THE ISLANDS OF THE MOON

A NOVEL IN VERSE
BY RIVER JACKSON

I. WE RISE AT DUSK

We rise at dusk on Winter Solstice Night,
donning our goggles to protect our sight,
and dance out through the daddy-long-legs light
to gain perspective from a perfect height.

We climb up on the roofs and higher banks,
purportedly to offer reverent thanks
for this, our Longest Night, but actually
to hurl abuse and shout profanity
at the retreating Sun. We jeer and boo
and scream defiance at the bully who
beats up the Earth by day, as from our view
he slinks away, descending deep into
the flat aquatic plain of brownish blue
where he is drowned. (Of course, it's easy to
defy an enemy in full retreat,
as though his exit signified defeat.)
We hear him hiss and sigh and sizzle when
his fiery head ducks underwater.
Then,
as those of us above the age of ten
attend our evening duties (feeding hen

and horse, letting the boars out of their pen,
milking the lady goats, setting their men
to chewing up the new-grown prickly briar),
the children split the wood to feed the fire
to cook the Winter Solstice Feast. They each
select a piece of oak or birch or beech
killed by the summer Sun and swing a sledge
against an iron axe-head or a wedge
until it splits in two, and then re-split
each half in two again with two more hits--
and then each half of these is split once more.

And so they learn how to divide before
they strive to multiply our scrawny lot
upon these hostile islands--harsh and hot
except on certain winter nights like this,
when we experience a balmy bliss
as Mother Moon presides over the night
and soothes and cools us with her Lunar light.

In olden times, we're told, the "snow" was white,
and even by the light of Sun it might
hold fast and keep its shape all day, its soft
slopes cushioning the jagged rocks. A loft
of "icicles" trimmed wooden houses' eaves
(before the reign of Hurricane, who leaves

such easy targets scattered on the sea,
converting them from homes into debris),
and when the mid-day Sun grew hotter, they
would melt just long enough to lengthen--say,
an inch or two--and then refreeze again.

Imagine such a thing! It must have been
so beautiful, to see them glimmering
above the fields of white and shimmering
beneath the light of Mother Moon! Despite
all scientific evidence, we might
imagine that is why the Moon is white:
that she is covered with, or made of, snow.

Our chores thus hastily dispatched, we go
back to our longhouse (which you may observe
is made of stone and built into the curve
of this wide western-facing cliff; that way
the angry Sun's most unforgiving rays
don't strike till nearly half-way through our days).
We water down the roof and outside walls
and light the breakfast fires, just as the calls
of crickets from the thickets in the wood
are heard. (Our evergreens continue good,
you gentlemen have noticed, though I fear
the hardwoods die at faster rates each year.)

Fermented fire-ant curd is what we eat
atop our hotcakes, as a special treat
this one night of the year. Its spicy-sweet
gross-gamey flavor, its complex bouquet--
overtly aromatic in a way
no Western nose can even tolerate
for very long, much less appreciate--
is something Easterners associate
with Solstice Night and so anticipate
with salivation when we celebrate
Sun's umpteen-hour retreat into the sea.

(Of course, our children know, as well as we
ourselves do, that our foe continues west,
never relinquishing or needing rest--
but it is part of our tradition to
explain it so, this night; it's what we do.)

So I apologize to all of you
about the gassing you received as you
approached our village. We had no idea
you were coming! But the diarrhea
and the vomiting is always brief;
the nettle tea brings fairly quick relief.
And I assume you're feeling better now--? ...

Though it's been years, I still remember how
that first exposure to the smell of bugs
or grubs sautéing in the saucepan tugs
at the esophagus when one is not
accustomed to insect cuisine. I got
my own initiation at sixteen,
when I arrived here, all alone. Between
the nudity of the inhabitants
and their rude habit of ingesting ants
and flies and fleas, I felt I had arrived
upon a foreign planet! I survived,
however, and within a week or two,
I'd learned to love the sweet six-leggéd goo.

It's an acquired taste, admittedly;
the unaccustomed palate obviously
must make adjustments. But I think each man
and boy of you will manage. When you land
on shore after a month at sea, the sand
shifts strangely underneath your feet. You can
and do adjust--and just that way, you'll span
the gastronomic gulf between your clan
and ours, I'm sure. (You'll love the cricket flan;
it's thought to be, from what I understand,
richly nutritious--and incredibly
delicious.)

Every Winter Solstice, we
indulge ourselves in all our favorite treats.
But in addition to these sweets, the meats
we eat--smoked goat, fried mice (they go so nice
with our December rice, prepared with lice
and lightly spiced), and rooster stew--all form
a part of our great feast. It's not the norm
for us to eat so much, but once a year
we stretch our guts; so your arrival here
on just this night is lucky, in a way--
although in honesty I'd have to say
a few nights to prepare your stomachs for
direct insect digestion might be more
desirable.

But you'll be glad to hear
about the "centerbeast." Much like the deer
they used to hunt on Solstice Evening years
ago (before the Sun rendered them blind
and they all starved or drowned, the people dined
on deer on holy nights), we feast on boar--
the animal the mountain folk before
the Great Apocalypse called "razorbacks,"
now re-domesticated. Roasting racks
are raised beneath the stars. I think you'll find
the taste much like your pork. We fry the rind,
render the lard, and save the guts to make

our grub-worm sausages--but stacks of steak
and organ meats remain for grilling then
and there. And so, you see, you gentlemen
won't be expected to convert complete
to eating bugs from eating mostly meat.

Once we have breakfasted, our eunuchs troop
down to the hollow in a winding group,
each man and woman of them--old maids, too
(we don't refer to them as "blanks," as you
young gentlemen are so inclined to do)--
and there they hunt, on this "hog harvest" night,
the boar who's first attracted to the light
held up by--
            Well, by me. The troop is led
by "She Who's Oldest" walking at the head,
snakes down the newly goat-chewed path to where
the herd of browsing boars, though unaware
of our intent, awaits us. We were just
preparing for this trek (the children fussed
and scampered, as they always do) when you
thirteen wayfarers sauntered into view
and threw our customary schedule off--
most happily, of course. ...
                            I heard a cough;
I hope that's from embarrassment, and not

a cold. I realize we must have caught
you all off guard with our insistence on
a bath. The way the younger women fawn
all over you is natural enough,
and their attempts to view you in the buff
while you were bathing were quite innocent--
or, rather, sprang from no covert intent.

They're caught up in an annual event
that gets them giddy with anticipation:
every Winter Solstice celebration,
there's an after-midnight free-for-all
we call the Open Orgy. Every fall
at Equinox, there are more babies born
than any other time of year--the corn
is planted at this "human harvest" season--
and the Open Orgy is the reason.
(True, we do have orgies every Full
Moon Night, but they're comparatively dull.)

I hope you'll all participate. But first
we hunt the boar, and then we slake our thirst
before the Midnight Lecture. (Every year
at midnight, I deliver, as you'll hear,
a talk on recent human history.
It's not as boring as it sounds; you'll see.)

I trust you gentlemen will hunt the boar
with us tonight--? Of course, we can't ignore
the fact that you are far from eunuchs--nor
am I a maid! But you're our guests--and such
unprecedented guests at that! So much
so that it seems appropriate you ought
to join us--? As observers--? ...
                                Good; I thought
you would agree with me, Ezekiel.
Your men will certainly have much to tell
your people of our method, which is--well,
about the same as how the "hillbillies"
who occupied this land for centuries
would do it: give them corn to eat at home,
but for their other needs, just let them roam
around the mountain forest, digging roots
and grubs, while you attend to your pursuits--
until one day when you run out of lard,
you lure a fat one out into the yard
and slice its throat. It isn't very hard.

We differ from the mountain folk of old,
however, in the way we keep our hold
upon them, making sure that every night
before full dawn brings on its lethal light
we have them safe inside: they get their corn

just as the unborn Sun suggests the morn
above the eastern sky. Their trotting feet
come promptly up the trail, to get their treat--
dessert, they think of it. Once in their barn,
safe from the morning's flesh-devouring harm,
they gobble up the goopy slop of boars
and never notice as we bolt the doors
behind them. Satiated, soon their snores
(and farts, and burps) reverberate within
their den, until next dusk, when they begin
again their gluttony-based cycle.
                We
have also modified, accordingly,
the way we slaughter them, as you shall soon
observe, beneath the silver Solstice Moon:
we never kill them anywhere around
the farm, but always in the lower ground
where they go foraging and congregate.
We never let the boars associate
their home-sweet-home with danger; it is here
where they feel safe and comfy, free from fear.

Since ancient times--since long before the birth
of Jesus Christ or Adam, when the Earth
was rife with continents and beasts and fish
and fowl, but shy of men--there's been a dish

which always has been served on Solstice Night
(or Day, I ought to say, since when the light
of Sun was harmless, it was in the day
the dish was served). The people all would pray,
before they even had much language, that
the beast they'd boarded, bred, and fed till fat,
once slaughtered, would impart to them a kind
of strengthening salvation of the mind
and body which would see them through the long
cold winter, keeping them both wise and strong
to persevere in populating.

When
the Christian era came (the Age of Men
by then long since established), people then
replaced the sacrificial beast--at least,
symbolically--with Jesus. But the feast,
the roast and prayer, even the time of year
remained about the same. ...

Oh, dear; I fear
I have offended some of you. Please bear
in mind that I was reared, like you, back there
among the Western Isles. I've had a rare
perspective to examine and compare
our cultures from--unique, in fact, until
tonight.

The concept that Christ would fulfill

the duty of the sacrificial lamb
is not original with me: "I am
the lamb," the Bible has him say. "The bread
you're eating is my body, and the red
wine in your drinking cup is blood I bled
upon the sacrificial Cross."
I see
your Captain has familiarity
with these old verses, by his nodding head.
But I suppose the Bible isn't read
much anymore among your Elder-led
young congregation. Thirty years ago,
when I escaped, it still was read--although
already its interpretation was
the sole domain of those who made the laws.

I don't suppose you've heard of Santa Claus--?
Saint Nicholas? Saint Nick? ...
The history
of Christmas from the nineteenth century
until the Great Apocalypse is quite
a fascinating tale--and sheds much light
upon the forces gathering which would,
in time, destroy the ecosystem. Good
and evil coexisted for a while
around the holy day--until the pile

of presents underneath the Christmas tree
began to suffocate, eventually,
its Christian roots, which were supposed to be
drenched in good will and generosity.

The ever-jolly Santa Claus--obese
Caucasian poster child for turkeys, geese,
and suckling pigs, who every year were killed
in millions--came to stand for unfulfilled
desires written on an endless list
by people who, instead of being kissed
beneath the mistletoe, were forced to bend
unwillingly (presenting their year-end
red bottom lines) before this god and spend
their future earnings on obligatory
potlatch gifts. It was a time of worry,
stress, and deep depression.
                So it was,
under the specter of this Santa Claus,
that Christmas wrought the opposite effect
of what it ought (of love and peace, respect
and charity); for most, it simply meant
more unearned money needing to be spent--
a season they had reason to resent.
The damage done to Earth's environment
just from the Christmas enterprise's dent

was measurably deep.
                But I digress;
I'm into history, as you might guess.
In fact, I serve as history professor
every winter here at Blueridge-- ...
                Yes, sir:
you have landed near the southernmost
extreme--as you surmise, the western coast--
of what we call the Appalachian Chain
of Islands. ...
                Yes, exactly: on the main
isle of the archipelago that ends
at the Potomac Channel; it extends
about two hundred miles north. ...
                So far,
exactly twenty-seven villages that are
accessible by foot or ferry; north
of the Potomac, no one's ventured forth. ...

Oh, that's all right; of course, geography
must sometimes override mere history.
I tend to monologue, but please feel free
to interrupt at any time. When we
are finished here, we'll hike down to the glades
with all our lovely eunuchs and old maids,
and once the boar's been slain-- ...

I'm sorry. Was
there something else? ...
Oh, yes; of course. Because
we hear them every night, the terms just flow
right by. Apparently some years ago,
back in the Fifties, when (as you may know)
the sexually undeveloped came
to form a large minority, the name
"old maid" was first applied to women so
equipped, and "eunuch" to the men. But no
old maid or eunuch liked to be addressed
that way; it made them feel second best--
and understandably upset. At first,
in sensitive reaction, they were cursed
with mouthfuls like "the hyposexually
confirmed" or even "reproductively
excluded citizens" by sympathetic
souls--which terms were even more pathetic.
Later, when they started to compose
a slight majority, the eunuchs chose
to joyfully embrace the former sneers
(much as the homosexuals did "queers"
back in the late last century), and so
the slanders turned to terms of pride--although,
of course, we take it all for granted now.

Before I came here, I remember how
the "blanks" were treated in our native land:
a class of slaves for breeders to command.
The only people with less liberty
were married women. Sadly, I can see
things haven't altered much in thirty years;
your crew, all fertile men, confirms my fears. ...

Okay, that wasn't fair, I must admit--
and I appreciate the fact that it
is up to all of us to propagate
the species, or assist in it. But hate
is not productive, and the hour is late
for humankind, and so I'd like to most
respectfully remind you, as your host,
that we do not use terms like capons here,
or oxen, mules, or blanks. Is that quite clear? ...

As you can see (just look around the crowd),
the maid and eunuch population, proud
and tall, is fully integrated here.
And yet on certain evenings of the year,
we throw events that tend to bring about
a reproductive-status-pride-filled shout.
One is the boar hunt, for the eunuchs and
old maids; then later, on the other hand,

there is the Open Orgy hunt, designed
with our more fertile citizens in mind.

These nights, in fact, our maids and eunuchs tend
to be our strongest players. My dear friend
and colleague--as you gentlemen would say,
my First Lieutenant or First Mate--you may
have noticed. Let me introduce her now
(Cecilia, do stand up and take a bow):
this is Cecilia, better known as "C."
Aunt C is indispensable to me.
Not much for words--or crowds (I'm sorry, C)--
she's nonetheless our sharpest archer and
our foremost herbalist, and my right hand
assistant in all matters great and small.

And there behind her, holding up the wall,
we can't forget the lovely Uncle Bette,
whom I am sure by now you all have met;
our Betsy isn't much for shyness. He
is magic in the realm of husbandry--
not only of the razorbacks and goats
and other eaters of our corn and oats,
but also beasts with six or greater legs
who skitter, fly, and lay their tiny eggs
by tens of millions in the woods around

about. I have no doubt it will astound
you, just the sheer variety of bugs--
a few of them containing useful drugs
to supplement Cecilia's remedies,
but most supplying in great quantities
the protein-rich, delectable cuisine
that keeps us all so healthy, sleek, and lean.

Of interest to you gentlemen, of course,
would be our Eastern version of the horse.
I can remember how surprised I was
at all the differences there were (because
of how their histories diverged in each
domain), when I first landed here; I teach
a course in equine history once in
a while now.
            In Twenty Thirty, when
the world ended as it once had been,
there were, throughout the southwest U.S.A.,
still several thousand wild horses. They
found sustenance enough, apparently,
from desert roots and grasses, running free
in herds about a hundred strong. They knew
enough to jump electric fences, flew
from highways when a car came into view;
though small, they were intelligent and tough,

but over generations grew so rough
that people rarely tried to catch or ride
them.

When the Great Disaster struck, they'd hide
from humans--which was smart, since they were shot
like buffalo at first, for meat (though not
as much, once ammunition got so dear).
Domestic horses quickly disappeared--
all gobbled up during the war that raged
across the Rocky region. Men engaged
in all-out civil war for years and years
out West and never thought of shifting gears
until their trucks at last ran out of gas--
the donkey and domestic horse and ass
by then extinct throughout the region.

Now,
before you Easterners start boasting how
your forebears had the foresight then to see
how necessary horses were to be
in future years, it's worth remembering
the Western Isles, despite the pummeling
they bore from weather never known before,
maintained a healthy breadth from shore to shore;
vast swaths of continental land remained,
perhaps a hundred times what we retained.
The many roads and highways still intact

(with gasoline and diesel fuel, in fact,
often obtainable throughout the first
few years) deluded them to think the worst
might yet be over; thus, they clung to ways
of life from pre-Apocalyptic days,
when food and electricity and guns
were plentiful, before the naked Sun's
destructive rays bore down.

Meanwhile, out East,
where Twenty Thirty was a different beast,
earthquakes had not the devastating force
felt in the West--but then again, of course,
the Appalachians stood at lower heights
than did the Rockies; forty days and nights
of rain completely swallowed up the land,
except these narrow ridges where we stand
and sit tonight. There wasn't time or space,
given the sudden flooding of the place,
to fight about the treasure left behind--
all buried under water.

Bear in mind
that somewhere close to ninety-nine percent
of those who died east of the Rockies went
by <u>drowning</u>. Think of it: not in a flash
of lightning, with a wondrous thunderous crash;
not in an earthquake or some seismic clash

of fault lines, crushed beneath volcanic ash
or scalding stone; not torn up by a brash
tornado, whirling like a whipping lash,
converting cattle into corned beef hash;
not in a gunfight, from a bullet's gash,
or by assassination, with a slash
across the vocal cords--but drowning: days
and nights of treading water in a craze
of panic, heartbeat pounding in your ears,
scanning the waves above your desperate fears
for any sign of land or ship or boat--
or any kind of refuse that would float--
but all, at aching last, to no avail.

And in the end, to feel your body fail,
betraying you! That has to be the worst:
your lungs suck in the killing brine and burst
the tender membranes you've protected all
your life. Then, in your agony, you fall--
sink unimpeded deep beneath the waves,
plummeting down and down, until death saves
you from your suffering.
                The Eastern horses,
bred in the South to run on racing courses,
with temperaments comparatively mild,
were never even tempted to run wild,

so pampered and well-groomed and fed were they
upon the freshest oats and sweetest hay
and rubbed down daily by devoted hands--
not out of kindliness, you understand,
but from their value in that fabled land
where Money talked and strutted to and fro,
commanding all wherever he would go.
A winning horse could turn a Poorhouse Pat
into a millionaire in minutes flat;
so it was better treated than the blacks
and micks and spics who trained it for the tracks.

But when the great rains fell, the waters rose,
and everybody panicked, I suppose
a hearty, healthy horse who held its nose
above the foamy fray and kept its pace
against the Reaper in that ruthless race
had new intrinsic value for its rider.
So it was, equestrian insiders
such as jockeys, stable boys, and trainers--
all the owners' onerous retainers--
knowing how to ride, often survived,
while those who'd made their fortunes on them dived
unwillingly into the newborn sea,
never to rise again. In legend, we
are told how these Kentuckians were found,

after the Flood, unconscious on the ground
beside their gracious saviors (safe and sound),
who munched the higher hilly grass of "Old
Virginny" nonchalantly.

We are told
a lot of nonsense in these tales, of course--
but be that as it may, the Eastern horse
has been regarded regally, time out
of mind. This very hour, our own devout
horse worshippers are exercising ours,
out on the mountain trails. At least three hours
each evening after breakfast, rain or stars,
these "stable ladies," as we call them, are
out riding. All of them turn out to be
young women who have only recently
passed through the mystic gates of puberty;
it's not a job requirement to be
so, but for some strange reason we have found
these tweens and teens to be the most profound
enthusiasts.

Before we leave the topic,
I should mention how--their misanthropic
attitudes aside--the mustangs west
of here are much the smarter beasts, and best
by far at plain survival. When the Sun
first turned so toxic, they began to run

for shelter every morning when the Sun
came up, and napped in shadow all day long--
and since their night vision was always strong,
they made a quick transition to the new
nocturnal regimen. Somehow they knew,
before their human counterparts, just what
the problem was: the Sun! The humans thought
it was pollutants, allergens, or some
new form of cancer--maybe fallout from
some buried nukes. The mustangs weren't so dumb:
the Sunlight hurt their eyes, and so they hid
from it. Well--duh!

In time, the humans did
the same--but not before great numbers died
with oozing cysts upon their blistered hide.
To say it was these Western horses who
inspired the desiccating humans to
adopt a night life might not quite be true--
but then again, it might. In honesty,
I don't know of another case where we
have seen a mammal who spontaneously
became nocturnal.

And most certainly,
the Eastern horse did no such thing; though strong,
its thorough-breeding hobbled it so long
that even now it's "written in the blood."

By afternoon, when Sun has baked the mud
outside their stables into stony clay,
they start to smell the grass turn into hay
from miles away. If you're awake at three
or four, you hear them snorting to get free;
the scorching smorgasbord of grasses, grains,
and flowers drives them mad. In hurricanes,
we have to bring them all inside with us;
even in thunderstorms, they make a fuss.
They're tethered tightly to the human race;
they don't know much, but they do know their place.

However, there are other adaptations
we have seen on both our island nations--
more so here, perhaps, since evolution
is a more acceptable solution,
philosophically, to us. To cite
just one example we see every night
in our domestic omnivores: the goats
and boars have now developed in their throats
and guts a sort of testing laboratory,
showing them which foods they should be sorry
they've ingested by expelling these
unwholesome dinners with a forceful squeeze
more powerful than any cough or sneeze.

Sometimes you'll see them standing in a pack
out in the woods, munching their midnight snack.
One of their number suddenly slips back
(a blurping belly signals the attack;
the other diners wisely clear the way
for their afflicted friend without delay)--
and out the geyser shoots, a gushing spray
of superheated soup whose rank bouquet
is quite unrivalled. Then the troop moves on
to munch upon some other patch of lawn.

So what's the distance record, Uncle Bette?
Has any passed the twenty foot mark yet? ...

Well, give them time. I can't think of a more
clear-cut example--these bulimic boar
and goat explosions--of an adaptation
case-specific to our situation
as a post-Apocalyptic nation.
I would venture to conjecture we
survivors (not coincidentally)
who walk upright upon two legs may be
evolving something similar. Like me,
most of the older citizens I see
are those who tend to throw up easily.

Captain Ezekiel, would you agree?
How old are you now? Thirty? And do <u>you</u>--? ...

Aha. Well, that's another point of view.
Perhaps God wrote the book for Darwin, too.

In any case, you'll meet our razorbacks
within the hour. And then you can relax
(while our brave barbecuing crew attacks
the carcass) and enjoy some brew and snacks
while I deliver what will have to pass
for what your people call the Midnight Mass
beneath the stars. Then comes the Moonlit Mating
Dance or Open Orgy, satiating
the desires of youth while populating
Earth. And then the moment we've been waiting
for all year: the Winter Solstice Feast--
the fête we celebrate throughout the East
on this, our holiest of nights (at least,
most wholly hedonistic).
Ah! What rare
delight! What rich aromas fill the air
as we indulge ourselves on sumptuous fare
like He-goat Haggis Hollandaise--and Mare-
milk Cheese Fondue--and Marbled Maggot Pie
with Caterpillar Cream--and Dragonfly

Supreme! The dishes we all know so well--
Cicada Pupa Dipped in Caramel-- ...

All right, all right; I'll stop. I'm being cruel--
but to myself as well as you! I drool
just thinking of it. Solstice is the one
night of the year when gastronomic fun--
unbridled gluttony, in fact--is not
just sanctioned but encouraged. Cold or hot,
crunchy or creamy, sweet or tangy-tart--
the climax of our culinary art!

Cecilia's giving me the evil eye.
What time is it? ...
                Oh, my! How time does fly
when you are monologuing on and on!
In nine short hours we will face the dawn;
first evening's gone. Unless our honored guests
have further questions for us, I'd suggest
we head out on our current quest and-- ...
                Yes:
Lieutenant--Peter, is it? ...
                Well, I guess
an orgy's always "open," more or less,
in that participants are well aware
of what's in store and generally don't care

who's in attendance or who sees them there. But when we say an "Open Orgy," we refer to those on holy nights, where three or more participants are generally involved in each conglomeration. We have just comparatively recently enlarged the old tradition's form to be inclusive of bisexuality.

There was a custom not so long ago they called "the Wearing of the Mistletoe." The women were encouraged to compete with one another to achieve the feat of mating with more men than any other on the Longest Night. (Cecilia's mother won one year, I understand.) The queers would gripe a bit at this, since volunteers for "glory crowns" were always hetero, and so they felt a bit left out: you know--since every point was scored with plain old boy-on-girl connections, there was little joy involved for those who leaned toward boy-on-boy or girl-on-girl.

And so one year they changed the rules; creative combinations ranged from more traditional ménage à trois(s)

to situations where the very laws
of gravity were challenged. When they found,
after the orgy, scattered on the ground,
the remnants of those torn-up mistletoe
tiaras, it was pretty certain no
reversion to the old tradition would
occur. The harvest, too, was very good:
the boom in births recorded that September
passed what anybody could remember.

I am well aware that in the West
it's different. I was not some foreign guest;
I lived for sixteen years under the reign
of Elder Councils, and I know the pain
of closetings and forced polygamy
first-hand. The frightmares fill my memory.
I know we are your hosts, and you our guests--
but let me please respectfully suggest
that such traditions may not be the best.

Our poisoned planet puts to us a test:
we have survived; to procreate is our
imperative. It's not within our power
to go back to the times of chaste young flirts
and young men wasting countless practice squirts
in private rooms before they try their wares

on un-imaginary women. There's
a lot of compromise we must accept
to keep the race afloat.
                And yet we've kept
a healthy measure of romance alive
beyond the basic propagative drive,
I think, here in the East. We separate
the way we marry from the way we mate:
we marry those with whom we can relate
as lovers and as partners and as friends;
we mate with those who serve specific ends.
But always, we endeavor to employ
traditions everybody can enjoy.

Our nudity, accordingly, is based
upon the notion that the human race
should strip away impediments to sex
with all due haste. Because our women's necks
and breasts and buttocks beckon wordlessly
each night, our men get horny, naturally--
and so extend their "calling cards," as though
to say, "We're ready, ladies." Even so,
erections do go wasted here sometimes;
it's just arithmetic.
                The only "crimes
of passion" we abjure are rape (defined

as sex with anyone who's disinclined),
assault (which may be sexual or free
from sexuality), and murder (we
have had no deaths in recent history
suggestive of that crime). "Consent is key,"
we like to say. Apart from that, we're free
to do whatever comes most naturally--
on Open Orgy nights especially.

But now our nodding natives start to snore.
I hope I haven't been too big a bore,
and you feel more enlightened than before. ...

I'm sorry, Peter. Was there something more?

II. PRAISE JESUS CHRIST

Praise Jesus Christ Our Savior and the god
who fathered him! Our sea-slick feet have trod
at last the legendary Eastern Isles,
and we have found the natives full of smiles
and hospitality.
As journeys go,
it wasn't much: the sea was kind, and so
we made good time, arriving here at Blue
Ridge (as they call this tiny village) two
short weeks and four long nights since we set sail
from home. We spotted land by Moonlight, pale
and clear, on Christmas Eve (though people here
don't celebrate that holy night, I fear).

Our angry Father had just touched the sky
above the cove with warning light when I
advised the men to let the anchor sink
and go below. Although a spring-fresh drink
of water sounded good, I didn't think
it wise for us to risk a rude surprise
attack from unknown islanders, our eyes
still heavy from the long night's work. Although

there was some grumbling, they went below,
and all were soon asleep (and I should know,
since I, despite fatigue, lay wide awake
another half an hour, give or take).

Our youngest, Matthew, woke me to report
he'd heard what he believed were sheep. A short
<u>baa</u> followed, from the distant wood.
"It could
be goats," said Mark--whose instinct there was good,
since that's exactly what the animals
turned out to be.
"Or maybe cannibals,"
Luke offered, and we all enjoyed a well-
earned laugh--although we couldn't really tell
how laughable the prospect was.
We stood
on deck, backs to the setting Sun, a good
half mile from where the beachfront met the wood,
and peered into the fading crimson mass
of land before us. Since we'd want to pass
from here to there before our evening prayer,
it was imperative that we prepare
ourselves with careful observation.
There
was just the slightest hint of evening breeze

beginning to blow westward through the trees.
Mostly coniferous, I noted, dark
with sap; dead hardwoods stood, their curling bark
falling away, like burly skeletons
among them. Wildfire damage from the Sun's
sheer pyromania was slight--say, ten
percent--suggesting to me, even then,
that their east coast could not be far removed
from this, their west (and so the case has proved).

We still could see the way the beach debris
had been picked through, just where the rising sea
would have been highest. There were humans here;
that much was clear. We heard a louder, near-
by greeting bleating of a goat or sheep:
these humans, then, had risen from their sleep
and let their foragers go free. No smell
of smoke or sign of fire; not yet. Oh, well.
We pulled our denim shorts and shore-shoes on,
loaded our guns (the dim dusk nearly gone),
let down our lifeboats, and embarked.
                We parked
our two dark blue canoes some ways apart,
in case a chase required us to part
in haste from shore; that way, if one were blocked,
the other might afford escape. We walked

a ways along the beach and up a bluff
to where the rocky shore rose just enough
to view the Revelation where she lay
in steeping darkness, and we knelt to pray:

"Protect us, Jesus, from our Father's ire,
and in this lightless night, provide us fire
that we who live in darkness yet may thrive.
By signs, please show your soul is still alive
and you remember all the pain of life
on Earth amid its struggles and its strife.
As you have promised, please return again
and free us from the Sun of Man. Amen."

And then, the last dull flicker of the day
extinguished in the waves, we turned away
from darker water, into darkest land. My right
hand, Peter, took the lead, since his eyesight
is better in full darkness; I stayed tight
behind him with the rifle. All thirteen
of us, at first, relied on Peter's keen
night vision, since to strike a light would be
unwise until we'd met the enemy--
if enemy indeed they were to be.

Proceeding single file, we wound our way

along a narrow goat-path (as I'd say
it must have been, in retrospect) and took
our share of scratches from the bramble's hooks
before we heard the gently gurgling brook
whose music led us into woods. Once there,
the air grew cooler as it dried our hair.

The forest floor was fragrant--firs and pines.
And soon we saw and smelled and felt more signs
of human habitation: where their swine
had dug and shat; where hunters, too, had sat
in wait while snacking on some deep-fried bat
(the bones were greasy, still). And then we heard
a cackling cry that sounded like a bird--
not owl or whippoorwill, but one of those
extinct domestic types which I suppose
they kept alive and reproducing all
these years, long after what we call "the Fall
of Fowl," when daylight birds went blind.
                A swell
of warmer air blew down and brought the smell
of hardwood smoke. It was too soon to tell
what they were cooking at their evening fire,
but just the scent of smoke awoke desire
for home-grilled breakfast in the men--including
me! With hopes we soon would be intruding

on their meal, our pace picked up. Though I,
as Captain, ought to always keep an eye
on my young men, I felt I could rely
on their discretion; so I let the spry
thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds fly ahead
of us a ways--
"But not too far," I said.

The Moon's white crest had just peeked up at last
above the east horizon, like a mast
above the waves. It would be full and bright
tonight, I knew, providing us with light
enough to see quite well--but not quite yet.
For now, I watched the lads in silhouette,
progressing, flickering through darkness.
Soon
they came upon an open space the Moon
illumined with a sparkling band of light
dividing it in two--a welcome sight,
most magical after our eighteen-night
excursion on the Mississippi Sea:
a flowing, glowing spring-fed brook that we
were free to drink from all we liked. (Our rank
canteens of stagnant water from the tank
we kept on board the schooner rather stank
by now.)

It warmed my heart to see our boys
discovering this spring; a man enjoys
watching the younger set move past their toys
and games into the world of men. But then
again, they are still boys at heart--and when
they'd knelt and tasted it, to tell the truth,
it was as though the fabled Fount of Youth
had found them: children once again, they leapt
about and spun with joy. (But still, they kept
their silence perfectly; their training had
paid off that much.)

Then Matt, the youngest lad,
came running back our way, first in the race
to reach us, with the other three in chase.
I had to chuckle as I saw his face
approaching us; even from fifty yards
or so away, its beaming glee was hard
resisting.

And then suddenly all four
of them fell down at once, as in a war--
although no shots had sounded.

"Stay," I said
to Peter--whereupon he ran ahead,
as though I'd said the opposite. (It's not
exactly disobedience; he's hot,
he lacks control.)

And then I saw and heard
the four young men all retching. It occurred
to me, for half a second, that they had
been drinking poison--and my heart went mad,
since I'd allowed it! But then Peter fell
down retching, too, and I thought, "What the hell?"

Then all at once, it hit us all: the smell!
Sweet Saving Grace, the smell! I couldn't tell
exactly what it was at first--but there
it was, completely taking up the air
we breathed: a nasty, rude, organic scent
our stomachs would not tolerate. It sent
us all directly to our knees, from where
we upchucked helplessly. We saw the fare
of last night's hardtack supper--what remained
of it--before us on the ground. We strained,
we heaved, for upwards of a minute more--
and then the wind changed, mercifully.
Our sore
ribs ached, our mouths hung open, as we caught
our breath. And yet it didn't seem, I thought,
as though we'd suffered any serious
calamity. It was mysterious--
and certainly disgusting--but we still
were here. Alive. Awake. It hadn't killed

us. No wild cannibals came rushing out
with spears or bows and arrows. I had doubts
it even was intentional.
"What <u>was</u>
that?" Peter asked.
I looked at him. Because
we had discussed the subject just
the night before, I figured I could trust
it to a hint: "Perhaps a punishment
from God--for disobedience?"
He bent
his head. "Forgive me, Jesus," he replied--
without a trace of irony. Denied
a sense of humor, Peter only knew
to take things literally.
Yes, it's true:
I ought to concentrate on discipline
a bit more with the men. But then again,
that's not my style. I let the matter drop.

"It can't be that much further to the top,"
I said. "This probably is where they stop
to get their drinking water."
Sure enough,
a well-worn path led up from there. The rough
woods yielded to a rolling field of grain--

a good five acres, maybe more; the pains
they'd taken with it were impressive. I
assumed the lead again, ahead of my
appointed First Lieutenant, now the sky
was filled with stars above the Moonrise. And
across the field in front of us were spanned
a hundred thousand fireflies--although
the temperature, I'd say, was well below
ninety degrees. (Not like the ones we know
on Colorado, where they only glow
upon the very warmest summer nights.)

We filed lightly through the field of lights,
feeling light-headed as we reached the heights
so far above the sea. The cricket song
seemed more intense (their numbers here are strong)
than down below--but then, the sense had been
knocked out of us with all that puking. When
the gentle breeze reversed itself again,
the barnyard scents became more certain then:
we smelled the mulch; the swine and milker pens;
the foreign stench of roosters, chicks, and hens
(their feather rot confirmed my former guess);
the horse manure, the straw, the hay. And yes,
that putrid stink again--though it was less
intense by far than it had found us by

the Fount of Youth in that thick cloud, its dry
repulsive odor like a swarm of flies-- ...

And then I stopped, mid-step, in cold surprise.
I was a child again. I realized
where I had smelled that dreadful funk before.

In some dank forest with a spongy floor,
I'd swung my ax into a long-dead trunk.
No gratifying, satisfying <u>thunk</u>
was heard or felt on contact--but instead,
a sloppy, sickly <u>thick</u> absorbed the head,
as though I'd hit a moldy loaf of bread.
I pulled it out again--and as I did,
a crumbling mass of pulp the rind had hid
came tumbling forward through the gaping hole
I'd left--and through this avalanching roll
of ruin surged a teeming population
of albino ants, whose destination
seemed to be my feet.
                I scampered back--
but far too slow for their surprise attack.
My shoes filled up with squirming, churning ants
(I was alone, thank God, and so my dance
of desperation wasn't witnessed by
a soul) before I could remove them. I

sat quickly down and yanked them off. By chance,
more ants ran up into my short-leg pants
while I was situated so; and so
I sprang up suddenly again.
                Too slow!
Before I'd pulled my pants off, they had bit
me countless times (their bites were like a lit
splinter of pine, jabbed in with force), and I
was prancing like a naked fool, with my
bare feet--still being bit--now being poked
by twigs and needles, too.
                (I had provoked
them, I suppose, with my attack. One stroke
of my small ax, however, was the sum
of it--and by the thousands they had come
in fierce response to my small <u>thick</u>, like some
invading army. How had I become
their enemy so quickly?)
                By the time
I reached the brook--and how I reached it I'm
not sure--I'd managed to detach them from
my legs and crotch. My pounding head still hummed
from the excitement as I eased my bum
into the cooling water.
                But the smell--
the smell! I could remember it so well.

Its sickly sour obnoxious power stayed
up in my nose for weeks on end and preyed
upon me. ...
"Captain?" Peter said, behind
me, as I stood there reminiscing. Lined
up single file in back of me, my men
stood waiting.
"Oh," I said, "excuse me." Then,
"Let's go." And on we went.
The people here
eat insects, then! Before, as we drew near
their fire, they must have just put on the grill
a brand new batch of their infernal swill.
My gut contracted at the thought of this:
as sharp as vinegar, more vile than piss,
hitting the griddle with an angry hiss--
a mass of squirming, bubbling goo! Their food
might well give off a fragrance foul and rude
before the heat burned off that crusty, crude
first stink.
But then I was abruptly brought
back to the present, as my ears first caught
the sound, above the crickets and (I thought)
the clucking of the hens, of children's cries--
in English. (That was good, but no surprise.)
I raised my hand for silence, and the men

came to a halt.
We heard a giggle, then
a small repeating voice: "Guess what! Guess what!"

And then another child responding: "What!"

To which the first one answered, "Chicken butt!"

And then a gale of laughter from the two
of them together.
Then I called, "Yoo-hoo!"

(We'd often talked about what we might do
as we approached a camp, to give a clue
to those we were approaching, so they knew
that our intentions were benign--and to
convey it in a phrase, we thought "Yoo-hoo!"
would do.)
"Hey! What was that?" a small voice spoke.

I called, "Yoo-hoo!" again.
It was a joke
to them, apparently. They giggled--then,
together, "Yoo-hoo!"ed back.
And so my men
and I emerged into the farmyard where

the children stood. They were completely bare--
not even wearing any underwear
or shoes--although their ages were, I dare
say, five or six, and they were girl and boy.
The moment we appeared, whatever joy
was left upon their faces dropped and gave
way to astonished staring. From their grave
expressions, I surmised they'd never seen
white men before; their skin was brown. (My keen
surmise, I since have found, was incorrect.)

The Moon, though rising, still was indirect,
its pale light hanging just above the low
log hut that must have housed the birds. Its glow
lit up the yard in blue.
                I said, "Hello"--
to no effect. And then, "Could you guys go
and get your parents, please?"
                But they just stared
at us. They weren't particularly scared--
just curious. The hens ignored us. They
were fine, fat birds; some white, some red, some gray
with stripes. Incapable of flight, I'd say.
They clucked and crowded as they pecked away
at scattered piles of yellow grain.
                And then

two blanks appeared behind the kids--both men,
as I could tell despite their beardless faces:
they were naked, too. (What sort of place is
this, where blanks are free to walk about
with their minute pudenda poking out
for all to see?) And fairly tall: they stood
well over seven feet. They both had good
muscle development and seemed to be
in perfect health. At first, I thought that we
were in for more blank staring (do forgive
the pun), until one spoke:
"Well, as I live
and breathe!" he started in, his voice much like
a woman's, only loud. "You've had a hike,
I'd say! Where do you hearties hail from?"

