say.

“James, show our guest to her room.”

My room is round inside—like a big fat drum.

“Steamy hot showers,
washing for hours—
at the Palace Hotel.”

Ring, ring.

“Hello.”

“Hello, Ms. Smith.”

“Yes.”

“We’ve got a surface chateau open. It’s in a Great Basin aboripark. I thought you might want to move up tonight.”

“Yes I do.”

“Very good. I’ll send James up in fifteen minutes?”

“That would be really great, thank you.”

“You are the welcome guest of aims trust.” Click.

James knocks quietly. He takes my bags to the elevator and says, “Upper lev.” We exit the elevator at a shuttle garage. James sets my bags into a car trunk and we get in.

“Aims reserve three,” he says, and we’re off through a kiddie sized railroad switching yard. We accelerate and join a train. Other trains whiz by.

“The rails are smooth,” I say.

“Mag lev is smooth,” James agrees.

Of course, what am I, stupid?

We stop at another elevator. Going up.

“Here is your chateau. For a while at least, it’s all yours.”

“Thank you, James.”

“Good night, Ms. Smith.”

I turn out the light. Moonlight fills the room. Moonlight from the moon in the sky. My moon is a big yellow harvest moon tonight. The room is bright. I dance across the room, I do the moon dance. I do the moon dance. I dance inside the house, I dance outside the house. I smell the sage. The willows brush my skin. I do the moon dance, I dance all night.

The moon has set. Oh familiar, unfamiliar ground and brush. Stumble walking, picking my way back to the chateau to crash for what’s left of the night.

In the morning.

I take a shower.

“I put on only Parker sandals.”

Blue vases on a window sill have thatched windmills delicately glazed over glossy white china. Windowpane sunlight squares curve around the Dutch vasescapes. Windowpane shadows fall from vase, to sill, to floor. Black and white marble hexagons and diamonds are overlaid with a shadow grid, like molecular diagrams on graph paper. This atomic floor, flooded with photons—appears through my eyes in my face, I hope. It's more than I can fathom.

My sandals tap tiles to the kitchen. I let the water run and rinse a glass twice with cool tap water. Then stop by the fridge and fill up my glass with cold bottled water. The water tastes good.

Blue vases on a window sill sit before my window view. Juniper trees and mormon tea, bitterbrush and sage; from here, nothing has changed.

Step outside the door and feel the sun! Skipping down a well worn path past tall dry grass and wild rose bushes; solar heat radiates through my soul, Sol I love. Naked, I slump down into a sandy lounge around. I soak up rays. I know UVs are bad for me, I'll take the chance. I'm wrapped in blue skies, comforting lies beneath sunlight. Blue skies, disguise black empty space and stars so far away—away from home; sunlight and blue skies, I am home.

Climbing up a little gully ledge, from here I see the land is brighter up ahead. Ahead is an open link fence. Dry desert, sand dunes; beyond the fence there is no sagebrush, sagebrush doesn't bloom out there. Wasting water, wasn't a good idea. This is an oasis in a sea of sand—bound only by clear blue sky. Well at least the sky is still blue. I'm not going to cry.

I cry, a little. My nose is stuffy.

I hang around the fence and feel sunburn tattoo on my back and on my butt. Beyond the fence the open barren sand radiates heat onto my front. I'm broiled and roasted. It feels so good, it feels so heavenly. I love you Sol. Sweat beads my pinking skin; it runs down my cleavage and over around my pink belly.

I touch myself. I am wet and horny. "Ah, ah." And ashamed.

Behind me I hear a child's voice, "That lady has no clothes."

There is a boy talking to a boy with some other boys and some girls. They all are looking at me from under their hats. I hear older voices; here come some moms, I think. I wave a quick goodbye and sprint away through the desert scrub. My whole body is burning up on microwave—high heat. Where is the house? I hear people, they're in the house. They're in my chateau, where I left my clothes. From my bush, I see a formal affair. Everyone has on lots of clothes.

Even those kids I saw were over dressed—in long sleeves and kilts over pleated trousers. They saw rather more of me.

Hurried steps move up the path below. It's a mom and two kilted kids. They disappear into the house.

I don't know what to do. I think I'm getting a headache, that dull thud thud. I step further back into the brush.

“Here, lady, are your clothes.”

I jump and turn to see a girl holding out a robe for me. Which I put on gratefully.

“Thank you,” I mumble. “Really, thank you.”

The girl says, “You are supposed to wear clothes here.” Then she leaves.

Hopefully calmly, I walk down out of the bushes and step into a party of strangers.

“Hi. You must be our guest up here. You seem a bit alarmed. You are a welcome guest of one of my hotels, I'm sure. Isn't this a remarkable aboripark?”

“Hi.” I'm, “Joan. Yes, it's quite a place.”

“Baron Ames. You talk funny. You talk some old fart language. Where you from anyway?”

“From Reno, a long time ago. I've just arrived from space.”

“How long you in space?”

“Over five and a half years.”

“A lot can happen in five years. Watch a few too many old movies?” Wink, wink.

“You know,” he goes on, “there was a naked lady outside? She was waving to the children, shocking. By the way, you look very red.”

I feel like a boiled red lobster.

“You’re an odd bird. Come with me, coo coo.”

I’m an odd bird? Mr. Baron Ames leads the way to a clutch of hens.

“Jah Hanny, how are you, I’d like you to meet Joan. Joan’s a hotel guest with us today. She has spent many years in space.”

“I’m fine, Baron.”

Jah Hanny has a kind soft face.

“Hello Joan, call me Jah.”

“Hi, Jah.”

Baron wonders off.

“Hello, I am Contaskar,” says a lady in coffered hair and a pill box hat. She looks at me kind of worried like, concerned.

“Hi Contaskar, I’m Joan.”

I look down and check my robe. It seems okay. What is it? A booger?

Willowy Ann joins us. She hands me a cold drink. Ann says, “You look like you might be thirsty.”

“Thanks, I am.” I drink. “This is good.”

“Joan has spent some time in space,” says Jah.

“Really, how long?” asks Ann.

“I flew through space for over five and a half years.”

“You were alone,” says Contaskar.

“Yes, I was.”

Ann says, “That’s a long time.”

“It was a long time.”

“Where did you go?” Ann asks.

“I flew around Alpha Centauri.”

Jah smiles widely and asks me, “You’re Joan Smith? The time traveler? Yes you are.”

I nod yes.

“Oh,” Ann looks surprised. “Of course,” she says.

We are joined by others. There is whispering, I hear my name. Life long ago, my life, is the topic in demand. Family and friends gone just six years and dead for over one hundred.

We munch on tasty party snacks.

“Yes the park looks just the same. I believed it, for awhile. Of course the distant views are gone here. Sand dunes in Nevada were rare. Sand dunes were far flung and solitary. They didn’t run in blowing rows like tall sea waves.”

At the request of Contaskar, room service delivers UV pills and medicinal sun cream. She says, “The cream will ease sunburn pain and arrest precancerous breakdown. The UV pills will unleash your own bodies defenses.”

I sniff and swallow.

“The sun is not good for you,” I hear over and over.

“The sun is our best friend,” I defend our Sol. My nose is wet

I sniff and swallow.

“We could do without the sun,” I hear Baron Ames has rejoined us.

No way, Baron.

My nose, don’t drip.

He goes on, “We can close the crystal domes over each oasis. We could replace the sun with sun panels. With the lights out, it would be like any night out under the stars.”

Pure flabbergast.

Where is something to wipe my nose on?

Ann among us announces, “We’d just batten the hatches down. Most of the time you wouldn’t notice any difference.”

I can’t shut up, “Once there was diverse and abundant life, everywhere: every everywhere.”

Contaskar says, “Relax Joan, they’re just making a joke.”

Runny snot is really dripping swinging loop. I catch the loop with the back of my hand and wipe it on the robe.

“Yeah, funny.” I go on, “First Alexander the Great goes off and conquers the world. Then the Romans build the highway system. It’s the God blessed Pandora’s highway of unchecked want.”

I catch another loop and draw a sleeve across my nose.

Jah hands me a hanky. In the hanky, I blow.

“Unchecked want made a mess of nature’s land. We’ve killed it.” Hankey in hand, open wide my arms implore. “If the world were a rhino’s ass, this planter box wouldn’t be fly scat. The land really outside is fried. That land does not breathe. The spirits are dead. The life is gone.”

Am I seeing chagrin?

I plunge on, “When I left Earth, the land was alive. Anytime, I could drive to some nearby meadow — where you couldn’t see dirt for life. I’ve stood in forests and imagined that there was only wild land.

“Soon I’d be back on the highway. I polluted a lot of the air in my Ford Galaxy. We gloriously worried life away — frittered our universe. Everybody wanted somethings. There was global complicity. I’m sorry for my part.

“Don’t gloam on to the old greed. When do people give back to the Earth more than you take from her. Not just this nature museum.”

Huh? Looking around — some now I’ve offended. Oh God, what have I said.

Roaring Baron tones, “We care for this fly scat. What have you done to us?”

“i try my best.” I’m flushed. “sorry, i was all alone in space. i’ve, i’m . . . sorry.” I’m flustered.

I gather my pharmacy, “it’s been nice to meet you all, excuse me please.”

Contaskar walks with me. She says, “Don’t be sorry. You’re alright.”

My stuff has been moved to a small back bedroom.

“There is a sunsuit and a hat in your closet. Please wear them outside.”

“Thank you, it’s been very nice to meet you Contaskar.”

Sun clothes are so weird—it's like dressing for the moon.

I step out on the veranda.

Oh so pretty little desert oasis.

Following moon dance footprints down to the cottonwoods and willow trees; there is a creek all of fifty meters long. It's nice in the shade by the creek. Even down here by the water there aren't any bugs. It's like being in a museum diorama.

In the evening I hear crickets and distant coyotes. I walk around, I'm sure that it's a recording—but I can't find the speakers.

When I return from dioramaland, I see there is a check out notice on my door, I thought I'd spend another night. What kind of hotel is this? "Jerks."

I call for a ride and James quickly arrives to take me back to Reno.

"Can I drive?" I ask.

"Uh, no ma'am. If you have a current LEV rating, then you could rent a car."

"Where do I learn about LEV ratings?"

"You might start with the Department of Motor Vehicles."

"I was last at the DMV over two hundred years ago."

"What, no way?"

"I'm a time traveler."

"Yes, Ms. Smith."

"You knew already."

"The DMV had the longest waiting lines."

He says, "No way. Long lines? Lines for hours."

"Lines out the doors and down the street."

"DMV?" He asks.

"Been there James, done that."

"Some things don't change."

We laugh, it feels good.

"I thought I could stay longer. What kind of a hotel is the Ames Reserve?"

“It’s not a hotel really, it’s a private residence.”

“Baron Ames’ house?”

“Ames Trust.”

“Oh, okay.” Baron Ames checked me out.

I’m alone in a hotel room. It’s a small half dome, with blue carpet and a partitioned bath. I take a short warm shower—not so hot on account of my sunburn. Real sunburn, feels great. I’m fried.

At the terminal at my desk, I look myself up.

I order room service, Chinese—sort of.

A lot is publicly known about Joan Smith, kind of.

There’s more about Mom than I care to see.

I’ve found Tom O’Mally, but no address. He’s been here a long time.

What days these are. I try to sleep but my mind races.

I wake up at three pm.

After all these years, I’m having my period. Thank you, moon.

I eat breakfast in the hotel coffee shop. I order Classic Diner Breakfast; bacon and eggs, with a short stack. Greasy food, black coffee—this is great. There probably was no pig, there probably was no chicken, there probably are no wheat fields. It tastes wonderful.

From my breast pocket I pull out a new toy. It unfolds like a piece of paper. That turns it on. I flip through the entertainment section. Let's see: theaters, some sex places, lots of music, bands and stuff. Huh, what's this?

you say there's a cow where stands a cannon
Holopsy at the Art Space

280 New Booth Street
ceive

"Where am I?" I ask. The electric flyer shows me a map with an X you are here. "Where is the art museum? Has the National Automobile Museum survived?" And so I plan my day.

Back to the beach, under a radiant sun pane. That nasty stuff, Contaskar cream, seems to stop burnt skin from peeling. It feels good too. Other bathers admire my real sunburn.

Oorup's not here today.

After my swim, I stop by the DMV to check out the LEV rating thing. There are no lines.

At the B train terminus exit, I walk out on a pleasant evening under sol light panels—sorta like the sun with warming rays over the shoulder. And over my shoulder too, a Chameleon bag is loosely slung—inside are tucked a few this and thats and a bit of magic paper. High over head, an express train tube snakes along under the ceiling. It's a clear vacuum tube with a clear bodied train passing through and silently gliding away. So long graceful tube glows with fake sunlight. Light that cannot hurt my eyes, pale and waverly light.

Mostly apartments line the thoroughfare: doors and porches and babies crying and music and a flickering glow—like television. Children play in the

common space. Two roving tykes run wildly thumpingly from behind. High speed, they pass me by. Off they disappear down an overgrown path between shaggy green tracts of leafy wisps and branches. Older folks mostly tend the gardens, snip at leaves, and harvest fruit and marijuana? Sure looks like it. Sticky stuff, hmmm.

Rows of pink and purple flowers, watermelon, lots of beans and lots of corn, darling little trees, thyme, dill, and blackberries.

Up ahead, the walk widens to a little market. Bushels of corn, and sacks of beans, and rice, and what's this stuff? Some kind of grain? There are tubs of various bugs and grubs. This must be the meat department. Behind the grubs are penned live featherless chickens. They've got red skin like long johns, those peckers got nothing on. After the naked red chickens, there is watermelon, taro, cabbage, leeks, coffee beans, and marijuana. Over past some root looking bins by more blackberries, there sits a likely stud—looks way past ninety.

I say, "I'd like to buy some blackberries and some marijuana."

The old guy jumps up all bony and spry. He says, "Why yes, allow me, these berries are on the house, my treat."

He hands me a bouquet of blackberries. "Juicy plump berries," I say. Juicy messy berries, I implore.

"Aren't you Joan Smith?"

"Yes." Now what?

"I'm Carter VanDeville. I've heard stories about you ever since I was a very young boy. You see, I am impressed by your future quest."

He hands me a beautiful and intricate basket. It's darkened with age, worn, lovely. "Here, take this basket. Carry it with you on market trips. That's the way we do it now."

"You are too kind," I say.

"These are our slooberries." He hands me some to taste.

Ooh, they are soo good and strange. I place them beside the blackberries in the basket. We walk back to the counter.

“What would you like?” Fresh buds lay arrayed in ancient cigar boxes.

“I’d like a mild sativa. It’s been a while. I don’t want to be too stoned to function.”

I buy a hairy red bud. “Looks good, smells great.

“So Carter, you’re like a fan, I’m touched.” He seems touched too. “Join me for a puff?”

“Gladly dear, I’ll join you for a puff or two.

“Hello, hello there goes Joan,” he creaky old throat sings to me. “Hello, hello, there goes Joan across the ages. Have a seat.” He motions to the chairs—where we have a seat. “That was a popular song,” he says, “when I was young.”

“There goes Joan across the ages, have a seat?”

“More or less.”

“How embarrassing,” and cool.

Carter says, “I always wanted to fly quantum class beyond the sky and into another time.”

“Do you still want to go?”

He says, “Yes.”

From an invisible pocket, I bring my own pipe out—the briar one.

I pinch a bowl or does a bowl pinch me?

“I’m thirsty, are you thirsty?” Carter pours us lemonade.

“Great lemonade,” I say. “I’m stoned.”

One hundred wrinkles smile beside me.

“Have you got a place to stay?” Carter asks.

“I’m staying at the Palace Casino, only there’s no casino. They have an ancient coffee shop, like something from the 1950’s. They serve a breakfast special just like the old days. Bacon and eggs, greasy food, breakfast at anytime.

“So eggs are real from real chickens?” I ask.

“Right, chickens lay eggs and we eat them.”

“But the chickens don’t have any feathers. Don’t they get cold?”

Carter says, “No.”

“Okay, how about the bacon? Is it from pigs that wallow in the mud?”

“Pork? No, bacon is from pork meat culture, meat trays. There are no pigs in those trays, just the meat.”

“You sell wheat?”

“Yes.”

“I wish for wheat fields. Let me guess, wheat trays?”

“Racks, wheat racks.”

The coffee is real, mostly.

“When I first arrived, they sent me to a clinic. I got some inoculations. A Doctor Vold looked at me, checked my blood, and asked me some questions. Then there were some scanners. They showed up some cancers. Doc cured me right there and said I was fine. How does that sound?”

“Good. You got a clean bill of health.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Your Vern Speedster is secure in your own hanger berth?” Sly charmer.

“Yes. I didn’t sell Vern.”

“Just checking.”

“My ass.”

“That too.”

“Carter, you’re flirting.

“I’m kinda famous, aren’t I?”

“Kind of famous—well I say yes, Joan, you are well known.”

“That’s kinda scary.”

“Really?” Carter’s assuring wink and wrinkles.

“Don’t you think so?”

Carter shrugs.

“Who is Baron Ames?” I ask.

“Just some super rich fat cat. Why?”

“You know he’s got a house on the surface, he calls aboripark?”

“Yeah, he has several.”

“Well, I saw the desert one. He kicked me out of his bonsai basin. I don’t think he likes me.”

“He kicked you out?” says wrinkles smiling.

“Well, we were all standing around at a cocktail party. And, well I did tell Baron Ames that his nature house was less than fly shit on a rhino’s ass.”

I ask, “Do you know where Tom O’Mally is?”

new Booth Street

There up ahead is a grand art deco arch triumph of neon light. It's the Art Space. And there, on the movie marquee, 'art by ceive' and 'Holopsy.'

I carry my berry basket past the empty ticket window. Behind the ticket booth on Booth, there is a table set with drinks. Around the table chatter an artsy looking clique. Plushy lobby carpet cushions softly padding feet.

"Excuse me ma'am," says a gray pallid man. He stands agape agog—his googily eyes fixed on me. He says, "You must have a drink before you enter the gallery."

From his shaking hand, I take the glass before he spills it. His hand is as chilled as the glass. I look around, no one seems alarmed. A booth girl looks on, she nods with charm. The cold drink is strange but good. It's a little like plum nectar—yumm yum nectar.

I'm drawn by strange music that segues into a familiar pop song—a sentimental oldie from my past.

Gray man says, "Before you go in, I'd like to explain a few things about the show."

That's not my style, "I prefer a naive first impression."

"Remember," gray man cautions, "it's only a show. Excuse me," he leaves.

I set down the glass and then I pass through heavy velvet curtains and step into a grassy glade in a piney woods under puff clouds and blue sky. Across the tiny meadow stands Grandpa and Aunt Angie. I run across the oddly even ground. Mom and Dad, hand in hand, step from an aspen stand. Fear and hope and pain and joy, my heart pounds. I'm in heaven. It's only a show?

I throw my arms out, "Grandpa." I pass through Grandpa? "Angie." Angel Angie slips away. "Momma, Daddy," I plead.

Momma says, "Dear sweet Joanie, we're not here."

"Not physically," adds Dad.

"But what?"

"We are your dream," says Grandpa.

“But I’m not sleeping.”

“That is the art,” says Mom. Momma is so young.

“Come with us Joanie,” says Angie, “I’ve laid a blanket out.”

So we walk unto a great blanket, where we sit—where I sit in shock. “You’re all so real.”

Closer, I can but faintly see pretty paisley patterns course through my dear apparitions and the blanket and the grass.

“I miss you all. It’s been so lonely without you.”

Sympathetic eyes, my heart strings pull—dear Momma cries.

My comfort caress passes through Mom’s shoulder. Oh no, gesture slips so hollow and disconcerting.

“I’ll be back,” I say and walk away across the meadow. Past the velvet curtains and into the lobby, I lean against the wall and catch my breath.

Peeking through the curtains—meadow with family. Stepping back—lobby with art clique. In a quiet lobby corner, I sit on a bench and lay my face into my hands.