"Hello," I answered carefully. "We come
from Colorado. From the West. ... We come
in peace," I added--though that sounded dumb,
I knew, as soon as I had said the thing;
the blank looked secretly amused.
"We bring
good news!" Lieutenant Peter had to say.

Luke whispered, "Ix-nay on the Esus-jay,"
and Peter said no more.

The blank grinned wide,
scattering chickens with his sudden stride
across the yard, a hand thrust out. "I'm Bet."
(I found out later that he spells it Bette;
originally, he was christened Bret.)

"Ezekiel," I told him, as I took
his hammy, clammy hand in mine and shook
it.
Giving me a slightly sprightly look,
he murmured, "That's a mouthful," underneath
his breath--at which I dropped his hand. (A wreath
of braids in an exotic knot atop
his head gave him the look of one who'd stop
at nothing to disrupt the norm.)
"Or Zeke,
if you prefer," I said.
He couldn't speak
without sauce seasoning that tone of his:
"I do prefer things simple; 'Zeke' it is,"
he answered--most provokingly.
"Is there
an Elder I could talk with here?"
Aware
that I was less than charmed, perhaps (the flare
of his full nostrils may have meant he smelled

the recent vomit on my breath as well),
he turned away unceremoniously
and started walking eastward.
"Follow me,"
he said.
And as I did so, I could see
(albeit just a bit unwillingly)
how wide his hips were, and how round and fat
his derriere.
"Oh, by the way, that's Cat,"
he nodded at the other blank as we walked by.
"He's kind of shy."
The other blank said, "Hi,"
with something like a curtsy or a bow,
but didn't look at me directly.
Now
another pair of children joined us in
our march. Both girls; still older--but again,
completely nude. We walked on past a round
stone structure set securely in the ground;
it smelled of swine.
Our guide then turned around
to let our shorter legs catch up with his.
"So--Colorado! Quite a ways."
"It is,"
I said.

He walked beside me for a while,
his lips evincing an elliptic smile.
"You grow some pretty boys there on that isle."

(I was, I must admit, a little shocked.
On Colorado, if a blank had talked
that way to anybody male and free,
they would have tied him to the nearest tree
and beat him till he screamed. But then again,
on Colorado, he would not have been
in a position to engage with me
in such unsavory diplomacy.)

"Each to his own," I said--I hoped without
betraying irritation, though I doubt
I was successful there. (How could a man
devoid of carnal ardor understand
attraction, anyway? Why would he waste
a stranger's time that way?)
"Or to his taste,"
he countered.
Then we came upon a stable
(built of logs, mud-mortared; I was able
to infer that during tropic storms,
they'd move the horses into houses, warm
but safe), encircled by a well-worn yard--

but no corralling wooden rails to guard
against escape. A dozen stalls all faced
the south, but they stood empty now. (They paced
their beasts with riders in the early part
of evening, it would seem. And so the art
of horsemanship survived here, after all.)

Directly to our right, a long low wall
of mortared stone with tiny squares of light
at every dozen feet or so (the sight
of which I found confusing) ran along
the edge of an embankment. With a song-
like cry, our blank ambassador let fly
a string of "D"s--unnaturally high,
delivered in a rapid-fire volley--
clearly, to alert his people.
                "Golly,"
Peter whispered.
                Here we all came to
a halt; we didn't know what else to do
but wait. The blank then bellowed, "Doctor D!"
and "Aunt Cecilia!"--in a manner <u>he</u>
considered normal, I suppose. But we
were mystified; as far as we could see,
he was addressing a stone wall.
                Then all

at once, out of a doorway in the wall
I hadn't seen before (since, after all,
the wall itself was less than six feet tall,
and in this wall, the door was rather small),
a beautiful, completely naked white
woman appeared, holding aloft a light
(she seemed to be the mayor of the town),
and close behind, an entourage of brown-
skinned natives, blank and breeder, each of whom
was naked as a bristle on a broom. ...

I ought to take a moment here to talk
about their housing, since the sense of shock
we felt upon this sudden flesh parade
appearing out of nowhere, I'm afraid,
cannot be understood until I do:

The Eastern Isles are fairly narrow; blue
oceanic vistas are the common view,
both east and west, from any peak you pick.
Although the archipelago is thick
enough (twenty to forty miles across)
for cultivation, I would guess the loss
of property and peace of mind each year
to howling hurricanes is most severe.
Accordingly, they have developed here

a style of architecture built so near
the earth that it becomes a part of it:

They find a bluff that's high enough to fit
their purposes--at least the height of one
of their gigantic blanks--and one that runs
a good long ways, thirty or forty yards
at least, and build a solid wall to guard
against erosion all along the length
of it. (I was surprised they had the strength
to lift such stones, but with their diet and
self-discipline, they do indeed command
more than sufficient force to take in hand
ambitious projects such as these.) And then
they build a second wall--again,
of mortared stone, but standing free--about
twelve feet in front of this; it billows out
or in according to the wall it mirrors,
thus following the landscape as it veers.
This wall is somewhat shorter and provides
a slant for the inclining roof, which hides
the living space with thick poles lying side-
by-side, all covered with two feet or more
of earth and living turf. As to the floor,
it's always dirt (or more precisely, clay),
since they are always barefoot and this way,

they wander in and out without regard
to footwear--though the floors are rather hard.

They call them "longhouses" and always face
them west, the best direction they can place
them in to keep the Sun's fierce heat away
until around the middle of the day.
At every dozen feet or so, at three
or four feet's height, in place of stone, a wee
four-sided window pane is set into
the outer wall; this pane allows them to
keep track of daylight's passing (filtered through
a few protective curtains hung within)
without venturing out. And then again,
at night, whatever lights are burning in
the longhouse glimmer through to the outside,
providing a familiar glow to guide
them home again.
The "living rooms" inside
these structures are so much at odds with those
we Christian civilizers would suppose
as necessary to a decent life,
you may be shocked to read: husband and wife
and children of all ages sleep here, all
together in one common room or hall,
without partitions or an inner wall

of any kind providing privacy.
It's not uncommon in these homes to see
a pair of blanks sharing a bed a few
yards distant from a married couple (who
may be a man and woman, or just two
young men, or two young women; these folk do
not make such fine distinctions). Just beyond,
a pair of naked children who are fond
of one another may drift off to sleep
entwined in placid innocence.
They keep
their beds and tables up against the wall
the windows punctuate; the side that's tall
enough for blanks to pass along they call
the "hallway"--but it's used (despite its thin,
unwieldy shape) as common space, within
which all their gatherings take place when Sun
or storm keeps them indoors; it's used for fun
and work and worship then. Apparently,
when "Uncle Bette" alerted them and we
were so surprised (to say the least) by their
en masse response, they'd been in heathen prayer
preparatory to their going out
and slaughtering a "boar" (their swine, whose snout
is long and sports two pair of tusks; its size
is small, compared with ours).

While our surprise
was great, I would imagine theirs was more-
so still, since they had had no chance before-
hand to prepare for guests of any kind,
not having any visitors in mind.
And so to see us standing there and find
we were complected like their lovely mayor
(who, I gather, led them in their prayer)
brought a shock to every dusky face.

The native people here are hard to place
in terms of nationality or race:
a mix of African-American
and Indian, I'd say, with Mexican
thrown in; perhaps some white or Asian in
the distant past, but nothing recently.
No one as pale-faced as my men and me
lives anywhere about, that I can see,
apart from Dorothea. "Doctor D"
(as she is called by all, or simply "D")
is every bit as Moonbeam-white as we--
and claims to come by it quite naturally,
since she herself set sail across the sea
from Colorado thirty years ago!
(I don't discount it out of hand, although
of course I'd need to see more evidence.) ...

However, to return to the events
surrounding our arrival: Doctor D,
although she must have been surprised to see
us there, assumed her role as hostess right
away, without delay. She raised the light
she carried (an oil-burning "hurricane"
made in the twentieth century, the same
as we employ out West on windy nights)
above her beaming face, and with a bright
smile cried out, "Welcome! Welcome!" and walked right
to me, apparently instinctively
aware that I was Captain, with her free
right hand held out.
(I heard Bette saying, "C?
Some tummy tea for all thirteen would be
a good idea," but I couldn't see
whom he addressed.)
"I'm Dorothea," she
was saying as she shook my hand.
"I'm Zeke,"
I answered--grateful I could even speak,
under the circumstances.
Standing there
in front of her like that, I was aware
not only of her beauty and her bare
and shapely figure, as you might suppose,

but also of her age: although her nose
and mouth and manner spoke of youthfulness,
the wrinkles round her eyes led me to guess
her age to be near forty. (Later, she
confessed to being forty-six; so we
had never seen a soul so elderly!)
Her hair was dark and plentiful, like mine,
and just as wavy. By the lantern's shine,
I noticed it was turning white around
the temples and especially the crown,
but with a pleasing symmetry which framed
her face as though its features fairly flamed
with beauty.

(Reading this, you may conclude
I was infatuated--that her nude
proximity induced this attitude
in me--but I do not exaggerate;
I'm sure that any one of you would rate
her beauty just as high, though Elders you
may be.)

Her eyes, like mine, were violet blue
and stood right at a level with mine, too--
at five foot six, quite tall for breeding stock.
And though you wouldn't know, to hear her talk
(her voice was calm and confident and clear),
her heart was touched: each eye produced a tear.

"It's good to meet you, Zeke," she said, as she
released my hand.
A brief command that we
be bathed was issued next, and I could see
a pair of blanks respond immediately.
The Doctor then shook hands with each of my
young men, getting their names and ranks, as I
looked casually (I hoped) around the crowd,
most prominent of whom--perversely proud
of their immodest state--were teenage girls
with budding breasts and sprouting pubic curls,
who moved in close and ogled my young men
as though they planned to cook and eat them then
and there. For now, they seemed content to stare,
but trouble loomed ahead, I was aware,
which might require me, reluctantly,
to go back to that false formality
of military discipline I find
so tedious.
Our troop was then assigned
a sort of suite of beds and furniture
that stood unoccupied, just as a pure
"guest bedroom" situation, in the north
end of the longhouse they had issued forth
from. (At the time, I thought this vacancy
an indication of an atrophy

in population. Such is not the case,
however; Blue Ridge, rather, is a base-
of-empire of sorts from which now and
again a hearty colonizing band
will emigrate to distant plots of land
and found new villages.)
                As we unpacked
the knapsack John had strapped upon his back
(he is our strongest sailor, though he lacks
great strength of mind, I find) and chose our beds
and fluffed the feather pillows at their heads,
a tray of thirteen steaming cups appeared
upon a nearby table. (It was weird,
the way whoever brought it disappeared
without our having seen or heard a thing.)
We drank the tea; it had a pleasant sting
of bitterness, warmed the esophagus
in going down, and seemed to each of us
to soothe our storming stomachs admirably.

We stored our guns and ammo separately,
as a precaution; it occurred to me,
since we were now outnumbered thoroughly,
it simply would be bad diplomacy
for us to keep them with us constantly.

I sat down on my bed and opened up
my notes and scribbled as I sipped my cup.
When Dorothea came to fetch us for
our baths ("Knock-knock," she said, although no door
divided us), she found me writing hard;
I'd brought us up into the chicken yard,
here in my diary. Delightedly,
she cried, "My God! You know stenography!"--
able to recognize it instantly,
though it was upside down to her. I told
her briefly how I'd found it in an old
forgotten textbook in our library
back home one night when I was twenty-three
and took to it enthusiastically,
but in the seven years since then had not
been able to promote its use. I thought
I caught an understanding look from her
at that--but for the moment, we deferred
discussion, since the tub outside was hot.

The little band of teenage girls had thought
they'd stand and watch the show as my young men
took baths; I therefore disappointed them
when I arranged things so that every new
bath would be blocked from their invasive view
by the remaining troops, ranged in a row,

shoulder to shoulder. I decreed we'd go
into the tub one at a time, by rank,
beginning with the lowest, since we stank
about the same (and that way, I could stay
with journaling a little longer).
                They
behaved themselves at first--distracted by
my earnest squiggly scribbling, which I
continued by a lantern lent to me
by the attentive, gracious Doctor D--
until around the time poor Peter stood
behind the barricade. But him they would
not leave alone. His flaming orange hair
was such a novelty, to see "down there"
became a point of curiosity
they couldn't quell.
                They set about to free
"the Captive of the Colorado Wall"
(as they had christened him) by any, all,
and every means they could devise. At first,
they tried to lure away the guards (the worst
of these unbridled flirts performed a lewd
and lurid dance, her twitching hips in rude
rough contact with poor Matthew's crotch). And then,
when these inducements failed to move the men,
they tried surprising them with sudden ducks

and dives and darts. But when our sailors stuck
courageously to their commissioned posts,
the ingenuity of our young hosts--
who'd failed at hassling and heckling--
progressed to itchy-kitschy tickling.

This tactic proved too much for my young men--
and thus, for me. I stood, recapped my pen,
and was about to loose a loud <u>ahem</u>
when Dorothea stopped me (thankfully)
by stepping in:
"Ladies? 'Consent is key'--
let's not forget."
And though she stood some feet
away and kept her tone of voice discreet,
her admonition neatly stopped them in
their tracks and turned them from attacks of Sin
back to a dull docility again.

She added, then, "These gentlemen are free
at all times to refuse your company
or to indulge in it--which is the same
rule that applies to you. Not that I blame
you for your curiosity, but we
must show our guests the utmost courtesy--
which in this instance means some privacy.

Now, let us offer our apology."

And here these demons of a moment prior
bowed their heads as in a Christmas choir.
"Sorry," they intoned in unison--
and filed away.
My journaling was done
(or nearly so: I'd gotten up to where
the tummy tea arrived, filling the air
with its refreshing steam), and so I stepped
into the bath. Our hosts are as adept
at soap-making as at herbology,
I find: the lather's scent reminded me
of cedar, balsam, pine, and fir;
it called to mind the frankincense and myrrh
the Wise Men brought to Bethlehem upon
this night so long ago.
To pull back on
my salty shorts and shoes on top of such
a bracing, brilliant bath was very much
against my inclination, but I did
so nonetheless. The tub was drained and hid
away again. Together with the rest,
we went back in, where Doctor D addressed
her honored guests much longer than I'd guessed
she would (close to a half an hour, I'd say),

while I transcribed. I did admire the way
she improvised her text, however, and
we learned a great deal more about the land
we have discovered here (you will have read
already every word of what she said),
and while we listened, we were lightly fed
on plain white cakes of millet, maize, and oats--
the very cakes they feed their milking goats.

The introduction of Cecilia made me start;
I felt a fleeting flinch that pinched my heart
when she rose up, without expression, part
way through our orientation session. She
is tall and taut, nearly reptilian, free
of any body hair below her close-
cropped kinky scalp, and easily the most
profoundly muscled creature I have seen
since birth. Her eyes are an unearthly green--
I'd almost call them yellow, even gold;
they glow so bright, and yet they gleam so cold,
they contradict themselves.
                But what is most
disturbing in our silent second host
is how she tends to disappear at will,
despite her height and striking form. I still
don't know how she escaped our notice when

she brought our tea to us, or when my men
and I first stood before the longhouse and
Bette gave her the suggestion (not command)
of brewing it. And here she rose, not ten
feet distant from me, even then--again,
without my ever having seen her.
                                Meek
and mild she's not, although she does not speak.
I've since been told she isn't truly mute,
but has a voice much like a fractured flute
that squeaks and squawks just out of her control,
and since its sound might sabotage her role
as second-in-command to Doctor D
and compromise her sense of dignity,
she never lets the other natives hear
it. Whispering in Dorothea's ear,
or Uncle Betsy's, is about as near
as she approaches to a conversation.

Just as Doctor D's indoctrination
lecture drew up close to its conclusion,
Peter's brow grew knotted in confusion.
I had sensed, among the other men,
a pricking up of interest toward the end,
when Dorothea spoke, as if by chance,
about the coming Moonlit Mating Dance

or Open Orgy. Peter was perplexed.
He raised his hand and cleared his throat, a vexed
expression on his face: "What do you mean,
an 'open orgy,' ma'am?"
As you have seen,
the Doctor then explained at length about
the planned debauch--increasing Peter's doubt
still further, till he had to let it out:
"But by allowing normal kids to see
such acts up close, aren't you afraid you'll be
promoting homosexuality?"

To which D answered, "No, not in the least.
Our attitude is different in the East.
We recognize that since the Dawn of Time,
there have been homosexuals. Hell, I'm
a homosexual!"
A silence filled
the air as though a pregnant god had willed
it there. Poor Peter with his bright red hair
undoubtedly could feel the whole room stare
at him, awaiting his response. A vast
ten seconds more ticked by, before at last
he answered:
"Oh."
At which point everyone--

myself included, I admit--was done
for, and we all laughed helplessly until
our bellies ached. The thing that made it still
more funny than it would have been was how
our First Lieutenant blushed from stern to bow,
his crimson skin in clashing contrast to
his carrot hair and beard. All we could do
was gasp for breath--until the Doctor said
at last, "All right, then, on that note, let's head
outside--and let the hunt begin!"
And so
we all went back outdoors again.
The bow
Cecilia held was of the "crossbow" kind
we've seen in our museum, where you wind
a crank to stretch the cord back and a "bolt"
is then inserted. There is quite a jolt
delivered to the shoulder when released,
as with a heavy rifle--or at least
that's what the caption underneath the one
in Boulder says. It's pretty much a gun.

But Uncle Bette, I found, was not to be
among the party. As it happens, he
does not believe in eating animals
with fewer than six legs. "You cannibals

go have your fun," he said, walking away.

(Bette's singularity, I have to say,
although peculiar, served to make me like
him more.)
In preparation for the hike,
all of the other "maids and eunuchs" lined
up just behind Cecilia. They're defined
officially at eighteen here, although
(as in the West) they usually know
their status years before. But on this night,
it's just the older ones who "hunt," despite
the telltale signs of hairlessness and height
apparent in some younger teens.
(I counted
thirty-two, a figure which amounted
to just over half of their adults--
but then again, statistical results
would have to take into account the mix
among departing colonists. To fix
upon an accurate percentage, then,
would mean more research. But the share of men
and women so afflicted seems about
the same, or less, here in the East as out
there in the West.)
As we were just about

to set off southward soundlessly, the ground
beneath us beat profoundly with the pound
of forty-eight approaching hooves. Of course,
this held us up a bit, since every horse
had on its back a rider unaware
of our arrival, till she found us there.
But even though these horsewomen were bare
and young, initially what made me stare
was what they rode upon. I was aware
that horses here were larger, but to see
them in their hugeness there in front of me
was something I could never have prepared
my mind for.

Such magnificent, well-cared-
for beasts! And of a size so uniform
(from centuries of striving toward a norm)--
their heads nearly as large as what's upon
their backs! And yet despite their girth and brawn,
they're gentle as a cool December night;
apparently the fight's been taken right
out of their family tree. They wear no bits
or saddles; every rider merely sits
atop the living hide and--through a kind
of bridle made of rope--speaks to the mind
of these most meek of creatures with a pull
or snap this way or that.

The Moon was full
and fully risen, floating well above
the tallest trees. The girls got down off of
their mounts and took the horses to their nooks,
but all the while they cast back longing looks
at my young men. The only difference was,
this time my men were looking back. (Because
of Dorothea's lecture? That could be.
But for the life of me, I couldn't see
the harm in it. Are they not men?) ...
Oh, dear.
I'll have to edit this; that much is clear.
The Elders who are my intended readers
wouldn't like to learn my fearless leaders
from the fatherland have such a flimsy
hold upon my heart. Unwholesome whimsy
born of heathen whores, they'd doubtless say,
has sought to lead my inner thoughts astray.

But what ridiculous old fools they are!
And not that old, in point of fact: as far
as I can see, we are essentially
the same in age. Compared with Doctor D,
our Elders are still in their infancy;
the oldest one is only thirty-eight.
I'm thirty--but I'm told I'll have to wait

another year before I get a voice
in their assembly.
                I'll have my choice
of wives then--as opposed to those I've been
assigned. (If I could do it all again,
I wouldn't marry either one of them;
they hate each other, and they dislike men.)
Another wedding hasn't much appeal
for me. The bond of marriage has no real
connecting force on Colorado. Quite
the opposite: whatever friendship might
exist before the dreaded wedding night
is quickly turned to distance and distrust--
and then, from there, to loathing and disgust--
because of "closeting," our quaint tradition
where the honeymoon becomes perdition
almost instantly, as each new wife
is cut off from all others in her life
until the "little visitor" arrives
within her womb. And soon the other wives
pour envy in her fresh-torn wound, as she
awaits with growing fear the mystery
of childbirth.
            What brilliant mind devised
this system? And what genius then revised
the Bible for the untaught mind to make

it fit that Jesus--dying for the sake
of every heart in humankind--should bless
such mockeries of love, such heartlessness?

In ancient times, we're told, the Captain of
a ship could join two passengers in love
with one another in a binding state
of legal matrimony, his innate
authority upon the open seas
was so well-recognized. If it should please
him to detach a hand off of a thief's
trespassing arm, societal beliefs
the whole world over backed him up. He was,
both in tradition and in written laws,
both judge and jury in his situation--
ruler of his roving island nation.

If, before the Great Apocalypse,
the Captains of those ancient sailing ships
had such authority, then certainly
to press the precedent a bit with me
might be permitted (although technically
we are not currently upon the sea),
so far that I might seize it to decree
that our small nautical society
should use a measure of democracy

henceforth in social matters, breaking free
from those assumers of authority
we left behind in Boulder.
                Let it be:
once we have come back from the hunt, I'll call
a meeting--and a vote. If, after all
we've seen and heard, my men still think we ought
to stick with every stricture we've been taught
by those back home who claim to speak for God,
then I will acquiesce.
                It would be odd,
however, if that turned out to be so.
Of course, there's Peter: would he even know
what his own heart descried, without a guide
to tell him if it spoke the truth or lied?
But even he would probably agree
to go along with the majority--
and if I made it clear that he was free
to disagree with me, I'm guessing he
would lend his full ascent more readily
(ironically).
            But it will have to be
the men's own free decision. They must see
that it would be ridiculous in me
to arbitrate the course of each man's penis,
when a coursing ocean stands between us

and the land we left behind, where all
the rules of naval discipline (in thrall
to which I was made Captain over them)
originate.
When sailors try to stem
a tide they ought to ride, they wreck their ship--
but if, instead, they keep their heads and slip
their sails into a more obliging breeze,
their altered tack will track the gale; it frees
them from the hazards a stiff course would court
and brings their starboard level with their port
until they're harbored in a safer sound.

This lovely garden where we've come aground
has grown on me already. I had prayed
this mission would be less a pirate raid,
a hunt for plunder, than a sort of trade
between societies, with reverence paid
to every treasure openly displayed--
those gifts of ingenuity arrayed
and offered freely for the other's aid,
in mutual respect. What if we made
the choice to make no changes here, and played
the part of faithful pupils, unafraid
of finding them correct?
What if we stayed?

III. CECILIA HOLDS THE CROSSBOW

Cecilia holds the crossbow close across
her breastless torso. Never at a loss
for utter silence and an outward calm,
she stands there motionless, whatever qualm
or question might be beating its bright wings
against her ribs kept hidden, mute. She brings
this same illegible demeanor to
each task she undertakes. The people who
have known her all their lives have no more clue
to what she's thinking than these strangers do;
the difference is, they know it's of no use
to speculate.
The maids' and eunuchs' loose
line trails in back of her; she feels it, there's
no need to look. This Captain, though (who wears
the same repulsive shorts and shoes as his
subordinates), ignores his men and is
absorbed instead in taking spying notes
and talking with the Doctor (whom he quotes,
no doubt, to edify his Generals). When,
at last, he notices his aimless men
and asks them to fall into line--just then,

the stable ladies come, and once again
all falls into confusion.
                Estrogen
must be a powerful narcotic, C
reflects. Somehow these women cannot see
the danger here; all they can think about
is how to get these hairy white men out
of their peculiar pants and pull them down
into the mating dance.
                A subtle frown
begins to play about C's lips. She sees
the Captain has less interest, now, in these
young women than the horses they are riding.
What is his intent? What is he hiding?

They confer--the Doctor and this "Zeke."
C notes the way they giggle as they speak,
looking directly in each other's eyes,
like fine old friends, as diplomatic lies
slip back and forth between them. Side by side,
they walk up to Cecilia, smiling wide;
it makes her stomach slightly sick to see.

"I'm sorry, C," the Doctor says. "We'll be
a little longer. Zeke will walk with me,
while his young men take up the rear. And we

should say the prayer again, I think, before
we go. But we don't need to go indoors
again. I mean, if that's okay with you--?"

Whatever Dorothea wants to do,
she does; Cecilia is accustomed to
this artificial way of asking her
consent, without her needing to concur.
It wouldn't ordinarily occur
to her to notice or resent this fake
consideration--but tonight, it takes
her by surprise to find it irritates
her very much.
              And yet she stands and waits;
it's all just fine. For Dorothea's sake,
she keeps no more expression than a snake's
upon her face, until each man has found
his place in line. By now, the Sun-baked ground
has cooled, a comfortable temperature
for walking or for stalking prey. The pure
experience of it is ruined, though,
by these ridiculous young men, so slow
to come to order--noisy, short, and white
(the tallest one is Dorothea's height).

According to tradition, it's old maids

and eunuchs who compose the hunt's parade,
with She Who's Oldest lighting them, as though
to sanctify their mission and to show
how copulating populaters owe
a great deal to their taller, stronger kin.
But Dorothea speaks the prayer again--
the prayer that ought to be the last words spoken
prior to the hunt, in holy token
of the Hunters' Vow, to leave the house
as quiet as a laryngitic mouse--
outdoors, in front of gross unwelcome guests
(Aunt C regards them more as noisome pests),
not only witnessing but pre-profaning
everything in sight (an entertaining
spectacle, for them):
"The Moon is white.
The sky is black. The colors of the night
contrast simplistically, like wrong and right.
But in between these layers of the light,
a grand complexity is glittering:
the starlight twinkles and the crickets sing.

"A flock of ticking bats has taken wing
in search of dragonflies and fireflies
and every kind of moth; they scan the skies
with ricocheting sound. Down on the ground,

they know, the grubs and grasshoppers abound
among the cricket thickets--but the bat
out on the hunt thinks, 'Where's the sport in that?'

"The Moon is cool. The Earth is hot. Beneath
our feet, where Father Sun sinks in his teeth
by day, his anger burns by night, despite
his flight from view. But now the Moon is white,
the sky a deeper blue, a cooler hue
than in the day, inviting humans to
come out and play. But we have work to do.

"The Moon is full. The ocean never sleeps.
It licks our shores all night and day and keeps
our islands thin and spare. The ocean air
is full of salt and damp, and that is where
the razorbacks go grazing, in the bog
that nestles in the curling, swirling fog
down by the pounding surf, where sod and turf
are spongy and the trees are dead. The earth
is dank and smelly there, more foul than fair
down in their lair, the mucky hollow where
they rut and root and wallow without care.

"The Moon is salt. The sky is deep--a sea
of never-ending twinkling tears. Now we

whose barrenness has made us strong will follow
down along the trail into the hollow.

"Mother Moon still loves us. It is she
who lights the dark and blesses us as we
embark. The lantern light is for the boars
who wait for us down where the ocean roars
against the shore; for us, the Moon is quite
enough. Her beaming face is broad and white
and smiles upon our hunt.
                "That other one,
who calls himself our Father or the Sun,
resents our midnight ventures. He would make
us all his sacrificial beasts and bake
us from the inside out, our living skins
the husks of corn that wrap us in our Sins.
But we will not become the Sun's tamales,
paying for our foolish fathers' follies,
shucking off the shredding ozone layer.
We will fight and seize the part of slayer
in this midnight play.
                "Oh, hear our prayer,
Mother Moon, and let us see your face!
And lead us always by your guiding grace
held high and mightily! Our lantern Moon!
Our savior Moon! Our Sun-defying Moon!"

To see D standing there, her arms held high,
face to the sky, is to remember why
this stranger started to personify
the very concept of the deity
so soon after she rose up from the sea,
transported magically from some far place,
possessed of an amazing strength and grace
and (after her recovery) a gift
of gab like none before: all served to lift
her starry status in the firmament,
till she was seen as the embodiment
of Lunar light, as though she had been sent
by Mother Moon as a presentiment.

Cecilia loves her, helplessly and madly;
she would sacrifice her own life gladly
to preserve her precious Dorothea.

But to suffer fools! The whole idea
grates against Cecilia's teeth. And now,
to have the line arranged this way, the plow
before the horse! An insult so profound--
wedging this man between them, with the sound
his shoes make on the ground (the silly squeak
of misnamed "sneakers": how could stalkers sneak
up on the deafest prey with feet that speak

so plainly?) and the scent of his rank clothes
(his filthy sweat-soaked "shorts") shoved up her nose!

He takes his notebook everywhere he goes.
Has Dorothea gone completely blind?
Can she not see what this man has in mind?

Perhaps it has to do with how alike
they look, Aunt C considers as they hike
along the southward, downward trail: their skin
so smooth and white, their forms so light and thin;
the same thick, curling night-black hair--his chin
producing lavish locks nearly as long
as those that cloak D's back. Do they belong
to the same ancient tribe? And could that be
what's blinding her? A sense of family?

As they descend, the ground already damp
beneath their feet, the Doctor holds her lamp,
the Captain holds his little book, and right
behind, Cecilia holds her crossbow tight
against her churning heart. In back of her,
prepared for tasks the hunt will soon incur,
the maid and eunuch butchers lug their saws
and skinning knives, their hatchets and their claws.
In back of them, another thirty yards

of silent, mostly empty-handed guards--
and then the rattler's noisy tail: the twelve
invaders with their foreign manners delve
into the stillness with their squeakers and
their coughs and raspy whispering, a band
of children masquerading as young men.

They snake along the goat-width path, and then--
just where the briar thins into a patch
of rocky, mossy deadwood forest--catch
a pair of goats, a buck and doe (who seem
to know this is a night the humans deem
appropriate for woodland romps), immersed
in a "light appetizer" course, the first
sweet morsel of a lovers' feast. Well-versed
in oral arts, the slurping Romeo
ignores the man parade, not to forego
the pleasures of his Juliet, who stands
likewise immovable (by the commands
of Cupid's pointed arrow) inches from
the trail, her ears flat back, the hum of some
internal serenade holding her fast,
and lets the hunting party file past
without so much as a discursive bleat,
scarcely acknowledging its passing feet.

The lantern light illuminates her eyes,
a pair of bright green diamonds; no surprise
or sense of shame is written there. They stare
unseeingly, serenely unaware
of all except the sweetness of the suite
playing within, its lilting rut and heat
combining in a gorgeous harmony.

Although their color matches hers, Aunt C
conceives no sisterly camaraderie
in these two angulated orbs. In fact,
the scents of ardor sent abroad just act
to stimulate Cecilia's appetite,
reminding her that just the other night
one of these hungry lovers' cousins met
his end and afterward was bled and set
above a slowly smoking hickory bed
of coals for four nights running. It's been said
this recent casualty is bound to be
the sweetest cold meat plate in memory
at Solstice Feast. We'll see, thinks C; we'll see.

* * * * * * * * * *

Cecilia's mother died when C was nine
years old. Her health had started its decline

some time before her final pregnancy,
which ended, like the others (but for C),
in what is called "spontaneous abortion."
Miscarriage, in other words. The portion
of her pregnancies which terminated
so (nine out of ten), it must be stated,
caused a lot of talk. Since she was the
authority, or was supposed to be,
on every aspect of midwifery
and of obstetrical herbology
in Blueridge, naturally the fact that she
apparently lacked the ability
to see through any of the pregnancies
originating with her ovaries
was grist for gossip.
Not that people lacked
all sympathy for her. Indeed, the fact
that she had nearly died in giving birth
to her one child, a citizen of Earth
herself but thirteen years back then, was cause
enough to give the gossipers some pause
before they strayed into pure condemnation.
They were sorry for her situation
as an orphaned teenage mother and
admired much the way she took command
of her own life, the way she could persist

in all those studies that her herbalist
great aunt had set before her, prior to
that great aunt's death. And it was very true
that in apprenticing Cecilia, she
displayed a certain sense of family
tradition which you just had to respect.

And yet C was a victim of neglect,
according to some other mothers, who
(once they themselves had born a child or two)
had rearranged their lives according to
the needs of their descendents in the here
and now. They picked a partner (whether queer
or straight) and concentrated all the love
of both to beam like Moonlight from above
upon their little Earths. But this was not
Cecilia's mother's style. Although she taught
her daughter every herbal trick she knew--
and, more than that, made efforts to imbue
in her a deep exploratory yearning
for the source of knowledge ever burning
in her brain--still, basically, this learning
on Cecilia's part and teaching on
her mother's was as far as it had gone;
their whole relationship was based upon
the intellect and not the heart.

It was
Cecilia's mother's heart that was the cause
of such tut-tutting. It was seen that C
was not as nurtured as she ought to be
by her too-clever mother, who'd correct
her cornrows once a month and would protect
her from diseases of the body through
her various infusions, but would do
so little for confusions of the heart
which might arise, apart from herbal art.

Specifically, they disapproved of how
she wouldn't settle on a suitor, now
that she'd become a mom. When she had tried
one out a week or two, dissatisfied,
she'd move on to another. When the pride
of one was injured by attentions paid
to someone new, she'd tell the duller blade
that (fun as it had been) she was afraid
the time had come for them to not be so
exclusively involved (for him to go,
in other words). This pattern would recur
for months on end, until one evening her
most recent lover would observe that she
was pregnant and would incidentally
remark upon it. Here her latest fling

would end, and in its place, she'd promptly bring
all that attention which had formerly
been focused on her lover to the wee
one occupying her quite literally.

Another two weeks passed, or maybe three,
and then the same fate fell to her new son
or daughter as had fallen to the one
who'd fathered him or her (and to the two
or three since then): it would be sent into
oblivion. Someone or something new
would always come along, then, to provide
that sense of novelty which gratified
her only fleetingly.
(We ought to say
here, for the benefit of those who may
be reading this discussion in some age
long after--or perhaps before--this page
was penned, that in the Twenty Sixties, when
this woman lived, the question of which men
had bred which children was of no event;
paternity was thought irrelevant--
on Southern Appalachia, at least.
And yet surviving children in the East
were "nurtured" and indulged to a degree
unequalled in the world's history

up to that point. Infant mortality
was at its highest peak since well before
the Christian era; when a child reached four,
he'd beat the odds to such a grand extent,
a feast was held, with invitations sent
to other villages for miles around.
Such fuss and coddling might well astound
you readers of another age.)
                No one
objected to the quantity of fun
Cecilia's mother had in bed--but when
her child was kept awake all day by men
whose moans and smells were changing constantly,
it caused concern. If the community
had had another druggist or physician,
other parents might have sought permission
to adopt the girl away from her,
but as dependent as these people were
on her in times of illness, stillness seemed
the wiser course.
                Cecilia's mom was deemed
a "nymphomaniac" (a word that had
a few good connotations then, and bad
ones, too), but that was neither here nor there.
Still, over time, people became aware
that her preferred age in a lover never

changed. She liked them young and was forever taking first-time twelve-year-olds to bed, even when she was past her teens. She said it helped the lads, having a wiser head to guide them; it was rather philanthropic, in her view. And then the hot new topic gossips hopped upon was whether she would start to horn in on the boys that C might be attracted to, once puberty set in.

But that, of course, was not to be. Besides, Cecilia was so small and shy, that to imagine her with any guy stretched all credulity. She only had one real friend, and that was Bret, a lad who stood a good head taller than his chum, although he was a good year younger. Some suggested they might grow up to be man and wife--but Bret already had a plan in place by then, even at eight: he would be queer, like both his dads, and if he could, he'd be an entomologist, like Ray.

(He ended up not having much to say about his first intent, but on the day he turned fourteen, his father Ray passed on--

his father Bob already two years gone
by then--and Bret became, if tragically,
the town's expert on entomology.)

Cecilia's voice was "normal" then, though small.
There wasn't anything bizarre at all
about the way it sounded. It was high
and clear and was just one more reason why
outsiders thought she was no more than five
or six, when actually she'd been alive
for nine long years (that, and her modest height
and tiny frame). Her eyes, though, and the light
that emanated from them, gave a fright
to these outsiders when that fiery fierce
green gold intelligence of hers would pierce
clean through all notions of the simple sense
of children; expectations leapt their fence.

Cecilia's mother died as a direct
result of her last pregnancy. Neglect
of her own health had weakened her, they say.
People had noticed how her skin was gray
now and no longer brown; they'd heard the way
she coughed so, in the middle of the day.

Her miscarriage began as usual:

early one evening when the Moon was full
she took off down the trail, alone, before
the breakfast fires were lit--down to the shore,
where there was something in the ocean's roar
that helped her to hypnotically "ignore
the pain" and seemed to actually reduce
the cramps' intensity. This time the juice
flew out of her too quickly, though. And much
more thickly than before. And there was such
a lot of pain. And such a lot of blood.

She lay there in the lukewarm coastal mud,
and suddenly she knew: "This is the end.
No one will hear me if I scream. They'll send
somebody later--say, at three or four.
But this is it for me. I'll be no more."
And then she died.
It was Cecilia who
discovered her. When midnight passed, she knew
that something must have gone amiss. At two,
she headed down, her stomach in a knot.
Bret said he'd come along; Cecilia thought
it better that she go alone, however.
Nine years old, already strong and clever,
hard and brave inside herself, she never
would accept assistance if there were

another option. So it was, with her.

She found the boars all huddled in a pack,
intent upon some unseen midnight snack.
Cecilia threw some stones and hooted at
them in her little girl's voice. At that,
they scattered--all except the middle boar,
whose snout was stuck inside the source of gore
that oozed out of Cecilia's mother's womb.

The boars had not yet started to consume
the body proper, though they'd trampled on
it pretty well. Some time before first dawn
they would have had it torn to pieces, but
for now, they were content to slurp at what
emerged out of the crotch, still very warm
and wonderfully odiferous. The norm
for boars was following their snouts and then
letting their tusks dig in a while, and when
their tongues found something to enjoy, to chew
and slurp and gulp.
                Cecilia threw a few
more stones, to no avail. The boar just squealed
and shifted here and there, confused. He reeled
around a bit, but stayed attached. And so
Cecilia found a rock (too big to throw,

but light enough for her to lift it), stepped
up on her mother's chest, and (while she kept
her balance) slammed it with a sudden thump
against the creature's scrubby razor hump,
the pain of which provoked the boar to jump
back in a leap of terror--and to dump
Cecilia in the mud--the body still
attached. A supercharging strength of will
born of adrenalin allowed the boar
to drag it in an instant to a more
convenient spot; it caught upon a knot
of root and rock, and with a rip, he got
it loose and scrambled back into the woods.