The cushion sinks beside me. A real hand rests on my shoulder. It’s the skinny guy with the gray pallor.

He says, “Hello, Joan, my name is Ceive. I am the artist.”

He knows who I am. “Ceive, I can’t believe—I mean,” I throw my arm out toward the curtain, “you did this? How can you see into my heart?”

He sweetly smiles, “I can’t but you can. You project what you want to believe. Your visions blare in empty air—I wish I could see. But it’s not there: where you see a cow, I see a cannon.” He tilts his head to others in the lobby, “What he sees is his, what she sees is hers.” Eye to eye, “What you see’s from you, what I see’s from me. Art Space is a dream place—it’s imagination on a romp. Here.”

I take a tumbler from his hand. My pulse quickens, now what?

“Call it an antidote,” he says. “It cancels the illusion.”

I quaff the bitter shot. The familiar pop tune turns strange again.

Ceive says, “Now look into the gallery.”

Inside, future folks wander an empty floor. Some talk to thin air. Rainbow lights flicker and sweep the room.

I sit back on the bench. “Before, I didn’t see any of those folks.”

“Nor did they see you,” says Ceive.

Ceive says, “I’ve seen some of your college artwork. You lay deft lines and have curiously eclectic styles. I’m captivated by the eyes.”

“Huh? My, well, you’re kidding. No? Gosh.”

“Joan, was it artwork that sustained you out in space?”

“Yeah, well, art had a lot to do with it.

“Care for some berries?”

He takes some. His hands are thin and weak.

“They’re messy,” I apologize.

“Could you show me your space art?”

“I think we’d have to ask Vern to conjure them up.”

“Vern?”

“My spaceship.”

“Do you mind?”

“I guess not. How about tomorrow afternoon?”

“Great.”

“Can I have another drink of dream potion?”

Vern, my rocketship, is in his berth. His ancient and pockmarked hull is powdered with frosty white corrosion. Lockheed-Vern Speedster, old man of the cosmic sea, what a trip. My dear compadre.

Inside. I step inside four gray walls, gray carpet, and a white ceiling. It smells pretty bad in here.

“Vern?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?”

“My systems are all satisfactory.”

“Do you need anything?”

“My systems are all satisfactory.”

“Do you want anything?”

“I don’t understand.”

“Good old Vern.

“Joan resume, sculpture menu. That one there — and that one there — and that one there,” and so on.

I choose the Night Rider for the aft display. On the central nav, I rotate my art from space.

Knock, knock, at the bulkhead. Ceive peers in around the open hatch.

“Hi,” I say.

“Hi,” he says.

I invite him, “Come in. Look around.”

Ceive looks around my house. He’s repeatedly drawn back to the nav display. Soon Ceive is absorbed in my art show.

He charms me. I’m a sucker for flattery.

Gray, gray, white; closing tight. “Ceive, I think I’m ready to leave.”

Outside the hatch, Ceive sits in a waiting wheelchair. Beside him pops out a svelte sidesaddle and with a hand flourish, Ceive bids me to sit there. I hop on and off we’re gone.

We cruise out of the quiet wharf and into the pedestrian throng. Like a rickshaw through Canton, we putter along.

“Have you survived yesterdays cows?” Ceive’s tone traces mirth.

“Your dream-land? Yeah, I recovered. Your stuff, it’s not exactly pictures at an exhibition. You’re a genie. My dreams came true before I knew that I had dreamed. I was rattled at first but I got used to it.”

“You know, you can direct your holoptic vision.”

“I kind of thought so, toward the end.”

Between the long cliff side lanes, slopes rise and fall like gentle hillsides. People all around, we roll down, down, down. We roll across the mall to Delight Confectionery.

I can say the art of ice cream has not abated. It tastes the same.

Ceive asks some of the usual questions and, “Do you believe a wild bear could drive a truck?”

What? “I guess. Yes, yes I do.”

We hit the road.

I say, “I need to walk over the land that I was raised on. I need to be under blue sky and feel the warmth of the sun.”

Ceive says, “Do not dash recklessly to the land under the sun in the sky. The tits are dry and life outside is cruel. It is too hot and there is too little water. Those are desperate lands and desperate folks. Desperate folks and sometimes slaughter.

“I’m not saying, don’t go. I’m saying, be prepared and stay alert. And don’t travel in the summertime.”

“Yeah, well, okay, but I have to check it out. Besides,” I say, “I’ve an old friend who still passes that way.”

“Tom O’Mally,” Ceive says.

“Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

Ceive doesn't really talk much. He does have lingering puppy eyes. I think, is he watching where he's driving?

Ceive pulls up to the Reno Auto Museum. I sidle off the saddle and we go in. I can tell that they know who I am. I say my celebrity hellos. I'm told that my Galaxy is in the museum.

Ceive and I check out the old cars. Many are new to me. These cars were built after I left.

I see it, "Look, there it is."

I stand beside the old nineteen sixty-one Ford Galaxy Starliner. Its graceful curving roof line has chrome stars falling down the thin arched rear window pillars. Panel light sparkles in the stars and blue ceiling reflects off strips of chrome. The long tail fin stretches away from the side view mirror to the round rocket nozzle taillights. The dark navy blue paint has faintly faded. Otherwise, it looks just the same.

Beside my Ford, sits Tom's Porsche.

We eat again.

We go to Ceive's place.

We talk about Alpha Centauri.

We smoke cocktails.

I stand and say, "How did the world get this way?"

With a soft click, the catch gives and the door swings gently open. The bathroom light casts my vague shadow across the dull red-brown floor and up a blue bed spread. A pale smoky haze turns in the air, wisps that twine with Debussy's La Mer.

Only the bathroom is partitioned off in this round familiar apartment. Through shadows I move to the kitchen. Across the room in a wash of light, Ceive stares at the floor just beyond his feet. Leaning forward, his angular body's hunched over the arm of a big soft chair. With a couple of beers from the fridge, I walk back from the kitchen, slide in behind the coffee table and take my own warm spot on the couch.

"Here," I hand Ceive a beer. He takes the opened bottle with an absent nod and an amiable grunt.

Wet beer rings and spilled weed lie around the empty beer bottles on the table. I carefully push them aside, making room for my feet. I stretch my toes. Rosy pink vamps, winkles around the corners of their eyes, stare back at me. This beer tastes good.

Turning toward me, Ceive puts a knee across the wide seat cushion of his chair. Bright and sad, his eyes reflect his clear quiet voice.

"Tracing what comes and came to be, and what is. What are the parts? Are there parts?"

"Huh?" A clever reply. I put down my feet and straighten my skirt.

"Things." He answers coyly, as if that were all the explanation I need.

Now looking at my shoulder, now looking into my eyes, he goes on.

"Let's say there are patches of transparent colors. Colors of uncertain sizes and uncertain edges. They're alike and they're not. There in groups and there apart," his hands gesture in air. "Some groups are more alike; groups of groups, alike and not. It's a nebulous mobile of transparent colors with clouded labels and relationships. Looking into the mobile, the colors mix and change without scale."

My own confusion goes unnoticed by Ceive. Lost in his own abstraction, his eyes had dropped into my lap. With maybe a hint of mischief I relax my legs, pulling my skirt taut between them. At that Ceive's eyes meet mine. A slight embarrassed smile falls lightly on his face, then his eyes drop away.

"Ceive, what are the colors?"

After a pause he glances up. "Musings."

“The colors are like ideas or perceptions. They interact forming a picture that shifts with perspective; perspectives on a mobile too large to know. The mobile’s our constructions of reality—from one fleeting notion to the collective consciousness of all. At close inspection each color might shatter, emulsifying into its own vast mobile.

“We sift and weigh ephemeral clouds to find our own approximations.”

I look away from our mutual gaze. What mysteries lie hidden on the floor just beyond my feet.

It’s quiet. The music’s stopped. Ceive’s eyes lay tenderly on mine as I unwind from thoughts recesses. For a moment our eyes linger. Abruptly, Ceive softly bites his lip and withdraws. He turns from me to the coffee table where he happens on his beer. He takes the bottle as an actor grasps a prop and drinks.

Did water well upon his eyes as he turned away?

“What’s the matter, Ceive?”

Ceive turns and looks to me. His eyes are wet, his cheeks are dry. After a pause he says, “I’ve fallen in love with you.”

“Oh,” tumbles from my mouth. And we sit in silence. There’s a pain in my chest. “Well, I like you, maybe even love you—but not as a lover.”

His thin forearms resting on splayed legs, Ceive holds the bottle in both hands. He looks down through the neck into the beer. A tear splashes on his hand.

“Oh, Ceive, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

I’m flattered and a little embarrassed.

“Did you love me before I landed? Have you fallen in love with the idea of me?”

Ceive shrugs his shoulders and his smile. He turns back with shy glancing eyes. His face is a little flush. “I’m sorry too. I don’t talk and then I say too much.”

“No,” I reflect, “our shades of perception have just clashed a bit. We’ll put them together and see what we get.”

He asks, "What do we get?"
I shrug.

Tom was last seen in Shasta.

I buy travel supplies: canteens, big floppy hat, portable sun shade, stuff like that.

Paradise

It's way too early in the morning. For breakfast I order coffee and wish wish—I don't know what this stuff is. I'm getting used to it—all of this future food. The coffee is great.

Magic paper plays the way to the train station, it's not too far. 'Gotta go. I shoulder my bag and take a lift to the top deck. I cross the esplanade and pass between massive buttress walls. Past the boarder check, I leave Submareno for some subway to the land above.

At seven am, I'm standing in line on the platform. Fourteen folks ahead, there looms the ticket window—tickets for the express tube trains. The line moves fast.

"Next," says the bored booth lady.

"One way. Shasta, California."

"California, very funny," she's not laughing. "Shasta, okay," she seems to warn.

Miss ticketeer stamps a holographic bug onto my wrist. The rainbow bumblebee has SHASTA written across its outstretched wings. I take my bumblebee line ticket across the broad platform and board the wide white express. I step past seating passengers. Everybody has colorful wrist bugs. Mid-car there are some empty seats. Mid-car I take the weight off my feet. It still feels early to me. I rest my head back into the cushion. Sprawls of graffiti scrawl across the seat in front of me and down the aisle floor. Over the painted script there walks a man who stops and sits across the aisle. He's giving me the 'hey baby' look. He's an oversized tough guy, sporting one black eye. Just ugly. I turn him off with a look, you know, then I look away.

Outside, I see platform activity has slowed down.

Away we glide into pneumatic tube blue light. Blue light casts the car in blue. I don't know why blue light but the blue feels right. I feel a blue pull, I wanna go home. I wanna go home.

The red graffiti on the seat back says SUCKER. Well yeah, I guess so.

Ugly man has sunk back into his seat. He sleepily looks balefully at me. Fleeting malice ripples across his face. Show no fear to the scary guy.

An uncomfortable tingle tightens my butt. I straighten up. Then he turns forward and nods. He nods and bobs.

Outside there is nothing but blue light on tunnel walls. Beautifully speckled pale gray granite or plain cement? Who can tell as the blue lit wall blurs by.

Oh Romeo snores. His arm hangs loose over the armrest. His beetle says San Francisco. I grab my bag and slip off to the forward car. The forward car's more crowded and not so quiet. I sit between some old people. I lay back and close my eyes.

I dream of rain.

I wake to bright sunlight. The slowing train rolls across a broad salt flat. The land is scattered with ruins like weeds. I look back to see bleak mountains. This must be the fertile Central Valley. The sign on a railroad bridge reads, Sacramento River. The Sacramento River is a wide and empty channel. In the flat bottom meanders scraggly bushes along a dry creek bed.

The train rolls to a halt. A raggedy couple shoulders dusty bags and gets off.

A sweet wrinkled prune gently taps my wrist and says, "This is your stop dear."

"Oh, thank you." I grab my bag and hurry off. I join the unshaven man, his matted haired woman, and scary guy outside. We stand on a platform beneath an open canopy. Slipping on the sandy concrete, I turn back to the train. The white express slips away, back under the sandy plain.

Holy mother. Damn it's hot. Now what?

Scary guy lounges on a bench. The raggedy couple start to walk away.

"Excuse me," I follow, "ma'am?"

She looks back at me, creases worry her bored eyes. "Yes," she replies.

Pointing to my bee, I ask, "How do I get to Shasta?"

"You walk," she says flatly and turns to go her way.

"Shasta is like two hundred miles away," rising panic.

“So,” she says without looking back. They walk away into the wasteland. My heart quickens. I look back—Romeo’s on the bench—leering. I shiver with creeps.

I can’t figure out these station signs.

The couple heads north. I follow them. Out from under the shade, the heat is oppressive. I stop and yank out my canteen and take a long pull. I sling the canteen, grab my sun hat, shoulder my bag, and trudge on. A quick look back, leaves Romeo on his bench. I hope he stays there.

They cross the river. I cross the river. Away from the river channel, nothing grows. Heat radiates up from the baked earth. I shadow the couple up ahead. We give the ruins wide berth, somewhat veering east toward the Sierras. I stop to drink and look back. I see no sign of the train platform or of scary guy. I see nothing and ruins—endless ruins. We walk and walk and walk.

The air is thin.

Slowly the ruins give way to empty wasteland. We walk and walk, yet never seem to gain on those unchanging mountains.

Midday the couple stop to erect a fabric parabola. When I reach them, they have both stripped naked in the shade. The man has a revolver in his hand.

I walk past and walk on. When they are specks far away, I stop and set up my own sun shade. In the shade, I half unbutton my dress and pull it down around my waist. Sweat beads on my skin. I am drowsy.

“Wake up.”

“Huh?” It’s my couple.

“Pack up. It’s time to walk,” says the man.

“Okay.” What else? I button up and drink and drink. We all move on. The sun is low.

My traveling companions are dark of dirt and sun. Their creased leather faces make a mystery of their ages. But I've seen their lean and smooth white asses, they are not old. They both are packing guns. Where did? I don't think they? Not on the train? Maybe they cached them.

"I am Sayth," his voice is horse. He betrays no emotions.

"Joan. Sayth, I am Joan."

"Leesley," weary Leesley.

"Hi, Leesley."

Leisure is our quiet pace.

"Excuse me." My bladder is hurting. I pace off a ways. There is no place to hide. I face them and squat, with my dress down over my knees and hiked up over my back. My shadow is long. Sayth and Leesley murmur in the distance.

Dusk eases the heat. We all three stop to eat.

"You are a strange undergrounder," says Sayth.

"Yes, well, I'm not surprised. I have traveled great distances. I am strange to this land."

Sayth and Leesley exchange glances.

"You are Joan Smith," says Leesley, not at all bored now. "Joan, Joan across the ages?"

"Yes I am."

Each grasps my arm without alarm.

"You are welcome with us," warm gravel Sayth.

"Yes, Joan, you are welcome." Creases around their eyes and smiles. What a relief. With an easier stride, we walk on.

Dusk turns to dark. The mountain's silhouette looms closer. Stars amass like clouds. Leesley giggles.

Sometimes we sit and rest, back to back, we lean against each other.

We cross Interstate 5. The freeway looks fine but there are no cars on it.

Three sand dunes in moonlight glow like the pyramids of Giza. Loose sand underfoot drags the pace. It takes a long time to pass by the pyramids.

And we push on through the night. Numb, dull numb, walk on.

We walk into the rising dawn. I am out of water. Leesley shares her water with me. I have to rest often.

Leesley is out of water. Sayth refills our canteens from his last jug. My muscles are aching. My lips are cracked and bleeding.

Sayth points ahead across the flat land, "See those hills? When we reach those hills, we rest."

A mirage surrounds those hills, like islands on an inland sea.

Distance is deceptive.

They are not hillocks. Are they mountains?

Glaring sunlight is blinding.

My legs are cramping. My gait is chopped. I stumble and fall down. The ground burns me. Sayth and Leesley help me up.

Just past midday, we reach the hillsides.

We climb the northern slope of the second hill and enter a ravine. There we collapse in the shady lee at the base of a cliff.

When I wake, it's dark.

A shadow slight and smells like, Leesley.

"Leesley?"

"Shush," Lees kisses my lips. She hands me a canteen.

"It's almost gone," I whisper.

"Go ahead, drink it all."

I drink most of it. I offer Lees the rest.

"No, I've had mine."

"What about Sayth?"

"He's gone to get more water. He'll be back soon," Lees whispers.

"What was it like?" She asks. "I mean they say that green plants covered the earth."

"Yes, pretty much. The winter rains used to turn the grass too green to describe. This hill was once covered in lush deep grass. There were thick leafy bushes and giant oak trees. The oaks offered a bounty of seeds, called acorns.

"By the time I was born, most of the oaks had already been cut down. Over the flatlands we just crossed, the grass was replaced with crops. We just walked through rice paddies, and fields of beans, and sugar beets, and all kinds of things."

"This hill was covered with grass?"

"All the hills around here were covered with grass."

"Paradise has grass.

"In the old days, we would be wet and cold?"

"Yeah," I sigh. "Maybe, it's winter."

I start to move. "Ow. My legs are killing me."

"We must walk very far tonight."

"Can't we stay awhile and rest?"

"No, this is not our people's land. We won't be safe until we reach Chico Estado."

Lees runs her hands up my legs. “Your muscles are hard as stone.” Leesley rubs and rubs.

“That feels good.” I think aloud, “I wish we had a pickup.”

“I have some pills that will help.”

“Really, I meant a truck. You know, like a car?”

“Oh, yeah. You are so tight. You should take a pill anyway.

“Roll over.”

I scoot to the sandy bottom and roll over. Lees flips my dress up over my back. The air feels cool.

“What pills?” I ask.

“Pickup pills, pick you up. When Sayth comes back, you take two.” She works my calves.

“Can those pills make me too high?”

“No, not too high. They just, ah, pick you up.”

“Okay.”

Leesley’s hands are strong.

“That feels so good.”

“You can drive a truck?”

“Yes, I can.” I’m no eighteen wheeler gear jammer.

“You can fix a truck?”

“Maybe.”

“That’s cool.”

Leesley rubs on up.

“Oh that, yeah there.”

“Your legs are great big knots.

“Why did you leave everybody you knew behind?”

“Everyone in my family was dead.”

“Sorry,” she rubs.

“It’s okay. It was a long time ago.” Oh, Grandpa.

Lees slaps my butt, she’s done.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sayth returns. Lees welcomes him back with a kiss. Then she rummages through her bag.

“I’ve got the water.” Sayth sets down the jugs.

“Here Joan, take these pills,” says Lees.

“Cyclos?” He asks.

“Yes,” she answers.

“Two?” He asks.

“Yeah,” she answers.

“Okay,” he says.

Lees whispers into Sayth’s ear.

Sayth says, “We’ve gotta go. I think they saw me.” Danger is his tone.

We fill our canteens. I take my pills. We check our gear. With urgent stealth we move out. Sayth takes the point.

The air is electric. I feel stronger than ever. In the shadows of the foothills we carefully work our way north. We sprint across the open spaces.

Pantomime is the language we speak tonight.

We climb an embankment and cross old broken pavement. Beside the road there is a bent over sign. I brush off the dirt, it says, HIGHWAY 99.

Sayth and Leesley take it more easily. We move with less haste and stealth.

“We’re in Chico Estado now,” says Lees.

We pass a ramshackle farm. I’m flagging and stop more often to rest. I put my hands on my knees and catch my breath.

Sayth says, “We’re almost home.” He points to the near headland, jutting out into the flatlands. “Paradise lies around the next butte.”

So we walk up the next valley. We walk through lost paradise; knocked down trailer homes, main street, downtown. In the dark, I see no signs of life at all.

We walk up the steep foothills into the mountains. The air is cooler here.

I see a light in a window; cats yawl, there must be people around.

Here comes the sunshine.

At the yard gate of an old brick home, Leesley says, “Momma’s house.”
On the porch, she whispers, “Shush, Momma’s asleep.” Soon we are asleep
too—in Leesley’s room.