Cecilia looked upon the damaged goods
that used to be her mother. It would be
impossible to carry, she could see,
or even drag it, all the way back home.
And yet the boars, once she had gone, would roam
back over with their sniffing snouts, intent
upon more mischief. Bret could have been sent
back home to get some help, if she'd have let
him come along; she felt some real regret
then that she hadn't. But it wouldn't get
her anywhere to dwell on that. No Bret.
Oh, well. What now?

She started piling stones
up on the corpse. She heard no cries or moans
as each stone dropped, only the crack of bones
beneath the muted thud of each one's fall,
until the pile had grown enough that all
she heard was stone on stone, above the sound
of crickets, wind, and waves. Cecilia found
the largest stones that she could lift and brought
them, one by one, and piled them on. She thought
if they were piled up deep enough the boars
would give up trying to excavate; the chore
would prove too difficult, and they had not
the patience to endure and wait. She thought
their laziness and constant hunger would
remind them how, right in this neighborhood,
they could find other food nearly as good
or better than her mother's corpse, and they
would give up rooting and just go away.

And so Cecilia (who was very small
for nine) kept on, continuing to haul
more stones, despite her bleeding fingers and
her aching back. She had at her command,
even back then, a single-minded force
of will allowing her to stay a course,
enduring any inconvenience to

herself to have it done, to see it through.
It must have been an hour, or maybe two,
before her playmate, Bret, and Ray, his dad,
discovered her at work. By then, she had
created something like a pyramid--
a pointed pile, at any rate--that hid
all traces of her mom's remains.
                                Bret was
surprised to find her so employed, because
he hadn't thought about the way the boars
(not vegetarians, but omnivores)
might tamper with the freshly dead--and yet
he wasn't really shocked. (Lest we forget,
back in those early nights, the stench of death
was common as the drawing of a breath.)
But Ray, who always found the little bright-
eyed gnome unnerving, shivered at the sight
of her at work this gruesome Moonlit night.

The scrawny tawny cornrowed gremlin stood
and waited as the two drew near, her good
work of the last two hours shining white
there in the salty mist, like something quite
as ancient as the waves whose rhythm beat
like thunder underneath their naked feet.
The shaken Ray stopped short of her a ways.

He held his son back, too. Her steady gaze,
as green and gold as fireflies in maize,
was strong enough to stop a man Ray's size
without a flicker; nothing like surprise
shone from those eyes.
                "Hey there, Cecilia," he
got out at last. "What are you doing?"
                She
responded in her childish monotone:
"My mother died. I had to pile some stones
on top of her to keep the boars away."

And that was all she was prepared to say
for now, apparently. She looked at Ray
as if it were his turn to speak again.

"Good job," he said. "Good job." (Where to begin?)
"It's almost dawn. We'd better go back in. ...
We'll hold the funeral rite tomorrow night."

She nodded in acknowledgment. "All right,"
she said, and walked past Ray and Bret without
a glance, back up the trail to home.
                No doubt
Cecilia missed her mother, though she shed
no tears that anyone could see. Instead

of crying, she closed in upon herself,
becoming even more the silent elf
of Blueridge, spending all her time around
the brook or in the fields or woods or down
among the salty bogs. She kept the old
apartment in the longhouse, where she rolled
the pills and crushed the teas and remedies
her mother taught her all about. Disease
was rampant then as now, and so her skills
were always in demand, for curing ills
or easing pain when hope was gone.
                                Although
Bret's dads were hers, now, too, they didn't know
how they should handle her. Sometimes they'd try
to turn her inside out, to tell them why
she never shared her feelings, never cried--
as though it were some tricky point of pride
with her. But she just told them she was shy.
She thought that answer ought to satisfy
them; there was really nothing more to say.

For three months, things continued on this way.
C never "opened up" to Bob or Ray--
or to her new adopted brother, Bret.
However, Bret would never try to get
Cecilia talking. Even then, at eight,

he had a tendency to dominate
a conversation; just to know that she
was listening was quite enough. Soon he
began to tag along with her when she
went "herbing," with the opportunity
for "bugging" in attentive company
so pleasant and convenient. Botany
became biology; herbology
went hand-in-hand with entomology.

Still, people fretted that the orphaned child
was suffering inside herself, defiled
by grief and warped by loneliness. But no
one knew how to approach her. Even though
she was just nine, already people showed
that fear of her, that hesitant "respect"
for her, that kept all contact circumspect.

And then one day (it was two hours past dawn;
all of the other villagers had gone
to bed; Cecilia listened to them snore)
somebody knocked upon the longhouse door.

* * * * * * * * * *

The bog belonging to the boars is near;

its scent wafts up the path. The sky is clear
above, but here below, the mist is kissed
with vintage swine bouquet. They've shat and pissed
and puked and wallowed in the mud in this
vicinity for heaven only knows
how long; perhaps their residency goes
back to those pre-Apocalyptic days
before the sea received its massive raise.
Who knows? In any case, for generations--
hog and human--thorough infestation
by the razorbacks has marked this region
with its unctuous odor.
                Here the legion
slows and circles round the tall dead trees
that mark the border of the bog. A breeze
of salt and acid seeps up from the shore,
lending a touch of spice. ...
                One of the boars
(a four-year-old with four long tusks; a male,
therefore) lies lounging like a shipwrecked whale
in tepid slime. Like all his brother swine,
he cannot sweat, and so he takes his time
while here to give his hide a moistening
before returning to his foraging.
He notices the lantern flickering
at intervals, like starlight twinkling

among the trees. He wonders at the sight
and points (in the direction of the light)
his telescopic, deeply caverned snout:

Humans, of course; there can't be any doubt.
Mostly the larger, furless, muskless kind,
like Bette. (His snout, however, doesn't find
the scent of Bette himself; that's odd.) And here,
trailing along behind the rest, a queer
new odor from another group of men--
small, musky men, unknown to him. (But then,
what <u>is</u> that queer new odor? Salty-sweet--
but upchuck-making underneath.) Their feet
are making squeaky noises as they walk.
They're speaking in that raspy breathy talk
that doesn't use the sinuses or chest.
(They have no insect odor; strange.) The rest
are quiet, but for one, next to the light.
His feet are squeaking, and he's just the height
of those behind--and yet his mouth is shut.

And now the lantern light stops moving. But
the squeaking at the rear continues for
a little bit. And then it stops.
                The boar
rolls over, wallowing a moment more,

then rights himself and shakes the excess slime
off of his hide. Nearby, a pair of fine
young sows, just two years old, observe his rise
and turn their tuskless snouts and tiny eyes
in his direction--but remain, for now,
mostly submerged. The agitated sow-
scent stirs some interest in the boar, but he's
distracted by the gathering of these
familiar and unknown humans, their
behavior, and their light.
                He is aware
that one of them, under the lantern light,
is very pale. Her hide is almost white,
much like the Moon. (He knows her; she's a friend
of Bette's, he thinks. Sometimes when they are penned
in for the night, it's she who brings the sweet
warm slop they eat before they go to sleep,
when Bette is not the one.) She looks so bright
and Moon-like in her stillness, with the white
light hovering above her at a height
so close to Earth, the sight serves to invite
him forward for a closer look.
                His snout
held high, he moves--a modicum of doubt
restraining him from full-on trotting--out
of mud and up onto the harder ground.

He is aware of danger, of the pound
of his own heartbeat in his straining ears,
but something in the light contains his fears
and keeps his cloven feet advancing at
a sturdy pace.
                He recognizes that
peculiar scent of burning oil, the fat
that sizzles almost silently just where
the flame burns brightest, and is half aware
it is the same scent that he smells upon
his fellow foragers when early dawn
reminds his kind to all come trotting back
for supper, close together in a pack.
And yet his hooves continue to advance.

The sows rise up behind him now. Romance,
more than mere curiosity, inspires
their rise; their moistening has roused desires
in them which draw them forward, too--in train
to him who rules all hearts in his domain.
But they are not so bold, and so remain
some distance back.
                    The boar now brings his four
hooves to a halt. He needs some sign, before
he dares to chance advancing any more,
that there is not some mischief underway.

He strains his neck to lift his snout and splay
his nostrils all the way. Just where the ray
of round white light would take him in if he
drew nearer--

Perfect stillness. ...

Doctor D

holds up the lantern, keeping very still.
Ezekiel can feel it now: the kill
is near at hand. He hardly breathes. Beside
him--for they all have turned to face inside
the circling spindled trunks, into the bog,
through which a light mist drifts (to call it fog
would be a gross exaggeration)--he
can see Cecilia aiming carefully.
He realizes with a start that she
is at his level now, down on one knee,
although he didn't hear or sense or see
her moving so, into position.

D

stands motionless and waits. Now subtly
she points her chin (or really, just her lip;
it would be crass to raise a fingertip)
into the misty bog. Ezekiel peers;
he doesn't see the snout or tusks or ears
(all straining forward, as we know)--but there,
suspended in the darkly fetid air,

a pair of tiny coal-red glowing dots,
some distance off. No grunts are heard, or trots,
and yet the spots grow brighter as they spread
out further from each other. Still, no head.

Now Dorothea lets her pursed lips take
the lead a little bit, as though to make
Ezekiel aware of something more,
a little further off. Another boar?
He squints--and makes out yet another pair
of small red dots, still further off--and there,
just on the other side, another.
                                Thump!
A thrill shoots up Zeke's legs and makes him jump.
Cecilia, swiftly following her shot,
shoots into darkness, Dorothea hot
upon her with the lamp. Ezekiel--
although he doesn't hesitate--is well
outflanked by eunuch butchers bearing tools
before he gets to where the lamplight pools
around the newly slain. His men, despite
their eager youth, take up the rear.
                                Her light
held high, the Doctor speaks: "A moment, please."

The boar-side butchers (and Cecilia) freeze,

to let the young men see the angle he's
received the death blow from: the bolt has passed
straight through the arched roof of his mouth, a fast
and painless "Hitler shot." The men (all in
their teens, and thus in love with death) begin
to compliment Cecilia on her shot--
but at her glance, decide they'd better not.
Zeke quietly directs them all to fall
back and observe.

C walks away. It's all
too much for her--this gross intrusion D's
allowed upon the maids' festivities.
She lets the bolt remain in place for now
(something she wouldn't otherwise allow),
because she feels her thin facade about
to crack. She walks away to wait it out
among the mossy ruins, once again
amazed at her own anger.

Now the men
observe the butchers at their speedy work:
they hang the carcass upside down and dirk
the jugular, thus letting loose a rain
of blood, all in a torrent. As the vein
continues pulsing for some minutes more,
another long, deep slice connects the boar's
warm anus to its pouring throat, and all

the organ meat disgorges in a fall
upon the ground, like giving sudden birth
to some strange monster on the steaming earth--
the smell of which might knock a grown man down
if he were unprepared.
                The guts are wound
around a rack made out of fresh-cut fir
and squozen out by Reed and Juniper
(the "sausage butchers," as the rest refer
to them), while Della saves the liver and
the kidneys (using nothing but her hands)
together in a netted bag; the heart
and lungs are chiseled loose and pried apart
by Alexandria and Fred. And now
the gutted carcass, hanging from two boughs,
is hoisted to the shoulders of the two
most massive eunuchs, Hercules and Boo.

Cecilia hears them chattering and joking
with the foreign sailors (how provoking!)
as they go about their duties. Don't
they understand what's happening? Why won't
they see the coarse contempt these men display
for maids and eunuchs? (She just heard one say,
"These blanks are huge!" just as she walked away.
At least, that's what it sounded like; he said

it underneath his breath, turning his head
away from her, to whisper to his friend.)

The hardest thing for C to comprehend
is Dorothea--of all people, knowing
what she knows about their culture--showing
them such fawning hospitality!
And after having fled across the sea
at such a reckless risk to life and limb,
how can she be so cozy now with <u>him</u>?
A ranking officer fresh from the West,
arriving armed and eager to invest
his time in analyzing them--her "guest"!

But now she hears the carcass being shifted
from its hanging tree, soon to be lifted
to the shoulders of Aunt Hercules
and Uncle Boo. She cracks her neck and frees
herself of all this nonsense, strides back (calm)
into the busy clearing, wraps her palm
around the bolt inside the mouth and twists
it free, as if with ease (though it resists),
then whispers something in the Doctor's ear
(which interrupts the Captain, standing near,
and so disturbs their conversation; good)
and disappears again into the wood.

She heads due north along the coastal trail,
up to the cove, to see what kind of sails
these sailors blew in on. She keeps above
the bluffs and scans for indications of
a landing down along the rocky beach.

(Cecilia's eyes, beyond their look, can reach
much further in their gaze than anyone's
yet born upon these islands. Bright green Suns
that pierce through darkness even on those nights
when Mother Moon is hidden--glowing lights
revealing sights the others cannot see--
her eyes are just as much a mystery
as she herself.)

She spots the lifeboats first:
two blue canoes, banked far apart; they're versed
in warfare, clearly. Where the paint is scratched,
the raw aluminum abrasions catch
the Moonlight.

Further on, just where a bluff
sticks out above the cove--there, sure enough,
she finds a perfect view. Their ship (she's heard
it called the Revelation, from a word
in their revered New Testament, absurd
as that may sound) lies moored a quarter mile
or so from shore.

Cecilia has to smile.
It looks so small, compared to what she had
imagined. How ridiculous--how sad!
She almost laughs out loud. They must have had
to sleep packed in like insects in a nest.
Two measly masts; a "schooner," then, at best.

She sits down comfortably on the ledge
and lets her long legs swing out from the edge
above the droning surf. Her heartbeat slows
and calms. The gulf between what she now knows
and what she had imagined stretches out
before her like the Moonlit sea. She doubts
herself, quite happily:
Cecilia. What
an idiot you are sometimes! So what
if these adventurous young men explore
our islands? You could take on any four
of them at once! A thousand miles and more
of ocean separate our countries! How
on earth could you get so worked up? Allow
yourself to worry so about a group
of teenagers--a little Boy Scout troop?

The Moon is white. The sky is purple. Light
cascades. The ocean laps the shore all night.

The world is wide. And Dorothea's right.

* * * * * * * * * *

No one had ever knocked upon that door
before. The sound was foreign. What was more,
the hour was wrong for visitors: the Sun
had risen hours ago; so anyone
left stranded out of doors would have been fried
by now, unless they'd found a place to hide.
And anyway, the people of the East
just hooted, never knocked on doors--at least,
not in the southern villages. So when
that sudden pounding broke their sleep, the men
and women in the longhouse didn't know
how to respond; they saw Cecilia go
to open up the door but couldn't yet
connect her walking with that knocking.
                                Bret
(who slept a little closer to the door,
near Bob and Ray) hopped out of bed before
he'd fully woken up and followed C,
at which his dads assumed (confusedly)
that he was getting up to take a pee,
despite the sudden racket. They could see
him catching up with C the moment she

reached for the latch, at which point they "came to"
and leapt from bed to catch up with the two
of them. The door swung open just as Bob
and Ray caught up--and there they saw a blob
of shiny blackness in a human shape,
topped with a shattered Cyclops eye that gaped
and bled and made a wheezing, sucking sound.

Bret's dads both screamed initially, but found
their nerve a moment later as their son
and C helped in the blob and everyone
began to talk at once. Cecilia cried
out, with a force and volume never tried
before in public:

"Get out of the way!"

And something in her tone of voice held sway
with her fresh-wakened neighbors, who made space
to get the patient with the shattered face
back through to what was once her mother's bed,
but which in recent months she'd used instead
for tending to the sick.

"I need a light,"

she said, her tone turned down again to right
around the little girl level--but
with just enough authority that what

she asked for soon appeared: a hurricane
was lit and hung above her, of the plain
lard-burning flat-wick type.
"I need to use
your knife," she told someone.
Who could refuse
her anything? Her strength and concentration
were phenomenal. A first aid station
had appeared beneath her fingertips,
as if by force of will. A few deft snips
and peelings later, and the diving mask--
the shards of shattered amber isinglass,
corroded rubber-treated cloth and clasps--
lay spread about, and her new patient's head
lay bare. A number of abrasions bled
around her scalp and forehead, but her eyes
looked fine. And they were open--a surprise,
and certainly a hopeful sign.
"Hello,"
Cecilia said. "My name is C."
Although
she seemed to understand, she made no answer.
Maybe she was mute. Some kind of cancer
was suspected by those present, from
the color of her skin: stark white, with some
dark purple patches here and there. But when

the rest of her had been stripped naked, then
opinion changed: an isolated race
of white-skinned people, surely.
                                Though her face
was bruised and cut, it had been spared the sores
and ocean burns her lower body wore
from neck to ankle. She apparently
had worn a "scuba diving suit" (which C
and others there had read about, but none
had ever seen) to seal away the Sun
for several weeks on end--but over time,
it must have been, the sea's corrosive brine
seeped in and did this harm. Cecilia called
for and received a pan of water (walled
up there indoors past dawn, she had no means
of boiling it) and sponged her patient clean
before she smoothed in several kinds of creams
and ointments made from plants as well as bugs
and barnyard animals. (Some of the drugs
C had prepared as pills might come in handy
now; she'd have her patient take some brandy.)

When she rolled her over on her side
to peel the sticky cloth-and-rubber hide
off of her back, there was a startled gasp
among the onlookers. Some sort of rasp

or whip had been repeatedly applied
there in the last few years, leaving a wide
swath of cross-hatching scars across her back
and shoulders. These were purple, almost black,
at present--but that probably was due
to lack of oxygen, Cecilia knew,
and the effects of brine; in time, if she
survived, their color would undoubtedly
grow paler. (And her dark thick hair could be
worn down her back to cover them, if she
were vain about such things; we'll have to see,
thought C.)

After a few more hours, despite
the novelty, all the adults, now quite
exhausted, went back to their beds and slept--
then even Bret dozed off. Cecilia kept
awake all day, however, tending to
this visitor with eyes of violet blue
and skin as white as milk. She combed her long
black hair and checked her scalp for lice.

How strong
she was! How brave she must have been! And oh,
how beautiful! Her perfect breasts, although
they had been reddened by a rash, were very
full; a subtle purple capillary
pattern spread out like the Moon's aurora

from her nipples. An enchanted aura
clung to her, as though the stars above
had fathered her.
                Cecilia was in love
with D, in fact, from that first day when she
began to nurse her back to health. For three
weeks, nothing (save one crowning pregnancy
and two impending deaths) could loosen C's
attention, even momentarily,
away from her.
              A future fantasy
had formed already in Cecilia's mind:
a few years down the line, once unconfined
by such a silly childish form, she would
take full advantage of her womanhood
to woo and marry this enchanted queen.
Their eyes of violet blue and golden green
would meet in perfect understanding and
a Love That Knows No Bounds, and hand in hand
they would rule over Blueridge as its royal
couple. (What calamities might spoil
this delicious scheme, of course, were not
considered in Cecilia's dream.)
                              She got
a few words from her patient on the third
night of her bedside vigil--just a word

or two at first ("some water," "thank you," and
the like), at which Cecilia took her hand
and squeezed it gratefully. Not till a week
after her patient first began to speak
did she reward Cecilia with the claim
that "Dorothea" was her given name--
although the way she said it made her nurse
suspect that this occasion was the first
on which she'd used it.

Many details soon
emerged about her homeland: though the Moon
was generally appreciated, they
did not refer to her as Mother, pray
to her, or offer feasts or orgies in
her honor. They were terrified of "Sin"--
a type of disobedience to rules,
but with a harsher connotation. Tools
left over from before the Flood were still
in fair abundance; so they had no skill
in making new ones out of wood or leather.
Maids and eunuchs didn't live together
with the breeding population; they
were housed apart, as slaves, and had no say
in government. Although the weather there
was just as hot as here, they thought a bare
uncovered body was a form of Sin,

and so they still wore clothes, outdoors and in,
even in summer. Marriage was controlled
entirely by "Elder Councils"--old
decrepit men past thirty--who would preach
stern sermons to the younger men and teach
them that, according to the Holy Bible
(magic book) written by God in tribal
times, a man should marry several wives,
while women ought to cleave all of their lives
to just one husband, who was generally
a good deal older--and would often be
a member of the Elder Council.

C

began to think, after a while, that D
might possibly still be delirious
(although her fever wasn't serious)
and that these "facts" were frightmares she had had
over a long, traumatic voyage: bad
dreams, but not grounded in reality.

She claimed that homosexuality
was not permitted there, but guns were quite
acceptably worn everywhere. The sight
of malnutrition deaths was commonplace,
yet eating bugs was thought a great disgrace;
insects were deemed "unclean."

The strangest thing
of all, however, was the worshipping
of "Christ," who died two thousand years ago--
inventor of the calendar--although
according to the Westerners, he "rose"
(up from his erstwhile deathbed, C supposed)
a few days later and came back to life
immortal. Though he never took a wife
himself, since coming back, he'd been involved
in sanctifying weddings; he resolved
all issues of who married whom by speaking
secretly to Elder Councils, leaking
this important information through
the medium of prayer.

All this was true
(we know, omnisciently) about the way
the Westerners believed and lived and prayed--
and yet Cecilia hardly could be blamed
for being skeptical. Her heart inflamed
the way it was, in fact, she showed a wise
discretion by her doubt.

The only lies
that Dorothea told her were about
her personal biography. The doubt
Cecilia felt about her name, we've seen;
her age, which she reported as sixteen,

seemed likely. When she said she'd never had
a baby, though, Cecilia did feel bad:
whatever situation she'd escaped
from (whether she'd been forced to wed or raped
or both), it was most evident to C
that she had nursed a baby recently;
she clearly still had fears of being caught
and brought back forcibly. Cecilia thought
(with unconditional, blind sympathy),
"How horrible a place the West must be!"

As Dorothea's mind and skin grew clearer
(three weeks in, C let her see a mirror),
she grew stronger in her body, too,
and soon was walking with Cecilia through
the woods, around the farm, and here and there--
responding well not only to the air
of Appalachia, but to insect fare
and all the small nocturnal rodents that
the Easterners enjoyed so. Chicken fat
was also new to her, domestic fowl
being extinct out West (she'd had an owl
egg once, but that was it). And very soon
the "schmaltz of life," the light of Mother Moon,
and young Cecilia's tender loving care
all worked together to produce a rare

miraculous complete recovery
in Dorothea.
            Her celebrity
spread rapidly to the communities
up north, who sent down delegations to
pay homage and congratulations to
this brave exotic teenage immigrant--
expecting her to be an innocent
and hearty girl who'd thank them humbly for
the opportunity and nothing more.
But what they found instead was a verbose
(once she was mobile, she was not morose),
articulate, inspiring speaker who
took rapidly to firing up her new
compatriots with visions of a land
where vast improvements were imagined, planned,
and executed with a goal in mind:
to research scientifically and find
the means to turn the tide of atrophy
throughout the Eastern Isles, that they might be
somenight the saviors of humanity.

(In Twenty Sixty-eight, when all of this
occurred, there was no bright utopian bliss
in Blueridge or in any village of
the Appalachian Isles. Though there was love

and joy enough to glimmer here and there
among the horrors, they were well aware
that their annihilation was at hand.
As noted earlier, the rather grand
fourth-birthday celebrations in demand
were indications of a situation
where a fast-depleting population
spent much time in burying its dead,
and where quite naturally a kind of dread
surrounded every birth, since chances were
it meant another death would soon occur.)

She stressed the value of an education
as the fountainhead of innovation,
preached the studying of history
as key to conquering the mystery
of superstition, ignorance, and death.
But she might just as well have saved her breath
if it had been her purpose to rely
exclusively upon the powder-dry
and well-worn wisdoms of that one-note tune.
It was her full embrace of Mother Moon
and the religion of her newfound land
that turned the trick for her: to see her stand
there bathed in Lunar light, her skin as white
as any constellation in the night,

and hear her agile alto tones intoning
phrases--like a pagan angel moaning
her ecstatic praises, never droning
like a passive pastor--was to fall
beneath her spell.
                The wonder was that all
the words one heard were improvised (sometimes
she even instantly devised some rhymes!)
yet had the music of authority,
the density and authenticity
of ancient texts, their rhythm and their hue.
It is an old cliché, and often true,
to say a recent convert to a new
religion will outpray, outpreach, outdo
the standing congregation. In this case,
when Dorothea put a timeless face
on timely ad lib evocations, she
was borrowing (largely unconsciously)
the cadences (if not the point of view)
of certain sermons she'd been witness to
on Colorado, all in praise of Christ.
The beat and roar of memory sufficed
to bring to Dorothea's Lunar rants
the tune and energy of psalm and dance.

And so the convert cleverly advanced

her standing by presenting stirring sermons,
gobbling with glee the erstwhile vermin
she'd abjured out West, and laying bare
her body and her soul. She was aware
sometimes of how her hurt and anger fuelled
her newfound joy--but good intentions ruled
her heart, she reasoned; where, then, was the harm?

Cecilia, as chief victim of her charm
(though she felt anything but victimized),
became her slave (she fully realized)
and closest friend, her confidante and fool.
She helped her found the Appalachian School
(and later, Blueridge University,
whose first and only doctorate degree
went duly to its founder, Doctor D)
and usher in the age of literacy
and scientific inquiry that would
eventually achieve the crowning good
D sought to bring into the neighborhood.

It took another twenty years to turn
the tide, as it turned out: the Sun still burned,
the Hurricane still blew, the wrenching fear
of "maidenhood" still loomed--but in the year
of Twenty Eighty-eight, the newborn breaths

in Blueridge did outnumber recent deaths.

But long before that grateful hour, the fate
of little C went sour. She had to wait
another six years (till her middle teens)
before a single sign of growth was seen
in her brief form, still far beneath the norm--
even for those times, with so many born
defective, undersized, or incomplete.
Not only was she small, from neck to feet;
she showed no signs of womanhood at all:
her chest stayed flat, her hips stayed slim, no ball
of fur emerged between her little legs--
and not one cramp or drop of blood; no eggs
in need of gathering.
                And then, the same
year Bret (who hadn't yet revised his name)
became a full-fledged orphan (he was tall
by then and had concerns about his small
unbearded genitalia), C began
to grow--not gradually, as she had planned,
but in a sudden skeletonic spurt.
For eighteen months, she ate and ate and hurt
and hurt, first passing Dorothea by,
then even Bret, and kept on growing--high
and ever higher--in her skyward track.

And odder still, her voice began to crack.

* * * * * * * * * *

According to the custom of the hunt,
it's Doctor D who always walks in front,
leading the party to the bog and back.
However, on the journey home, she lacks
the guiding lantern, which is shifted for
this passage to the centerbeast--the boar
himself--who hangs now by his hooves between
two branches. From a distance, he is seen
serenely floating upside down, the lamp
secured between his teeth, his four tusks clamped
around the wire hoop from which the lamp-
light swings, beneath.
                Ascending from the damp
odiferous low country to the high
(even in wintertime, the ground stays dry
till nearly dawn up there, and fog is rare),
the Captain contemplates the derriere
of Doctor D without the lantern's glare
right in his eyes, the swinging of the light
behind them now providing brief but bright
and tantalizing glimpses. There she goes:
the planet's oldest soul, for all he knows--

and yet he nearly trips from the distraction
of the sweet bewitching switching action
of her ancient buttocks once or twice.

His men, meanwhile, indulge in no such vice,
the maid and eunuch bodies having no
distractive powers over them. They show
no shyness in conversing with their tall
brown muscular companions; after all,
they've shared a blood rite recently, and so
the warm adrenalinic afterglow
brings them together in a bond. As for
the butchers, though accustomed to the gore,
they've never had an audience before,
and (with Cecilia gone off to explore,
as we have seen, along the western shore)
a free vivacity comes to the fore
in them as well. And so the journey back
to where the boar will mount the roasting rack,
ordinarily a reverential track,
becomes a party where the trekkers yak
and schmooze and crack some jokes.
                Not so with Zeke
and Dorothea; neither one can speak
so blithely as the rest. Ezekiel
is half afraid his host can somehow tell

his eyes caress her. So he breaks the spell abruptly with, "Well! Dorothea."

"Yes?"

"I was a bit surprised, I must confess, to see how shy your swine are. But it's just the opposite with ours. We know we must eventually kill them, but the trust they have in those who feed them is complete, like children have; it's really rather sweet. You have to be a certain age to feed them--I believe it's ten--not from the need for safety in their pens, but just because the children tend to get attached. I was a swineherd as a boy, and it's still hard to think about this one. I named him Lard."

"You <u>named</u> him Lard?"

"I did. We weren't supposed to name them; so I kept it secret, chose a name I thought would keep me more detached."

"Oh, Zeke."

"I know, I know. But I just latched right onto him the first night in. He was the biggest one of all--and yet, because

he had to lug that weight around wherever
he would go, at feeding time, he never
made it to the trough before the good
stuff was all gone. And then the runoff would
mix in with all that nasty..."

"Understood."

"And so I thought I'd give the guy a treat.
I waded in among the cloven feet--
all clattering, all battering their big
fat bodies up against me, making pig
prints with their gooey snouts all up and down
my legs, heaving their hammy weight around
to knock me over. But I held my ground
until I reached old Lard, then dumped the slop--
all hot and fresh and smelly--right on top
of him, right on his head. He loved it! He
was in..."

"Hog Heaven?"

"Yes, exactly! He
was in a state of utter ecstasy.
The noise he made was so emotional,
so passionate--not intellectual
at all! It sounded almost..."

"Sexual?"

(And at that very word, Ezekiel's eyes
are following her. Does she realize?)

"Well--yes. And that became the ritual
from that night on: I'd haul the victual
in this big plastic bucket, but instead
of troughing it, I'd dump it on Lard's head--
and let the others shift as best they could."

"You favored him."
"I know, and that's not good.
They hadn't even told me they were right
about to kill him. I went in one night
and he was gone. It gave me such a fright
that I just dropped the bucket, ran outside--
and there, up on the wall, they'd nailed his hide.
They hadn't even boiled it yet; it was
still wet with blood. And it was Lard! Because
of how I puked and cried outside the pen,
they never let me feed the hogs again."

"Well, did you even want to, after that?"

"Not really, no. The smell of bacon fat
just sizzling on the grill would make me ill
a long time afterward. In fact, it's still

not something I enjoy that much. I'll eat
it if you put it on my plate, but meat
in general doesn't much appeal to me."

"You ought to talk to Uncle Betsy. He
began to feed the boars when he was just
a kid and gave up meat from pure disgust."

"I thought it was because of principle."

"Well, yes and no; it's so emotional.
You'll see it for yourself, when they come back
at sky's first lightening. A razorback
is very--geographic. If he sees
you in the woods, he shies away; a sneeze
from you would make him bolt. But when he comes
back home from foraging at dawn, he runs
into the yard the way a child runs in
from play, circles around you, tries to spin
you into his homecoming joy."
                "What kind
of animals are we, who don't much mind
killing such trusting creatures?"
                "Human kind,"
the Doctor says.
(Or maybe "humankind."

Zeke isn't sure which one she said. Then he
considers asking her, for clarity--
but then he feels a little foolish, and
the moment vanishes. The fatal hand
of silence covers up their mouths again.)

As they approach the yard, the Blueridge men
and women raise a cheer. The children dash
straight for the centerbeast and with a brash
incaution break the line on either side
of it and run in circles (rife with pride
and excess energy) around it--screaming,
whooping--Hercules and Boo both seeming
not to notice them (although they need
to bite their tightening cheeks) as they proceed
in the direction of the fire pit,
around which several teenage women sit,
anticipating the arrival of
the Western men--and the allure of love.
Nearby, a serving table glistening
with fresh-filled polished pewter steins of spring-
chilled Solstice beer awaits the eunuchs and
the maids, with snacks and canapés at hand.

"The hunters get the first crack at the beer,"
D tells the Captain. "Just stand over here

until the beast is hung, and then we'll cheer
and whistle and start calling out for toasts."

Obedient to his directing host,
Ezekiel instructs his men about
the protocol. The teenage women pout
and bat their eyes; the Captain's men just grin
and shift inside their shorts, and once again
the minutes itch with electricity--
until the boar is pierced and hanging free,
and then the air pops with hilarity.
The toasts are brief (ten seconds at the most)
and boisterous; the boar begins to roast;
and soon the pallid guests and naked hosts
are knocking steins together by the light
of Mother Moon on Winter Solstice Night.

The beer is very dark and very bright;
it has a thick head and a bitter bite.
It tastes a bit medicinal to Zeke--
but then, an insect diet might well tweak
one's taste buds in an odd direction; so
the counterpointing brew would have to go
somewhere some ways from Colorado.
                                Oh!
Here on the table are some wooden bowls

containing deep-fried caterpillar rolls,
and others filled with powdered "Moths in Flight."
The first of these Zeke tries, and they're all right;
a little earthy, but the salt is light,
and they're appropriately crunchy. But
the moths are just the opposite of what
he thinks they'll be: not airy-sweet at all,
but musty--like inhaling a dust ball.
He sticks with caterpillars. And the beer
begins to grow on him.
Then, standing near,
he notices the Doctor with a queer
expression on her face, checking him out--
more with appreciation than with doubt,
he thinks, but with a bit of each. "How are
the snacks?" she asks.
"Oh! Good," he says. "Bizarre,
but good," he adds, remembering that she
went through the same adjustment.
"Actually,
we do find that the lepidopterans
have softer shells, or exoskeletons,
than do the burrowers."
"Good place to start,
then?"
"Easy on the stomach. But you'll fart

like crazy if you don't let up."

Zeke looks down at his handful, and the Doctor hooks them up and pops them in her mouth. "Mm! Thanks," she says. "How go things in the lower ranks?"

"Oh--great. As you can see. They fit right in."

"And Peter?"

"Well, he is obsessed with Sin..."

"And its invariable consequences?"

"Yeah. I'm hoping when the rite commences, he'll let loose a bit. How long before the lecture?"

"Fifteen minutes; not much more."

"Well, I just need to meet for maybe five or ten with my young men--and then, if I've interpreted their mood correctly--"

"Take your time."

"--I'd like the floor before we break, after your talk. Just for a very brief announcement."

With a look of sly relief
accompanied by an enormous grin,
the Doctor tells him, "Good. We won't begin
until you're there. I'll pick out thirteen seats
for you up front."
As it turns out, the "seats"
are just a patch of ground in front of an
imaginary podium, each man
and woman of the village sitting there
cross-leggéd in the open Moonlit air--
an "in the round" arrangement, with a few
young parents standing on the outskirts who
keep watch over their smallest as they roam
about among the happy hens that comb
the ground for fallen remnants of the Snack
of Gods. Among the parents in the back
are also several maids and eunuchs, all
past twenty-five, whose cooking chores will call
them to the fire occasionally. Tall
and structurally sound, a curved rear wall
of human pillars is suggested by
their forms; together with the arching sky,
an auditorium is thus described.

Some auditors continue to imbibe,
off toward the back in their cross-leggéd seats,

while those in front, all teenagers, have sheets
of paper clipped to boards and hold their pens
and pencils ready to take notes. (The hens
are shooed away by these attentive scholars.)

When the sailors come, nobody hollers;
they're directed to their seats by D,
who stands there bathed in Moonlight, patiently
awaiting their arrival. Quiet falls
on the assembled, and the night-bird calls
and cricket songs take precedence again.
The Doctor smiles warmly on the men--
a look of heart-felt love, it seems to Zeke.
She clears her throat and then begins to speak:

IV. OUR RECKLESS PREDECESSORS

Our reckless predecessors from the first
years of the current century are cursed,
here in the East, as monsters who reversed
the planet's course; they're rated as the worst
new batch of human beings to have burst
upon the scene since Eve and Adam first
descended from their snake-infested tree--
all most unfairly, it would seem to me.

As we who study here have learned before,
the root of the Apocalypse, its core,
was overpopulation. And the more
advances humans made in science or
in farming or technology, the more
they multiplied. Even the art of war
and its evolving arsenal of skills
did little to slow down the pace, with kills
outnumbering live births world-wide occurring
only on occasion (mainly during
nation-sponsored genocides back in
the twentieth century, and then again
with "terror parties" in the Twenty Teens)--

but even then, the birth rates in between
these holocausts continued swelling.
                                I
suppose the question then comes down to, Why?
Why, given such an Earth, with scarcely space
enough to turn without a stranger's face
pressed up against your own, would you decide
to clutter up the planet with a pride
of screaming brats depleting oxygen
supplies still further? Living back then, when
abortions were quite painless, and when men
and women had a vast array of tools
for circumventing pregnancy, what fools
they must have been to keep on reproducing
uselessly, redundantly, unloosing
countless copies of themselves upon
a planet whose supplies were nearly gone!

Excuse me, but I hardly think it fair
of us (whose situation can't compare)
to blame them if the world's supply of air
was not their primary concern. How dare
we, from this distance--each of us aware
precisely of their actions' consequence--
expect such prescience? It makes no sense.

As our most welcome visitors--our guests
and newfound friends fresh from the frontier West--
can tell you, in the ancient holy book
of Genesis, if you'll just take a look,
you'll find Jehovah (also known as "God"),
Creator of the Sun and Moon, the sod
and sand and soil of Earth and all its seas
and springs and rivulets--and of the breeze
that blows the clouds about, along with all
the stars and planets in the sky--of fall
and winter, spring and summer--this Creator
of the Universe you'll find, no later
than page two or so, instructing Man
and Woman to go out upon the land
he has prepared for them and procreate
as quickly as they can and dominate
all of the creatures, plants, and rocks they find.
Right there in Genesis--which, keep in mind,
is just about the oldest book in print--
you'll find Jehovah (never one to hint
about the burning bush) instructing those
of us he made in his bare image (clothes
had not yet been invented) to go out
and use our naked brains and brawn and clout
to populate and subjugate each nook
and cranny of creation.

Every book
since Genesis, with hardly an exception,
has reiterated this conception.
But apart from art, our D.N.A.,
the basic instincts we feel night and day,
our hearts and guts and minds, all join to say,
Of course! We're human beings! That's the way
we do things! We're designed to man the helm
and rule the roost and oversee the realm!

Even the first "environmentalists"
to rise up from the toxic smoggy mists
of the last century could not resist
the urge to overpopulate. Although
(as those who've studied with us here all know)
there did arise two warring camps who fought
each other over whether carbon ought
to be restricted, taxed, or even paid
attention to, the two sides always made
benign bedfellows in their attitude
toward procreation, which was always viewed
as something positive to be pursued--
as though it were a separate sphere. Apart
from China (who made something of a start
at trimming down the human locust plague
with Mao), the world's nations flapped the flag

of propagation with a frothy glee;
their growing numbers were a victory,
they all assumed. In all but three of the
United States, the illegality
of suicide was firm. Incredibly,
tax breaks were given to each family
according to how many children they
produced. The government would never pay
for an abortion, though.
I know it all
seems backwards to us now. But let's recall
just for a moment that the course we blame
our predecessors for is just the same
one we pursue ourselves--right now--tonight!
In thirty, forty minutes, by the light
of Mother Moon, half of us gathered here
will be engaged in ringing in the year
ahead by seeing just how pregnant we
can get. (By "we," of course, I don't mean me,
since I have reached that stage that used to be
so common, known as "menopause.") ...
I see
your hands, my dears; just put them down. You think
because we humans teeter on the brink
of full extinction, it must be our duty
now to heed Jehovah's ancient booty

call again and retro-populate--
and if that means we're forced to copulate
our brains out in the woods for mankind's sake,
that's just the sacrifice we'll have to make.

Yeah, right: it's just the human species' stake
in cosmologic history that makes
you wonder how much time I'm going to take
with this year's lecture. Please--give me a break.
We're animals! The reason we've survived
this long is that our propagative drive
is pretty much unstoppable.
                We've got
more reasons than our forebears did to <u>not</u>
indulge ourselves: at least a tenth of you
young ladies who "succeed" tonight will do
your penance in nine months, at which time you
will die in childbirth, painfully. A few
of you will give birth to an incomplete
new generation in the way of feet
or hands or lungs or brains and you will see
them die before your eyes, quite helplessly,
as your engorged new bosoms go to waste.
Still more of you, once you have had a taste
of parenthood a year or two or three,
will find yourselves (abruptly, suddenly--

or even worse, after protractedly
awaiting the eventuality)
no longer in possession of a child.

These are the laws of nature, of the wild;
we get no credit and we take no blame.
We follow our directions, just the same
as those before us did: no matter how
the landscape looks, we stand behind the plow
and push. We live, we love, we take our chances--
all regardless of our circumstances.

It was not that many years ago
the citizens of planet Earth were so
impacted that the so-called "civilized
metropolises" sported towers sized
a dozen families wide and sometimes ten
or twenty stories high (oddly, the men
and women living in them rarely spoke
with one another), while the simple folk
in less advanced societies lived ten
or twenty to a hut (but then again,
<u>their</u> social skills were high).
                Picture a ball
hung from a string. A line of insects crawl
or march down from some undisclosed locale,

anus to nose, each one atop its pal
in its precipitous descent. The legs
of these descenders, from the time their eggs
first hatch, can never manage a reverse.
And so the situation soon gets worse
and worse upon the teeming ball: some fall,
others are pushed (they're insects, after all),
still others have their legs or heads torn off
and yet survive somehow. (Though you may scoff
at my imperfect ant analogy,
I think it's apt: the metaphoric tree
from which this insect-laden ball hangs down
we might equate with Heaven, who may frown
upon the mad descent but has no power
to stop it.)

Yet right up until the hour
of their disaster, when the string at last
goes <u>snap</u>, the ants keep coming, thick and fast,
without the will to stop and think, to blink
or ponder what they're doing, on the brink
of self-destruction, piling on and on.
And when the ball goes <u>splat</u> upon the lawn,
some ants are squashed and perish instantly,
while others linger on in agony.
A smattering, escaping injury,
go looking for survivors. When they find

a few, they quickly form another line
and go on marching.
Growing up among
the Rocky Islands, back when I was young,
we heard a very different point of view
about the Great Apocalypse and who
was most to blame for what went down. As we
discussed this evening, earlier, the sea
here in the East rose up so fast there was
no time for treasure hunting--and, because
the mountain range that stood above the Flood
was relatively narrow, shedding blood
would have been much more intimate, up close,
than in the West. And anyway, the most
abiding tie that humans had to one
another here was their survival. Gun
possession was a rarity--and race,
religion, politics, had little place
among those stranded on these peaks. And so
no war, as such, occurred.
But as we know,
out West, a lot more land remained intact.
Communities, religions, tribes, in fact,
held onto their traditional approaches:
love thy neighbor--until one encroaches
on thy people's livelihood, at which

point thou may hate and kill the Sunny bitch.

The last time there had been a Civil War
among the North Americans was more,
then, than a hundred sixty years before;
nobody talked about it anymore,
except in school, where it was treated more
or less like ancient history. But when
the storm of Twenty Thirty hit the men
and women living in the West back then,
Americans soon found themselves again
engaged in intraspecies savageries
as though the interim of centuries
was but a passing dream.
However, in
the nineteenth century event, there'd been
just two teams playing--North and South--and they
were organized. In Twenty Thirty, play
was open, there were countless factions, and
chaos was king. No brilliant Generals planned
campaigns weeks in advance. Gun shops were raided,
gas stations were commandeered; they traded
running shoes and canned goods for cocaine
and ammunition. Pharmacies became
like banks; the schools were military posts.

The airwaves, which had been the constant hosts
of news and music programs, all went dead;
communication grids were torn to shreds
in the initial blast and never rose
again--disorienting, I suppose,
to people who were used to constant racket
in their ears. Some addicts couldn't hack it
and went mad from all the sudden silence
pouring in their heads; the savage violence
loosened by these jonesing volume junkies
turned explosive as their back-seat monkeys
took control and pushed them on and on
past every stop. The rule of law was gone;
without a cop or principle to guide
them, many went on killing sprees or died
by their own hands, initially. But they
were soon consigned to history.
                                Some say
the Mormons had a war among themselves
lasting for years, their well-stocked cellar shelves
allowing them to hunker down and wait
it out up in the hills above the Great
Salt Lake, which quickly mixed its ancient tears
with the encroaching ocean. Whether years
or merely months went by we'll never know,
but by the time the victors made their slow

way east across the rugged, ravaged range
to conquer Colorado, they had changed
in character from peaceful proselytizers
to a sect of sickle-sharp incisors
ready to devour.
                Before they swept
down on the eastern Rocky slopes and leapt
into their roles as occupying lords,
one day their leader stood before his hordes
and told them he'd discovered, underneath
a rock, a golden tablet with a brief
but to-the-point inscription, chiseled by
an angel, telling them the time was nigh
for them to seek out every copy of
the Book of Mormon--as the Lord above
had ordered--and destroy it, so that in
the days to come, when every human Sin
would be revealed, reviled, and routed, no
one coming after could corrupt or throw
a clouded light upon the revelations
made to Smith and all his nascent nation.
(One of the assembled asked to see
this newly found angelic plaque, but he
was quickly killed.)
                By Twenty Thirty-three
(or -two, or -one), when this occurred, the Sun

(now largely unimpeded) had begun
to make the soldiers ill--though, as discussed,
the war-distracted zealots hadn't sussed
the source out; all they knew was they were tired
and sick and thus no longer so inspired
as they had been at taking on the Foes
of Christ. The Coloradoans, God knows,
had long since ceased to struggle. When the bolder
men from Utah marched down into Boulder,
there were white flags flying from each shoulder,
in the place of firearms, to greet
them; their capitulation was complete.

No shots were even fired by the invaders
(who now called themselves the New Crusaders,
to dissociate themselves from former
Jesus Christ of Latter Day Reformer
Saints who might still practice their diluted
form of Mormonism in reputed
tabernacles on the eastern coast
of what we call the West). Their passive hosts
were rounded up and given work to do:
the ones whose skin was of a darker hue
were made to shovel up the toxic goo
along the beach; within a month or two,
they all were dead. The homosexuals

and academic intellectuals
were neutered and assigned to inventory
all the spoils of war; the multi-story
schools and office buildings that survived
the early storms and quakes were thus revived
and put to use.

However, it was not
a strictly one-way street. The use of pot
and alcohol, endemic there, soon spread
among the new arrivals. Many read
the King James version of the Bible for
the first time in their lives. Some even wore
a crucifix around their necks; some swore.
The Elder Councils soon took on a more
interpretive approach to what, before,
had been essentially a banned book. They
decoded the King's English in a way
that would support their mission in the here
and now--although it wasn't always clear
just how they had arrived at their translation
of the text.

And so the Western nation
known today as Colorado grew
from there. At least, that's how the story, true
or not, is told in Boulder. Denverites
add more details about the epic fights

between the crack-crazed heathen gangs and the
invading Christians--who arrived by sea,
according to their legends. In Cheyenne,
the story centers more around a man
named Simon Jones, who spoke with God in dreams.
According to their history, it seems
Cheyenne was where the Christians first appeared,
led by this glowing man with flowing beard.
He fashioned crosses out of living snakes
and chased the Indians away with quakes
and storms the snakes brought on.
                As you can see,
the contradictory mythology
we find even within this narrow range
of Earth suggests we ought to take these strange
reports with just a grain of salt. And these
are stories learned in childhood, at the knees
of those whose parents or grandparents bore
full witness to events! So how much more
should we apply our skepticism to
the many legends of just what or who
brought on the Great Apocalypse of Twenty
Thirty? Even though the world had plenty
of communicative power then,
right up until the very second when
the awful thing occurred, never again

would they be able to communicate
with people living in another state
or county, let alone with those a half
a world away! I always have to laugh,
to see how desperately we all adhere
to our pet theories that we find so dear,
when no supporting evidence is clear.

Here on the Eastern Isles, the people say
it was a self-created Judgment Day
brought on by all the flagrant tracking in
of carbon footprints, time and time again,
across our nice clean planet--coal and oil
contending, sometimes blending, to despoil
our waterways and atmosphere--with flukes
involving nasty accidents with nukes
exacerbating the whole situation.

Nonsense, claims the Colorado nation;
there, the holocaust is mainly blamed
on Enemies of God, unnamed and named--
especially the heathen hordes who wear
peculiar clothes and twisty turbanned hair
and call Jehovah "Allah." In the West,
it's guessed that somewhere in the hornets' nest
of Twenty Thirty, with the great unrest

that plagued the "Middle East," a crazed jihadist
tribe or nation somehow got the oddest
notion, that to save the world they must
destroy it, all in one dismissive gust--
and so they commandeered some missile sites
they stormed and wrested from the Israelites
and went about creating Armageddon.

The official story we were fed on
when I was a little girl was that
it all was one pure act of God, who sat
in judgment on the Sinning world. Annoyed
one day, he hurled a giant asteroid
into the sea, which set the whole thing off.
Of course, he kept the Rockies safe, aloft
above the Flood, so we, the chosen few,
along with Christ, could start the world anew.

I personally like to mix and match.
Perhaps it happened when a certain batch
of submarines with nukes on board were moored
around Hawaii, where they felt assured
no enemy could intercept them. Then,
just as they turned to ply the sea again--
kabang!--from outer space, a meteorite
the size of Pluto, in a flash of light,

broke through the atmosphere and tore a crater
out of paradise. A percolator,
then, composed of reawakened deep
volcanic molten rock, aroused from sleep
by this explosion, caused the sea to leap
into atomic-fed combustive motion,
with a billion tons of boiling ocean
spewing forth radioactive steam
in an ear-splitting copper-kettle scream.
The seismic repercussions that ensued
spread round the world, with speed and magnitude
unseen since Earth was in its infancy.

That could be true. Why not? It seems to me
as good an explanation as I've heard
for all the quakes and storms that have occurred
since then. And we now living probably
will never know, with any certainty,
the truth. A century or two from now,
if humans make it, they may solve the how
and wherefore of it all.
                But even in
our state of ignorance, we can begin
to form a few conclusions as to what
the inexplicable disaster brought
us in its wake: enormous wildlife kills,

born of the mother of all oil spills,
with countless subsequent extinctions; scores
of nuclear explosions--more than wars
would ever have unleashed--resulting in
genetic scrambling we just begin
to see the long-term consequences of;
and once the acid ocean rose above
the toxic waste facilities, the re-
release of all those fluorocarbons we
had put to rest some forty years before,
arising from the fast-dissolving floor
of our new world-wide sea to perforate
the ozone layer to its current state
of mere confetti.
So no matter who
or what began it all, it's plainly true
that our dear reckless predecessors--all
those scrambling insects on that rubber ball--
prepared the theater and set the stage
for this, our current cataclysmic age.

And yet I sympathize with their sad plight,
as such slight sharers of the human light--
each one a fraction of a thousandth of
a thousandth of a thousandth! Look above
us now, at all the nameless stars that fill

the sky, and contemplate it, if you will:
suppose one star, who wished to benefit
her fellow stars, turned down her wick a bit.
Would anybody even notice it?
I don't think so; not if we scanned the sky
with all the earnest power of every eye
could we appreciate her sacrifice.

Appalling as it sounds--not very nice
at all--I'd have to say the only way
she might distract us from our work or play
would be to burst out with a gross display
of garish light, as sharp and bright as day,
as she exploded and thus blew away
a little portion of the firmament,
leaving a patch of darkness where she went
her self-destructive way, taking a batch
of fellow stars along with her. We'd catch
our breath at that, I would imagine. Yet
tomorrow night, we'd probably forget
what we had seen, not even noting so
minute an interruption in the glow
of countless stars.
I must admit, when I
consider how a billion souls could die
on one October afternoon, just fly

away invisibly, without a cry
of fear or tear of sorrow or a sigh
of fond regret (a twinkling of an eye
was all the warning they would get), that my
poor intellect can't make the reach. I lie
out on the beach sometimes and watch the sky
so busy in its glimmering, and I
imagine all those baffled angels, high
above their shattered homes, their eyes still dry,
the coffee cups still in their hands. "But why?"
they ask. "Why are we here?"
                And for reply,
more billions soon appear, until the sky
is filled with them. And yet no clever spy
arrives with information that can tie
it all together--no one to rely
on to confirm the truth or to deny
the rumors. "What do all these stars imply?"
they ask, as ignorant as you or I.

But then the Moon floats by, serene and dry
and cool despite the heat, seeming to ply
her way among the stars like some great ship,
white-sailed, advancing at an easy clip
through crowded single-occupancy isles.
She doesn't speak; she merely beams and smiles

her loving light upon the Earth below
and glows among the angel stars. And so,
although these displaced souls may never know
the details of their sudden emigration,
they appreciate their situation.

Moon is worshipped now, as formerly
the Sun was worshipped--as a god. Just three
or four disastrous years (here in the East,
at least) sufficed to bring on this increased
devotion to the Moon. Sun worship ceased
abruptly once the ozone layer was wrecked;
that's natural enough. We still "respect"
the Sun (in much the way we might "respect"
a poisonous snake), of course, but any love
we might have felt for him was roughly shoved
aside once he began to treat us so.

And yet it wasn't all that long ago
the Sun was thought the heart of God. When we
look back on human history, we see
examples of this Solar deity
extending from the earliest up to
the latest civilizers, quite a few
of whom I'm sure you've heard of: Akhenaton,
the Egyptian king, would not have gotten

such a cozy spot in history
had he not solved the troubling mystery
of life by designating Mr. Sun
as the progenitor of everyone.
The ancient Greek philosophers would follow:
their celestial charioteer, Apollo,
was supposed to know the future of
all men somehow, while riding up above
them, whipping his equestrian team into
a lather as they arced across the blue.
In medieval times, the paintings in
cathedrals (where the clergy battled Sin)
would show, above the billowed clouds, a land
where angels dwelled, from whence God could command
the Universe--a sphere of brilliant light
unending, just the opposite of night.

Benjamin Franklin--certainly the most
inventive mind among a teeming host
of eighteenth-century American
political contenders, planters, and
inventors (one of whose inventions was
the U.S.A.)--said something like, "Because
the Universe is infinite and vast,
no matter how I contemplate or cast
my intellect upon its endless sea,

I cannot comprehend it, much less be
a servant to its wishes. I, therefore,
have settled on the object I'll adore:
the Sun! The giver of all life on Earth!
The author of creation and of birth!"

Two hundred years passed by. Then, in the last
half of the twentieth century, the past
repeated in perverted form, as fat
(or ghastly thin) Caucasians lay out flat
upon their sandy, palmy beaches and
attempted by their presence to command
the Sun to turn them brown. Ironically,
a fair proportion of these patiently
self-toasting whites still held tenaciously
to their traditional white bigotry;
so if one came by color naturally
and didn't need such browning, one might be
expected to convey the trays of those
who lay in light-absorbing gross repose.
(The parching Solar heat, as you might think,
provoked this horizontal class to drink.)

Before the ozone layer (or the lack
thereof) became a major issue back
in Nineteen Eighty-four or so--in fact,

long years before--the Sun was known to act
as a corrosive cause of cancer when
indulged in, in this reckless fashion. Men
and women with a dearth of pigment in
their pinkish northern European skin
were warned to moderate their intake of
the ultraviolet rays or else their love
affair with Sun would turn out badly. But
these warnings went ignored. Brown as a nut
and tough as wrinkled shoes, the lucky ones
lived to regret their recklessness, the Sun's
aesthetic damage done. Less lucky were
some others, who were fated to endure
the surgeon's scourging scalpel until cured--
or till the overeager cells had spread
to other regions, like the heart or head.

Why do you think Americans ignored
the warnings? Were they all so jaded, bored
with life, that imminent demise was no
big deal? I rather doubt it. When we go
outside at Sunset, fire still shimmering
upon the western sea, we feel the spring
in every step a little more. That risk
of death we take with every breath's a brisk
reminder of how precious life is. So

it must have been with those, not long ago,
who risked much less than we do every dawn
we stay outside without our Sun suits on
or go out early when the sky's still light.
There is an undeniable delight
in risk.
        I've even heard it theorized
that in the Nineteen Forties people prized
their cigarettes and fast cars all the more
because the whole world was engaged in war.
When "kamikazes" (who would ride again
as "suicide bombers" circa Twenty Ten)
began to make their scary aerial dives,
Americans lit up and went for drives.

Some blame the subsequent Atomic Age
for rising drug use, which was all the rage
from Nineteen Sixty-something onward. They
suggest the threat of Nuclear Judgment Day--
the popular apocalyptic specter
of a "War to End All" that would hector
every dream of every Baby Boomer--
brought the problem on. Indeed, no tumor
of the brain or wheezing of the lung
seemed half so scary as the doom that hung
just north of the polluted atmosphere;

no pill could quell the underlying fear
that any morning, somebody in power
might wake up with a hangover and shower
the other hemisphere with bombs, at which
point Superpower Number Two would switch
its arsenal of missiles on--and thus,
before the lunchtime whistle blew, the Us
and Them of politics would be no more,
and every living thing from shore to shore
to shore would be disintegrated--or
would wish it were.
                The famous "Nine Eleven"
incident (in which just six or seven
"terrorists" killed thousands in one day
without a single nuke in their array)
made such scenarios seem so passé,
however, as our century began.
No Hiroshima, now, or Marshall Plan
could serve to contradict or countermand
the newborn threat no one could understand--
a free-form global war devoid of sides.

And yet the East's own Emma Burns derides
the whole idea that the Terror Age
led even indirectly to the page
we later turned, into this new world where

we have to stay indoors all day and dare
not show our naked faces to the Sun.
She argues, quite convincingly, in One
Big War, the work she is most famous for--
well, here, I'll read a little:
"Long before
the breakup of the Soviet Union, long
before the 'opening' of China, long
before the twofold Bush administrations
kicked the hornets' nest, the planet's nations
had begun that last essential war
they'd be condemned and then convicted for--
the War On Nature. That's the war that made
us, in the end, nocturnal. Now the shade
of night is our new home."
Of course, she wrote
these words (which I am privileged now to quote)
back in the Twenty Forties, when these isles
were crowded with survivors, still. The smiles
her writing style provokes (it seems so sour,
its prose devoid of jokes, despite the power
of her analysis) have most of all
to do with her world view: it is the fall
of what was called "the Western World" back then
that she views as the tragedy. Again,
we must remember that she was a child

of that same culture which she so reviled.
Explaining at great length about the pains
she has to take in writing, she complains
how she must do it all "by hand," without
the capability to "print it out"
or route it to her "blog," where other eyes
might read her words before she'd even rise
out of her chair. ...
                Exactly; thanks for asking.
No one even questioned "multi-tasking"
then, it was so integral a part
of their society--the very heart
of their computer-centered way of thought,
their mode of operation. They were taught
from infancy through "windows" and were brought
up to assume there was another world
of infinite potential (every girl
and boy was born to it by Burns's day)--
an "information highway," they would say--
accessible through small hand-held devices,
often clipped right to their ears. The vices
of the age we always focus on--
the cars, the drugs, the artificial "lawn"
surrounding every house--were nothing when
compared to the assumption-- ...
                Come again? ...

They were computers. But the telephone
was at the root of it. Before the "home
computer" made its grand debut, around,
oh, Nineteen Eighty-something--fifty pounds
or so at first, quite heavy--they had found
a way to make their phones extremely light--
and wireless, as long as it was right
around the house. A caller might be told,
"Hang on a sec; I'm putting you on hold,"
then while "on hold," she'd use the time to make
a second call, then tell her, "Let me take
this call," when she received a signal that
the one she'd called initially could chat.

And that was where it really all began,
as it related to the common man
and woman. By the time technology
caught up with that part of society,
the market was a hundred million strong.
So when the Nineteen Nineties came along,
Americans imprisoned by their "cells"
(as they were called, ironically)--with bells
that played their favorite songs instead of merely
ringing--were endemic. It was nearly
a requirement to have one when
the century began; to leave one's den

without it was too frightening.

Now, just imagine for a moment what it must have been like for Americans back then: a survey from--I think it's Twenty Ten--revealed the average American spent more than half her waking hours engaged in conversation, and, when so engaged, spent roughly four times <u>more</u> time talking on her telephone--to someone who was gone, in other words, then--than to anyone in her immediate vicinity!

The almost mystical divinity of "multi-tasking" was the Twenty Teens' great holy mission--not just as a means to reach an end, but as a value in itself: to fill each orifice within and every nook and cranny in one's path with some profound distraction from the math of one's existence as a microbe on an overpopulated planet gone berserk. Their T.V. time continued to expand till it was nearly equal to the time they spent in conversation. They would oftentimes complain about their day

to someone on their "cell" as they consumed
their "fast food" as they watched T.V. Their doomed
(or "unsustainable") lifestyle retreated
several windows back and was deleted
from their memories as more distractions
piled up in front.

Our forebears' actions
(or inactions) may be more forgiven
when we understand how they were driven
to this passive state by world events
that, as they moved in closer, made less sense
than ever; how the "War On Terror" seemed
to bring more terror to the homes they'd dreamed
were safe somehow; and how the more extreme
things got, the more unyielding they appeared.
It's little wonder that the things they feared
the most were those most out of their control,
and that they tended to ignore the role
of things closer at hand, more under their
command--the little things beneath their hair:
their cell phones.

Now, to be completely fair,
we have to understand: they were aware
of the reports--but equally aware
of industry reports that told them just
the opposite! So who were they to trust?

The government? The "blogosphere"? We must
remember how barraged they were, all day
and night, with streaming data.
                                Anyway,
the nature of the malady, the way
it spread, was little understood. They called
it "cell phone cancer" and yet, after all,
it wasn't cancer but a D.N.A.
disorder, first contracted--in a way
unknown before--by babies in the wombs
of "cell phone mothers." Later, in the rooms
of these young children, mothers would allow
them access to their cells, not knowing how
this would awaken the disease and cause
the child to want to get its tiny paws
on every cell phone it would see in its
environment, thus leading to the fits
that caused these mothers to give in and buy
them cell phones of their own (and that is why
they started coming out in "baby size").

At first the doctors didn't realize
these infant fits were physiological;
they treated them as psychological
phenomena and often would prescribe
group therapy and place them in a tribe

of similarly afflicted youth. The truth
(discovered by a doctor from Duluth)
became apparent in these groups, as one
by one, each in its childish search for fun,
the tiny subjects crawled off on their own
and started tapping buttons on their phones
until (most inexplicably) they all
became connected in a "conference call"
and then began to interact in more
or less a normal way--except a door
or two would always hide them from their new
companions. Once their friends were out of view,
the urge to socialize kicked in.
But still,
despite some social-network-rumor-mill
reports on line about a Cell Phone Bill
"stuck in committee" up on Capitol Hill,
it wasn't till the "Sub-millennials"
(as they were called, in the perennial
pursuit of naming each new generation)
started <u>driving</u> that the situation
reached its crisis: they began to kill
pedestrians--not with a vicious will,
just carelessly--and yet would not react
with horror or remorse. Often, in fact,
they wouldn't even stop their cars or stop

their cell phone conversations till a cop
shot out their tires. ("Ah, shit; I hit that guy,"
they'd say, and keep on driving. "Oh, and by
the way, Jen phoned me. Have you seen her blog?")
They streamed through life as through a moral fog
where what occurred out there in "cyberspace"
had more reality than any place
of physical domain.
At this point, there
began a billion-dollar anti-scare
campaign, backed by the industry, designed
to make it all just seem a state of mind.
"There's no such thing as cell phone cancer!" was
their message; blocking any looming laws
restricting cell phone use (or profits) was
their mission. And their lobbying success
was equalled only by Big Oil--who, yes,
right up until the Twenty Thirty mess
still had its future-holocaust deniers
screaming through the storms and wildfires.

Washington's ignored investigation
ran eight thousand pages, but the nation--
and the world--stayed in denial, till
the "cell phone sillies" had made millions ill
by Twenty Seventeen. People were duped

into believing scientists were grouped
into two disagreeing camps; the truth
was that the scientists had long had proof
so unimpeachable that not a one
of them allowed her daughter or her son
to use a cell. But in the industry,
they made a point of letting people see
them with their little ones in tow, appearing
publicly wearing the latest earring
models, chatting happily away
with their invisible companions. They
were getting very rich.

Then came that day
in Twenty Seventeen when poor young Seth
DeNay (whose sufferings and grisly death
exposed the truth) appeared on YouTube. He
had been stealth-videoed (ironically,
the nurse who videoed him used her cell
phone) just the day before--clearly in hell,
clawing his bloody ear and yelling "Sup!"
repeatedly. Unable to hang up,
the line stayed open in his childish mind.
His mom, the C.E.O. of Cell Block Nine,
the largest cell provider of the time,
at first continued to deny, despite
the forty million "hits" the YouTube site

had scored in just the first two hours; then she
herself went fully mad, apparently.

By this time, though, the damage had been done.
The level of detachment of this one
"lost generation" had surpassed, by then,
the one that went before it, even when
no drastic secondary symptoms flared.
Their style of jokes ("I didn't know you cared,"
uttered in utter monotone), the ways
they partied (bands with names like Troop Loss Days,
Jihadicide, and so on), how they dressed
(their uniformish clothes all neatly pressed,
like clean-cut government employees)--all
prepared them for the task which would befall
them in the Twenties, when the rising coasts
of every continent demanded hosts
of infrastructure engineers.
By Twenty
Twenty, half the labor force (and plenty
of our predecessors labored for
a paycheck, right up till the end) and more
were constantly employed in building dikes
and levees--"infrastructibles"--the likes
of which the world had never seen. In San
Francisco, New York, and L.A., the dam-

constructing (and maintaining) culture grew
into a way of life, complete with new
cuisine and fashion--and a new discrete
security contingent ("the Elite"
is what they called themselves; "sweeping the street"
is what they called their kind of work) who served
with diligent detachment. They deserved
the contradictious praise they were so proud
of, that they "thought like terrorists." Allowed
the liberty to roam completely armed
with battle gear from ear to rear, they farmed
themselves out to the highest bidders from
the hydroarchitectural firms (some
of whose chief officers were trillionaires)
and cruised financial centers, urban fairs,
and so on, watching out for "fundies" (or
potential terrorists), whom they were more
or less allowed to shoot on sight, thanks to
a measure Congress had just gotten through--
the Patriotic Infrastructure Bill.

The bill had its outraged opponents, still,
whose property was further from the sea.
Those born back in the twentieth century
(the "Fogies") were particularly free
with their derision of society

along the coasts. Preferring to drink tea
prepared from single-serving bags to the
extravagant café drinks favored by
the coastals, "Baggies" had a battle cry
they used at every demonstration: "Damn
the Coasts!" (The "n" they added to the "dam"
was actually the innovation of
a Coast Guard grunt, ironically.) Above
the water line, they were a different set,
politically and culturally.
                And yet
the army carried on its foreign wars
the same as ever--really, even more
than ever, any time since well before
the famous Nine Eleven incident
of Twenty Zero-one. But when they sent
off troops, it wasn't such a big event
as it had been before the National Guard
was privatized. The soldiers had it hard,
of course, but (if they lived) were reimbursed
at healthy rates and, coming from the worst-
hit states as far as unemployment went,
they lined up to be sent.
                (The government
had cut out all its social programs by
this time; the costs had gotten far too high

for them to keep up Medicare or Health
Relief or So-security. What wealth
was left was spent on keeping cities on
the coast from drowning in the ocean. Gone
were programs aimed at cleaning up the air
or water; bake sales at the county fair
were all the schools had to rely on; there
had not been any funding for the arts
in many years.)

Back in the states, the hearts
and minds of home were otherwise engaged:
the war against the rising ocean raged
and was exacerbated by attacks
from terrorists. The "added-value tax"
(or "sales tax," as it had been known before)
replaced the "income tax" to wage that war--
mainly through subsidies provided to
the hydroarchitectural firms, who
spent vast amounts on bigger, burlier
security. (I mentioned earlier
their famed detached demeanor, and the fact
that Congress granted them a special act.) ...

October Twentieth, Two Thousand Thirty
was particularly hot and dirty;
I might go along with those who say

the last ice melted on that scorching day.
Exactly what occurred, as I have said,
we just don't know--but when they went to bed
that night, a billion people more were dead.

Ten/Twenty/Thirty brought an end to much,
including who was "rich" or "poor," as such.
The people who survived the year were those
already less concerned with cars and clothes
and leisure time. The poor, in other words,
could better fight the predatory birds
of prey than could the rich, who, once they'd lost
the means to hire or bribe or pay, were cost-
effectively downsized. Nobody who
was rich in Twenty Thirty even knew
how to approach her own survival. Thieves
did well--and athletes, too; athletic thieves
did best of all. But when the mighty ships
of state all ran aground, those fingertips
that used to tap computer keys went dull
and idle, as the technological
spontaneously turned historical.

It's reasonably safe to say the East
became nocturnal at the very least
five years before the West, and may have beat

them by as much as fifteen years. Complete
conversion to a night life didn't come
out West until the warring parties (some,
in any case) experienced attrition
in their stock of rifle ammunition--
Twenty Forty at the earliest.
From that time forward, they put all their best
and brightest to the task of making more.
They never got the knack, however; war,
and living underneath that Sun so long,
had weakened them. They were no longer strong
in mind or body, and technologies
requiring adjustment strategies
to reconvert them into non-electric
powered manufacture proved too hectic
for their baffled brains. They worked by hand
(and still do, even now, I understand)
to eke out bullets at a snail's pace--
bullets inclined to blow up in one's face
(or in one's firearms, in any case,
thus incapacitating them) much more
than had the old ones, mass-produced for war.

Eventually, as word spread in the West
that staying indoors in the day was best
to save oneself from catching "instant cancer,"

truce became the unofficial answer
(undeclared, but nonetheless observed)
between the white polygamists who served
on Colorado and the darker "Old
New Mexicans" who were to keep their hold
upon the southern islands till the Plague
of Fifty-eight (whose details are still vague).

No such political intrigues engaged
the East; so while the Western war storm raged,
those who'd escaped the water here and who
were scientifically inclined strived to
ensure societal survival through
the post-Apocalyptic years. I'd say
their biggest innovation was the way
the "insect problem" was turned on its head:
now when the buzzers teemed and swarmed, instead
of their provoking irritation, they
would trigger salivation, in a way-- ...

I'm sorry, Uncle Bette. What did you say? ...

Oh! Yes! Of course! You're absolutely right;
my mind's a little buggy here tonight.
The insect revolution didn't hit
till later on. Before that happened, it

was all about the birds--and that was how
the East became nocturnal. Just allow
me to back up, and I'll explain it now:
Back in the early Thirties, there were boys
and girls who, disinclined toward light and noise,
already lived by night. With eyes like cats,
they'd go out in the woods among the bats
and owls and crickets, gathering the day-
light birds--myopic now--who'd gone astray
and slammed into the rocks and trees and lay
half-conscious, feeble, on the forest floor,
requiring of the hunter nothing more
than quick beheading with an ax. Before
they went extinct, these fowl became a main
nutrition source for several years, insane
as that sounds now.

Eventually, some bright
observer noticed that the so-called "night
patrollers" kept a clear complexion, that
they had more energy and body fat.
Their would-be playmates who persisted in
their daylight romps, meanwhile, grew frail and thin,
until the very flesh seemed to decay
right on their bones; they rarely smiled, and they
were dying at alarming rates. It was
most fortunate this link was found, because

the daylight birds were soon no more, and so
the "night hunts" might have ended (we don't know)
without such easy pickings.
                So they say
the Easterners began to sleep by day
and live their lives by night around about
late Twenty Thirty-five. (There's still some doubt
about the date.) And since already then
the nights were hot, the women and the men
of Appalachia soon forgot their shyness
and embraced the comfort and the dryness
of full nudity--except when they
were forced to go out in the light of day.

Speaking of which, I think it's time we took
advantage of the Moon's inviting looks
and let you scholars put away your books
until the first night of the winter term
(a week from yesternight; the date is firm)
and turn you loose to pack your pipes with pot
and see about increasing mankind's lot
upon the Earth-- ...
                But first! Before the play
begins! ... I do have something more to say!
(Come on, Horatio; put that thing away.) ...

Our lovely emissaries from the West,
who Mother Moon and Providence have blessed
us with tonight, have made a small request
that for a moment we might be addressed
by their brave Captain--who, if I have guessed
correctly, has an offering of good-
will to impart.

So! Captain, if you would?

V. BENEATH THE STARING STARS

Beneath the staring stars, thus introduced,
I stood. A joke occurred to me ("Unused
to public speaking as I am...") to earn
a laugh--but suddenly my throat had turned
into one solid cramping muscle, and
I found I couldn't speak.
(I understand
now, from an hour or so's perspective, why
this knot occurred: it was the first time I
stood offering, in public, not just my
opinion, but a challenge to defy
those precepts taught to me since infancy--
as though I had arrayed in front of me
not only my young men and naked hosts,
but in among them, grave and angry ghosts
of all the Elders I had ever known.)

So there I stood, embarrassed and alone,
as the applause I'd garnered disappeared
(it had been slight, polite; no one had cheered),
my helpless heartbeat hammering, my head
on fire; I suppose my face was red.

Whether from plain old panic or from Grace
I cannot say, but in this hellish place
my soul cried out to Jesus, from within:
"Dear Christ, deliver me--although my Sin
is great!" I prayed in speechless agony.

Then instantly, I sensed a sympathy--
not just from sailors there in front of me,
but from the gathered naked natives, blanks
and breeders intermixed among their ranks.

Our youngest, Matthew, was the first to speak:
"You tell 'em, Captain."
"You can do it, Zeke,"
Mark offered.
Peter put a rather weak
"Praise Jesus!" in.
Then little Luke--unique
as always--yelled: "Praise Captain!"
And a shriek
broke loose from Uncle Bette, the eunuch freak:
"WOO! Make it happen, Cap'n!"
And the meek
joined forces with the proud, until a peak
was reached where everybody in the crowd--
native and navy--joined the caucus, loud

and raucous--ranting, chanting "Zeke! Zeke! Zeke!"
and "Speak! Speak! Speak!"--combining into "Speak!
Zeke! Speak! Zeke! Speak!"
And I cried out "All right!"
and threw my arms up high--the very sight
of which let loose a tidal wave of cheers,
washing away all remnants of my fears.

"My friends! My new-found friends!" I raised my voice
like Moses to the masses. "In our choice
of landing places, we have been most blessed!
We never dreamed--we never could have guessed--
how warm a welcome we'd receive!
"The West,
where we have journeyed from, is sober to
a fault at times. Beneath the overview
of older men--our 'Elder Councils'--who
interpret every Gospel verse with due
deliberation from the point of view
of somber age, we younger men, in lieu
of listening with love, accept our cue
from those who preach down to our passive pew
from high above. We swallow quite a few
proposals thus that might be quite untrue.

"For instance: if Our Savior was a Jew,

and if it was the Status Quo that slew
him, is it right for Christians (knowing, through
the Gospels, his perfection as we do)
to persecute the 'chosen people' who
are born as strangers in our midst--the new
rendition of the dispossessed, who sue
for our protection?
"And consider, too,
the older scriptures Jesus often drew
his listeners' attention to and threw
new light upon, with their injunction to
'go forth and multiply.' Surely he knew
that in the post-Apocalypse milieu
humans would need to reassess and hew
unto new-formed traditions to pursue
this goal with gusto--find new ways to woo
and win the planet back and to imbue
its stewards with a sense of duty.
"You!
Our long-lost loves! Because of <u>you</u>, my crew
and I have tasted paradise--and knew
that <u>you</u> were naked--and began to rue
the night when we first donned our silly blue
jean shorts against the chilly pre-dawn dew!

"Who is this 'Caesar' we must render to,

and who the Lord? We were not made apart
from God, but <u>in his image</u> from the start!
The lifeblood of the diplomatic art
flows not just from the head, but from the heart!
So let us rise up proudly, men, and shed
these shackles sewn of outworn shame and thread!"

Then up rose every member of our crew,
and all at once--as we'd decided to
when we had met--we dropped our denim blues.
(As Luke suggested, we kept on our shoes.)

The crowd went wild--quite literally. The soft
hands of the Blueridge women raised aloft
all thirteen Colorado men (but then
again, the hands must have belonged to men
as well as women) easily, as though
we didn't weigh a thing; for all I know,
we didn't. And beneath the giddy glow
of giggling stars, we rode this wave, as bare
as on our nights of birth. Exactly where
it carried us, we couldn't tell; the sky
alone bore witness now. (It seemed so high
above, and yet so close!)
                But even in
this dazzled state (a state of shameless Sin,

our Elders all would say), I was aware
of Jesus smiling down, exactly where
the Moon, there at its zenith, also stood--
and both seemed to be saying, "It is good,"
in one familiar voice. And as we rocked
above the rolling thunder, I was shocked
into a powerful epiphany,
like summer lightning bursting over me:
Our deities are the same entity!
They differ only in their sex and name;
apart from that, they are one in the same.

The sound of our new family--the pound
of naked feet on hard-packed earth, the round
warm tones of their sweet laughter, the profound
unfettered, unselfconscious whoops of joy--
was roaring like an ancient sea, each boy
and girl and man and woman of them free
with their anointing love, all lovingly
appointing us (despite our distant birth)
as brothers, knowing our intrinsic worth
and value to their tribe, without the need
to cross-examine our intents or read
our ancient scriptures.
                Jesus Christ the Moon
was laughing as we rolled downhill. And soon

we found ourselves among a grove of oak--
all dead (and blackened here and there with smoke),
but with the grace and beauty to evoke
the feeling of a living soul, their long
up-reaching, crowding, twisting branches, strong
and joyous, hailing Moon and stars and all--
as though this celebration had been called
not just for members of the human race
but for the planet, spinning round in space,
itself a living thing. The fact that they
had died and that the months or years had flayed
the hide right off their trunks now made it seem
as though they too were naked, drunk; they gleamed
there in the Moonlight, glowing in the dark,
no shred of shame at having shed their bark
and joined the planetary rut.
                But hark:
I sensed a slowing of the love stampede.
The tree debris, I thought, must now impede
the progress of their naked feet. (I wonder
at the toughness of these soles that thunder
over rock and root all night: they must
have calluses with a reptilian crust
as thick as leather boots. Or is it just
the nerve-endings that over time grow dull?
When I have leisure, I should make a full

investigation.)