Under a spinning ceiling fan, I’m spinning too—in a sweat. I sit up. I don’t
feel good. I’m going to throw up. The window is open. I lean out the window
and puke.

Lees pats my back.

“I guess I got the flu.”

“Not the flu,” she says, “cyclos hangover.”

I slump against the wall beneath the window.

“Here this will help.” Lees hands me a pill and a glass of water.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a half a tab of cyclos.”

I ask, “Hair of the dog that bit you?”

“I guess,” Lees shrugs.

I am so stiff and sore. Lees rubs my legs some more.

I meet Leesley’s mom and her sisters and her brother and her aunts and some
other people. They are nice.

Lees and I pull a wagon of jugs to a public well. The bottles clink and the
wagon clatters over the ruts and bumps. Each step raises little clouds of talc.
Paradise is a dusty town.

Children clamber and ply the dump beside the road. Some little bandanna bandits dig for treasures with spades. One child triumphantly holds a piece of sheet metal over her head. The dump looks rather picked over and meager to me.

Oh Sol feels so good.

Sage and thistle dot the sandy foothills. Distant darker green clumps grow up high on the mountainside.

I ask, “Those dark clumps up there, are those trees?”

Leesley says, “Yes. We plant Monsanto Pinions to replace the dead pines and firs.”

I lick my cracked lips.

Folks stand in line up ahead. This might be a well. Yes it is. Fenced off beside the well, there is a scruffy lawn of yellowed grass.

“Our grass,” Lees beams.

We wait our turn to fill Leesley’s jugs. Nobody walks on the grass.

An old lady offers me a glass of water.

“Thank you. I’m thirsty.” I take the glass.

“My name is Doe,” she says.

“Hi, Doe, my name is Joan.”

The well water—well wished—is, well, bad. It tastes awful. I smile politely and drink my poison.

We fill our jugs. Lees assures me this is the drinking water.

Ragamuffins still scour the refuse. The dump dust plume does waft like smoke.

I’m to bathe in a sort of oversized tea saucer. Lees hands me a gallon jug and a bar of soap.

“You may use the bath water first.”

“Thank you, Leesley.”

Tonight we stroll through the neighborhood. The sounds of party float through the air—music beats, people laugh. A halo shines around the house ahead. We walk through the back yard and see the house next door is lit brightly. It's the light of the party in the yellow house. We walk up the old driveway. From the open windows pour the happy chatter rumble beat. Worn concrete steps rise to the kitchen stoop. Sayth opens the green wooden door. Lees and I follow him into the milling bash. Rubbing shoulders, passing through, I can feel the body heat. Lees kisses everyone we meet. She introduces me.

“Isn't she a doll,” Lees says.

Hi, “Hello, yes I am Joan Smith.”

I meet another Joan. And I meet Tharit and Rojoha and Viem and other names I can't remember. Sweaty bodies, glad happy hands.

We boogie, yeah, yeah.

I'd say Sayth has moved on. We settle into the party throng. Leesley pours me a cup of beer. To beer, we toast and toast with beer. The crush around the keg lets out a cheer, to, beer.

Some big happy guy gives me a hug. He says, “Welcome back from space and time. Welcome home.” Others welcome me home.

I feel welcome home. The music sways a happy sound. ‘Can't stand still with that sound around. We swing on a current surge out of the kitchen and into the den.

The big happy guy says, “Hi Joan, my name is. . . .”

I didn't catch his name.

A tall dark guy gives Lees a squeeze. She smiles up into his serious eyes.

“Pleased to meet you,” he says. “My name is Bob.”

Bob. “Bob, I think I can remember your name.”

Somebody says, “Joan, please tell us a story.” They want to hear about the old days.

I tell them about the forest and the gold mine. I tell them about Tom's bear.

Bob says, “You come from the Waste Age.”

“Is that what you call it now?”

Nods yes around. Oh, okay.

“I can see that,” I say. “Makes sense.”

I still grieve, dear, dear Gaia. “We were careless of the Earth, unwary of cold
vacuous space, unthoughtful of the rapture that created us.

“There is so much destruction. We walked in from a Sacramento train
station. Sacramento looks abandoned. It looks dead. What happened there?”

“You walked in from Sacramento? Damn.”

“Had to,” says Lees.

Bob says, “In the summertime, Sacramento exceeds one hundred and fifty
degrees. Nobody can live there.”

“How hot does it get here?” I ask.

“Last August, it hit one hundred and thirty-two.” Bob adds, “People died.

“That kind of heat is very hard on plants. The more plants die, the hotter
it gets. The hotter it gets, the fewer the plants, the thinner the air. The
atmosphere is dissipating. Worldwide we strive to restore our air. Still, the
oxygen level declines.”

“What is Shasta like?” I ask.

Bob says, “You probably mean Under Shasta.”

“Why would I mean Under Shasta?”

Bob says, “Old Shasta is almost as hot as Sacramento.”

And so, I, “Oh. And so, what is Under Shasta like?”

“I’ve never been to Under Shasta. Undercities are off limits to all of us.”

Tightened jaws—distant angry eyes, I’ve struck a chord among these pals of
mine. Enough said.

Warm vibrations pulse from the other rooms.

“I like it here the best.” I raise a toast, “Here’s the best.”

We drink to that.

“How come my bee said Shasta if it only went as far as Sacramento?”

So I get a roundabout answer. I don't quite get it but the upshot is that sooner or later something would have come along.

I look at Lees and wonder why? Was it the scary guy?

Big happy says, "The buzz is, you found life on two planets around Alpha Centauri.

I run down the lowdown on Water and Nabhar Cinco.

Big happy asks, "What's the fastest that you flew through time?"

"The fastest I flew through time? About eighteen days per hour. That's over a year per day."

"Radical."

"Far out."

"Yeah, far out," I agree.

I gotta pee.

I knew just what was the matter, feels good to empty the bladder.

We join the party in the noisy front room.

Ravens hang out around the snack table. Some talk with guests. Some talk with each other. One bird outstretches his wings, like four feet wide. I have to work up to sharing the chip bowl with the big black birds with the big black beaks.

I ask around, "Does anybody know where Tom O'Mally is?"

Most don't know. Some says he's in Shasta.

I ask a raven.

Raven says, "Tom's here."

I think that's interesting but I don't see him.

Lees leaves with Bob and some women.

The party has thinned. Folks are starting to crash on couches and pads. I've found a nice pad too.

Too much beer.

"Good morning," I think.

There stands an old man in the doorway—like I should know him. Glory, it's Tom.

I run into his outstretched arms—we embrace.

"Tom it's you," I cry in joy.

"I came as soon as I heard you were here," he strokes my hair.

His tousled hair is now white. He has the same incorrigible blue eyes.

We leave.

I forgot my stuff.

The bright gray landscape blurs by off my right shoulder. Tom drives beside my left.

I go on, "Well, yeah—actually, the whole thing was somehow realer than real but I could also tell myself that it wasn't real, that it was art in the twenty-third century. Then I met the artist, Ceive."

Tom says, "I've heard of him and his dream machine."

"It's the fruit punch that got me."

We crest a rocky hilly pass and drive down to cross a broad wasteland. The hot sun glares off the desolate flats. Ahead rises a dark ugly mountain.

A breeze sifts dust into the air. My eyes burn and feel puffy. My nose is getting stuffy.

"We indicate dangerous airborne toxins," Tom's voice is flat.

“What? How dangerous is that?” I seal up my window.

“It’s okay for passing through but I wouldn’t spend the night. How are your inoculations?”

“Fine, I think.”

“They probably are.”

Great, I think.

Tom seals his window and adjusts the air conditioner.

“So where are we going?” I ask.

“We are riding ahead, to that toxic black mountain. In Dump Mountain, you will see the germ that reforests a desert. I helped cultivate that foul earth. I worked there as a laborer. I wanted to work outside.”

“I understand the outside part, but outside here? So far, I’m not impressed. At least Paradise has grass.”

“Mars has grass. Paradise has a dry patch of lawn.”

“How is Mars these days?” I ask.

“Fine, quite a bit warmer. But it isn’t nearly as nice as Earth. You still have to breathe from a hose.”

“Do many people live there?”

“There are lots of Martians.” We laugh.

“There are about a million Martians.” Tom asks, “You didn’t fly past Mars on your way in?”

“Yes and no, I was in a hurry to go home.”

“I know what you mean.”

It’s a mountain of garbage. We wind our way through foothills of trash. There are no children plying through this refuse.

“You’ve been on Mars lately?” I ask.

“Well, yeah, a long time ago. I stopped by on my way in from history. After all, I left from Mars.”

I kid him, “Take me there.”

“Really? No,” his twinkle eyes. “I will take you to Dump Mountain. There you will see creatures like you’ve never seen.”

“Dump Mountain? How charming. And what do you mean, creatures?”

Tom just grins.

“Creatures of the toxic mountain?” I’m intrigued.

“Yeah, creatures,” he says over his shoulder as we sweep over a sand dune. The craft glides smoothly above the surface. Tom drawls, “Out there, the air is poisonous.”

At the base of the mountainside, is the portal of a tunnel over two hundred meters wide. We skim into its dim light.

The walls squirm and, well, if garbage can shimmer—it shimmers. Tom turns up the hull lights. What are those, animals? The walls are shimmering with animal like things. Some are kind of like pig and hippo sized slugs with what looks like slimy elephant skin. Others look like, I don’t know what. They come in all sizes. They completely cover the walls. They mass and churn like bees in a hive.

“They don’t fall off?” I ask.

“No,” Tom replies. “This is a niche in a kind of bioinorganic toxic eating ecosystem. They even eat up radiation, somehow. Anything they eat comes out clean—or safe anyway. These creatures are part of a vast project. In a way, working here reminded me of Lyle’s vast project. Both being vast.”

“Daddy. You know, Dad died in an accident right after you left.”

“Everyone but you did, dear.”

I rest my head on Tom’s shoulder. He puts his arm around me.

“What’s this bioinorganic?”

“They’re inorganic life. Some of it’s hybrid inorganic-organic life.”

“Inorganic life? What’s that?”

“It’s not all carbon based. I can’t really explain it.”