But they didn't stop.
Instead, they started spinning us, on top
of them, while trilling in a mad cascade
of sound, till all the branches in the glade,
the Moon and all the stars were whirling round
and round. My heart began to pound and pound,
caught in the center of the swirling ceiling,
helplessly revolving through the reeling
twirling stars. It was a thrilling feeling
of both terror and ecstatic joy--
unfiltered, unrestrained, as when a boy.

Then, just as I was on the verge of shrieking,
all at once, without one native speaking,
simultaneously, every hand
stopped moving, as by some unseen command,
and every tongue cut short its trilling sound,
and we thirteen were lowered to the ground--
abruptly, but not roughly. Or at least,
with me, they were most gentle. (In the East,
I've noticed, people have a different way
of touching one another. I would say
their nudity--the fact that without care
in how and where they put their hands, that there
would be a chance of contacting the bare

pudenda, inadvertently--is where
they have acquired that automatic care
they tend to have in this regard. It's rare,
I would imagine, for an Eastern pair
of hands to go astray that way.)
                But then,
as soon as I had landed--and my men
were spirited away (a woman on
each arm, in many cases; they were gone
before I knew it)--suddenly I felt
disoriented, like I'd downed a belt
of Moonshine from a mountain still. The ground
beneath my feet was tilting up and down,
as though I stood on deck amid a storm;
it nearly made me seasick. I was warm,
and yet the blood ran cold into my feet
as I stood struggling against the heat
to keep my balance. I was half aware
that there were women (though I didn't dare
to try to look them in the eye, for fear
of falling over) who were trying to steer
me off with them into the woods, to mate.

"No, thank you," I was saying. "I'll just wait
until a little later."
                It was late

enough already, certainly--but my
reluctance was enough; they didn't try
to coax me into it. Before long, I
was standing there amid the naked trees,
alone but for an unexpected breeze
that gave me gooseflesh even as I sweat.

I heard myself repeating, "No, not yet;
a little later, maybe," even after
every auditor was gone.
                The laughter
and the shrieks kept echoing from all
directions--but for me, no Cupid's call
was there among them. What was wrong with me?
My deck no longer tilted with the sea;
I didn't feel "undressed," especially.
And yet my merry mood had suddenly
evaporated, and the Moon was just
the Moon again; I felt no love or trust
in its blank stare. A deep uneasiness
had taken hold of me--not queasiness
from having eaten all those bugs (in fact,
I felt no repercussions from that act,
not even the suggestion of a fart),
but a profound discomfort of the heart.
I felt abjectly foreign and alone

in this strange land; I wanted to go home
and never sail away again. I was
afraid, yet couldn't ascertain the cause.

And then I heard the Doctor's voice: "Hello.
I thought you might not know which way to go
without your trusty guidebook."
                So I looked
around, and there she was--holding my book
and pen in front of her--approaching me
with what I would imagine had to be
a knowing smile on her face. But I,
of course (of course--of <u>course</u>!), only had eyes
for what she offered me: my home away
from home--my manifested means to say
whatever I might have to say--my note-
book and my pen!
                The swelling in my throat,
the tears now brimming over in my eyes,
I'd have to guess were of no great surprise
to D. She understood me perfectly:
my newborn nakedness meant less to me--
far less, immeasurably less--than the
atrocious absence of my journal. She
had known how utterly alone I'd be
without it, when she saw it. She could see

that instantly, as soon as she had found
it lying unattended on the ground.
(But how? How did she know my heart so well?
Her love of language, maybe? Who can tell?)

"Yes--you were right," I told her.
I suppose
my voice must have betrayed the warmth that rose
up from my heart just then; I had no art
to hide it at the moment.
"Did you start
to feel a little lost?"
"I did--yes," I
replied.
And then I looked up, and my eyes
met hers, and hers were not exactly dry.
I felt a certain thrill, but no surprise;
I think I could have kissed her then and there
(although, quite naturally, I didn't dare,
her being homosexual and bare
and barely introduced to me). A rare
experience of utter empathy
moved through us both, it seemed--both her and me--
just for a moment. Then, of course, it passed.

"Well--thank you very much," I said at last.

"Don't mention it," she told me. "Acid-free?"

To which I had to answer, "Pardon me?"

"The paper. It's still white. And smooth, not rough.
But I imagine that it's old enough
to be your great-grandfather."
                "Yeah, the stuff
is tough."
          "It's acid-free; it's got to be.
Out here, that's something of a rarity."

I opened up my journal to the page
where I'd left off, just as I took the stage.
I sensed that Dorothea recognized
her lecture, upside down--and realized
she was a little flattered, seeing it
immortalized in shorthand.
                "When it's lit
by lantern light, you see the lines," I told
her. "'College ruled,' they call it--blue and bold.
But in the Moonlight, they just disappear.
I don't know why that is; it's rather queer."

"Is that a vintage pen?" she asked.
                "Uh-huh.

A Uni-ball. They're great. I carried a
whole carton of them with me on the trip.
I'll never use them all. I love the tip."

I passed it to her, and she tried it out
by opening my hand and tracing out
the life-lines on my palm--a process which
put all my hairs on end and made me itch
from head to toe, but which I nonetheless
enjoyed immensely.
"They're still common?"
"Yes;
we're still pretty illiterate out West."

She laughed and glanced up at my face. "I guess
that's what we used to call 'the Christian <u>we</u>.'"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. ... It seems to me
you're getting quite a crop of scholars, though.
In history, at least."
"Well, yes and no.
They like the freaky stuff. But I don't know."

And then it looked as though she suddenly
just noticed she was doodling on me.
She stopped abruptly. "Hey, let's find a spot

to sit," she said.

She capped the pen (I thought
I might have caught a slight blush on her face),
handed it back, and headed for a place
where several long-dead trees had given in
at last to gravity. I can't begin
here to describe all my covert sensations,
following her to our destination;
let's just say that I was instantly
aware of having shed my shorts. When she
sat down upon a fallen log, I took
my seat strategically, holding my book
at what I hoped was not an awkward angle.

All around us where we sat, a tangled
mass of tough, metallic ivy spread
across the forest floor, over the dead
trees lying there (as if to pull them down
into the earth and bury them, or drown
them in a sea of green) and all around
the base of those still standing tall. I found
my perch completely smooth, and fairly dry--
but just the circumstantial fact that I
had never in my life before assumed
a seat outdoors without my shorts on, doomed
me to complete distraction: suddenly

I couldn't keep my mind off bugs. The tree
we sat on must have housed a colony
of tens of thousands--maybe two or three
such colonies.
"I guess if literacy
were commoner, you wouldn't get to be
so free with pen and paper," Doctor D
was telling me. "It is a luxury."

"It is indeed," I said (thinking instead
of earwigs, with those pincers on their heads,
and how I'd found one once at home in bed
and had a hard time killing it: its dead
flat abdomen just lay there while its red
front end squirmed energetically and tried
to run). "I always thank the Lord," I lied,
"that for whatever reason, I'm allowed
to write so much, so easily."
"I'm proud
of you," she said. "I can remember how
resistant--and I hope it's different now--
the Elders used to be to writing, when
I was a girl."
"It's better now. For men,
I mean. A woman still can't own a pen--
not technically, at least. But now and then,

one shows a flair for arts and crafts, and when she's good, they actually encourage her." (I wondered where the hardwood termites were and how they would react if they should come across my anus. Would it seem like some inviting passageway, ripe for exploring?)

"Arts and crafts!" the Doctor said. "How boring!" (And of course, when she said "boring," that just made me think about the termites that much more.)

"You mentioned you have sons," I said--changing the subject, trying to get my head away from insects, if I could. "Where do they live?"

"Just north of here--an hour or two, depending on how fast you ride. ... And do you ride?"

"After a fashion."

"Well, if you can ride a Western horse, you won't have any trouble riding ours. There aren't that many ways to mess it up. They're very sweet."

"That would be wonderful. I'd love to meet your sons."

She turned her head away from me
when I said that--an eccentricity,
I thought, considering the normal pride
of parents. "Cool," she said. "Why don't we ride
up there tomorrow, after breakfast?" (But
her voice was somehow unconvincing. What
was going on?)

"Terrific," I replied.
"And so they live just on the other side
of that next peak?"

"Just underneath it, to
the west."

"Aha."

A balmy, light breeze blew
the scent of marijuana smoke our way.
The crickets purred, a little ways away.
I tried to think of something else to say.

"And so they're not that far. How old are they?"

She looked at me to do the math. "Let's see:
if Ladislaw is turning twenty-three,
that means that Casaubon has got to be--
what, twenty-six?"

I laughed. "Well, <u>you</u> tell <u>me</u>."

"Yes: twenty-six, and twenty-two. Or three," she said--again, turning away from me.

"You're sure about that, now?" I tried to kid her. "And I guess they must have children. Did you notice any on your last trip north?"

There was an awkward silence. Why on earth had I said that, the way I did? There must have been a reason for her strangeness. Just as I was going to try to put it more discreetly, she spoke up: "That is a sore point. Cas and Lad are eunuchs."

And of course, I felt just terrible. And she felt worse, it seemed, for my sake, having to inform me of it just like that. Her hand was warm, I noticed, when I picked it up. "I'm sorry" was about all I could say.

"Don't worry, Zeke," she said. "It's not like in the West. They are some of our brightest and our best. The only thing that sucks..."

But I could see it in her eyes. "I know," I said.

"Still, we

should go. First thing tomorrow evening. Let's."

"We certainly don't have to."
"No regrets!
And no excuses!" she said--brightening
a bit too much, I thought. "And you can bring
your notebook and your pen, if you are so
inclined."
She kissed me on the cheek, as though
we were about to part, and let my hand
go. Neither of us made a move to stand,
however.
I could hear an owl nearby.
It had an oddly inward-sounding cry,
as though conversing with itself. The men
were making moans I'd never heard from them
before, although I thought I recognized
a voice or two. Before I realized
what I was hearing, the percussive slapping
was reminding me of topsails flapping
in the wind--and underneath it all,
there was the constant thrumming cricket call,
like waves. It all combined into a kind
of lullaby of sound which brought to mind
again the sea we had been sailing on
so many nights and heard from dusk till dawn:

such constancy, yet such an utter lack
of symmetry--each cry a new attack,
each sigh a new response, each woven through
a different woof or warp--the shifting hue
of noise expressing nothing, perfectly.

"Do you believe in Christianity?"
the Doctor asked me, rather suddenly.

"I do," I answered, automatically.
"Or rather, I believe in Jesus."
She
was staring with a strange intensity
directly at my right--my closer--eye,
the way a mother looking for a lie
might stare into a child's, alert for any
guilty shifts or tremors.
"Often... Many
times," I tried to say, "I've thought about
the possibility... I <u>have</u> had doubts
that Jesus, as the Bible introduces
him--the man who sits beneath the spruces
and the cypresses and preaches to
disciples, who can heal the lame and who
can walk on water and do all those tricks
with bread and wine and fish while he predicts

the future of the Universe--was ever
really here among us. But I never
could work up the skepticism to
imagine that it wasn't even true
that he exists right now, right here," and here
I touched my heart, "and that if we just clear
away the other noise and listen, we
can hear him speaking to us; we can see
him in the eyes of others, all around
us, every night. To me, it's so profound--
and obvious: I feel him! I can feel
him here right now."

Apparently the seal
of Doctor D's approval then was granted
me; she let my right eye go and planted
her left hand upon my knee. Her eyes
went back to scanning tree-tops, where the sky's
clear cast allowed a brilliant silhouetting
of the branches, with the starlight letting
every intricacy show. "That's good,"
she said. "I only wish the Elders could
have listened with as innocent an ear
back in my time. It might have saved a tear
or two."

"Well, I'm afraid that part of it
is still the same. For them, the heart of it

is power: power over everyone
not in their little group. It's not much fun
for them, though, either--or at least, I can't
imagine that it is. I know there's scant
enjoyment in a marriage where the man
does all the thinking, making every plan
for all his wives and children."
Here her eyes
came back to mine; they registered surprise.
"You know that from your own experience?"

"I do," I said.
"You mean that, in the sense
that you yourself have wives and children?"
"Two
of each," I said. "All girls. Bizarre but true."

She seemed dumbfounded. "No."
"It's what we do,"
I said. "The little ones are quite attached.
Three months apart in age; they've really latched
onto each other."
"And the mothers?"
"Not
so much. In fact, that's partly why I thought
a little time away from them might do

some good."

"Might do some good for whom? For you?"

"Well, yeah; that, too," I answered honestly. "But what I meant was possibly, with me away, they might start acting like adults-- and friends."

"Polygamy always results in jealousy," she said, as though reciting from a text.

"It's constant. Constant fighting, over me, from dusk to dawn each night."

"That must be quite exciting for you."

"Right," I said.

"It's not that glamorous?"

"It's hell on earth. To tell the truth."

"You might as well," she said.

Then suddenly she yelled out, "Hey!" and hurled a rock at something. "Go away!"

I heard a cat-cry and the scampering of feline feet, but didn't see a thing.

Involuntarily, I found, I'd stood
(I'd lost my woody, luckily; it's good
I hadn't stood up earlier). "You threw
a rock at that poor kitty!" I was too
surprised to be more diplomatic.
"Shoo!"
she shouted, after it.
"That wasn't nice,"
I scolded her.
"They hunt off all the mice,"
she said, as though that somehow justified
her shot. "We eat mice here, sautéed or fried."
But she could see I wasn't satisfied.
"Come on, Ezekiel. I aimed it wide!
If I had tried to kill her, she'd have died."

"I have a cat at home," I said. "A pet."
I wasn't ready to forgive her yet.

"I know, I know. I used to have one, too.
But things are different here. You know that's true,"
she added, glancing at my shortlessness.

I felt a little foolish, I confess,
standing there stubbornly. She took my hand
and pulled me down again.

"I understand!
You've sailed into a very different land
from Colorado; I remember how
that is. Just try to let the here and now
develop gradually, and then respond
accordingly. ... I'm really very fond
of cats."

"Well, then I hope you don't grow fond
of me," I said.

"Too late," she answered. "What
about your men?"

I couldn't get it. "What
about them?"

"Do they all have several wives
apiece, back home?"

"Oh! Not at all. Their lives
are strictly limited in that regard.
There's not much privacy; it would be hard
for them to gain experience before
they wed. There's no such thing as marriage for
a man until he's twenty-five. If he
survives that long."

"And if he does, he's free
to wive it merrily?"

"He's never free,"
I said. I didn't mean it bitterly,

but I suppose it sounded so.
"How old
do women have to be?" she asked.
I told
her: "Twelve."
"Aha. The bridal laws still hold."

"Unfortunately, yes. ... And so I guess
my men must all be virgins--or, unless
I'm much mistaken, they were virgins till
a half an hour ago. Some may be still."

The background noise had shifted to another
key. A few still slapped and moaned, but others
had already drifted into quiet
after-conversation. Every riot,
every hurricane, must have its "eye,"
when the commotion heaves a little sigh
and settles, and the tempest seems to die
away--until another gale comes by.

"What drew you to the sea?" the Doctor asked
me, just like that. (I hadn't even basked
in wordlessness two minutes and was tasked
now with explaining something that had been
a mystery to me for years.) "Begin

at the beginning," she suggested, when
I didn't start in right away.

"All right.
I lost my parents early on. The sight
of Father I remember: he was tall,
I think. Of course, I was myself quite small
when forming that impression. I recall
his voice as very deep--although he never
spoke to me that I remember, never
picked me up or smiled at me. A clever
man, they say; he was among the three
or four chief Elders our community
supported then. I was the only son
of his fifth wife; I wasn't even one
year old when she was killed, and she was just
sixteen. My father died--I guess I must
have been around four and a half--in bed
with number seven. All at once, he's dead--
'swept off to Heaven on a wave of bliss'
was how they put it."

"And they told you this?"

"Oh, yes. I do remember that, because
it caused me some confusion. In the jaws
of death, he was described as 'glowing, beaming.'
I imagined him serenely dreaming

of a childhood Christmas. I was ten before I understood their meaning, when somebody used that turn of phrase again."

"So who adopted you? What happened then?"

"Aunt Esther raised me. She was actually my stepmother--my father's number three wife--but I always called her 'Aunt.'"

"Was she a little distant, then?"

"Not in the least! I think it's safe to say she never ceased to love my mother, whom she always would refer to as her dearest friend."

"I should have thought the jealousy between a third wife and a younger fifth would have deterred all possibility of friendship."

"They'd been close since they were little girls--and stayed that way, apparently. I think the truth is that my father only married Ruth to keep his rival there beneath his roof."

"Your mother's name was Ruth?"

"Uh-huh."

"I love that name."

"It's Biblical."

"The eighth book of the Bible; yes, I know. But what I love about it is the meaning: sympathy, compassion--"

"Or remorse."

"I'm sure that she had no cause for remorse in having you."

"Well, thank you, Doctor D. I hope that's true."

"How did she die?"

"They say she fell into the sea one night while looking at the view. But no one saw it; no one really knew what happened. She went missing, and they found her body washed up on the rocks."

"She drowned, then."

"Maybe--or she could have slipped and hit the rocks before she had the chance. But it would have been hard to tell; the Sun had done its work on her before they found her--one

day, anyway, or maybe two."

"Ah, shit. That's horrible."

"I don't remember it, of course. I doubt I was aware of it on any level at the time. But by the time my father died, I gather I was old enough to know that people die in various ways and afterward they go to Heaven and the people here below on Earth don't see them anymore. And so it must have been around that time that I began to suffer frightmares where I'd cry out in the middle of the day and wake up half the house. Aunt Esther had to take me down into the cellar then and make me up a cup of milk and whiskey and just kind of stay with me and hold my hand."

"What did you dream about?"

"About the sea. Always the sea. And it was always <u>me</u> who was its victim."

"Not your mother?"

"No. I think that was because I didn't know

what Mother looked like. No one ever drew
a portrait of her; all I really knew
was that she looked like me. That's what they'd say
when I inquired; so in my childish way
I always saw this little boy, my twin,
above the ocean--slipping, falling in,
and drowning."
"What a thing to tell a kid!"

"To give her credit, Esther never did--
but all the other widows said it, all
the time. And in those dreams, I'd always fall
from some great height--and so whenever we
walked near a bluff that looked out on the sea
(my aunt and I, I mean), I would become
upset--my heart would race, my face went numb--
and then, when morning rose, the dreams would come
on worse than ever. So eventually,
when I was old enough for roaming free,
Aunt Esther did impose one rule on me:
I didn't get to play down by the sea
with other children."
"Really! It was she
herself who made the rule?"
"Aunt Esther. By
the time I had turned eight, she'd told me I

was not allowed to go down where the sky touches the water. That might well be why I ended up a sailor. Or perhaps."

"It was forbidden you."

"Exactly. Maps and charts began to interest me. The same with ropes and ladders. And those pirate games--walking the plank, plundering troves of treasure--all provided me with hours of pleasure growing up. The frightmares never went away, but I had started to resent their influence upon me: when I woke up from a dream, I never screamed--or spoke about it to a soul. I'd even joke about my scaredy-pants behavior in the past to my new pirate pals, to win their confidence. When I was older, I began to navigate the books and try my hand at little makeshift models. By the time I reached my teens, to satisfy my naughty nautical desires, I had a secret Sea Scout crew."

"You were a <u>bad</u> boy!"

"Well--Aunt Esther knew by then; I guess

she knew it all along. But to confess
my Sins of subterfuge to her, address
the issues such deceptions raised--and yes,
to beg for her forgiveness--she believed
would build my character. She was relieved
when I broke down, admitted I'd deceived
her (if, in fact, I had), and she was glad,
I'm sure, that she had borne it out and had
not come to me in caustic confrontation,
scolding me with scalding accusations."

"Sounds to me as though you had a mother
all along."
"I did! And that's another
thing: whenever she had something of
importance to discuss with me--above
the normal night-to-night--she'd wait until
the Sabbath, after sermon, to fulfill
the pending conversation."
"So she was
religious, then?"
"Oh, no. The Sabbath laws,
of course, required us to attend and pray,
but she would never go out of her way
to bring the preacher's rant into our talk.
But after church, we'd always take a walk

up to the graveyard where my mother lies
and sit and talk a while. I would surmise
she thought of it more as an antidote
than an enhancement or an after-note
to what we'd heard."
"And so you visited
your mother's grave each week?"
"We did; she said
it was as much for her sake as it was
for mine. And sitting there, of course--because
of how my mother had been killed--it was
impossible to treat the subject of
a sailor's life with levity. My love
of the adventure of it had to be
offset by the hard-nosed reality
that taking out a craft upon the sea
meant being faced with danger constantly.
And taking the responsibility
for other men required me to see
that all their lives were in my hands, and thus
demanded I take pains ensuring us
the safest possible equipment and
most thoroughgoing training for each hand--
under my care, as well as my command."

"No, wait a minute; I don't understand."

"There was no navy when I went before
the Elders. Just an army, nothing more--
and it was all geared toward guerilla war."

"But that was later, surely. What I mean
is, what about your childhood, in between?"

"This was in Eighty-three. I was fifteen."

"My God! You were ambitious."
"I was bored.
My pirates had outgrown their wooden swords.
For years, we'd shuttled up and down the coast
in little sailboats--nothing much to boast
about--made out of salvaged hurricane
debris. But we'd have had to be insane
to try to cross more than a mile or so
of open sea in boats like that."
"I know."
"I didn't mean--"
"No! That's okay. You <u>would</u>
have had to be insane. You weren't; that's good."

"Aunt Esther actually helped a lot
with brainstorming, to formulate a plot
to get the Elderhood to contemplate

the naval. Even setting up a date
to go before them meant I had to wait
until they'd had a sign from God."
                "You should
have buried an angelic plaque."
                "I would
have if I could, but I was short of gold."

"Plus, you were--what, only fifteen years old?"

"An upstart youth. So to convince my betters
I was worthy, a campaign of letters
was commenced. It worked; I was invited
to present my case. They were excited,
some of them, by what I'd written."
                "Oh?"

"A few had even spoken with me--though
I still was nervous when I had to go
before them with my adolescent beard,
unclear complexion, and a voice I feared
might squeak just when I wanted to impress
them with a point. But I had primed them, yes.
In fact, I might as well admit, I played
them, using Christian buzzwords like 'crusade'
to fire them up, when I had never been

one of those door-to-dooring kind of men
who liked to cram my creed down people's throats.
I wish I could come up with some old quotes
from those first letters. ... Oh! Far and away
the one most brilliant stroke--and I can say
that, since it was Aunt Esther's stroke, not mine--
was every time I named it--every time!--
I'd never say 'the Great Midwestern Sea'
or 'Mississippi'; it would always be
denoted Jordan. Never any 'Thee'
in front, or 'Sea' or 'Ocean' after: 'We,
by crossing Jordan,' I would say, 'will be
the couriers of Christianity
to heathen nations in the darkest slumber--'"

"Well! You certainly did have their number."

"Building ships requires high grade lumber,
sturdy canvas for the sails, and rope
that doesn't rot or snap. My only hope
was to convince the Elders to invest
their property and power in the best
equipment we could get. My sole concern
was safety. Little did I know the turn
events would take once I had carried through
my bright idea."

"Uh-oh."

"Well, I knew
they had a military bent; that's true.
But I was desperate. What else could I do?
To get the Elders' blessing and permission,
I of course accepted their commission
to be Captain of the Navy. I
just thought, that way I'd get to keep an eye
on things."

"And how did that work out?"

"Okay,
at first--when all the Elders did was pray,
and all the navy did was build and train.
They had their Lord; we had our bounding main.
The trouble started six years in. One night
a man who'd just turned thirty--none too bright,
but full of energy; a Denverite
christened Hosea, though he was referred
to privately as 'Holy Moses'--stirred
things up when he appeared and spoke before
the Colorado Council, wanting more
'formality of purpose,' as he said,
between the Council, with its 'wiser heads,'
and what he called the 'after-sermon Cub
Scout club' that ran the navy."

"Did he snub

you publicly?"

"I never met the man!
But he had heard, from what I understand,
about my story and my situation
as a kid who'd crawled above his station,
rising through the ranks by his own wits.
That brought on Holy Moe's conniption fits,
and he began to rant and rave and roar:
'We must remind them what the navy's for!
It's preparation for a Holy War!
We need a tighter leash around the necks
of these young sailors! Let them swab the decks
with good old-fashioned blood and sweat and tears!'"

"Ah! What an asshole!"

"Thank you. All my fears
about his influence were soon to see
fruition, since he couldn't let things be
till <u>he</u> was named the 'Lord of Admiralty.'"

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. And he has been a pain
in my rear flank all through the Nineties. Plain
maliciousness, unfortunately, is
the <u>least</u> annoying attribute of his
I've had to deal with. Even crew recruiting

is a chore now, with his 'go in shooting'
attitude toward exploration. I
don't want a crew hopped up to fight and die
for Christendom; I want young men with minds
wide open, eager to explore and find
out what the world beyond their little realms
might have to offer. So far, at the helms
of my own ships, I've had my pick of men--
though fighting for the privilege, even then.
(Lieutenant Peter was a compromise;
I couldn't pass him up, with those sharp eyes
of his--and as for loyalty, he's got
that to a fault.) But other Caps are not
so lucky. On an expedition to
the northern islands, with a hand-picked crew
of Holy Moses' choosing, some poor man
was shot holding a white flag in his hand,
right from the ship. The Captain in command
took all the blame, and luckily, no war
ensued. But damn!--excuse my French--"

"You swore."

"Someone should sail our Lord of Admiralty
off to some desert isle! Diplomacy,
as far as he's concerned, is blasphemy
against the Lord. We simply can't afford

to have his kind of attitude on board
our ships; it's utter madness."
"So your job's
not that much fun these nights?"
"Hosea robs
it of a lot of charm sometimes--on land,
back home (the chafing chain of his command
and all that worrying, you understand)--
but on the whole, I'm pretty satisfied
with my career; I take a lot of pride
in what I do. And really, just the thing
itself--adventuring and voyaging
and sharing it with these young men--the way
the sea looks on a clear full Moon... The spray
does burn a bit, and then of course the smell
is rather rank... I don't know when I fell
in love with it, or why, but I'm obsessed;
I think the sailor's life is quite the best."

"What's been your finest hour? So far, I mean."

"So far? I'm pretty proud of that nude scene
we pulled off earlier."
"Come on; I'm being
serious."
"Well--seriously! Seeing

what you have accomplished here, the way
you work together, managing to stay
so strong and healthy--not just physically,
but intellectually--and socially,
with such a close-knit, heartfelt harmony
of purpose that you hardly ever see
out West--a miracle, it seems to me...
In perfect honesty, it's got to be,
of all my high adventures on the sea,
the most amazing."
"Thanks, Zeke. Good to see
you, too. But what about before? Have there
been any grand triumphal moments, where
you really grabbed the glory?"
"Ah. Well, yes;
one voyage does stand out above the rest.
In Ninety-one, I took the prototype
of our fleet schooner--with a gale of hype
filling her sails--and with a dozen men
(though they were hardly more than boys back then)
we circumnavigated what was called
'the Mainland' in those nights. But after all,
since most of it had yet to be explored,
that was a liquid term. We took aboard
supplies enough for forty nights--far less
than what we brought this time. (I must confess,

I was remiss in failing to insist
on more.) We chose a clockwise course that kissed
the southern eastern coast, going ashore
on every other evening to explore
the ruins of New Mexico, where 'plague'
reportedly had wiped them out. A rag
was worn on each man's face at first--but really,
that began to feel a little silly
after we'd explored a while; there was
no smell, to speak of--and besides, the cause
of all those deaths could just as easily
have been from radioactivity
that leaked into their drinking water source
as from disease. The fact that we found horse
and cattle skeletal remains there, too,
among the human, would support that view.
And anyway, it had been thirty years
or more since their demise, and so our fears
were few. The vast Chihuahuan Sea was much
more scary, when we reached the south, with such
a shallow, shifting floor; too wary there
to go ashore, we held our breath (the air
was thick and stifling even on December
first) till we were through. I can remember
clearly our first view of the Pacific,
heading north again, and the specific

moment when (despite a very slender
Moon) the sky lit up--fraying our tender
nerves--like dawn, with madly dancing lightning
all across the curved horizon--frightening
us all witless, since with every burst
of light, we witnessed, to our right, the worst
place possible on which to try to land
a craft--a sheaf of rocks, you understand,
that stood like giant knives, so close at hand.
We raced our lives against the shocking death
that stalked us, praying hard with every breath,
and felt as much as saw the storm crowd in:
the very hairs stood up upon our skin;
our teeth vibrated in our jaws. It raced
against us eastward and would have outpaced
us by its speed--but with a saving Grace
that found us in our hour of need, a south
wind intervened at last, just as the mouth
of Hell unhooked its jaws, and let us slip
through safely. Not until the northern tip
of Utah's 'New West Coast' was reached, a long
week later, did we see a beach, so strong
and high the waves rose every hour of night
and day, regardless of how clear or bright
the Moon and stars shone overhead. (The word
pacific--'peaceable'--is so absurd

a name for that great undulating range
of mountains made of brine! It does seem strange
that anyone, at any time, could find
that an appropriate description.) Kind
and gentle, by comparison, the flow
of currents from the Gulf of Idaho
invited us within it for a rare,
relaxing rest-and-recreation, there
among the rising, relatively bare
but lovely-in-the-Moonlight hills that give
the place its character. And people live
there! We could see their fires and smell their smoke
at first--but they were shy. They never spoke
to us, and we had no time left to spare
to try to coax them out of hiding. There
we sat--right there!--all painfully aware
of my great blunder, only stowing fare
enough for forty nights. We didn't dare
explore the many islands (thirty-two
at least a mile long, and quite a few
much larger) off the northern coast. The maps
I drew proved useful to the other Caps
and crews who went in later and converted
everyone they found--and stopped perverted
customs such as dining on their dead.
But we were running low then, as I said,

on drinking water and the rock-hard bread
and jerky we had brought along. We sped
back down the northern eastern coast, along
Wyoming Sound. The wind was warm and strong,
and so we made good time. There was a throng
of people waiting for us--even though
we'd been expected thirty hours ago,
on Christmas Night. We docked on Boxing Night
at Boulder Bay, just at the first faint light
of day."

"Your aunt must have been very proud."

"We came ashore amid the biggest crowd
I'd ever seen--or have seen since. I scanned
the faces for my aunt's. And then a hand
reached out and touched my arm, and it was Eve,
my father's youngest widow. 'You should leave
at once,' she told me. 'Esther had a spell
last night at Christmas feast. She isn't well.'
She didn't have to tell me twice. I ran--
as fast as I had ever run, as man
or boy--straight up the hill to home, some seven
miles. And all the way, I prayed to Heaven--
never even thought to stop and rest;
my heart was nearly bursting in my chest.
But by the time I made it to her bed,

the sheet was covering her. She was dead."

A tiny cry escaped from Dorothea.
This time, I am certain I did see a
blush (despite the bluish light) before
she turned her head away. But it was more
a blush of natural compassion for
my loss, I think--a sympathy of spirit
bringing blood into her cheek, to hear it--
than embarrassment that she would let
her little cry escape, that she'd forget
herself in front of me. And anyway,
she turned again to face me right away.

"Oh, Zeke. I'm sorry." And she took my hand
and held it tight.
I don't quite understand
what happened next; to say it was unplanned,
unlooked for, would so understate the case.
One moment I could see Aunt Esther's face
before me; I could feel with savage force
again the inescapable remorse
I suffered when I realized my course
had taken me away from her just at
the hour she needed me the most, and that
because of my untimeliness, I'd see

her nevermore. The next moment my free
arm was encircling the Doctor's waist,
and I was kissing her, and I could taste
her tears and--so it seemed--could even feel
the warm blood pumping through her heart. Unreal
and yet completely undeniable,
the moment made us fully liable
to one another's feelings--though it seemed,
as it was happening, more like a dream
than anything that could be passing here
on Earth. Now every sound, both far and near--
the sleepy roar of crickets in our ears,
the reawakening desires of my
young men and her young women--every sigh
and whisper, cry and moan, each urgent and
impossible suggestion or demand--
together with the owls and whippoorwills
and crumbling leaves and creaking limbs that fill
the woods with sound and life at every hour
of the night, regardless of our power
to absorb it--and incredibly,
the steady pounding of the distant sea--
we heard together in a kind of chorus,
there, surrounding us, in that dead forest
with its curling blades.

Then came a <u>crack!</u>

nearby, and all retreated, shrinking back
to what had been before.
We moved apart
like guilty children--quickly--and my heart
clenched like a fist. A footstep on a dry
dead branch beneath some fallen leaves, if I
am not mistaken, must have made that sound.
We sat stock still and listened, looking round
and waiting for some further sign--a laugh,
a voice, a whistle, or a cough. But half
a minute passed, and then another; no
one greeted or appeared to us. And so
at last the Doctor rose and said, "Well--we
should probably head home again and see
how all the preparations are proceeding."

I stood up. "How many are you feeding?"

"Just the hundred, give or take--and you
thirteen. It isn't customary to
go traveling on Solstice Night; on New
Year's, it's another story. Don't forget
your notebook."
And I nearly had; I'd let
it fall into the ivy at our feet.
"Oh--thanks."

Our conversation was discreet,
as though we thought it might be overheard.
It felt peculiar watching every word,
our intimacy now completely gone.
Was D so used to being spied upon?
But naturally, I couldn't ask her then.
I picked my notebook up and clipped the pen
into the spiral binding.
As we walked
back up the hill to home, we barely talked.
The palm of my right hand still tingled where
I'd touched her back, beneath her long black hair.
Its surface had been rough; I was aware
then of a ghastly patch of scarring there.

I thought of our extraordinary kiss,
with all its rare intensity of bliss--
more personal, it seemed to me, than any
I had known back home, in all my many
months of marriage. But then suddenly
it dawned on me that never once had we
allowed our lips to part; that actually
our tongues had never touched. And even though
we both were naked when it happened, no
caresses had occurred.
Yet even so,

we had achieved a kind of ecstasy
involving all our senses: we could see
the very sounds surrounding us, and we
could hear each other's feelings in them, free
of all the normal limitations of
our consciousness, in consciousness of love--
a love that both awakened and redeemed.

At least, to me, that was the way it seemed.
Or was it something I alone had dreamed?

VI. MEANWHILE CECILIA WATCHES

Meanwhile Cecilia watches from the back
as Dorothea, with a careless lack
of protocol, steps to one side and lets
the Captain close her talk. But he forgets
what he was going to say; he stands there like
a fool, his face a brilliant red.
(To psych
his audience up into sympathy
for him, perhaps? And so deliberately?
Has C been hasty, to dismissively
judge him a fool? But no, that cannot be.
If he's pretending now, thinks C, then we
might just as well officially surrender.
No one could be such a skilled pretender.)

Uncle Bette jumps in the game. And so
the maids and eunuchs, usually so slow
to take the lead, start egging on the breeders--
cheering, hooting, hollering--the leaders
of the pack for once. Now laughter races
through the crowd, amid the grinning faces
and the clapping hands. Meanwhile Cecilia

watches silently.

Old Aunt Cecilia
(thirty-nine, and so the oldest maid
in Blueridge) stands in the perpetual shade
that shrouds her everywhere she goes. Her eyes
alone stand out (or would, if any spies
were present to observe) in glowing new-
leaf green, as though the Sun were leaking through
the midnight Earth at these two points. Her eyes
burn brighter suddenly in some surprise
as Captain Zeke breaks out into a storm
of oratory and--behold!--transforms
himself into a prophet, as he warms
up to his task, showing himself to be
as bold an orator as Doctor D.

And so the many calming words that C
has lately spoken to herself to free
her of her own absurd anxiety
fade into nothing. She can plainly see
his impact on his audience, that he
has won their trust.

(And yet, we must attest,
despite the twisting tightness in her chest,
C's quickening concern does not arrest
her other senses; she has not gone deaf.

She still has quite enough discernment left
to note that Captain Zeke, high on the crest
of his self-winded wave, has now addressed
his listeners in terms they'd have no means
of understanding: lyrically, he leans
upon the verses of the Holy Book
of Colorado. No one here has looked
at those old passages, apart from D
and--out of love for D--the teenage C,
who forced herself to plow through chapter after
chapter, until Dorothea's laughter
freed her from that thankless task.)
                And then
abruptly all the Colorado men,
in one grand culminating gesture, rise
up from their seats, to everyone's surprise,
and drop their shorts. It is an act so rash
and unforeseen, that with the thunder-crash
of clashing voices comes a brilliant burst,
a lightning-flash, of terror. It's the first
Cecilia's felt in years--quickly dispersed,
but scathing in its breaking blast. She steels
herself against its aftershock, then feels
the great wave rolling outward--with a roar
like some gigantic beast's, unheard before--
as all thirteen young foreigners are swept

up bodily into the air and kept
aloft among the stars, as off they all
career into the woods below.
                The "hall"
has emptied. Maids and eunuchs follow in
the wake a ways, to see them off. The din
grows dimmer. Many of C's neuter kin
will come back soon, to tend the fires and get
the feast prepared; the centerbeast they'll let
continue on its spit, but there are side-
dishes to co-create, and eggs to hide,
and punches to concoct. The unassigned
may take their time, if they are so inclined,
and stroll in pairs and share a pipe as they
enjoy the night before the shortest day
and listen to the eager breeders play
at their amusing desperate passion game.

For Aunt Cecilia, it is much the same
as it has always been. Since long before
her status as a maid was guessed, before
her mother died amid that tide of gore
and horror, for as far as she can reach
back in her memory, there's been a breach
between herself and every other soul
on Earth, as though she were assigned some role

quite separate from the rest.
                (Her best bud Bette
regards her as a large exotic pet--
or so, at least, it seems to C--without
the human capability to shout
for joy or cry for pain. Ironically,
all of those aspects of humanity
most bafflingly mysterious to C
are on display in Bette most blaringly.)

Across the empty lecture hall, there stands
the Doctor. What's she holding in her hands?