“They look like they’re farting,” I can’t help notice.

“Their gas is nontoxic, mostly air.”

We glide along through the tunnels.

“Tom, what do you think about Nabhar Cinco?”

“I think it’s too far away. All that flying, you know what I mean.”

“Alone. Yeah, really. I’m done with deep space. This time is our time.”

“Our adventure,” says Tom.

“Ooh la la.” Kiss me. I scoot up tight and squeeze his strong arm.

He kisses me, he reads my mind.

There is light at the end of the tunnel.

“The land is clean here.” Tom opens his window. In comes fresh air. Mosses and tiny plants grow toward the light. And they grow thicker and thicker to the overgrown hole to the sky. We pop out onto a green glen dotted with bushy copses. We cruise to the edge of the meadow and park. Young pines grow up the hill beside us. The air is cool. There flutters by a lovely butterfly. We step out on the grass and spread a blanket and a picnic lunch and stuff.

We kiss.

I fall into his deep blue eyes and swim in iris pools.

Tom takes off his shoes, then he takes off mine. Tom pulls off his shirt. There is his aging skin and his broad muscled chest.

Tom croons, “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“You are my only one.” My pattering heart.

“Let me help you with those buttons,” he unbuttons my dress.

I stammer, “Yes.”

We are naked. Tom has an erection.

He lays me back with a long soft kiss. Skin on skin. I spread my legs. He pokes and prods me there. Tom slides down over my belly and . . . “Yes.”

Wild he sends me with his fingers and his tongue. I, I come and come.

Don’t stop, don’t stop.

He pushes in and in, “Ah, ah.” Tom fills me up. Rhythmic rocking: bump, bump, bump, and grind.

“Yes!” I grind. He reaches places deep inside me. I come.

He pumps, he grunts. He comes, we come.

Oh so bliss from my warm cunt.
 I whisper, “I love you.”
 Tom’s slipping out. My legs wrap tighter.
 “Stay inside,” licentious whisper, “stay inside me.”

Wet ass. Happy.

In little green eden, smells of him and sea and blood.
 Ancient miracle of sex and love.
 Womb and life and hope.

“So, will a bear commandeer your car while we eat?”
 Tom starts chuckling. I chuckle too, I’m not sure why.
 “There never was a bear,” says Tom. “Or, well. . . .”
 “Or, well?” I cheerfully mock.
 “There was a bear but we never saw it. And it never drove the truck.”
 “What?”

“Dawn and I were bombing around drinking wine. I drove toward the lower creek ford. I was fourteen at the time. We were goofy kids. I wore my football helmet. Dawn was practicing her lines for Romeo and Juliet. Dawn was Juliet.

“Off a dropping crook in the road, I slid head-on into a stout fir tree. Dawn had her seat belt on. My helmet cracked the windshield.

“We got out. I stepped back, fell over a rock, and sat in a pile of fresh bear shit. Behind me there were big claw gouges on a tree trunk and bear fur.

I smashed some fur into the windshield cracks. Dawn scooped poop onto some bark and plopped it on the seat. Then she wiped it off—but not too perfectly. The Twinkies were already squashed on the dash. So I didn’t crash the truck, a bear did it.”

“Fig Newtons.

“You thought up the bear story?”

“Yeah, we did. I don’t think Pop really believed the story. But he didn’t punish us for it. Later, he’d boast about that bear.”

“It was one of Grandpa’s favorite stories.” And mine.

“I had a secret too that day.” I trace the scar on my arm—just below the shoulder. I tell Tom about about my day so long ago, naked dodging raw broken rocks. Tom traces my shoulder over around my breast and down there.

Well, yes.

We glide through the night on a magic carpet. Cuddling against Tom’s arm, well.

“Now where are we going?”

“My home away from home,” he says.

It kind a bugs me about the bear.

The moon is full.

Tom’s home is a bedouin tent.

He pulls back on the tent flap and walks in. A lamp flicks on. Tom stops short and I bump into him.

“Honey,” he sounds strange.

I say, “Yes,” as she says, “Tom.” I’m startled.

Long graying hair, pretty face, her eyes meet mine.

“Tom, who is this?”

I might say the same. Who is this woman in your bed?

“Honey,” Tom says, “I’d like to introduce you to Joan, Joan Smith. Joan, I’d like you to meet Diana, my wife.”

Stun me. “Your wife.” My voice sounds distant to myself. “Bastard.”

I look right at him, “You slut!”

Tom winces.

I leave their tent.

“Tom?” Diana sounds angry.

Tramping off, I stomp the earth beneath my feet—trailing angry voices wailing from the tent.

On a low ridge crest, I look back—distant glows the fabric home. Tom does not follow me. He does not call. I sit and cry. Damn you, Tom. I love you, you. Fuck you. He does not look for me.

I walk the barren ridge.

I take one last look back. No Tom.

Tears turn to sobs.

From the valley below, I hear running water. Sidesteps, I work my way down the backside of the ridge, toward the gurgling sound.

Somewhere, far away across the central valley, lies Paradise.

It is steep and slippery down the barren slope. That sound, is a creek?

Fuck you, Tom. I wish I never fucked you, Tom.

There is a stench before the stream. It smells of chemicals and gasoline. The stink is nauseating.

I skip the poisonous drool. On the opposite bank I slip and nearly fall in what?

An ancient dirt road winds up the gulch. My way is blurred through tears and pain. I stop and lay back against a steel drum for fitful rest. Sweat and shiver—shiver and sweat.

The moon sets.

The sky lightens distant off over my port of call.

A breeze is picking up.

I am stiff. This big steel drum is a poor backrest. The rusty half buried drum was once gray. I can make out white Cyrillic letters — Grandpa's Russian drums.

Oh familiar, unfamiliar terrain. Huge mine dumps. Rusty industrial ruins. The old cabin lies collapsed. Rusty window frames, shards of windowpanes. There is no potable water. The sun is rising. It's twelve miles to Cascade.

Eroded road, really a path now, leads through the twists and turns of memory. The land contours were once obscured under the verdant skin of Gaia. Some few flakes of her dandruff remain. Faintly green scrub dwarfs cling few and sparse, here and there — across the bare earth. Derelict aluminum power line towers stand mute sentinels over the looted landscape. Distant bent and broken towers are accomplices in their own destruction. The worn path's eroded through with a precipitous gully gash. I detour up beside the raw scar 'till I can leap across the narrowed chasm. From high upon the slope I survey the waste of Grandpa's mine.

The breeze has died. The sun is hot. I am burned and dehydrated.

The slide area has slid across the road. I transverse the slippery slope. Rocks dislodged underfoot tumble endlessly down.

The ridge road leads up out of Walsh Gulch and back down the southern fork. All these places I have driven are long long walks now.

My head is baked, my feet are searing.

I don't know what I'm so upset about. Tom hasn't changed. What did I expect? Tom always was a dick dog.

Miles are miles on foot.

Beyond the gap between two foothills, there are the giant dredged boulder furrows. Beyond the boulders are the rooftops of Cascade.

Large bullet holes pockmark the stucco houses on the outskirts of town. Curtains hang in the windows of homes that seem to be abandoned.

A pack of some scrawny dogs is walking up the road. Those lost waifs don't pay much attention to me. Listlessly, they ramble past, on dog patrol.

In an open square ahead, a half dozen trees cling to life. Two little girls hand pump water into a big plastic bucket. They eye me suspiciously.

The littlest one asks the other, "Quién es esa mujer?"

"Shh."

"Tú a mí no me mandas. Quién es ella?"

"No sé. No es de aquí."

"Ah."

On opposite sides, each girl grasps the bail. They lean apart to lift the heavy pail and carry it away.

I drink from the faucet. The water tastes like plastic.

An old woman comes. Under her yoke hang two large jugs. While she fills her jugs, I sit in the shade of dusty leaves. When her jugs are full, she goes too.

I drink from the faucet. The water smells faintly of gasoline.

I'm hungry.

A rangy teenager boy lopez into the square. He fills a large bota.

To me, he mumbles something quietly.

"What?"

"Do I know you?" he asks again.

I answer, "Nope, just passing through."

"I didn't think I ever saw you before," his voice cracks.

Stinky boy sits beside me.

"My name is Bo."

"Hi Bo, I'm Joan."

Bo pulls out a crusty roll and gnaws at it.

I am transfixed. My stomach growls.

"You want some rolls?" He stammer stares at my cleavage.

In his few thin clothes, I don't see anymore rolls. I duck my head and catch his blushing eyes that shift away. "Do you have any?"

Bo runs his fingers through his greasy hair.

Bo blurts, “At home?”

What’s he asking? I ask, “You have rolls at home?”

He lets his breath out, “Yes and beans too.”

“Are you inviting me over for a meal?”

“Yes,” stutter, “yes, if you want to come.”

“Just to eat,” I say, “then I’ve got to go—I cannot stay.”

He looks at me and nods okay.

“Yeah sure, thank you.”

He jumps right up. He leads the way.

The way strays off main along a back street, through an alley, and across an open lot. Bo picks a path between heaps of discarded appliances, auto artifacts, broken bottles, and smelly garbage. Beyond the trash looms a tall grayed building. Its warped and weathered boards have raised and wavy grain. Up cement blocks we climb, under the leaning facade.

At the threshold I ask, “Your home?”

“Sort of,” he says. “Wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.”

Bo leaves me in the stairwell foyer. Floors creak as he rambles around the house.

Bo leans over a rickety rail and says, “Come on up.”

I gingerly ascend the stairs. Bo’s apartment is as spare and tattered as his clothes. His clothes that he has all but underpants shed.

Boner boy sets out some not too dirty plates.

I turn the sink tap, nothing.

Bo says, “The only water in town comes from the public pump—where the trees are. All the other water is poisoned by the mines.”

Bo ladles up some beans and sets out crusty rolls and water. I am famished. There are plenty of beans.

I eat and eat.

A booming angry voice rumbles up the stairs, “Who’s up there, is that you Bo? Are you stealing my food!”

Bo’s fearful face sends me to my feet. I spin around to face the door.

Bo’s trembling, “Zack.”