And then C recognizes what she's seeing,
and a sickness quickens through her being:
it's the Captain's notebook and his pen.
(Presumably, when he and his young men
were dropping trou, the speeding plow--so swift
it came to sweep the sailors up and lift
them high above the roiling crowd--had left
him nothing but his shoes, and thus bereft
of his collected data.) Dorothea,
glancing at its contents, doesn't see a
thing to worry her, apparently;
she closes it--unread, incredibly--
and, laughing to herself, strolls blithely down

the hill in the direction of the sound
of the retreating madness.
                C is bound
to follow her, of course, but doesn't let
her prey know of her close pursuit. And yet
despite the stalking mode Cecilia's in,
her heart's response is what it's always been
to seeing D, the Moonlight on her skin,
the sky-black flowing hair around her thin
but ever-graceful form--a sight to win
the worship of a follower. Again,
Cecilia falls in love with her.
                But oh,
why must her object's progress be so slow?
She seems to know just where she wants to go,
but shows no hint of hurry in her tread.
The naked oak grove (where the trees are dead
but lift their arms to Heaven) lies ahead
of her, but as she nears it, she is nearly
holding still--so full of stealth, so queerly
hesitant to enter there.
                Then all
at once, Cecilia understands: the tall
trees stand around an open, empty space--
a clearing--where the Captain's bearded face
is lifted to the Moon in mooning, love-

struck angst. He stands alone, the stars above
him staring down as if to taunt him by
their aching distance. Is he going to cry?

Now Dorothea stops dead still and waits--
and so C stops as well, as D debates
her plans.
          The woods are anything but quiet
in the interim. The orgy's riot
puts the crickets and the owls to shame,
as every player worthy of the name
competes to be the first to teach the game
of love to these recruits from distant lands.
Some work in teams, it seems. The slaps of hands
and inner thighs against the fleshy back-
sides of the breeder women has a lack
of dignity Cecilia tends to find
a bit repulsive--though she doesn't mind
it in the longhouse, after dawn. The sound
is muted there; it echoes all around
in open air. Outdoors, she notes, the goats
and boars are far less noisy. From the throats
of these two-leggéd rutters come such roars
and gasps and grunts and cries as ancient wars
must have produced, with the addition of
deep moans of passion, high-pitched sighs of love,

inept attempts at covert conversation
(silly in their breathless situation),
and occasional--

But never mind.

The Doctor starts to circle round behind
the clearing now, and so the Captain's face
becomes eclipsed as, orbiting in space,
the mother planet and her satellite
move southward. Dorothea finds the right
spot, now, to step into the clearing (C
remains behind, beside a border tree)
and strolls up casually--and noisily--
in back of him.

"Hello," she says. "I thought
you might not know which way to go..." She's caught
him by surprise. He turns, a startled look
upon his face, as she presents his book
and finishes her sentence with, "...without
your trusty guidebook."

Now the Captain's pout
transforms into a nasty leer. His eyes
fix on the Doctor's breasts; his cupped hands rise
as though to grasp. Cecilia's long legs brace;
she holds her breath, in readiness to race,
if need be, to the Doctor's rescue. But
the Captain's lust is focused elsewhere: what

he seizes is the notebook, which he scans
the moment he has snatched it from her hands--
presumably to make sure every leaf
is still intact.
                His search, thorough but brief,
is satisfactory, apparently;
he looks back at his host, shamefacedly,
and seems to thank her--though he speaks so low
and softly that Cecilia doesn't know
exactly what he's said. The Doctor, too,
begins to barely murmur as the two
move closer--almost touching. Then a crushing
minute passes (with her heart's blood rushing
in her ears, Cecilia sees) where they
just stand there silently and never say
a word, just stare into each other's eyes.

Then Dorothea (C must now surmise;
they speak as soft as lovers in the day)
requests a peek inside. She takes away
his pen and draws a tattoo on his palm
as he explains some passage in a calm,
deep voice. And then they giggle like a pair
of children. (It is more than C can bear,
or nearly so.) The Doctor breaks away,
returns his pen, and then speaks clearly: "Hey,"

she says, "let's find a spot to sit."
                She turns
around and scans the grounds--but never learns
of her devoted slave's close scrutiny.
(A less skilled tail might leap <u>behind</u> the tree
she stood beside the moment Doctor D
spun round. C understands how this would be
the very way to risk discovery.
She roots herself, becomes another tree
among the many there.) The Doctor sees
an alcove to Cecilia's right where trees
have fallen down over the years, their dark
prone trunks like benches in a ruined park,
the ivy growing all around, and walks
in that direction, while the Captain stalks
her with his eyes.
                But now C sees his gaze
has more about it of the lovelorn daze
than of the predatory leer. For just
an instant, she feels pity for his lust.
He'll find out soon enough how hopeless all
his longings are. The Doctor always called
her matings "sacrifices" in the old
nights; she would need a woman there to hold
her, just to keep from throwing up.
                But then

the Captain breaks out of his trance again--
and so does C: here is the enemy
of every Easterner! And now, as he
comes creeping up behind her, C can see
quite graphically the turgid evidence
of his immediate uncouth intents.

Once they are seated on a fallen tree,
however, it appears that Doctor D
has taken up the more aggressive role.
She leans in close and seems to want to hold
his gaze, while he looks nervously about--
at one point causing Doctor D to shout,
"How boring!"
After these bold words are aired,
the Captain tries to act as though he cared.
His focus turns completely to his host--
allowing C at last to move in close
to where they're sitting. With a soundless, deft
maneuver, she slips snugly in the cleft
of an old hollow tree just twenty feet
in front of them--invisible, discreet,
directly opposite their woodland seat.

Between the crickets and the background noise
of frantic fraternizing girls and boys,

however, and her subjects' tendency
to talk so quietly--and in this tree,
long dead, with its pulpy propensity
for cushioning all sound--C finds that she
(despite her new ability to see
each intimate response the two exchange,
showing the scope of their emotions' range)
is still unable, even now, to hear;
the words they speak are anything but clear.

Now looks of grave concern are shared. She sees
the Doctor's hand absconded from her knees
and held with earnest purpose by this man
whose skin and hair and eyes are of the clan
to which D once belonged. And D allows
it--turning in to face him, with their mouths
just inches from each other for a time--
sharing the very air they breathe! What line
can he be using on her now?
But then
D quickly pecks him on the cheek (again,
a prickly pang attacks Cecilia's heart)
and frees her hand, as though about to start
back up for home, this love seat in the wood
having become too hot for her own good.
But no: despite the gesture, they don't go.

Instead, they sit there silently--although
the woods around them sing--and gaze up at
the stars.
(Cecilia sees a feral cat,
a reddish ginger, creeping softly through
the ivy near her feet, so slowly you
might well mistake it for a snake. If she
were here alone, she'd kill it, mercifully
and quickly. As things are, she lets it be.)

"Do you believe in Christianity?"
the Doctor asks, distinctly.
And he, too,
brings up the volume, in reply: "I do."

But all the rest of what he says is lost
to C. His hand moves heartward. Has he crossed
himself? It's hard to tell. Then casually,
the Doctor lets her hand rest on his knee.
She keeps it there for an eternity
as they go back to chatting, moving on
to some new subject, talking on and on.

Cecilia's stomach churns a bit. She pries
a beetle off the tree's inside and tries
to suck its nectar, but it's still too soon

for that; the season hasn't come. Then Moon-
light glances off the feral's arching back
(it's focused on a rodent to attack),
and Dorothea sees it.
                "Hey!" she shouts,
to give it ample warning--and then clouts
Cecilia on the shinbone with the stone
she throws above its head.
                C doesn't moan,
despite the fiery pain; a beetle wing,
however, catches in her throat, and brings
a cough she can't fully suppress. But at
that moment, Dorothea has a spat
in progress with the man (about the cat
whose lucky night it is), and they don't hear.

Then, as her tears of pain begin to clear,
something Cecilia never thought to fear
starts happening: D grabs the Captain's hand
and pulls him down. Although he'd rather stand,
she uses her position to command
his intimacy--and the moment he
is sitting once again beside her, she
moves in. She never takes her eyes off of
his face--as though it's <u>she</u> who is in love
with <u>him</u>! How can the Doctor be entranced

by something with a beard? There was no chance
of that--not ever--not in thirty years!
That was a known. Yet through her clearing tears,
Cecilia witnesses, not twenty feet
away, her only heart-held love--her sweet
courageous woman-loving woman--stare,
completely hypnotized (how does he dare
to look at her?) into this stranger's face
(as though he were some miracle!) and place
her hands first here, then there. They are a pair,
a piece, a set: their skin, their eyes, their hair--
even their mouths, which hover now and wait
suspended, like two moths about to mate!

He turns away, seeming to hesitate
to take it further. Maybe he's afraid
of getting too involved with her. He's played
his game too well, perhaps, and doesn't know
if, having had her, he could let her go
again. And after all, his duties lie
in getting information, as a spy,
not making conquests. Not just yet, at least.

But Dorothea's interest hasn't ceased.
If anything, his distancing just piques
her curiosity. The less he speaks,

the more she coaxes him to tell her more.

A thought that hasn't crossed her mind before
now dawns upon Cecilia: maybe D
is pumping <u>him</u> for information. She
could well be lulling him, ingeniously,
into a false sense of security,
relying on familiarity
to free his tongue. C listens carefully
to pick out any words about the sea,
the navy, or the Christianity
of Colorado and its spreading sphere--
and soon enough, she catches phrases here
and there supporting her evolving eye-
defying theory, that it's all a lie,
that Dorothea <u>doesn't</u> love this beast
who's come to cast his net across the East,
and that it's just a ploy, this fascination
she pretends, to save their island nation,
Appalachia, from invasion. Now
she sees it working on the Captain--how
the more D questions him, the more he tells,
and as his sense of self-importance swells,
he dominates the conversation more
and more, his eyes fixed on the forest floor,
his voice incessant, seeming to ignore

the Doctor's presence altogether.
                                Four
or five or six full minutes pass before
D interrupts. Cecilia hears her, loud
and clear: "Your aunt must have been very proud,"
she says.
        But he just goes on wallowing
about in murmured memoir, following
his own self-fascinating tale until
it comes round to the end. And then a thrill
shoots through Cecilia: something he's just said
(she can't be sure; it sounded like "she's dead")
makes Dorothea cry out suddenly
and turn her face away--and finally
the Captain snaps out of his reverie.
He seems confused by her reaction.
                                She
turns back to him, and now Cecilia sees
her face is flushed. She reaches down to squeeze
his hand. The tears shine on her cheeks. "Oh, Zeke,"
she says. "I'm sorry."
                        Neither of them speak
or even move now for a time. They stare
into each other's faces, as the air
stands trembling between them--unaware
that just a stone's throw north, another pair

of eyes is watching them. Cecilia keeps
her breath held hard and still, but still she weeps;
her burning eyes, held to the fire this way,
begin to fill and spill. The light of day
could hardly be more brutal if it flayed
her blind, and yet she cannot look away.

Cecilia blinks against this salty sea,
and in one bleary instant, suddenly
her tree's-eye view goes badly, radically
askew: an image comes before her eyes
so far beyond revulsion or surprise
that every nerve she owns revolts, and pain--
in all its force and glory, in its plain
destructive madness--shoots through every vein
and muscle, through her heart and bowels and brain.

She flees, taking no heed of how her feet
land on the forest floor. She's fast and fleet
of foot but cares no more whether a <u>thud</u>
or <u>snap</u> or <u>crack</u> betrays her passing. Blood
is pounding in her ears now like an ocean
in a storm. To run--to stay in motion
till she's far enough away--is all
she cares about. And as her strong and tall
and able body thunders down the path

to where the sea assaults the rocks, her wrath
and anguish rage. She doesn't want to cry;
she hates the sound. She doesn't want to die;
not yet. She only wants to run--to fly
to where the crashing water beats the sky--
and pummel back this crushing waking dream,
and scream and scream and scream and scream and scream.

* * * * * * * * * *

Cecilia watched and waited, all those years
ago, for all those years. Her eyes and ears
stayed open--looking, listening. In time,
as Dorothea turned into the prime
celebrity of Appalachia, girls
and women (with their winsome curves and curls)
advanced upon "the Doctor" every new
full Moon, and sent their signals out into
the air:
        "I'm yours," one signal went.
                                "We two
are destined to be one," another one
would go.
         "A quickie could be kind of fun,"
although the least romantic of the lot,
was just about the only one that got

a positive response from Doctor D--
and even then, only occasionally,
on Full Moon Orgy Night, which used to be
(though not obligatory, technically)
seen as a monthly duty for the fertile.

Dorothea, to surmount the hurdle
of her homosexuality
(which was complete, as far as C could see),
would make the rounds with one of these female
admirers, allowing her to sail
past her straight-sex aversions (with the aid
of an infusion that Cecilia made
from hemp and jimson weed and juniper--
a recipe her mom prescribed to cure
"frigidity," as she used to refer
to it).
But any woman out to stretch
her stay beyond a single night--to catch
the Doctor's eye and try to keep it there--
soon found herself under the watchful stare
of young Cecilia. Even at a height
of forty inches, give or take, the sight
of that inscrutable, unsmiling sprite
fixing her gaze upon you in the night
(her eyes emitting an unearthly light

of such intensity, with such unswerving
scrutiny) was bound to be unnerving.

Dorothea didn't seem to mind
a bit. If anything, she seemed inclined
to view it as a rather thoughtful, kind
act on Cecilia's part--keeping her heart
free to pursue her science and her art.

It never even crossed Cecilia's mind
there could be someone D had left behind
on Colorado, someone she had been
in love with, and that never now again
would she love anyone with such a pure
devotion. Little C felt safe and sure
beyond all doubt that it had been arranged
ahead of time, this love that never changed
between herself and Doctor D, and soon
(she only had to wait till Mother Moon
shone down some future night, some balmy bright
receptive evening when the time was right)
the Doctor would be made aware of it:
Cecilia was to be her perfect fit.

Cecilia never shared her dreams with D--
at least, not those involving what would be

their future perfect reciprocity
of body, heart, and mind. She waited. She
endured with patience, living happily
in voluntary slavery. And when
at last the Doctor was with child again
(though only C knew that it was "again"),
Cecilia hardly ever left her side,
considering her post a point of pride,
being a mere extension of her body,
guiding her out to the sleepy potty
shack at brilliant hours of the day,
keeping her Sun suit fastened all the way,
lest any harmful Solar ray should stray
upon her swollen belly.
                And of course
C served as midwife, making sure the force
of nature kept in balance with the urges
of her patient, smoothing down those surges
of impatience D was subject to.
The child was healthy, if a little blue
the first few weeks; a full-fledged boy. D named
him "Casaubon," a foreign name she claimed
she found in some old novel she had read
(but never finished), just to keep her head,
on her by-this-time legendary trip
from Colorado to the southern tip

of Appalachia, three and a half years
before.

The baby's reticence raised fears
at first (in C's unspoken thoughts) that he
might be half deaf or blind or mentally
retarded. Once his color turned to brown
from blue, however, and upon his crown
a crop of downy curls began to sprout,
he wasn't shy; he'd cry and thrash about
and shout as lustily as any lad
had ever done. But D nearly went mad
during the nursing period. A sad
look always crossed her face when Cas was placed
upon her breast. "Oh, Casaubon, don't waste
my time," she whined at him. "Just suck; don't taste
it first." Once he had drunk his fill, she passed
him to Cecilia, who would pat the gas
out of him as she strolled around the grounds.

C found she rather liked the little sounds
the baby made. She had no motherly
ambitions of her own; when she would see
the younger girls play with their dolls, it made
her scorn them all the more, that they'd degrade
themselves with such a pointless game of make-
believe. But now, for Dorothea's sake,

she relished all the duties of a wife
the Doctor granted her, dreaming a life
they would be sharing yet more fully in
the future. Any night now, she'd begin
to grow and blossom, she was sure, and win
the Doctor's heart.
                But Dorothea's heart
was elsewhere. She was eager now to start
the boy on goat's milk so she could return
to teaching her young scholars (who would learn
to love the future's promise and to yearn,
like D, for ever-dawning revelations
in the nights ahead, with innovations
to transform the coming generations),
unencumbered by her motherhood.

C audited each lecture, but she would
cut class immediately when the child
began to cry or fuss; even a mild
distraction had to be avoided. And
in time the boy began to know the land
about him with an herbalist's regard
for color, shape, and blossom, and the hard
or soft or prickly feel of all the flowers
and leaves that sprouted in the woods. For hours
each night, he would accompany his nanny,

who would sit him on his little fanny
on a clump of comfy moss while she
pursued the harvest. She would let him see
each specimen of root or spore or leaf
and hold it underneath his nose a brief
but telling moment while she spoke the word
out loud (back when Cecilia's voice was heard
upon occasion, still). Under her spell,
he'd beg to have a look or feel or smell
of this or that--though it was hard to tell
if he were saying "See!" or "C!" But well
before his second birthday, he could tell
the difference between a poisonous and
an eating shroom, which roots or leaves she planned
to dry and which to cook for dinner--and
which words to use to demonstrate his knowledge.

The success of Dorothea's college,
meanwhile, made her famous and a sought-
out lecturer in other towns that caught
the "education fever." She'd be gone
sometimes for nights on end. One night as dawn
drew near, Cecilia and young Casaubon
were just returning home, right at the time
when Dorothea's horse finished its climb
up to the longhouse; she'd been gone a week.

Although she certainly had heard him speak
before, this was the first time D had heard
him recognize her and employ the word
for her in greeting: "Doctor D!" he shouted,
from Cecilia's arms, as D dismounted.

D was pleased to see him, no one doubted,
but she seemed to wonder if this counted
as a proper mother-recognition.
As he made the arm-to-arm transition
from his nanny to his mom, she said,
"Hey, Cas! Can you say Mommy now instead?
Can you say Mommy?"
It was plain to see
he didn't understand her, but his glee
was undiminished. "Doctor D!" he yelled
again and giggled as his mother held
him in her arms. The bitter tears that welled
and glittered in her smiling eyes were seen
but never spoken of by C.
Between
the next time Dorothea got with child
and when she once again gave birth, the wild
and frightening growth spurt in Cecilia's frame
(which had for some time made her sore and lame)
rose to its peak. Despite her stoic claim

that it was "nothing much," the racking pain
in every joint was an exquisite hell
for C--but worse than that, she knew full well
what future such developments foretell
for adolescents; she had treated many
cases since her mother's death, not any
of whom went on to develop breasts
or active ovaries. She made the tests
upon herself and failed each one. But she
kept busy, with D's latest pregnancy
among her chief priorities.

When D
gave birth to Ladislaw (her number three,
Cecilia calculated, privately),
the midwife stood well over seven feet,
her torso and her buttocks flat and neat,
without one hair below the neck. She was
sixteen; her patient, twenty-three. Because
there had been late developers back in
the olden nights, C couldn't yet begin
to join the eunuch-maid community,
officially, till age eighteen, but she
and everyone around her now could see
what she would be--or rather, what she had
become.

The new boy, aptly nicknamed "Lad,"

was not as bright as Casaubon, but had
a docile, easy temperament and rarely
cried. Cecilia was so strong, she barely
felt his weight at all; she tucked him under
her left arm and led his brother (wonder-
struck at how his nanny had become
a giant almost overnight) on some
near-nightly plant or fungus-hunting mission.

Only now there was one stark omission:
"Aunt C" never spoke out loud these nights,
having attained such monumental heights.
Though she was not a stutterer or lisper,
now she never spoke above a whisper--
even then, just in the Doctor's ear,
or Casaubon's; no other soul would hear
a sound from her. There even was a year
or two when she eschewed her old pal Bret--
until he changed his name to "Uncle Bette"
and made it clear he wasn't going to let
her get away with snubbing him.
But all
that happened later on, <u>after</u> the fall
of Twenty Seventy-seven, on the night
Cecilia turned eighteen. It's only right
we should explain about that night, despite

the painful nature of the tale; it might
shed light on C's behavior on the night
we have been focused on--the "present night,"
when thirteen visitors, bearded and white,
without the benefit of an invite,
arrive upon these shores.
                Once Ladislaw
was weaned, he slept straight through the day; C saw
that she could easily just lay him there
with Dorothea, neither one aware
of the arrangement. Little Casaubon,
a lighter sleeper, looking keenly on,
soon understood this was the time to don
their Sun suits and their goggles and to brave
the blazing heat and light to try to save
some freshly-budded resinous herb (like cat-
nip, hemp, or lavender) while it was fat
and sticky, still, before the afternoon's
combustive rays converted it to ruins
of charcoal. Casaubon was barely five,
and yet was one of two souls then alive
in Blueridge who could recognize, by night,
the time of year when buds would come to light
by morning but would burn by afternoon.
Cecilia was apprenticing him. Soon
he'd be respected for his faculty

in every aspect of herbology--
and not just gawked at as a prodigy.

Again, however, we have leapt ahead.
In Twenty Seventy-seven, as we've said,
Cas was just five, Cecilia only just
about to turn eighteen.
Although she must
have felt great disappointment in her state
of maidenhood, C's dream of being mate
to Dorothea, in the "soul mate" sense,
remained. She was a "helpmate" to her; hence,
according to her reckless reckoning,
there was just one small prejudice to spring
across: though there were breeder couples here
of both or either gender, and a clear
proclivity among the eunuchs and
the maids to pair off, too (without the gland
development to feel the fierce desire
that sets romantic breeders' loins on fire),
no couple that consisted of a maid
or eunuch and a breeder had yet made
the marriage scene. But Doctor D was such
an innovator--and so very much
a scorner of immovable tradition,
prone to progress by her own volition--

C felt sure she could convince her of
this revolutionary kind of love
whose time had come. Why not?
                And so, upon
that autumn night, an hour or two till dawn,
C left the children in the care of two
new parents and invited D (who knew
it was C's birthday) to a quiet spot
where dying oak trees stood. The night was hot.
The Moon was half-way lit and half-way not.
The starlight struggled through a steamy mist
that rose up from the western sea that kissed
the coast a mile below. Cecilia sat
the Doctor down before her, just like that,
upon a pre-selected fallen tree.
Then she herself got down upon one knee.

It startled her to find the Doctor's face
below her, still, and not there in the space
in front of her, where she had pictured it
when she rehearsed her part. It was a bit
unnerving. But it was too late to quit.
She looked down at the face below her, found
its eyes, and started whispering. The sound
seemed clear enough to C, but D was leaning
forward--not so much to catch the meaning

as to simply hear the words. Her eyes
slipped down three inches as, C realized,
she tried to read her lips. But it was much
too dark for that. And so the Doctor (such
was her unconsciousness of what her friend
was trying to say) set down her slender hand
upon Cecilia's massive knee and leaned
in close, turning her head so that her ear
was uppermost, nearer the lips, to hear
what C was whispering.
                Already, fear
was creeping up Cecilia's throat, and she
began to wish she'd planned things differently.
It was ridiculously plain to see
how vastly incompatible they were;
the Doctor seemed an elf child under her,
and she some giant from a fairy tale.
She didn't have a plan, if she should fail
to win the Doctor's heart and confidence.
Now what she had to say made little sense,
even to her. And yet she must go on,
she thought, in this last hour before the dawn:

"I think... I mean--I know... I love you."
                But
she hadn't whispered loud enough. "You--what?"

the Doctor said.

If only C had been
in back of her--or even sitting, then,
beside her--it would be so easy to
communicate with her, as she would do
on any other night: bend at the waist
until her lips were near enough to taste
the perspiration on the Doctor's ear,
and then just whisper. D would always hear
each word; their conversation would be clear
and candid. But this silly pose that C
had placed them in forced the necessity
of C's using her vocal chords, which she
was loath to do. That horrid door-hinge squeak
was bound to surface when she tried to speak
as other people did. She had no choice,
however, now. And so she brought her voice
up, carefully, to where it could be heard:

"I love you, Dorothea."

Love: the word
had come out like a last-breath gasp from one
of C's pneumonia patients. It had done
the trick, though. Dorothea rubbed her knee
and said, "I know you do." Then, "Thank you, C."
And then at last, "I love you, too."

But she
retained her ear-up posture. Not to see
D's face just at this time was something C
could barely tolerate. And now her knee,
where Dorothea's hand still rested, felt
peculiar. Usually, C only knelt
this way when she was hunting, taking aim
at something. This was not at all the same.

"I mean, I love you more than anyone,"
Cecilia said. "I want us to be one.
I want to marry you."
There. It was done.

But Dorothea didn't speak. Her hand
curled up, like fiddlehead. She didn't stand
up suddenly, nor did she move away.
She thought about what she was going to say.

"I've never had a friend before like you.
You saved my life. And you continue to,
each night. It's true--I don't know what I'd do
without you. And I owe you everything."

And then she thought to lift her face, to bring
her eyes up where Cecilia could see

them. They were sad enough, but they were free
from tears, Cecilia saw. Then on her knee
she felt the Doctor's other hand, beside
the first.

C said, "You don't have to decide--"

But when she heard the silly little croak
that came out of her throat (that nasty joke
that Mother Moon had thought to play on her),
she stopped herself.

"Right from the start, you were
the sister that I'd never had. You <u>were</u>--
and <u>are</u>! You know my heart so well. That's rare;
it's <u>very</u> rare. And you and I should care
for that rare thing we have. I don't think I
could ever marry anyone. And <u>why</u>?
Forget the <u>how</u>; just think about the <u>why</u>!
What would we gain by it? What would we get
that we don't have already? We should let
perfection take its course--because we set
a great example as things are! I mean,
just think about it: we're the perfect team!
Two women, brown and white, with eyes of green
and eyes of blue; one breeder, one a maid;
working together, every night--afraid
of nothing!--caring for the bodies and

the minds of all our children, hand in hand.
We show the world what family really is--
a sacred, living thing. A sister is
a sister and a brother is a brother;
all of us are born of the same mother--
Mother Moon. So let's be reconciled
to that." (She stopped a moment and she smiled,
and C could easily have slapped or kissed her.)
"Why should either of us wed her sister?"

Then a silence, empty as the sea.

Then suddenly a rage of words tore free--
"I'm not your sister! I don't want to be
your fucking sister!"--all accompanied
by slaps and pushes of a force and speed
exceeding C's intentions, from a need
to hurt her back--a squawking, shattered reed
of words whose sound was torture to her ears,
all honking hideously through her tears.

"Cecilia! Stop it!" Dorothea cried.

Cecilia's fury in her ravaged pride
was so intense that when she rose and shoved
her adversary (and the one she loved

more than herself) off of her fallen tree,
its force had gathered such velocity
that with the impact, when the Doctor's back
hit ground, it made a sound--a sudden <u>crack!</u>

Then, in an instant, everything was still.
Cecilia saw it all, against her will:
the terror in the Doctor's eyes (or was
it pain?), her body lying there. Because
of me, Cecilia thought; because of me
this all is happening; because of me.

But Dorothea raised her hand and said,
"I'll be all right."
                Then C could see: instead
of hitting ground, she'd landed in a bush.
It must have been a branch that cracked; her push
had not been fatal.
                Now a fiery rush
of blood came back into C's face. "You bitch!"
she squawked--a rooster squawk. "You heartless bitch!
I <u>hate</u> you! Now I hate you!"
                And a rich
new crop of tears sprang up as she ran blindly
down the hill, away from D, the kindly
teacher she had loved with such devotion

all these years. She headed for the ocean,
where she always went whenever it
was time to be alone. And when she hit
the beach, her knees gave out, and down she fell
onto the gritty stones, her face a hell
of searing shame, her hands clenched into fists,
collapsing there among the stinking mists
that rose up from the tide and foam--alone,
and yet unable to escape the moans
and sobs that shook her mammoth frame. Her rage
was like an animal's, trapped in a cage--
the ever-unfamiliar freakish form
to which she was obliged now to conform.
The howls she howled were torture to her ears,
and the result of torture. All the years
of her harsh sentence stretched before her, dead
and irreversible. Never to wed
the one she loved. Never to share her bed.

Although Cecilia longed to run away
from everyone forever then, to stay
out past first dawn would only bring a curse
beyond the one she'd suffered, only worse--
a search-and-rescue mission where she'd be
an object of contempt and "sympathy"
to people who had always been afraid

of her before, lined up in a parade
of intimate intrusion.
                Though she tried
it on for size, the thought of suicide
would never fit. C's long-held habit of
devotion in the service of her love
was permanent. D said she didn't know
what she would do without her (even though
she didn't want her in "that way").
                And so,
without a lot of fuss, just as the sky's
first rosy glow began to bloom, the wise
but foolish-feeling C came home. When she
arrived, Cas ran to her, yelling "Aunt C!"

Even at five, Cas barely reached her knee--
and he was tall for five. Wrapped round her shin,
he rode Cecilia's leg as she walked in,
which didn't seem to slow her down a bit.
The couple C had got to babysit
him laughed at this--despite the fact that it
was C, in part, they laughed about. But C
and D saw little cause for levity,
apparently. Their faces wore the same
peculiar look, a look without a name.

Although C wanted to be left alone
(even her silence had a certain tone)
and Dorothea knew it--still, she had
to check in; otherwise, it felt too bad.
It only took three words for them to say
the necessary things:

"Are you okay?"

"Okay. Are you?"

"Okay."

And that was it.

After that night, they never mentioned it.

* * * * * * * * * *

The Captain and the Doctor barely talk
as they return together, but their walk
seems neither secretive nor awkward, only
bare. If either one of them feels lonely
parting company upon arriving
home, it doesn't show. Intent on diving
back into his journal, Zeke seeks out
a private place where no one stands about
conversing. Dorothea goes to find
the epicenter of the public mind
and check on how the preparations for
the feast are coming.

This year there are more
distinctive dishes featured than before,
and those preparing them take special pride
in their creation, for the guests. Besides
the sizzling succulence of porcine flesh,
there's lots of salad, picked this evening fresh,
of shredded kale and cabbage; there's a goat's-
milk grand blancmange (a whitish island floats
on top, known as an "Island of the Moon"),
a deep-dish cornbread (eaten with a spoon
or with the fingers), steaming purply greens,
and other fare providing ample means
of filling foreign stomachs full without
their having to indulge in all those doubt-
provoking buggy masterpieces which
the natives (used to more inventive, rich
indulgences) prefer.

The arthropods
have hardly been neglected, though. The gods
with six or greater legs must be appeased--
and Dorothea is much more than pleased
to see them represented. How could you
enjoy a spicy bowl of Rat Back Stew
without crushed hornet stingers in the broth?
Roast Snake without a powdering of moth-
dust on the top? It's inconceivable!

Even to D, it's unbelievable
that once upon a time she'd turned her nose
up at insect delights like these--and those!
the lard-dipped Popcorn Grubs which always seem
to complement the Glazed Cocoons and Cream
so well--and oh! the nutty, buttery
aroma and the salty, utterly
transporting taste of Termite Tortellini!
Giant flavors born of beasts so teeny!

Yes, the preparations go on well;
in half an hour, D will ring the bell.

Meanwhile, Ezekiel has found a spot
secluded from the bustle and the hot
thick smoke, outside the northmost longhouse door
(convenient to the "suite" assigned before
their tummy tea and baths, which seem to Zeke
to have occurred some nights ago, a week
or more). He sits upon a low-slung tree-
length bench, with Moonlight on the notebook he
holds open in his lap. Across the way,
the scent of horses and manure and hay
(a not at all unpleasant odor) wafts
its way abroad, borne on a balmy, soft
December breeze. A swarm of buzzing flies

patrols the stable yard.

Ezekiel's eyes
stay focused on the page in front of him
so that before his memory grows dim
he'll get down every syllable of his
long conversation with the Doctor. (Is
it his imagination, or did <u>he</u>
do all the talking?) When he tries to see
beyond their talk, to write down how it was
that he and Dorothea kissed, the laws
of shorthand and the very limits of
the English language slow him down. (Is "love"
a word with many meanings, or with none
at all?) Before his task is really done,
his hand stops moving and his dull eyes stare
across the yard.

He's only half aware
of what he's staring at--the stable's east
end, one of its two narrow sides (the beasts
all leave and enter from the dozen doors
that run along the south). No windows or
the like, below the hayloft in the gable,
interrupt the plain log wall. Unable
to write further, Zeke sits gazing at
this blank in front of him. But what is that
patch, clinging to the middle of the wall?

Its shape seems so familiar, after all.

And then Zeke recognizes what he sees,
and sharp, unpleasant childhood memories
come crowding in upon his consciousness:
the coat in which the centerbeast was dressed
tonight until Cecilia shot it down
now hangs there like a canvas on the brown
and graying logs that form the barn's east side.
Its edges have been tacked, to keep the hide
from curling in the early morning Sun.

"Oh--Lard!" he says out loud. "What have they done
to you?"
But when he hears his childish words,
he wonders whether someone's overheard
him. Looking round, he sees a giant form
approaching from the south. It's Bette, a warm
glow shining on his face, from perspiration.

"What a masterpiece of civilization!"
Bette begins, referring to the hide
(although, to spare the Western Captain's pride,
he acts as if he hasn't heard the odd
impromptu eulogy). "Taken from God
and made to serve humanity. I hope

I'm not intruding? Are you writing?"

"Nope,"

the Captain answers, closing up his book. "I'm pretty well caught up."

"Yes, well, you look a bit caught up, at that. You're sure?"

"No, please,"

says Zeke (as each attempts to put at ease the other), "have a seat."

And so Bette sits down on the bench, which rises up a bit beneath the Captain in response. "And are the troops still soaking in the R and R?" he asks.

"Well, yes, I would imagine so. At least, they were a couple hours ago."

"And you're adjusting to the uniform all right?"

"Oh, yeah."

"But won't there be a storm of protest from the folks back home?"

"Well, they're a long way off. I rather like the air-conditioning."

"You definitely wear

it well, if I may say so."

"Thank you. And
I take it you've been cooking? Nothing bland,
I'm sure?"

"My usual--the Cricket Flan."

"Oh, really! I was given to understand
you were a vegan."

"Nah. I don't eat birds
or mammals, but the eggs and milk--the curds
and whey--that's perfectly okay."

"But what
about those cricket shells? Hard on the gut,
I would imagine."

"If you eat them, yes--
but I extract the marrow in a press.
A thousand crickets yield a half a cup
of goo, and that's enough to flavor up
the flan, which serves a hundred, give or take--
though naturally, that is a dish I make
but once a year. They are our best musicians,
after all."

"So are their prohibitions
against eating certain insects?"

"Not
officially. The ones you use a lot

tend to be plentiful. The really hot ones are a bit more rare, as are the sweet ones; so you use them more like spices. Meat eaters appreciate them more than we who stick to bugs and veggies do."

"I see. And are there other people who abstain from birds and mammals here?"

"Not who remain in Blueridge, no."

"But in the other towns? Like in that one just north of here?"

"It sounds like Doctor D's been talking up Unique."

"I never caught the name--but she did speak about the village where her sons reside; tomorrow night we're going to take a ride up there."

At this, Bette turns his head and tries to read his bench-mate's face.

"Does that surprise you?" Zeke replies.

Again, the searching eyes. "Well... Yes, a bit. Did Dorothea tell you anything--?"

But here the dinner bell
bursts suddenly into a strident ring,
and Captain Zeke (who's never heard the thing
before) leaps to his feet, throwing his pen
and notebook to the ground--an act which sends
poor Bette (who has been trying valiantly
to curb his tongue, practice diplomacy,
and play the perfect host) into a fit
of giggles. When the Captain reddens, it
becomes even more difficult for Bette
to salvage what their civil tête-à-tête
might have accomplished in the way of West-
East understanding.
Zeke feels so undressed
now suddenly that he can barely don
the grin traditionally mustered on
such fool occasions. "Well! That woke me up,"
he chuckles. "I suppose it's time to sup."

But Bette's a long way from recovery.
"Or someone's really late with reveille!"
he manages--and then dissolves into
another fit.
Now with his higher view,
Zeke notices again the eunuch's do--
the way he braids his relatively few

remaining strands of straggly hair into
that perfectly absurd arrangement. He
would shave it off at once if he could see
how pitiful it looks from here, thinks Zeke.
"Okay, okay," he says.
                Bette tries to speak
again: "I'm sorry; you were just so cute--
all prim and proper in your birthday suit.
I thought next you'd be making a salute!"
And off again into his giggling.
                "Well--
I gather that would be the dinner bell,"
Zeke says, recovering his notebook and
his pen (if not his dignified command).
"So I suppose we ought to get in line."

Bette shakes his head. "No, no; we still have time.
The breeders have to disengage. It takes
a while. ... Oh, Mother Moon, my tummy aches.
Sit down, sit down." (And so the Captain sits.)
"I really must apologize. These fits
come on so suddenly. Forgive me please."

He wipes his eyes and takes a breath. A breeze
blows up the hill, bringing the scent of salt
and death and chemicals along. "My fault,

entirely," Bette adds.

"It's no one's fault,"
the Captain says.

And for a while, they sit
in silence. Bette regrets his giggling fit
but hardly knows how to resume where they
left off. He tries to think what else to say.
"So! I expect nine months from now, we'll see
a new infusion of diversity.
Genetically, I mean. Or hopefully."

"Yes--hopefully. 'Go forth and multiply'
and all of that."

And then the well runs dry
again. Bette thinks: oh, hell--I'm going to die
before long; might as well give it a try.
"Are you--a missionary, or a spy?"
he asks.

The Captain turns. "Well, thank you, Bette.
That is the straightest question I've heard yet.
I'm actually not either one. But I'm
supposed to be a bit of each. At times
I feel more like a double agent. ... I'm
a traitor, I suppose. According to
the laws I've sworn to serve. What about you?"

"I'm just a simple farmer."
"Sure you are."

And then they hear some distant shouting--far
enough away to miss the words, but near
enough to know it's serious, to hear
the anger and the violence and fear.
Then all at once, Luke bursts into the yard;
he's breathing heavily from running hard.
The Captain stands.
"It's Peter, sir. He's way
out of control. I think you'd better say
some words."
Ezekiel turns to Bette--who waves
and says "good luck"--then runs, with Luke, to save
his second in command from his hot head
and reckless temper once again. (Instead
of Peter, Zeke had wanted Luke to be
his second, but the Lord of Admiralty
had interfered, promoting lanky Peter
to Lieutenant, thinking that a leader
needed years and inches more than sense.)

There in the clearing, where the scene is tense,
the Doctor has arrived just seconds prior
(with Cecilia and her eyes of fire

standing close at hand). She's speaking to
a clearly agitated native, who
is bleeding from the lip: "Consent is key,
Horatio--and that should always be
your motto."
"But he gave me his consent!"
Horatio says. "He wagged his tail and sent
this huge come-hither look back--"
"That's a lie!
You freakin' queer!" our Peter shouts.
("I'm bi,"
Horatio corrects him, mildly.)

"Lieutenant! You will speak to me!--and me
alone!--and only when requested to!"
the Captain cautions him.
"But Captain! You
have no idea what this little--"
"Hey!"
the Captain cuts him off--blocking his way,
two inches from his face. "What did I say!"