There is a bear of a man. Wild hair and beard and eyes. From loud anger to chilling menace, he looks me up and down and says, “My now, what do we have here?”

Over stark fear—so bold I say, “I’m leaving,” and muster swagger toward Zack and the door.

Open hand he slaps me hard upon my breast and sends me reeling back into the room.

Through a yellow teeth grimace he growls, “Like hell you are. That food’s not free, bitch.”

Zack grabs my arm and walks me back into the table. His free hand pulls my dress up.

Panic drives my knee into his balls. I yank from his dirty calloused paws and back away.

Zack rages.

I come alive.

Zack throws murderous lurching roundhouse swings. My hands up and skipping back, head slips and hands parry bone and muscle cannon balls. His knuckles crack my cheek and rocks my head around. I’m staggered back. The bedroom doorway is behind me. I keep my hands up.

Wild madness burns in his eyes.

Zack launches a lurching glancing blow. I grab his passing wrist and pivot pitch him forward off his feet. The way he swings is the way he falls. His big fat skull slams the door jam.

I flee on Bo’s flight down the stairs.

Glancing back, I don’t see Zack.

Bo and I; we run and run, and run and run.

I don’t see Zack.

Bo runs into a crumbling warehouse. We climb to a nest of rags where we plop down. We huff for air.

“Does Zack know about this place?”

“No,” says Bo.

“Zack’s sure crazy about his beans.”

My heart flutters, our titters gasp and titter tears.

“You kicked his ass.”

“I kicked his ass.”

Will I stop shaking? My heart still pounds.

I am weak. I am spent. I lie down and close my eyes.

The warm sun shines through a lattice of roofing gone. Dappled rafter shadows drape across the wild boy’s nest. I leave him sleeping.

Were the stair boards really this rotten when we tramped up? Outside, occasional bits of curb line the dirt sidewalk.

Those few people on the street are all carrying bundles or pulling carts. I think they are leaving.

Distant gunshots crack and pop.

I stop off at a bar I’ve known. The place is empty, I help myself.

In the dusty mirror, I see, I’m sporting a shiner aside my sore and swollen cheek. ‘Morning.

Sitting alone at the bar, sipping rude gin, looking absently out the hazy huge plate glass windows of the Cascade Saloon. Seeing nothing really, the empty bar across the street. The battle rattles and blasts on the outskirts of town thump through my heart.

Stupid, how could I be so stupid. Why am I here? To see Tom? That asshole. I wish he was here.

The gunfire grows closer.

Ceive knew enough to stay away.

A concussion blasts the windows in and throws me to the floor. I scramble around on hands and feet to behind the bar. I look around the bar, across the room, out the now gaping open front. A burst of white laser severs a man—mid trunk. Bulging eyes, he falls face up; his head hits the sidewalk with a thud. His blood. . . . Breaking cover, I dash in tunnel vision for the bathroom hall, past the kitchen, and the back door—is locked! The bathrooms—have no windows. I look down the hall and spring across to the kitchen. Yes there's a window, but it's over my head. Anything to stand on? No!

Running into the bar room, I grab two stools and flee back to the kitchen.

I hear boot steps and shouting out front in the street. With both arms and all my might, I throw one stool through the window. I leap on the other which clatters away as I heave myself up across the window sill. Just as I pull my legs over the sill, a blast blows me clear across the alley. Bricks of the Cascade hit me and fall around me.

I get up and run. I run away from war noises: up the alley, over a low sagging chain link fence, up a back porch, and through an empty house. Ducking through the front yard, I peer around an old washing machine that has rusted to lace. The street looks clear. I dash across. Shots whiz by as I stumble around the side of a tall wooden building. Behind the building is an empty lot where I dive into a shallow ditch choked with tumble weeds and catch my breath. My heart is pounding—bursting. Through the weeds, I watch men slice buildings with lasers. Some buildings stand, some buildings collapse. One fucker sweeps his laser toward me but before I'm dead, he clasps his hands to his chest, falls to his knees, then on his face. Explosions rock the ground and fill the air with dust. I look up from the ditch. I don't see any . . . yes I do. They're looking away. I crawl on my belly to an old Lincoln Continental lying wheelless across the ditch. I crawl under the Lincoln and squirm up around the front of the engine. God damn it, my foot, okay, ugh, okay, that's better. I sit on the frame and rest my head and back against the fan shroud. The exhaust manifold's under my knee and my feet are under the heater box.

Voices and footsteps approach the car.

“No one inside or in the trunk.”

“Pop the hood.”

Jolting clacks and creaks!

“It won’t open.”

Weeds crunch beside me and a deep voice bellows beneath me, “All clear down here.”

My heart pounds in my ears and I have to breathe. With my mouth wide open I try to draw air without making a sound but gasp and I’m sure he must hear me. Foot falls and voices move away and different voices come.

My blouse is sticky wet with blood. I think it’s from my hands. My knees are getting stiff. I’ve got a knot in my back and my ribs hurt—I hope they’re not broken. I pull glass from my palms and my tender face.

Concussion waves crash down on my shore, shrapnel rain beats the sheet metal—dust rolls in under the rocker panels.

I hear scattered troops in and around my parking lot.

Hours later.

It’s sweltering in here. My butt aches from sitting on this steel frame rail.

I wish they’d go away. I’m so thirsty—I wish I’d drank more water and less gin.

Men bivouac in my parking lot.

Blessed evening cools my brow.

Slowly, I tear loose a rotted radiator hose. Upon the hose, I pillow my head.

The night is cold. It's too cold to sleep.

Second day, dozing in and out.

It's hard to breathe. My tongue scrapes like sandpaper against the back of my throat. I need something to drink.

Last night I took relief on the ground under the car. My butt is so sore. I scoot from cheek to cheek. My kidneys hurt and my legs keep falling asleep. I push poo poo away with a stick, quietly, I know they're still around. I want to give up.

Damn you, Tom. I'm an idiot.

Groaning. Groaning, did I dream of groaning? Was I groaning? No groaning, no groaning.

Tonight I clamp my teeth against the chatter. I want to live. I've got to stay awake.

Third day.

Days, daze, malaise. Flies fly lazily in the heat. Some walk across the hills and through the dry cleavage gulch. Naked I sit on my folded dress. Just a breeze and a sip of water, please. A cool breeze by a mountain stream—in a meadow under a shady oak. Clear cold snow melt water. And no flies on my face. I readjust the rubber hose behind my head, then stretch my legs across the inside fender. I wipe cleavage gulch with my finger and taste the salt. I am so dry. I wet my tongue on the blood of my cracked lips. Sore throat and bruised ribs—it hurts to breathe.

Daze days, longer than space days.

Steps coming closer: with the padding sounds of boots crushing sand and shuffling gravel. Boot steps walking, stopping and walking around my car.

“Hum,” he grumbles.

The passenger door creaks open. He gets in. I can see his crotch through a hole in the fire wall.

I think he’s taking a nap.

After he leaves, I dry heave nothing and faint.

I drift in and out in the heat.

Holy Mother, I have forsaken you.

Please forgive my trespasses.

I am shamed for what I have done.

Holy Mother, I have forsaken you.

Please forgive my trespasses.

I am shamed for what I have done.

God bless the Janes.

Evening.

I’m twisted with my head hanging down above the ditch. My arm is stuck behind my back. A bolt digs into my elbow as I struggle to untie myself.

I’ve heard only distant voices and gunfire since midday. I can’t wait any longer. I am so stiff and weak.

Lowering myself off the frame and back out around the engine, brush snaps like firecrackers. Slowly I scoot out on my back from under the Continental and see the deep blue sky. Out past my waist, I try to sit up but I’m too weak. So I roll over, squirm out, push myself up with my hands, sit in the ditch and look around. The sun wanes. I don’t see anyone. It’s cooler out here. I button

my dress and tie my shoes. Grabbing an old Lincoln door handle, the grip feels pitted and rusted. I try to pull myself up. No and try again. Oh, my ribs. I push and pull myself up to my knees, throw my arms over the windowless car door and I'm on my feet—sort of. My joints pop, my legs ache. There's no one in sight.

Water. Where is water?

I pull a branch of dry thistle from my hair. And walk. The ground swells under my feet. I can barely breathe past my swollen scraping tongue. I have to stop to catch my breath. I lean against a brick wall, feeling faint. I slump to the ground with my back to the brick. After I catch my breath, the spinning in my head stops. I pull myself up off the sidewalk and walk. I walk from cover to cover in weary stealth, stopping to lean against a wall, or sit in an alley—hidden behind trash. I see no one. Cascade looks as abandoned as Bodie after the rush turned to dust and memories.

Walk on.

I'll stop at the stoop two houses ahead.

One house.

Just a few more steps.

I sit hard on the second step and hang on the stair railing.

I've got a pounding headache. The cracks in the sidewalk go deep into the ground. Like bugs dig.

Water.

I'm sucking water from a soggy towel. Sweet water, good water.

A slender boy, sweet angel, hovers into view. He holds the terry to my lips, he whispers into my ear, "It's okay, don't make any noise. We'll be safe, if you are quiet."

I nod my head. My head pounds—all over my brain hurts.

I sip down a cup of water and fall asleep.

Dim light casts upon the underside of plywood flooring. We're in a crawl space. Tired alert eyes, a woman sits stooped beneath protruding carpet nails. Weary worn she smiles and holds a finger to her lips, she shushes silently.

A little pink towel soaks in a white ceramic bowl. She wrings the water to my mouth. She helps me sit up. I drink from the bowl. She feeds me bread mush and salted grubs. No words are said. She adjusts my blanket. I fall asleep.

I drink more water and eat some bread.

I slide over to the momma. I whisper into her ear, "May I take some water with me?"

Momma looks away and, "No," is all she says.

I hug the momma tight and whisper into her ear, "I love you, dear, you saved my life." We part.

I squatting amble over to the angel by the way outside. "I love you, Angel," I whisper in his ear, "you saved my life." I brush past Angel, step up out of a corrugated rust hole, and walk into the blue afternoon.

And walk through the crumbled ruins. Bricks, wood, and glass litter the ground. The body of a dead child—a pretty girl. The smell of death.

Shots pop off from the direction of the water pump.

A few broken buildings silhouette against the sky, most lie in spilling heaps of rubble. From a pile of plaster and lath, something reflects in the setting sun. In the jumble and the splinter are torn scraps of clear sheet plastic, including a piece a full arm span square. I shake it out and fold it up. In another heap of a building, I tear off a strip of couch upholstery and tie it around my waist. I tuck the plastic under my belt and fold it over off one hip. On a yellow vinyl floor there lies a large unlabeled can of something—no rust, looks like food. I pocket a broken hinge that might make a good can opener and cradle the can on my plastic padded hip. I try faucets, nothing.

A shabby thin man steps off the sidewalk. He spots me and we hide from each other, then go our separate ways.

Behind hanging shards of glass, a thick beige curtain hangs askew on a broken rod. I pull it down and throw it over my shoulders.

It's dark now on the outskirts of Cascade. The moon casts half light.

Outside of town, I stumble across long abandoned furrowed rows. From field to field to empty desert, mile after mile, trudging on. A gusting wind blows from the north.

Stopping to rest in the lee of an embankment, I lie in the sand between sage bushes. Here I will make camp. Over those bushes, I stack together a shelter of tumbleweeds.

The hinge is sharp. Nearby lies a comfortable rock to pound the hinge. I hope it's green beans as I drive the hinge into the can. Smells good—it's sweet. I drip some juice on my tongue.

I can't breathe, I can breathe, I choke and cough. It's peaches! This is the best peach juice I ever drank. I cut and bend the top off the one liter can. Through the night, I sip the sugar juice and savor the peach slices.

How the dead plea with dead eyes
A pretty girl dances her dead dance
Through the stars

I wake from this dream of the pretty girl dancing through the stars. She's still haunting me.

The field around me is black. The stars are thick. I can see the pretty little girl with her horrible dead eyes.

Up before dawn, the air is chilled. I wring and suck the meager morning dew from stunted desert plants. With an old broken plank, I gouge and dig a solar still pit. I fill the hole with a desert wreath and pee on it. In the center of these plants there set the empty peach can. Over the hole I lay the clear plastic sheet. Rocks and dirt around the edges seal the plastic over the pit. I roll the drain stone to the center of the plastic. The plastic dips over the empty can.

Occasional shots still pop from Cascade over the horizon.

I spend the day in the shade of the tumble weed palace. The still cooks in the sun. Sometimes condensation fogs the plastic. Droplets trickle down and drip into the can. In the evening I find perhaps two cups of water. I sip the water. It smells like pee. I've got to find find more or I'll die. Folding and tucking my still away, I head out—through the evening into the night.

I walk away. I walk along the moon shadow edge of a raised railway bed.

Damn.

I tripped and can't get up. I lay back on a bush and rest. Twigs of the bush poke my back.

Crawling around the bush, I roll into a shallow dry channel. I climb to my feet up the opposite bank. My legs ache. Walk on.

A shadow rises above a low wall of black on the horizon.

The black wall is of scattered bushes. Crouching in the junipers, I see a house with a dark roof and light walls. The windows are dark and the air is silent.

A stick snaps under my shoe.

Freeze and wait, sit, and finally I lie down and pull the curtain over me.

False dawn brightens the eastern sky. A song bird twitters.

Approaching the house.

I've crept around the house and I see no sign of anyone. I creep in through the back door.

The kitchen is empty. The kitchen faucet is dry. The pantry is stocked with plastic jugs of water! Smells like, I taste it, oh yuck, it's alcohol. The next jug smells like alcohol: alcohol, alcohol, alcohol. They're all alcohol. Great, more gin. "Damn."

Window panes are broken here and there. Some curtains hang faded and frayed. In one room, an upside down chair lies flopped in a pile of trash. In the next, a right side up chair sits by a mattress on the floor. Spare empty rooms, dry taps, nothing to drink or eat.

In the center of the garage sits a faded blue Volkswagen Polo—on blocks with the hood removed. Some fender dings, a cracked windshield, the doors open and close; it has pedals and a steering wheel. Wrenches strewn around, a yellowed repair manual on the passenger seat, dark greasy fingerprints on the dusty dashboard; somebody's been here recently. Where are they now?

Is this thing drivable? Let's see, it's an air cooled three cylinder two stroke with direct injection. But where's the injector pump and the blower? And why is the top of the intake plenum ground flat? The crankcase oil looks fine. Gasoline might be a problem.

On the work bench sits an old downdraft Weber carburetor. Next to the carb are some gaskets and stuff. Was somebody converting this car to run on

alcohol? A greasy box at the back of the bench is full of brittle plastic 35mm film canisters. The canisters are full of carburetor jets.

Maybe I should finish this guy's project. It must be over a hundred miles to Paradise. There's plenty of alcohol in the pantry. It'd be nice to drive.

Back outside, I crawling scramble up the railroad bed and scan. Near the house are two ramshackles and two tumble-downs and nothing at all around as far as I can see. There is no patch of green that might say 'spring water here.'

The cistern is dry. The well is dry.

Nothing in the shed—broken bits on the dirt floor—a box of stinky bottles, scraps of old newspaper, more dirt—no water.

Sunlight shines through rafters on the half caved roof of the little house, ramshackle two. In a broken wooden rocking chair sits an armless doll, sweetly serene, in a dirty blue satin dress. Digging through a filthy pile of porno magazines, I pull out a banana shaped sheet of clear plastic. It's at least a meter long. Another solar still. Nails, a bent fork, a green glass bottle neck—no water, no food.

Lifting, pulling pixie sticks on the tumble downs—poke and dig around. Corrugated tin, nails, broken glass, nothing, nothing, nothing.

I dig around the juniper roots, no water. I dig two stills I fill with juniper. The juniper is dry. I think they're dead. In the rising blast of Sol, I retire to the shady garage.

Banging the bottom of the fuel tank with a 30mm box end wrench, the tank sounds empty. I pour in a couple gallons of alcohol. Walking to the front, I push the cables into the battery sockets. I jump the starter with a screwdriver. I'm startled. It cranks.

Now how do I make this beast run on alcohol? This carb looks too big for this tiny two stroke. Oh well, maybe it'll work.

This car's got an electric fuel pump at the tank. I don't need the blower or the injector pump, I hope. With a hacksaw I cut a plate from an old dishwasher. The block off plate covers the open blower drive port on the block.

The top of the intake plenum has been drilled. Hand filing shapes and widens the hole to fit the butterfly valves. Push, pull, cut, cut; aluminum filings sift like diamond dust.

Walking out into the dusk, I stumble at the stills. I drink the water. Not enough water. I crawl away. My arms are shaking. On the back porch I sit and rub my arms are thin. My whole body is withering. I crawl through the door and pull myself up on a chair inside. Catch my breath and up I stagger to the bed where I flop and pull a curtain on the day.

In false dawn, I dig new stills.

Twitter twitter lee, oh sweet melody. Where is the bird in the juniper tree? None take flight and the branches are empty. There is no bird, just a melody.

With some handy Metalmaster Quickset, the carb glues neatly to the manifold.

A nylon cord runs from the carburetor throttle through eye rings I screwed into the cowl. The cord runs into the car and ties to six inches of broom handle. The carb throttle return spring is wired to the oil temp sensor.

My stomach is so empty.

I didn't find the keys, so I take the steering column apart and toss out the ignition lock. I use the repair manual to sort out which wires are which. Then I strip the ends off two short and two long wires and jump the switch. The starter cranks. The battery is great.

I set the choke with a small pair of Vicegrips. Jumping the ignition to on, I pull at the hand throttle and pump the carb. The starter cranks but the engine doesn't even hint of firing—not even a backfire. Nothing. I leave the ignition on. I pull the coilplug cassette and crank it. The spark plugs spark. I take the fuel line off. Dry. I've got spark but no fuel.

The fuel pump isn't working and I can't make it work.
Fucking Volkswagen piece of shit! I quit for the night.

Nothing much in the stills.

In the morning, there is no dew—just dry leaves.
I hear the song twitter.

With the last bolt out, the gas tank drops to the floor with a bang.
I put on four plastic spare tires. One lug breaks, that still leaves three to hold that wheel on. I jack the car off the blocks. I top up the brake fluid. The brake pedal feels really soft.

I struggle and grunt and lift and drop and drag and shove the gas tank onto the Volkswagen's roof. I square the tank on a carpet pad and strap it down. Twisting wires clamp the gravity line at the tank and the Weber.

I try to start it. After a while, the engine sputters and dies.

I try bigger jets, I try smaller jets, I dry the plugs, the timing is off, I plug vacuum leaks, and I quit for the night.

I'm thirsty.

I fool with the jets and timing until the engine seems to run okay—for a blown direct injection gasser running on atmospheric carburetion and alcohol.

Polo drives out of the garage, down the driveway, and into the gutter and into the street. The left rear brake caliper has a hopeless leak, so I crimp the brake line and cut it off. There is only about half a bottle of brake fluid left. It just fills to the bottom of the master cylinder. The brake pedal is even mushier. There is no hand brake. Anyway it stops okay.

Polo and I drive off down the road, up over the railroad tracks and off to Paradise. To the Sierras and the rising sun, Polo skirts the shore of a sea of dunes. The sand ranges in my path. Polo drives in sand and stops and slowly backs around. Dunes tower before the winter sun. It must be over one hundred degrees. I stop and check the tank. I top it up, it's used five gallons of alcohol. I drive back around into the northern dirt and rubble.

Aft, the Sierras loom low and hazy gray across the horizon. Bouncing along, following a gully further west. Finger lakes of tumble weeds choke up the gullies. Impassable vast gray gullyland. Ow, this headache.

Pale thistles sparsely populate the bleached earth. Scattered wisps of dry grass—bits of prickly this and that. A scrawny jack rabbit hitch hops ahead along the Polo path. Rabbit skips off into the gully briars. Lovely scrawny rabbit.

Gullyland all day. The Sierras loom lower across the Central Valley vast and far away. The golden Sierra ribbon basks in the setting sun.

I drove all day, I'm further away.

Hi Mom.