And painfully the scene goes on this way
another ten long minutes, during which
Zeke wishes he were tied up in a ditch
with rattlesnakes and spiders rather than

just here, just now. A clasping of the hands
between the two combatants marks the end
of the event--but not before one friend
has told the other that, back in the land
he hails from, he would be neutered and
then hanged for such an indiscretion.
                                By
the time this tardy group has reached the high
ground where the feast is set up to commence--
the same spot where the Doctor's audience
ate up her Solstice Lecture earlier,
but dressed up in a different character,
with tables spread out in a circular
design around a vast central buffet,
the centerbeast on prominent display--
most of the diners are already in
their places, and the Solstice beer begins
to fill the standing steins.
                            An empty space
for four has been reserved just at the place
where Dorothea stood to lecture. She
now seats Ezekiel on her right, while C
sits on her left. (Lieutenant Peter sits
just to the Captain's right--unsure if it's
an honor or a punishment.) Once all
the steins are filled, the Doctor stands, to call

for the first toast:

"What holy night would be
complete without a family squabble?" she
begins (and people laugh, though many don't
know why). "I've kept you waiting; so I won't
say more than this: the light of Mother Moon
brings blessings every night--and yet the boon
she's brought tonight deserves a special note.
To family ties! Both local and remote!
So hoist it up and pour it down your throat!"

A rebel yell explodes from all the locals,
and the Westerners (unprimed for vocals
of this sort) jump in their seats--but then,
all being brave and game seafaring men,
they tip their steins up to the starry sky
and never lower them until they're dry.

After this toast, the conversations roar.
The Doctor sits back down. "There may be more
toasts later, but it's just the first one where
you chug the whole thing! Wouldn't want to scare
you!" she shouts loudly in Ezekiel's ear--
but with the hubbub, he can barely hear
her.

Then the platters start to go around,

and conversation slowly settles down.
Ezekiel decides to try one bite
of everything containing bugs tonight--
except the meat dishes (the Rat Back Stew
and so on); just this once, he will eschew
warm-blooded beasts, as an experiment.
He notes in D a similar intent--
while Peter, on his starboard side, seems bent
the other way: he fills his plate with goat
and boar and Poultry Slaw (despite the coat
of tiny ants on this last dish).
                A goat-
horn pipe comes round, and Zeke can feel the eyes
of Appalachia watch as he applies
it to his lips. Expressions of surprise,
delight, and approbation issue from
the natives as the pale-faced Captain, come
so lately from the West, inhales the smoke
(though he confines himself to "Clinton tokes"
on subsequent, less witnessed passes). Dense
and resinous, the cannabis is hence
much stronger fare than Colorado weed,
and Zeke considers whether there's a need
to warn his men against overindulging;
looking round, however, at their bulging
cheeks and love-struck faces, he can see

no way of doing so with subtlety,
and so he lets the notion pass.
                At last,
after a good long hour or two has passed--
in which indulgences have been so vast
and varied that the dregs of the repast
lie limp and scattered round the outdoor hall
no less than the participants, who all
gaze through a haze of holy night delight
and satiation--Uncle Bette, in sight
of all, assumes his full imposing height
and raises...not another stein (for there
have been more toasts tonight than any care
to count), but merely his right hand. And soon
the company falls silent.
                "Mother Moon
has blessed us all with beauty, grace, and light,"
he says. "And we've been doubly blessed tonight
by visitors whom it is only right
for us to honor in the fullest measure.
But! We have another priceless treasure
in our midst we mustn't <u>dare</u> forget."

The Doctor starts to interrupt: "Now, Bette--"

But Bette is not about to be reseated:

"Thirty years ago our D completed
what has come to be, it seems to me,
the Voyage Destined to Change History.
I don't belittle all the bravery
it took you gentlemen to cross the sea
in coming here; not in the least. But D
arrived here single-handedly when we
were perishing as a society--
back when the instance of mortality
was twice the birth rate. Very literally,
she--was--our--savior."
"Really, Bette! You make
me sound like Mother Moon, for heaven's sake.
You know as well as I--"
A small typhoon
of shushing voices stills the Doctor's tune,
and Bette continues: "Let me now propose,
not only for the benefit of those
who come to us in virgin innocence--"
(and here a burst of raucous laughter rents
the air, but only momentarily)
"--but also for the entertainment we
who know these islands better would agree
has been denied us long enough, that D
recount for us the thrilling history
of that first voyage on the savage sea

of Twenty Sixty-eight."
A tiny pause
ensues as Bette sits down, and then applause
bursts forth from every pair of hands--except
those of the Doctor, who has vainly kept
her eyes fixed on her empty plate and who
refuses even now to raise them to
the hundred-odd expectant faces who
await her story.
"I'm so very sorry,"
she begins. "I'm honored. But I worry
what I'd have to tell might well offend
our Western guests--and bring a bitter end
to what has been a lovely night."
And then
a murmur-laden moan, both from the men
of Colorado and their helpless hosts,
swirls round the tables like a troubled ghost.

The Captain realizes it's become
his turn to speak, but finds it awkward, from
the Doctor's close proximity, to start.
Should he proclaim it loudly, with the art
of oratory? Or speak from the heart,
to Dorothea, in a normal tone?
Like her, he's feeling suddenly alone

and put upon. And oddly, now, D seems
so young to him!--a woman in her teens,
uncomfortable with the close attention
being paid to her. His intervention
in her lack of willingness to share
her tale feels crass, intrinsically unfair.

Yet speak he must, and so he puts his hand
on hers--and speaks: "I think I understand
why you would hesitate. The very things
you ran away from in the West, we bring
along with us--our 'baggage,' as they used
to say--tonight. It's a bizarre, confused
collection of traditions, prejudices,
and great articles of faith. If this is
what we bring, I hope--I pray--it's not
the sum of who we are. One thing we've got
in common--all of us, I mean, who brave
the sea--is a desire to serve, and save,
the Earth. We leave behind the close confines
of our familiar turf to free our <u>minds</u>
as much as our uneasy bodies or
our souls. I tell my men not to ignore
the possibility that <u>we may have
it wrong</u>; if we know anything, we have
to know that first. And so I think it would

be good of you to tell us, if you could,
what made you move out of our neighborhood
back then. 'Do unto others,' Jesus said,
'as you'd have them do unto you.' Instead
of trying to spare our feelings, I would say,
just tell it to us plainly in the way
<u>you'd</u> want to hear it, if our situations
were reversed. ... And if you think our nation's
vanity can bear it."
                On this last
note, Zeke withdraws his hand. The Doctor casts
her eye in his direction, but does not
recast her posture--not until she's got
a good ten seconds of eye contact in,
while coolly daring Captain Zeke to grin
and spoil the whole effect.
                "Give me that pipe,"
she says at last.
                And here the rather ripe
exhaling of about a hundred pair
of lungs pollutes the air (before a fair
breeze racing through the pine and hemlock trees
blows it away) as guests and natives ease
back down relaxedly into their seats
amid a laughing sea.
                The Doctor treats

herself to one long toke, one long exhale,
and then one more of each. She tells her tale
while gazing through the savaged centerbeast
among the ruins of the Solstice feast:

VII. I WAS KEPT PRISONER

I was kept prisoner for twenty-seven
months, twelve nights, eight hours, and eleven
minutes, measured from the time my lover
and I were arrested (when discovered
in an act of Sin so great that it
required those who witnessed it to sit
in judgment in the place of God and act
his part) until the moment when I cracked
my dungeon door and fled forever that
unbearable incarceration.

At
the time of my arrest, I was fourteen,
as was my lover. Still, it had been seen
by those who witnessed all that it was I
who had seduced, while she succumbed; so I
alone received the public scourging--which,
it was explained to me before the switch
began to tear the skin off of my back,
was based upon Our Savior's fierce attack
against the traders and the money changers
in the temple. (You who are not strangers
to the Bible may recall the Book

of John's precise description of the look
of that Christ-crafted "scourge of small cords.")
Not
surprisingly, a man or boy, when caught
in similar adventures, would be rated
even guiltier. He'd be castrated
(without benefit of anesthetic)
and then hanged by his unsympathetic
Elders promptly, lest he bleed to death
before the hangman's noose could choke his breath
away in further agony--before,
presumably, he went to Hell, where more
such punishments awaited him. And so
I was accordingly advised to go
down on my knees and thank the Lord that I'd
been born a woman.
I was made a bride
(before my wounds had even healed completely)
to an aging Elder, with a sweetly
singing choir composed of other brides
of his attending. I was let outside
the house but twice a night from that time forth,
to use the outhouse stationed at the north-
east corner of the garden; on these treks
I would be guarded by two of my sex
who had instructions not to speak with me.

In fact, I was well guarded constantly--
except on those occasions when I'd be
most grateful for a guard: on that one day
each week when I would go to "sleep" (to say
it in the delicate, evasive way
the Western women would) with my new mate.
But through a close coincidence of fate
and circumstance, I never got with child
by him. The combination of my wild
and fierce resistance and his rather mild
and feeble lust; my tendency to toss
my cookies and to thus provoke a loss
of appetite in him; and the distraction
of those wives who wanted satisfaction
from him daily--added up to my
apparent "infertility."
But I
was well aware that I could not get by
forever in this way. The reason I
had not been killed initially two years
before was that I had a womb. So fears
for my own life began to worry me.

And yet I ought to say, in honesty,
it wasn't fear of death or dread of rape
that urged me constantly to risk escape.

The thing that made my life unlivable,
the punishment most unforgivable
in those who exercised it over me,
was that I never was allowed to see
my erstwhile lover. Her proximity
I knew to be a fact; she was denied
to me, and would be till the night I died.
That was the hell I suffered--and to hide
from that was never possible.
                But still,
there was one saving place of grace to fill
my stolen leisure hours--if not with pleasure,
quite, at least with one small welcome measure
of relief: a veritable treasure
trove of learning, art, and literature--
my husband's well-stocked library. I'm sure
to him it was no more than just a pure
proud token of the place he held in his
community of saints; it was (and is,
for all I know) the largest room of books
for many miles around. He liked the looks
of all those volumes on his shelves, from floor
to ceiling, bound in leather.
                (We have more
books here in Blueridge Vault, measured by sheer
number of works or words or pages. Here,

however, they've been damaged by the sea
and lost their covers or their bindings. He
kept no such wounded volumes on his shelves.)

The other wives would sometimes help themselves
to cookbooks, children's picture books, and so
on. No attempt was made to tell them, "No!
Thou shalt not read!" But they could barely make
the words out anyway. No one would take
the education of a girl in hand
except perhaps her aunt or mother--and
if Aunt or Mother didn't read herself,
then neither did the girl. And so the shelf
was rarely reached for where the higher, drier
sort of book might live.
                In my desire
to escape--both in reality
and, till I had the means, in fantasy--
I read whenever I was able. (I
was fortunate: my mother didn't die
till just a year before my great disgrace,
and she had taught me how to read.) The place
I'd been assigned--a little closet-space
next to my husband's library--six days
a week, to sleep in, was some little ways
both from the front door and the back, no doubt

in order to prevent my sneaking out
unheard and unobserved. On sleepless days,
I would sit near the curtains where the rays
of Sun would filter through and read sometimes
for hours on end. I liked the books with rhymes
and illustrations best, of course. But when
I thought of physically escaping, then
I took down books about the sea and sailing.

When, in Twenty Sixty-eight, the wailing
summer hurricanes were fewer than
they'd been within the memory of Man,
with milder winds and showers, I began
to formulate less fearfully the plan
by which I would escape by sea. A tan
worn-looking canvas sack with shoulder straps
was the first thing I stole; I thought perhaps
I'd make it my main knapsack for the trip.
Once that was hidden, I was in the grip
of my adventure, and I thought of little
else.
     I started saving bits of vittles
from my meals--mostly crusts of bread
and smoked or salted scraps of meat. The dread
of being caught in pilfering reduced
my appetite; so leftovers, produced

by my uneasiness, increased. I lugged
a gallon jug of water (while I hugged
the walls in moving to and from the spot
where it was kept, for fear I would be caught
red-handed from a squeaking hallway board)
one day at noon, but I could ill afford
to try that trip again until the day
of my escape: I heard the first wife say,
"Where did that jug of water go?" the night
after its theft. By Michaelmas (so right
around the Autumn Equinox), I had
a fair supply of food--though I was mad
to think it was enough to cross the sea--
and only waited opportunity.

As it turned out, another five weeks passed
before my passage opened, on the last
night of October--"Halloween," the night
before "All Saints," both holy nights. One rite
of Halloween is that the wives drink toasts
at supper to their husband. It's the most
intoxication they're allowed the whole
year through, since drinking toasts and smoking bowls
is otherwise reserved for men. The night
ends early, well before the sky is light.

As always, my night clothes were turned in for
a daygown and the night clothes, as before,
hidden away. But soon I heard a snore
come from the armchair stationed by the door
that led outside, and I could hear still more
deep snores resounding from the upper floor.
This was the moment I'd been waiting for.
I took a second jug of water back
into my closet, packed it in my sack,
stuffed in my pillow so one wouldn't clack
against the other, and then stole back to
the library one final time. I knew
that on the seventh shelf I'd find the book
I'd chosen for my trip.
(I'd seen "Miss Brooke"
as its first words, and it was very thick--
nine hundred pages--and I made my pick
based on this slim criterion. A quick
decision on my part, but quite a lucky
guess: Miss Brooke turned out to be a plucky
character I liked a lot, despite
her taste in men. And I suppose that night
its title, Middlemarch, might have suggested
to my mind that in my new untested
future, there would be a mid-March night
where everything looked brighter. I was right,

if so.)

I packed my book, snugged up the sack,
and lifted all that weight up on my back.
Though I had underestimated (now
I know) my future needs, I don't see how
I could have managed more. My feet were bare,
and they were tender then, as pink and fair
beneath as on the top. I didn't dare
to stop and look for shoes; I didn't care
about the pain. (Besides, I don't know where
they hid my night clothes; probably upstairs.)

I held my breath while opening the door;
it sighed as I departed, but the snore
continued unabated from the chair.
The stars were all still shining, but the air
was warming even then, and in the east
a pinkish glow was spreading. I increased
my speed accordingly, letting the pack
bang on my back until I got the knack
of keeping it in rhythm with my stride,
in the direction of the waterside.

My first stop was to be "The Everything
Museum" (as the children used to sing).
I hadn't been there since I was--oh, nine

or ten, I guess. I was surprised to find
a sign outside that read THE HALLOWEEN
MUSEUM. I was sure I'd never seen
that sign before, though it appeared to be
from ancient times, before the Flood. A tree,
now dead and leafless, wrapped its limbs about
the lettering.

I hadn't figured out
how I would get inside. The walls were brick,
the windows barred; the metal door looked thick.
But now the stars were disappearing and
all I was wearing was a daygown, hands
and feet and head exposed. And so I took
a chance and ran up to the door and shook
its handle till I heard a thunk within,
then shoulder-shoved it (warm against my skin
already) till it gave way with a groan,
together with a ping, like steel on stone,
inside.

When I emerged ten minutes later--
having crept past a stuffed alligator
and a zebra and a buffalo
into the hall recalled from long ago
where there were manikins decked out in feather
bonnets, war paint, scalp locks, and fringed leather
standing side by side with astronauts

and Nazis and Victorians and lots
of other citizens of history
or fantasy who were unknown to me--
I wore, from head to foot, a diving suit
over a century old. (Just to be cute,
I left my flowered daygown hanging where
the suit had been. And since I hadn't cared
to leave a note for anyone, to tell
them where I'd gone, it served that purpose well.)

It was impossible to run in my
new outfit--but I had less need to try
now; while the Sunrise scorched the eastern sky,
I viewed it safely through a tinted mask
that gave the scene a brownish cast. My task
was complicated by the pair of flippers
underneath my arms, and all those zippers
in my suit distracted me at first.
But once I reached the waterfront, the worst
was past. I parked the flippers and the sack
and readjusted my attire, then back
to work: which boat to take?
                There was no navy
in those nights, and when the sea was "wavy,"
as they used to call it--half the year,
at least--nobody even sailed. Like here.

So it was more or less a winter thing.
But still, from, say, mid-fall until mid-spring,
the boats were ready and the docks were stocked.
Between the coastal townships, if you walked,
it took you five or ten times longer; so
it was by far the fastest way to go.

Three boats lay upside down next to the dock,
all wood. They might have been awaiting caulk
or paint for all I knew. But they looked good
and solid, and I liked the feel of wood.
There in the water was a smaller craft,
about eleven feet from fore to aft,
made of aluminum. I never trusted
metal claiming it could not be rusted--
but it had one clear recommendation
in its current dockside situation:
it was floating and was dry inside.
The logic there could hardly be denied.
(Besides, I knew I wanted it, because
I was afraid that if I even paused
a moment to consider, I might not
go through with it; I would be caught and brought
back to my prison, there to die--or worse.)

And so I chose aluminum, the first

thing I could lay my hands on and get under
way in. I was brave; I didn't wonder
what would happen next. All that was hazy,
and I liked it hazy. I was crazy--
brave and crazy. Crazy brave. I threw
my sack and flippers in and grabbed the two
best oars I saw and started rowing till
the dock was just a little dot. And still
I rowed, the Sun behind me, rising in
the east, until at last I could begin
to see the mountains leveling, the Rocky
Islands lowering, not half so cocky
as before. The world was great and they
were small and growing smaller as the day
wore on, and so I rowed and kept on rowing.
Even with the pain increasing, growing
in my back and creasing through it like
a scourge of Jesus cords, a Roman spike,
unceasingly I rowed. There was such joy
in that fierce pain--overt orgasmic joy
as every stroke I pulled against the oars
tore me away from those detested shores!

I would have rowed forever through my pain
until the land all disappeared (insane
as that may sound to you young men who know

how stern and broad those island mountains grow
as one pulls back and looks at them in all
their stubborn permanence, that solid wall);
I was on fire, prepared to persevere
regardless of discomfort, heat, or fear--
but I forgot about the need to steer
either <u>against</u> the waves or <u>with</u> them: here
I let my craft go cockeyed for a mere
half-second, let a cresting wavelet rear
up on my larboard side and splash a tear
of ocean on my scuba diving gear,
hitting my suit just as I sought to veer
back to a straighter course, and I could hear
the hiss of steam it made in my left ear.
The danger I'd been courting, then, was clear:
I'd stayed out in the Sun, as it drew near
its apex, far too long. The shiny sheer
black surface of my rubber suit--that queer
reptilian garb--was bubbling in severe
reaction to the noonday Sun.
I'd planned
(if you could say I <u>had</u> a plan) to stand
the mast up and employ the sail once land
had disappeared. I had to countermand
abruptly that self-order, since both hands
on deck were mine; emergency demands

decision, even in a crew of one.
I grabbed the pail and drenched the sail; that done,
I pulled it over me, so no more Sun
could filter through. The canvas had begun
to steam already; so evaporation
cooled my overheated situation
(as occurs with human perspiration)
fairly quickly.
In my tent-like station
on the heaving waves, I soon was sound
asleep. When I awoke and looked around,
to my chagrin and horror, now I found
that I had drifted half-way back to shore.
The mountainscape I had escaped before
was back upon me, looming. What was more,
my aching muscles were so tight and sore
that I could barely even lift an oar.
As for adrenalin, I had no store
of it to draw upon; I'd used it all.
And now, with evening just about to fall--
I had another hour or two, at most--
the tide was towing me back to the coast
at an alarming rate.
So in this frail
and ailing state, I had to learn to sail.
I started shouting loudly, just to hear

a friendly human voice, to keep my fear
from taking hold and help my brain to clear,
to bring the words and pictures from those books
back into focus. As I took the hooks
and ropes in hand, I held my scattering
thoughts tightly with my rapid chattering,
explaining all, weaving my smattering
of knowledge into something like a scheme,
somewhere between remembrance and a dream.

At last I got the mast in place, the ropes
and pulleys where they ought to be, my hopes
strung on that scrap of cloth that flapped about
haphazardly, so close to shore a shout
from there would reach me easily--or so
it seemed--just as the land began to glow
with Sunset. (Pictures came into my mind
of my small sleeping cell, where they would find
my bed unslept upon; I saw the bustle
in the house--beyond the house--to rustle
up a posse and begin the search;
I saw the guns and lanterns at the church.)
The sail puffed out, resisted, and a lurch
beneath me yanked me sideways. I could feel
the power of the wind, and it was real.
It took another half an hour, at least,

for me to master aiming it due east-- ...

Excuse me. "Master" isn't quite the word;
I'm sure my floundering would look absurd
to you old seasoned sailors. But I got
the hang of it enough that I could plot
a course and keep it steady as I steered;
so by the time the first few stars appeared,
I saw, when I looked back over my shoulder,
leagues and leagues of sea.
                Now that I'm older,
I'm amazed: how could I be so brave?
Though I can stand up to a crowd and rave
and shout and argue and defend all night,
the thought of sailing chokes my throat with fright.
Somehow I have become a coward in
that way. I feel as though I have a twin
whose picture-memories I've somehow gotten:
I can <u>see</u> it all, but I've forgotten--
if I ever knew--how that rash being
got to where those images I'm seeing
stood in front of her. What faith she must
have had! But faith in what, I wonder? Trust
that death, no matter what its terrors, had
to be no worse than life upon that mad
inhuman island? I suppose.

I sailed
all night. The Moon was bright. The ocean paled
and glittered in her light. And yet I failed
to pray to her. It never crossed my mind
to do so. (Right from birth, I'd been consigned
to Jesus; so my praying was confined
to him. Once he'd humiliated me
in public, beaten me, imprisoned me,
and kept me from the one I loved, however,
I stopped speaking to him. I just never
prayed--to anyone. It wasn't that
I disbelieved in him; the fact he sat
in judgment on me was as good a proof
of his existence as could be. Aloof
and vengeful, dictatorial and mean--
that's how I thought of him. I'd never seen
a side of him suggesting he was wise
or kind. I felt he should apologize
to me, in public, with his head hung low,
his nose tucked in his beard, scraping his toe
uncomfortably in the dust. And I
was positive he never would. But I
would not presume to credit or deny
him; Jesus was as much a part of my
beliefs as anyone's who lived there.)
When

the Sun rose in the east, I turned again
and looked behind, to see where I had been.
I can't describe my feelings--though you men,
I should imagine, would have some idea:
now a world in which I, Dorothea,
was the only living resident
surrounded me. The whole horizon bent
around and touched itself. "The Firmament,"
the Bible calls it.
                I should mention, though:
back in those nights of thirty years ago,
there actually were creatures living on
the ocean, somewhere on the planet. Gone,
of course, were whales and dolphins; they'd been killed
by Twenty Thirty. Later, those with gills
were wiped out (fish and eels and even krill)
by the Apocalypse. And yet there still
were animals (albeit without brains
or nerves to think with or to feel pain,
but complex bio-organisms none
the less) whose thoughtless instinct, when the Sun
shone on the water, was to dip below
the slimy surface just an inch or so--
to sleep away the day, perhaps (although
of course they wouldn't dream). I didn't know
where they began life; no one did. And no,

I never saw one living. Still, as late
as that November, Twenty Sixty-eight,
you'd see their gray-green corpses as they floated
down from the Canadian Sea, their bloated
jelly-like translucent bodies swarming
with a thousand flies, since they'd been warming
in the Sun a while. I liked to think
they came from the North Pole, right on the brink
of endless day and endless night. They'd stink
worse than the foulest land beast--really strong.
In fact, I usually would smell them long
before I saw them, even with those flies
on board. After a week, I was surprised
to see one floating by without its flies--
and then for three weeks more, it was the same.
There was no island close enough to claim
them, I suppose.

Around the time the flies
stopped coming round, the brightness of the skies
began to dim: the Moon had gone from full
to half; at night, a vapor formed, a dull
gray film hiding the stars. And so it came
to pass I couldn't read at night. (A flame
from some small lantern would have done the trick,
but when I fled, I had to move so quick,
I thought it would be cumbersome.) By then,

I had become addicted to the men
and women Eliot depicted in
her book (or his book, I supposed); as thin
a border as that one thick novel kept
me sane. I read and steered by day and slept
by night, then, for a while. While I reversed
my schedule, I felt guilty and perverse
the whole time, half expecting God to send
some special punishment to put an end
to my insistence on this upside down
behavior: I'd be struck by lightning, drowned,
or worse--all this despite the fact that for
a million centuries or maybe more,
mammalians had lived in just this way:
they slept by night and gathered food by day.

Speaking of food: as you anticipate,
I'm sure, I came to realize (too late)
I'd been a fool to underestimate
my needs. Unlike the water, where the weight
of it would have been hard to carry, I
could easily have brought more food had I
just planned a bit--and thought to keep it dry!
The meat stayed good (ironically), but by
the time of the inversion of my days
and nights (I still kept covered, by the way,

all through the middle of the day; I read
inside my "tent"), the mildew in the bread
had gathered furry energy and spread
all through my dwindling supply. But since
that and the meat were all I had, against
my better judgment (and a few small hints
of illness), I continued eating it,
a mouthful at a time. I finally quit
trying to force it down around Night Ten,
when I threw up for half an hour, and then
I realized that it was costing more
than it was worth in strength. Another four
nights, and the meat was gone as well, and I
had polished off half of my water supply.
By then, the Moon had vanished from the sky.
My head ached. I was sore in every joint.
(I hadn't even reached the half-way point,
as it turned out--but it was just as well
I didn't know that at the time.) I fell
into some better drinking habits then:
I held it in my mouth and counted ten
before I swallowed. I continued, though,
to sleep most of the night. I didn't know
which way the boat was drifting, but the odds
were one in four it was due east. If God's
intentions were that I should live, I would;

if not, it all would soon be over. Good.

On Night Nineteen, it rained.
                                I always slept
without my mask, then put it on and kept
it on all day. As for the scuba suit,
the pain unpeeling it was so acute
the second night I tried (I must admit,
I cried the last time I attempted it),
that I decided I would let it sit
right where it was, it was so tight a fit.
There was a zipper in the back for--well,
you know--and just from that much, I could tell
my skin was starting to adhere to it.
And so except when I would piss or shit,
I simply kept it zipped for the duration. ...

Not great dinner table conversation;
I apologize. But as I said,
I took the diving mask off of my head
each evening when the Sun went down. And so
on Night Nineteen, when it began (quite slow
at first) to rain, my face was bare.
                                    So there
I lay, breathing the rank oceanic air,
my head sunk in the pillow I'd acquired

from home, from prison. I was weak and tired;
I hadn't eaten for some nights and days.
I'd grown accustomed to the briny sprays
the sea would sometimes send me in my sleep;
they rarely woke me. Now my sleep was deep
enough to keep me dreaming even through
the first few pelting drops. They came into
my dream instead.

I dreamt there had been new
accusers brought against me: I'd been found
to be a witch. They stripped me naked, bound
my hands and feet, and wrapped me round and round
inside an itchy, sticky canvas sail,
then cinched it tight with ropes. Just to inhale
was difficult. Somebody threw a nail
at me, then someone else. And soon a hail
of nails was hitting me. Some hit my eyes,
some hit my nose and mouth. I realized
at some point I was lying in the water,
and the crowd--my husband's eldest daughter
was among them--held me down. The waves
were rising; they were chanting "Jesus Saves"
and pushing on my chest. I did my best
to breathe, but when I tried, a wave would crest
and fill my nose and mouth with brine. I choked
and spit and spluttered. Someone made a joke

about it, and the whole crowd laughed--all one
long rat-a-tatting, louder than a gun.

I woke up coughing, rolling free. The loud
inhuman rat-a-tatting of the crowd
continued as the rain bore down upon
the metal boat I lay in. I had gone
from one frightmare into another. On
and on it went. I choked and wheezed and flailed
a while, the "Cheney cocktail" I'd inhaled
still working to deprive me of the breath
of life as the descending threat of death
became apparent to me: I could drown
now if I didn't act.
The sail was down,
I soon discovered as I came across
it in the dark--but to assess this loss
I'd need at least a glimmering of light,
and now the deepest, darkest black of night
surrounded me. I might as well have gone
completely blind. How close it was to dawn
I had no way of knowing; rain was pouring
from the sky. I went by touch in storing,
first of all, the sail beneath the bow,
and then the ropes and pulleys, which somehow
had stayed inside the boat, thank God. I found

my pillow and my book (Miss Brooke was drowned,
I feared) submerged in water in the stern.
All I could do was drape them, each in turn,
up on the metal bench and hope the rain
would stop in time for them to dry. The main
quest of my search was for the gallon pail
that <u>had</u> been hanging where I found the sail
but wasn't anymore; I'd have to bail
some water out before too long or I
would sink from all the added weight. In my
fatigued and addled state, I thought that I
had found it, but that it had somehow shrunk.
(It was as though I'd gotten rotten drunk
on Moonshine liquor, pickling my brain.)
What I had found instead, half filled with rain,
was that old vintage diving mask, and when
I recognized it for itself again,
I put it on. Immediately I
could see a dim light pulsing in the sky,
behind the rain. I also saw the pail,
where it had rolled beneath the rudder rail.

And then the sky lit up like dawn, just for
a moment. In a moment more, the roar
of thunder rolled across the waves. I thought
about the metal mast and thought I ought

to take it down, and so I did. But I
was far too tired for terror; if I died
from being struck by lightning, that would be
a relatively quick death, and the sea
had much worse ways to go. And so I bailed
a while, until one burst of passion failed,
then sat down with the tiller in my hand
and steered a bit, till it was time to stand
again and bail some more.

As time wore on,
the waves grew higher. Whether it was dawn
or dusk or in between, all sense was gone
of day or night. I was a drifting pawn,
bobbing about among vast shifting mountains,
lifting me and dropping me, as fountains
of disrupted ocean rose and fell
outside the boat and in. (A perfect hell
would have included leisure time to think
about and dread what it would mean to sink
into the sea's dark center; I had no
such luxury, after an hour or so
of the compounding storm.)

The lightning flashed
at first a beat before the thunder crashed,
but soon the two fused into harmony
and gained a dazzling synchronicity

there at the apex of activity
where my absurd tin boat (which seemed to be
a magnet for the electricity
that hovered over me) spun giddily
and leapt and dove and belly-flopped its way
across the bucking monster. Night or day,
awake or not, I bailed each time I had
the chance between the movements of that mad
slam dance, loudly accompanied by sad
and useless howling wind, the rain sometimes
cascading like a waterfall, sometimes
attacking sideways from the north or south
or east or west, there in the roaring mouth
of the volcanic sea.
                And so it went,
without much let-up, till the storm was spent--
perhaps another twenty hours. And then,
once night set in again, it said Amen
and followed in the Solar wake, to spread
more chaos in the world.
                Although my head
was heavy, tired, and sore, going to bed
at night was something I would do no more.
I raised the mast and hung the sail before
the trailing clouds had even left the sky.
I wrung the pillow, spread the book to dry,

and sat. I kept the North Star in my sight
and steered accordingly, all through the night.

From that night forward, I lost track of how
long I had been at sea. I kept the bow
before me pointed east, but hardly knew
what for. The pillow mildewed, and the glue
that held the covers onto Middlemarch
dissolved. My mouth was in a constant parch.
I still counted to ten before I swallowed,
but I couldn't go beyond. (What followed
eight-nine-ten? I didn't quite recall.)

I dreamt awake. The things I saw were all
mixed up among the things I dreamed, and they
mixed up among my memories. Mid-day,
I lay beneath the sailcloth, as before,
but didn't "fall asleep" there anymore.
I always was awake, always asleep,
and always dreaming.
                Though I couldn't keep
a tally of my sea nights, Mother Moon
became a faithful faceless clock, and soon
she told me by her fullness I had been
at sea a month. I couldn't count past ten;
I couldn't read; and yet I knew that much.

(But how much time "a month" comprised, as such,
I couldn't tell you.)
                Right around this time,
I smelled a jelly corpse one night--a prime,
ripe, smelly one that must have been quite near--
and then I heard a buzzing in my ear.
I gleaned the gleaming water with my eyes,
and there it was: a swirling cloud of flies,
a thousand tiny passengers aboard
their raft. These voyagers--the humming horde
that feasted on its northern fare--meant land.
What little wits I had at my command
then came together to produce a spark
of hope I kept alive all through the dark,
and when at dawn the Sun began to rise,
I squinted through my mask against the skies
that burned before me in the east. It was
too soon to celebrate: just sea. But laws
of physics still applied, I reasoned--and
I spoke the word, over and over: "Land."

A few nights later, or perhaps more than
a few, gazing before me at a span
of sparkling sea--that half-infinity
of rows of waves, each imperceptibly
more distant, smaller, than the one we see

in front of it--an odd anomaly
came to my notice: there, in front of me,
slowly approaching my cross-cutting prow,
marching in rhythm to my patient bow,
a blinking syncopating row slipped in
among the rest, one with a broader grin
and wilder fringes at its collar. How
bizarre, I thought: even among this now
predictable array of waves (the night
was calm, bathed in the soothing, smoothing light
of Moon), an individuality
of spirit--an expression of the free
will's force--shone out as it approached my throne,
a nonconformist rising all alone.
I smiled. I couldn't help identifying
with this little rebel row, defying
as it did all expectations of
conformity. I felt a sort of love
for it, in fact--which may sound strange to hear
me say, since what I <u>should</u> have felt was fear.
My boat began to nod its greeting to
this emissary coming into view,
a good head taller than its predecessors,
maybe more. Then (as you second-guessers
have undoubtedly deduced by now)
my diplomatically deep-dipping bow

knocked into contact with a rock, flipped back,
and took a second, echoing attack
under the stern--two bangs, like gunfire, in
a row: Bang! Bang!
Before I could begin
to analyze these shots, I felt the whole
boat grounding, grinding on a sudden shoal
that reared its back up underneath me, while
the full sail hauled the hull across an isle
of screeching rock beneath my feet. (And if
you've ever come across a gray slate cliff
and run your fingernails down its face,
then you have some idea, from my place
perched on that hollow metal bench, just how
it felt and sounded: like a scraping plow
on stone, times ten.)
A remnant, now I know,
of what was once the Cumberland Plateau
had done the damage. How much damage had
been done, I couldn't tell; that it was bad,
I couldn't help but guess. In any case,
I was awake now, wanting to erase
the last two minutes, knowing I could not.
All of the ropes were still in place, each knot
I'd tied still holding, with the boat still flying
eastward at its former pace. While trying

to detect a gurgle or a hiss
(without success), I did consider this:
together with the insects I had seen
the other night, two omens that might mean
a nearby island were presented to
me. (And remember: no one really knew
whether the Appalachians had survived
in any form, back home; I'd merely dived
into my late adventure with the hope
they had.) So now, if I could only grope
along a little further in the dark,
I felt more sure my little metal bark
and I eventually would intercept
an Eastern island chain. If I just kept
my bearings straight, I only had to wait
for it to happen.

As the hour grew late
and weary, I began to hear a slosh
inside the boat, a counter to the wash
of waves outside. Around my ankles there
was water gathering. I was aware
I had no further energy to spare,
no further sanity. Now everywhere
I looked, the Moonlight sparkled back into
my eyes. So what was I supposed to do?

I found the bailing pail and started bailing.
All my strength was gone. My eyes were failing.
Since the rainstorm all those nights before,
I'd starved. I couldn't stand up anymore.
I crawled around on hands and knees and threw
the water overboard. From blue to blue.
I made no progress with the pail and soon
was bailing out the ocean with a spoon.
Or was that just another dream?
                The sky
began to lighten in the east, and I
put on my mask again. I grasped the mast
and pulled myself to standing with my last
bare ounce of strength. Despite the fullness of
the sail, its futile force could never shove
another inch of forward motion from
the boat, which was so mired it had become
a mere ingredient in all that brine.

Between the ocean and the sky, a line
was drawn in pen or pencil, to define
each sphere. A cloud was balancing above
the line, just in the territory of
the sky, which was a brighter, lighter shade
of blue than was the sea. The cloud was made
too small, however, for the drawing's scale.

And it stood upright, like a little sail,
a wispy perpendicular affair,
ascending upward in the morning air.
Instead of sitting horizontally
above the line, it shot up vertically--
and that was wrong. It wasn't realistic.

But it made me feel optimistic.
Or euphoric. Giddy, anyway.
I laughed hysterically, facing the day.
Not knowing what I was about to say,
spontaneously, I began to pray:

"Oh, heathen god that Jesus never hears!
Glide me along across this sea of tears
and guide me to your sordid sideways cloud!
Oh god perverse and vain, profane and proud!
My heart and head are freed of Bible verses,
and my mouth is filled with heathen curses!
John and Joseph and the Book of Job,
jump with Jehovah from the spinning globe!
May every 'thee' and 'thou' and 'verily'
and every cross of Christianity
be broken into splinters and set fire!
May every caterwauling Christian choir
be choked upon the ashes! And may I

be one among the watchers as they die!"

The cackling blasphemy that spurted like
a mortal wound or like a bursting dike
out of my mouth and my immoral soul
was wild and shocking. I had lost control
of my own body, throat, and tongue--and now
some witch or devil who would not allow
my eyes to turn away from the emerging
Sun no matter how I tried was urging
me to waste what little strength and breath
I had in shouting down the face of death
across an empty sea. I heard my voice.
I felt my body shake. I had no choice
but see my heart's blood pounding in my brain
in brilliant circles. I had gone insane.
And all the time, I howled and prayed--or swore,
if you prefer--in an unearthly roar:

"Out of this poison potion Man has made,
call forth familiars to abet and aid!
Bring life unto these toxic toys and tools
about my feet! Make them my faithful fools,
my instruments of death-defying power!
Oh Godless god, equip me in this hour!"

No sooner had these words escaped from me
than I could sense commotion at my knee:
the pair of flippers I had wisely thought
to bring along caught my attention, brought
it safely from the rising Sun back down
to where they nudged me as they swam around
insistently, like baby razorbacks
at suppertime. And so I said, "Relax--
I'll put you on right now."
                Then, once my feet
were fit, equipped with fins, the square red seat
I'd sat upon for all those nights (its neat-
stitched post-Apocalyptic cover sewn
around the crumbling slab of float-a-foam
inside) slipped out from underneath my butt
and with its twin bobbed up to offer, "What
about the two of us together?"
                And
that sounded like a fine idea, grand
and timely; so I laid them face to face,
aligned their loops, and slipped my arms in place,
resulting in a breastplate style of vest
whose cushions crossed my heart. Thus smartly dressed
now to abandon ship just as the sea
within rose up to meet the outer sea,
I skimmed away in the direction of

that skinny pen or pencil line above
which hung the sideways cloud and kicked my feet.
I was unconscious of transition, neat
or otherwise, between one mode of motion
and another; I still rode the ocean,
as before, but now without a boat.

(If I should die, I thought, I'm bound to float
for some time after. Then perhaps a cloud
of flies will come to feast upon my proud
and unrepentant flesh. But it will be
a challenge for them, getting through my sea
suit.)
In one way, I was already dead.
Not in a bad way--only now instead
of taking orders from my heart or head,
my body functioned independently
of me; some other unknown entity
had taken over, superseding me.
Pictures and sounds still flickered through my brain
as I hallucinated, but no pain
was registering. Arms and legs still clutched
and kicked, but effortlessly. Will, as such,
had ceased to be a factor. I could tell
I was still moving east. The gentle swell
and pull of my surroundings was a kind

of contribution to my peace of mind,
a comfort to my heart and chest.
I kicked my feet and laid my head to rest
upon my life-preserving cushion-vest
and slipped off into slumber.
                When my hand
pushed down against the heavy crumbling sand
that had replaced my heaving pillow and
my rubber fingers clutched what I had planned
to readjust, I didn't understand
at first I'd been deposited on land.
My comprehension grew--not in one grand
revealing flash, my brain seizing command
of it at once--but bit by bit, one strand
of information at a time:
                My hand
was clutching sand. My head was wedged between
two rocks. My legs were splayed. I felt a keen,
sharp pain all through my neck and upper back.
My mask was jammed on hard, and it was cracked.
My eyes kept filling up with blood, like tears.
I heard the ocean pounding in my ears--
but it was further off now than before.
I wasn't in the water anymore.

I started rocking, as a mother rocks

her baby off to sleep. "Beneath the docks
the washing water sloshes as it knocks
against the rocks." That's what I thought as I
rocked back and forth in rhythm to the high
crisp cresting waves I heard behind me, slow
and patient as I swayed and rocked, as though
I were myself part of the ocean and
my blood were washing up upon the sand.

At last I managed to dislodge my head
from in between the rocks. It seemed the bed
of sand and gravel underneath me was
the softest thing I'd felt in years, because
it was so disinclined to tossing me
about; nonviolent, unlike the sea.
I looked up into what I then supposed
was Sunset, never guessing I had dozed
away a whole day and a night and now
another dawn had come. (I don't see how
I could have missed it, with the western sky
still dark above the ocean and the high
ground rising brightly to the east.)
                                Then I
rolled over on my side and struggled to
achieve a belly-down position through
a patient course of push-and-pull. I knew

somehow the tide was coming in (despite
my inability to tell dawn's light
from dusk) and dragged my body up the beach
until I felt myself safe from the reach
of those pursuing waves. I looked back and,
against the glare of Sun-reflecting sand,
I scanned the shore for any sign of my
familiars--but they'd left me high and dry;
neither my cushions nor my flippers had
escaped the sea's devouring. It was sad.

I'd barely made this scan when I began
to barf--something I couldn't understand
at first, since I had not had food for weeks,
nor even water recently. The streaks
of lightning zigzagging around my eyes
while retching made me slow to realize
that it was brine and bile I was throwing
up. Apparently, asleep, not knowing
I was doing so, I'd swallowed some
of that sea poison; now it had to come
back out of me, whether or not I chose
(a perfect illustration, I suppose,
of how a fussy stomach helps out those
of us condemned to live in toxic times
like these). So for my late unconscious crimes

of gluttony, I paid a bitter price
in burning sinuses, a stinging twice
as potent as produced by any spice,
a pounding skull caught in a gripping vise,
and to the south-- ...
                Oh, dear. Not very pleasant
after-dinner patter. For our present
purposes, I could have easily
skipped over such details. Please pardon me. ...

But afterward, I was so flushed and hot
that in my hazy state of mind I thought
it must be summer here, somehow--that I
had strayed too close to the Equator, my
non-navigation on those nights when I
inverted normal sleep and waking times
depositing me into tropic climes
prohibitive of human habitation.
(Nothing like my real situation:
it was only eighty-five or so--
cool, even for December fifth--although
until my fever broke, I wouldn't know.)

Enhancing the illusion (or delusion,
I should say) born of my mind's confusion,
now a penetrating high-pitched whine

cut sharply through the vaporizing brine
and pierced my headgear in a needling line
that bore into my brain--another sign,
I thought, of how far south I'd strayed: the pine
woods rising here before me were infested
with cicadas!
But I never rested
for a moment. I had almost drowned;
instinctively, I crawled for higher ground,
as far as I could climb above the pound
of waves. At first, I had to pull the dead
weight of my legs behind; my knees, instead
of helping to propel me, only dragged
me down. They caught on roots and rocks and snagged
on fallen branches. If I hadn't worn
that scuba suit, my legs would have been torn
to shreds in that first half an hour, before
the nerves woke up down there. Meanwhile, I tore
along like some crazed wounded creature who
had lost its hind legs in a trap but through
blind instinct thrashed on with its forelegs to
propel itself along until the end.

Eventually, my legs began to bend
when I required them to, and to extend
once they had found a place to push off from.

They started prickling, no longer numb.
I worked up to the point where I could crawl
along efficiently, employing all
four limbs at once, but still could not rise more
than one arm's length above the forest floor.
(As it turned out, it would be weeks before
I'd have the strength to stand up, much less walk;
it would be nights before I'd even talk.)
I saw things from the viewpoint of a baby
or a boar or hen. The ground was maybe
<u>this far</u> from my face.
                And then I came
across a path, with hoofprints much the same
as those I'd known back home, from pigs. And there
were goat tracks, too (though I was not aware
of goats or any milker smaller than
a cow back then). The footprints of a man
or woman were among them. If I'd been
in my right mind just then, I might have been
alarmed, since they were rather large and shoeless.
But my brain was far from sane (quite clueless,
senseless, groping through that waking dream);
the sight of those bare footprints didn't seem
forbidding. Just the opposite! I scrambled
faster than my former crawling amble--
gasping, more determined than before--

until at last I reached the longhouse door.

(The longhouses were built into the hills
back then, as now, but they had wooden sills
around the doors and windows, and the walls
themselves were wood in places. They have all
been torn down and built up again since then
and blend into the background more. You men,
I daresay, were a bit surprised, before,
when all those people poured out of that door--
but back in Sixty-eight, you would have seen
the structure standing out against the green.)

I grasped the sill and pulled until I leaned
against the frame, then pounded with my fist
till someone answered. The cicadas hissed
on in my ears (or in my head, I ought
to say) so fiercely that at first I thought
my knocking made no noise at all--though I
have since been told that every sleeping eye
inside sprang open at my sudden pounding,
that the noise was frightening, astounding:
Eastern doors were never knocked upon,
as in the West. And it was hours past dawn!

The door swung open, and I saw a small

girl standing there before me in the hall--
stark naked, staring. I began to fall,
but she and a companion caught me and
conveyed me to a nearby bed. Her hand
was sure; her head was cool and calm. I owe
my life to her-- ...
                Where did Cecilia go?
(How does she do that?) Anybody know? ...

Well. Everyone was brown and bare, which fit
right in with what I had been taught, and it
could be predicted heathens all would live
together in a common room; I give
my teachers credit for that much. I saw
rather than heard them speaking to me: jaws
moved up and down, lips tried to show me words.
But even then, the only sound I heard
was that intense cicada whine. Absurd
as it may sound to say, I just assumed
they all were swarming there in that long room,
beneath the rafters, under beds. They whined
incessantly inside my fevered mind.

Once I was lying on my back, the blood
stopped filling up my eyes, and that was good.
The lamp above my head was very bright.

I lay there on the bed beneath the light
and felt my skin peel off along with my
black rubber suit. Cecilia had to pry
it off me piece by piece and then apply
a soothing balm.

She never left me by
myself, from that time forth, that I could tell,
for weeks and weeks on end. Till I was well.

VIII. THE FEARFUL FACE OF HEAVEN

The fearful face of Heaven had begun
to pale in dread of the approaching Sun
as Dorothea closed her winter's tale.
And then we heard them, roaring up the trail--
the herd of razorbacks (or "boars") who'd spent
the balance of their Solstice Night content
enough, below, in the vicinity
of their late comrade's slaughter. With a glee
(as D predicted) much like children's, they
came galloping up, squealing all the way,
stampeding through the starlit dining hall
where everyone was sitting--or, well, all
except Cecilia, who had disappeared,
magician-like. The human children cheered,
thus filling up the hush that had descended
on the crowd when Dorothea ended
her account.
(I'd been unsure if it
was diplomatic or appropriate
to break into applause at the conclusion
of her jailbreak saga--my confusion
lying in the fact that it was from

our country she'd escaped--and maybe some
of our more thoughtful hosts had felt some such
ambivalence themselves.)
                There was so much
disorder and hilarity occurring
all at once--the smelly smellers stirring
up the ground around our feet and all
but knocking us off of our benches, tall
quick-witted eunuchs snatching up the small
excited children who might slip and fall
into the scavengers' mad path--that I
was half afraid we'd hear a sudden cry
and someone would be seriously hurt.

But swine and human share this common dirt,
this "village green," each night at dusk and dawn
(who knows how long it has been going on?)
and so have learned to watch out for each other.
Uncle Bette--the boars' adoptive mother,
it would seem--stood up and cawed a few
long Sue-sue-suuues to give his crew their cue
that it was time for slop and sleep, then blew
a kiss to Dorothea (an adieu)
and sauntered slowly southward with the boars
surrounding him.
                I'm told the structures for

the milking goats, the horses, and the hens
are airier than are the so-called "pens"
for boars and he-goats (round, sunk in the ground,
and built of solid stone, against the pound
of hurricanes) for two related reasons:
One, in the inclement weather seasons,
horses, chickens, and new mother goats
get nervous; so they move them (with their oats
and corn) indoors among the humans, where
they can relax. And two, the pungent air
inside a building housing he-goats or
(regardless of their age or gender) boars
is far too rank for human noses; so
no matter how unkind the wind may blow,
the billy goats and boars must stay outside.
But luckily, the toughness of their hide
has an emotional component, too:
as long as they have something they can chew
on and a little space to crowd into
with their companions, that's enough to do,
for them, and howling Nature can grow hoarse
for all they care; they take it all in course.

The stable ladies went to bid their pets
good morning, and the "milk maids" went to get
their buckets, while the younger eunuch men

who tend the chicken flocks snatched up a hen
or two en route to where a supper feast
was spread for those pin-headed clucking beasts.

The Doctor touched my hand and smiled and said,
"Excuse me. Nature calls," but then, instead
of heading for an outhouse, as I thought
she would, went off into the woods. I caught
the sound of vomiting some distance off.
As though just waiting for the nod or cough
of their directing hostess, several more
went off and followed suit, including four
or five of my young men.
                As for my own
gastric reactions, while I found the tone
and texture of my belches different from
what I was used to, I did not succumb
to nausea in the least; in fact, I found
the feast most satisfying. But I'd downed
only a fraction of what others had;
the reason some of them were feeling bad,
I think, had more to do with quantity
than quality.
            Sitting there next to me,
Lieutenant Peter filled his plate up three
times, and he never let a pitcher or

a pipe go by untasted. I ignored
his gluttony, and warned him casually
about the weed but once, trusting that he
would learn his lesson soon enough should he
choose to ignore my hint. And sure enough,
he was among the first to brave the rough
dark woodland brambles to give back to Mother
Earth what he had taken from her.
                                Other
men had other ways of saying "no"
to moderation. Young Horatio,
the native lad our Peter had been so
undiplomatically involved with just
before the feast, returned to courting Lust
(I'd kept my eye on him during our sup,
to make sure he and Peter had made up
completely): he was now wedged in between
a woman and a boy who shared his keen
undying interest in "forbidden love."

By contrast, Luke, who'd kept his head above
the rising tide of wild abandon (bless
his heart), was now engaged in what I'd guess
was after-dinner patter, more or less,
with a diminutive young woman of
the East. She seemed to be falling in love

with him already; she was beaming and
nightdreaming at him as he held her hand.

When Dorothea came back from her jaunt,
she looked disheveled and a little gaunt.
"The world's oldest human!" were the first
four words she spoke to me--but then she burst
out into laughter when I looked concerned.
"I'm really quite all right," she said, then turned
her gaze back to the crowd before she ended
with, "just very tired." I had intended
to engage her in more conversation,
but in deference to her situation,
I postponed.
            I started counting heads;
to get the men all safely off to bed
was certainly my main priority
just then. I'd just reached ten, when suddenly
I heard a crash and an apology
("Oh! 'Scuse me! 'Scuse me!") right in back of me,
and there was Peter--very, very drunk--
stumbling forward, and my good mood sunk
a notch. He looked like hell and stunk like puke.
I took him by the arm and signaled Luke
for an assist. I did apologize
for prying Luke from those enchanted eyes

he'd found to tuck in Peter (who outranked
him, after all), but he just smiled. I thanked
him heartily, and off they went.
                                A bright
glow threatened from the eastern peaks, the sight
of which impelled me now to speak: "All right,
my lads! Impolitic or impolite,
I have to interrupt this rare delight
of intercultural exchange to cite
the Sun's appearance in the east, whose light
(as always) puts us in our mode of flight.
Let's thank our hosts now for their kind invite
to share in their exciting mating rite--
and what has been a most delicious bite
of Eastern hospitality!" And quite
on cue, the men broke out with all their might
in cheering and applause, which their nonwhite
companions quickly joined. "And so sleep tight,
my friends--and at the risk of sounding trite,
I'll say, 'Tomorrow is another night!'"

Adieus were hastily concluded then,
and soon I followed my elated men
back to our "barracks." By the time we found
our bunks, with children running up and down
the hall among the mellowed-out adults,

Peter had passed out fully (the result
of self-indulgence in the face of shame,
I'd say) and snored contentedly, no blame
adhering to his pinkish, orange-topped frame.
Now Luke was settled where he'd spend the day;
there on his stomach on the bed he lay.
He held a book, and yet I wouldn't say
he read it; he just used it as a way
to keep naval society at bay.

The other men were still inclined to chat--
until each one in turn assumed a flat-
backed horizontal posture; after that,
they quickly drifted off to sleep. Before
the Appalachians, they began to snore.
It was the softest berth they'd known since they
left home, a matter now of nineteen days.

As Luke continued "reading" (meditating),
I took out my notes, which had been waiting
for me since I'd had my chat with Bette.
I hadn't had the chance to write more yet--
with so much I did not want to forget!
I seized my trusty Uni-ball and set
to work.
About a half an hour had passed

(the transcription-from-memory went fast,
and I was coming down now to the last
words of the Doctor's story) when I felt
the bed I sat on shift as someone knelt
beside me. "I cannot believe you're still
awake!" said Dorothea, as a thrill
shot through me. (I did not expect to see
her anymore that day--especially
not then, as I was quoting her at length.
Perhaps I blushed.) "It must take all your strength
and discipline, keeping a journal and--
to all appearances--keeping command
of such a rough and ready crew."
My crew,
while rough enough, looked ready only to
enjoy more sleep just then. But I said, "True;
I always seem to have enough to do.
But writing it all down is just for fun--
or mostly so."
"I take it he's the one
you couldn't do without," she said, with an
appreciative glance at Luke, whose hand
now held his book under his head, as though
it were a pillow; his soft breathing, slow
and even, told me he'd succumbed to sleep
at last.

"Luke is diminutive but deep,"
I said, "and eons older than he looks."

"A lad with an affinity for books,
I see," she said.
"Yes; nineteenth century,
especially. In fact, it seems to me
that just last night I heard him say <u>that</u> tome,
brought all the way across the sea from home--
the one he's sleeping on--is by the same
author as <u>Middlemarch</u>. What was her name,
again?"
"George Eliot?"
"Uh-huh; that's it."

The Doctor was awake now. "Holy shit!"
she said. "I wonder if he'd let me borrow
it. You think?"
"I'll bet he would. Tomorrow
night, first thing, I'll ask him."
"When he's through
with it, I mean."
"Of course."
And there ensued
a silence, during which she knew I knew
what she was thinking--and I wanted to

assure her, then and there, of what is true: I've no intention of returning to the West, and I want nothing more than to persuade each member of my brave young crew that immigrating is the thing to do. But much as I was eager to relate this to her, or to hint, the hour was late, and it would not be right for me to touch upon that topic with the Doctor, much as I would like to, in advance of my discussion with the men. Abruptly, I switched subjects: "So tomorrow evening, you and I will ride up to--Unique?"

Her blue eyes looked directly into mine. "And who have <u>you</u> been talking to?" she asked.

I must confess, I felt as though a certain trust had been disturbed, but couldn't fathom just what sort of indiscretion I'd committed. "Bette and I were talking," I admitted, "and I told him of our plans. He seemed surprised by them, and yet I think he deemed it more your place than his to fill me in. About--Unique."

She looked away again.

"And so I will. But not tonight," she said.
"It's complicated. And it's time for bed."

She kissed me on the cheek and left me there,
with several questions hanging in the air.
I watched her walk away, again aware
of her extraordinary grace and beauty,
her elastic tread and matchless booty.

Now the Sun has come. It burns and glowers
through the windowpanes, turning the flowers
of the curtains to an angry red.
The day has dawned; the longest night is dead.
And yet, despite the late exhausted hour,
my mind is wide awake. My thoughts devour
each other as I try to figure out
how best to tell them--ask them--go about
convincing them.
                It can't just be an order.
I'm not asking them to cross some border
and incur some risk; I'm asking for
a change of course that never ends--a more
indelible decision than their deaths
would even be--where all their children's breaths
would be composed, henceforth, of Eastern air.

If we went back to Colorado, there
would be no stopping all those Elders and
their mania for ever more command--
command over more hearts and souls and lands
and waters. I can think of no worse Sin
I could commit than letting that begin.

If, on the other hand, we were to fail
to reappear on Colorado--"sail
off into legend" in their history
and be an object lesson for them ("See
what happens when you hazard into blank
uncharted waters! All those men who sank
and drowned in Twenty Ninety-eight! Beware!")--
that would be useful work. And just. And fair.

And what an opportunity--so rare!--
for such a relatively small group of
young men to influence the course of love
for a whole nation of humanity!
The Appalachian Isles. It seems to me
the people here, despite their "heathen" tribal
ways, despite the absence of the Bible
in their nightly lives, have much the better
understanding, if not of the <u>letter</u>
of the Christian law, then of its heart,

than do our people.

Take the way (to start
with) they regard the eunuch: it's been sad
for him, they reason. He may well have had
as promising a childhood as the rest
of us. He may have been among the best
and brightest in his class. He had no cause
to think that nature's normal course of laws
would fail him. His plight should give us pause.

We're obligated by our faith, they'd say,
to vividly imagine it: the way
one friend after another starts to change--
to dip into a deeper vocal range
and sprout erections and thick facial hair--
while all the while he's painfully aware
that nothing much is happening "down there"
for him. And for a growing girl, it might
be even worse: her hips stay slight and tight,
her chest remains a plain of barren ground,
while all around, the flowering pubic mound
of feminine fertility--the scent
of menstrual blood--is fully, freely spent
among her playmates as they graduate
from children into child-bearers. Late
developers grow anxious as they wait--

until at last the cruelest hand of fate
is dealt, and as they rise up through the air,
their hearts sink bitterly. It isn't fair.

(An Easterner would never put it in
such terms, but certainly it must be Sin
to cast off children. Eunuchs, in a sense,
are always children, in their innocence
of sexual development, their lack
of what makes up a "grownup." In fact,
they are the Children of Eternity--
and clearly our responsibility.)

Our Savior often spoke about deriving
grace from empathy, and so reviving
our forsaken souls' salvation through
a sympathy for others' plights. But do
we need a Bible verse to tell us this?
Isn't it clear enough the gift of bliss
is given us when we become the givers?
We're forgiven when we are forgivers;
likewise, when we pray for other souls--
not for fulfillment of our own small goals--
our prayers catch fire from smoking, smoldering coals.

They say the Lord works in mysterious ways.

And so he does--working by nights and days
and all those states of ambiguity
between. And he invented irony!
So should we really be surprised to find
the very book he gave unto mankind
contains odd verses seeming to suggest
without our holy books, we do our best
work, and by doing so, are better blessed?

The intellect of God, I think, is well
beyond the grasp of humans. (Who can tell
what Infinite Intelligence is planning?
One of us, down here? Our whole lives spanning
twenty, thirty, forty years?) When we
consider God has had Eternity
to study and prepare his plans, and he
has yet another vast Eternity
before him to fulfill their destiny,
his workshop taking up Infinity
in all directions, a humility
of mind sets in (at least, for me).
And yet
the heart of God is not so hard. Forget
our finite forms (not much of a request,
since every night we live, we do our best
to keep remembering our finite forms,

and still, we keep forgetting them)--the norms
of our existence, bio-mathematics
ticking on beneath the fine dramatics
of our nightly lives on planet Earth--
our round of eating, sleeping, giving birth,
and dying. We perceive reality
through limitless emotionality;
we live our lives for Love. In seeking Love,
we seek "within ourselves," not "from above"--
and so our physicality and all
its physics just disintegrate and fall
away.

So goes the theory. We're designed,
however, to direct our hearts and minds
to bodily survival, which requires
us to focus on the outward--fires,
floods, and hurricanes--so we won't die
before we have the chance to reach that high
exalted place where we can just deny
the body and live spiritually. And so
we opt for something physical we know
to be composed of matter--say, a book
or cross--some sort of symbol we can hook
into and hold without a second look.
That way, we need not take the risk involved
in letting go of "real life." We've solved

the riddle, never having heard the question.
We are safe, free from the soul congestion
any inner quest might cause us.

I

was struck tonight at Midnight Lecture by
what Dorothea said about the way
the Sun was loved when people lived by day
and slept by night. Of course, I'd read about
it all before and never thought to doubt
that ancient Solar worship simply was
a primitive precursor to the Laws
of Moses. Now I start to see the flaws
in thinking so. It was a purer form
of worship, certainly, and was the norm
before the written word came into being.
But to call it primitive, I'm seeing
now, is worse than meaningless.

"The Word

was <u>with</u> God, and the Word was God," we've heard.
But words themselves can also be the Devil,
and they often are; they seek to "level
out the playing field," so to speak.
Inheriting the Earth in all its meek
and splendid glory, I would say, involves
embracing Mystery, the great Unsolved
and (in our present forms) Unsolvable.

Religious gulfs are irresolvable
when based on arbitrary Laws, but when
faith speaks to Love--the concept that all men
and women love each other as they love
their God and in so doing are much loved
by God--then theologic quibbles count
for naught. I'm confident we can surmount
any objections my young men might raise
based on religion.
                Jesus Christ would praise
these worshippers of Mother Moon, I'm sure--
not only for their faith but for their pure
devotion to the common welfare. "Who,"
the people asked him, "is my neighbor?" (You
would think the people living then were dull
as stones.) Of course, he told a parable
to answer them, but could have trimmed it down
to two or three choice words: "Hey--look around."

Without a formal creed ("Consent is key"
is all I've heard of it), instinctively
the Easterners obey those laws Christ held
most dear, but don't appear to be impelled
by any threat of Hell to do so. Why,
then, when they raise their arms up to the sky,
is it the Moon they worship? Let me guess:

Like us, the Moon lives in a wilderness
of darkness. Though she knows (let us suppose)
the real reason life on Earth still grows
is that the Sun still burns and beams and glows,
she nonetheless finds it a trifle hard
(like us) to <u>love</u> the Sun. The Moon is scarred
and pock-marked by his glare whenever they
are forced to share the sky (at break of day
you see them there sometimes, contending). So,
although the Moon (and we) must always show
respect, if not regard, for Sun, there's no
romance involved, no chance our hearts will glow
at his arrival or, when he must go,
turn melancholy. What is needed, then,
is something more reciprocal, that men
and women can both love and be loved by.

Traditionally, we look to the sky
for such a being--and since night is where
we live, then naturally, it's then and there
we seek our God, up in the starry air
above. But like the Earth this century,
the Moon is changeable. Some nights we see
her as a brilliant sphere, a sort of mirror
to the Sun--above the Earth, but nearer
than the stars. At other times, she's but

a silver sliver, barely lighting what
small portion of the sky she wanders in.
Sometimes she is invisible, a thin
black spot that covers up the stars where they
would be if she were not. When skies are gray,
she hides behind the clouds. Sometimes she sets
and rises like the Sun--sometimes forgets
and rises late or early; goes away
sometimes some hours before the break of day.
Inconstant, but we love her anyway.

Think of that time when God became a man:
Jesus was born so God could understand
the suffering of humankind, confined
(though holy and immortal) to a mind
of limited capacities, a soul
incapable of self-awareness (whole
and yet opaque), a body strong and true,
as Earthly bodies go, but tethered to
the laws of physics. If God knew what he
was doing (and I think he did), then he
was purging his divine hypocrisy
to guarantee that he himself could not
be called a kettle-criticizing pot,
in asking Man to do what he would not,
under Man's circumstances.

On the Cross,
beaten and torn, but still not at a loss
for words, according to the Matthew version
of events (ignoring the perversion
of them that claims Christ was quoting, oddly,
from the Scriptures of his time, in godly
scholarship, spikes piercing through his palms,
displaying his vast knowledge of the Psalms),
he cried out, as most any man would cry
in such great agony, about to die
so miserably: "My God, my God! Oh, why
hast thou forsaken me?"
When God woke up
in Heaven from this dream, a bitter cup
of truth awaited him: despite the fact
he'd led a holy life, his final act
on Earth had been most humbly human. After
that (if we assume that tears and laughter
were among his repertoire), he must
have wept most heartily. How could he trust
himself with judgment, condemnation--all
those powers of a god supposed to fall
to him--when he himself had failed to pass
the test he had imposed?
And so at last
God set about dismantling Hell (which he

had spent some little time and energy
constructing). But the Christians loved their Hell
and felt their system wouldn't work so well
without it; so they countered God's desires
by cramming references to brimstone fires
and such into Our Savior's mouth throughout
the Gospels. Thankfully, they failed to rout
the more authentic quotes, and these stood out
like diamonds in the toxic texts (no doubt
the Golden Rule and "love thy enemies"
were two of these) throughout the centuries
that intervened between Our Father's grand
experiment and now; so every hand
that turned the pages of the Bible had
the power to discover both the bad
and good.

But do we really need this Book
of Faith to tell us how and where to look
about us now for humankind's salvation?
I've observed that on this island nation
of the East, they look up to the clean
white pages of the Moon's blank gaze and glean
their answers from that ever-changing face--
and learn how winning in the Human Race
requires a fine enlightened doubt as well
as faith. (The threat of an eternal Hell

is more redundant now than ever; we're
barraged till our capacity for fear
is worn away by such forebodings.)
                                Here
they've put in place a new set of incentives
for our propagation, with inventive
holy nights and feasts and so on (these,
I think, will do more to advance my pleas
for immigration than whatever course
of reason I might try to urge or force
upon my men); they've condescended to
take lessons from the smallest creatures, who--
with their six legs or more, not merely two--
are thriving well past Doomsday, into night
(as every belch reminds me, as I write);
and best of all, from what I can observe,
they concentrate on finding ways to serve
each other, rather than on trying to
enslave (as Colorado's Elders do)
some other class (or sex) to wait upon
them. Jesus would approve.
                            It's well past dawn,
however, and although my brain still leaps
from thought to thought, I really ought to sleep,
if I expect to open any minds
tomorrow; Peter's droning snore reminds

me this will be no easy task. And so
I'd better close my book (and eyes) and go
into a horizontal pose--and trust
to Jesus that my sleep is deep and just.

* * * * * * * * * *

Whoa! That was weird. I'd just capped up my pen
and closed my book, as if to say Amen
to my post-dawn recording duties, then
drew up my sore, stiff arms for stretching--when
I suddenly became aware that right
beside me on the bed (and I'm not quite
sure, even now, how she accomplished it)
sat Aunt Cecilia.
                Well--I nearly spit.
My muscles spasmed in a sort of fit
instead of stretching out; my shoulders knit
into a knot, as though someone had hit
me in the lower back, flat-handed. Shit!
How could a giant twice my size just sit
down next to me like that--without a bit
of noise, presumably completely lit
the whole time by those windowpanes--and fit
all of her mass beside me, yet not split
the balance of the bed?

But there she sat,
her smile as subtle as a tawny cat's,
her greenish golden eyes benign and calm,
holding a steaming cup of lemon balm
(or something like it) in the mammoth palm
of her left hand. I had the feeling that
if I'd just curled around her, she'd have sat
there all day long and never said a word.

She whispered noiselessly--and yet I heard
each word she spoke distinctly: "I inferred
you suffer from insomnia. I brewed
some tea to help you sleep."
To find a nude
young woman not at all embarrassed by
her nakedness but in her speech so shy
(or quiet, I should say; her steady eye
and dry reserve preserve her self-control)
was strange. She's really far from young, I'm told;
the Doctor says she's thirty-nine years old.
Her voice is like a child's, with a cold--
a tuneless, toneless, lightly lisping breeze--
but holds precision and decision; she's
no stammerer or stutterer. "So please,
do have a little."
I was flustered. "Thank

you, Aunt Cecilia; that was thoughtful. Frank
of you, and very accurate, about
my problem with insomnia; no doubt
you've seen your share of cases. I should think."

She held it out to me and whispered: "Drink."

As I received the cup, I noticed that
it had no handle and was nearly flat--
more of a saucer, then. "It heats up fast
that way, under the magnifying glass,"
Cecilia answered (though I hadn't asked
her anything), "behind the curtain on
the window sill."
                And then a little yawn
escaped her, soundlessly. She covered up
her mouth, discreetly. With the shallow cup
beneath my nose, the steam at first smelled sickly
sweet, but then another odor--prickly,
woodsy--came up from beneath. What was
it? It reminded me of home, because--
well, why?
          I thought of building ships from new-
cut lumber, dragging out the mast-trees through
the woods, working bare-handed with the goo
of fresh-killed evergreens all up and down

my arms--out of the forest, through the town,
down to the waterfront. The Moon, of course,
was full on harvest nights, the hauling horse
less prone to panic when he saw his course
in front of him, behind the blanks.
                But why
did all these memories come back as I
sat with this brew beneath my nose? I think
there must have been some dim half-conscious link
between those fragrances and this strange drink
I held.
    Again, Cecilia whispered: "Drink."

I blew on it and took a tiny sip.
It wasn't bad. The flavor had a nip
of... Pine cones! That was it: those tiny pine
cones, when they first peek out and seem to shine
with newborn innocence--but with a scent
that slices through the senses, tears a rent
right through the fetid forest air. It sent
its arrows through my sinuses and went
straight to my head.
                I blew across the top
again, then took a gulp. It didn't stop
at warming me inside and out, as you'd
expect a cup of tea to do. A rude

narcotic, alcoholic heat spread through
my chest, as though I'd slugged a shot or two
of Moonshine whisky (corn or rye).
"Oh, my!"
I said, and laughed.
And then I caught her eye
just for a half a moment as she glanced
at me. Her golden eyes got up and danced,
or seemed to. "One more swallow and you're done,"
she said--not smiling, but still having fun,
I felt.
I tilted up the cup and drained
all that remained, although the effort pained
me slightly. My esophagus regained
its footing as I smacked my lips and feigned
a satisfaction that I hardly felt.
But when I turned, after that hearty belt,
to hand Cecilia back the empty cup,
she'd gone. I never heard her getting up
or saw her walk away. I was alone
again among my men, the steady drone
of their unconsciousness surrounding me.

I opened up my book again, to see
if I could write a few more lines before
the tea kicked in and I began to snore

myself. Just in the time it's taken me
to write this much, the rolling of the sea
has come back to my blood. I've gone from mere
lightheadedness into a state of near
hallucination. Halos now appear
above each sleeping head when I look up.
My God! What did she put into that cup?
My hands, my face, my feet, my throat--all numb.
My pen keeps dropping.

If I don't succumb...

IX. CECILIA WHISPERS

Cecilia whispers in the Doctor's ear.
Her words are terse and urgent, clipped and clear;
she calls her "Doctor D," instead of "D"
or "Dorothea."
"Doctor D," says C,
"wake up--but quietly. We have to be
completely quiet."
Dorothea's eyes
fly open now, discomfiting surprise
putting an inconclusive end to what
has been a brilliant, complicated but
(now that it's over) untranslatable
lost dream. It's suddenly impossible
to even tell if it was good or bad,
much less if she'd have liked the ending, had
not Aunt Cecilia whispered in her ear
just then.
"What is it?"
Everything is clear
enough inside, but dusk is drawing near.
Cecilia's fingers touch the Doctor's chin,
and then her giant hand turns over in

a silent "follow me." Outside the door
(once closed), as she has never done before,
Cecilia wraps D in a full embrace--
just tight enough that D can't see her face
as she informs her: "All right. Keep your head.
The worst has happened now. The Captain's dead."

Involuntarily, the Doctor's arms
and legs spring out, the various alarms
of "fight or flight" set off inside her by
this simple information. ("That's a lie!"
she might have shouted out, had C not tightened
her embrace just as the Doctor's frightened
heart began to bolt.) Cecilia hushes
her without a sound; until the rushes
of mad fear grow calmer, she's a wall
of strength for Doctor D, who mustn't fall.

"Just breathe," C whispers. "Out--and in--and out--
and in..."
          (It's all superfluous, no doubt;
the Doctor won't forget to breathe. It's an
involuntary instinct; every man
and woman, every bird and mammal, knows
enough--and doesn't even <u>need</u> to know
enough--to breathe. And yet it has its uses

now, this coaching, till the Doctor's juices
find their proper paths again.)
"Where is--
the body?" Dorothea asks.
(Not "his,"
but "the." That's good, Cecilia thinks; she's ready.
No more need to hold her up and steady
her.)

C lets her go and turns and strides
up to the horses' yard that stands outside
the north end door--the sailors' suite. And there,
tacked to the stable wall--exactly where
the jacket of the Solstice centerbeast
was stretched to cure last night, there on the east
side of the long log barn--the Captain's form
now hangs. It clearly has passed through the warm
hours of the day outdoors, exposed; its skin
first blistered and then bled. (A human's thin
and hairless hide is such a fragile thing--
more like a fruit skin than a covering
an animal might use.) And now instead
of white, it's turned a grisly, brilliant red.

Instinctively, the Doctor thinks to go
back in for goggles or a suit. But no--
Cecilia hasn't bothered. And here's Bette

as well, uncovered. All is dim and wet,
although the Sun has hardly yet begun
to set; a drifting, stinking mist has done
the work of dusk.
                Cecilia and Bette
may possibly have failed to notice yet
what Dorothea sees at once: the pose,
the attitude in which the killer chose
to leave the Captain, comes from Calvary.
His arms are stretched out wide, to form a T;
his hands are spiked in place. His feet are brought
together like a ballerina's, caught
and crossed and fastened with a single spike,
below. No crown of thorns adorns him like
the Savior's, and no Latin words are scrawled
above his head--and yet the picture, all
in all, is quite complete. From head to feet,
he is the martyred god--displayed to greet
the men from Colorado as they come
out of their door (still stretching, yawning, dumb
from sleep) and blast them with a thrilling shock.

"Let's get it down."
                There is no other talk,
except these words from D. And even Bette
is silent (for perhaps the first time yet

within his waking life) as he and she
go to their task, with Bette on bended knee
to loose the punctured feet and Doctor D
stretching her arms to reach a hand, to free
it if she can. Except the corpse is pinned
so high up on the wall, she can't begin
to reach it. Odd.
                "I'll get the claw," says C,
and disappears again.
                Ordinarily,
this factor (this peculiarity,
the body hung so high) would seem to D
worth noting and considering. But she
is not simply the Doctor anymore;
she is the head of state, and one word--War--
consumes her thoughts, as she looks to the door
that opens from the longhouse out onto
the yard. She only thinks of what to do
about the men from Colorado, who
could bring a brand-new Armageddon to
her Appalachia, should they be allowed
to sail back home and so incite the crowd
of unforgiving Christians there against
them. To prevent this army of incensed
invaders from arriving, their young men
must be prevented from returning. When

that much has been accomplished, maybe then
there will be room for more considerations;
those relating to the state of nations
and the threat of war can then recede
a bit. But till that time, a single need
takes precedence.
                Unnoticed, Uncle Bette's
apprentice, Cat, approaches them. He lets
a cry escape when he first sees--forgets
his own habitual reserve. Bette gets
up off his knees and puts a hand upon
his pupil's shoulder and a finger on
his own pursed lips. Cat's eyes and mouth go round;
he probably could not make any sound
now if he wanted to.
                C comes around
the corner of the stable; she has found
the "claw," or wrecking bar, and sets to work.
She squats before the feet and with a jerk
(but strangely, not a sound) pulls free the lower
spike. She stands and then--a little slower
now, as Bette supports the arms--pulls out
first one, and then the other, of the stout
sixteen- or twenty-penny nails that kept
the hands in place while everybody slept.

Aunt C and Uncle Bette then slowly roll
the body sideways, trying to keep it whole
and leave as little flesh as possible
stuck to the stable wall. And once the full
weight of the Captain's body (now no more
than half the total mass it had before)
is in their arms, they lay it on the ground
face up, with care. Cecilia crouches down,
performs a test or two, then stands again.

"The neck's been broken, but he may have been
unconscious or already dead by then,"
she tells the Doctor. "No sign of a blow
that I can see--but then, you never know,
with all that Sun; since noon at least, I'd say."

D nods. "It certainly does look that way."

Indeed, the stringy flesh adhering to
the skeleton looks like a barbeque
fresh from the grill. It's hard to even tell
its age or sex (which may be just as well
for D) and harder still to recognize
its former features or to analyze
how it was killed.
"Cecilia: you and Bette

have got to get that ship to sail and get
it to Unique before all hell breaks loose."

"I knew eventually I'd find some use
for those old books," says Bette (who made his way
through Moby-Dick and Billy Budd by day,
when sleeplessness disturbed him as a teen)--
and he and C exchange deep looks which mean
they'll sink or swim together now.
"All right,"
says C.
"I'll meet you later on tonight,"
the Doctor says. "Good luck."
And off they go,
without another word, into the glow
of Sunset burning through the mist. And so
now only Dorothea and young Cat
remain there in the yard.
"I'm sorry, Cat,"
she says. "I've got to leave you here alone
for now." (A sudden flush and tiny moan
are his response.) "If anyone comes out,
it would be better if they didn't shout
or scream. You understand?"
He tries to speak,
but nothing comes except a little squeak.

He nods his head. The terror in his eyes
suggests to D he might not be a wise
choice for a sentinel. But Peter lies
there in the longhouse, and it must be she
who goes to wake him; so she lets Cat be.

Thank God, the men are all still sound asleep
(except for Luke, whose sleep looks light). A deep
narcotic nasal snore still fills the air
above the young Lieutenant, lying there
flat on his back. The Doctor sits down where
a little spot perhaps ten inches square
remains un-sprawled-upon, on Peter's bed,
and leans in closer to the dreamer's head.

"Lieutenant," she begins--to no effect
(her voice too soft, its force too indirect).
"Lieutenant Peter!"--louder than before.
(Luke shifts a little in the bed next door;
no penetration into Peter's snore.)

And so she has to be a little bolder,
grasping him now roughly by the shoulder--
shaking him, her other hand across
his large wet mouth. It is the sudden loss
of oxygen that finally breaks his trance.

He splutters--then, before she has a chance
to silence him, blurts out, "Hey! Who are you!"

The sleeping Luke rolls over (if it's true
he's still asleep), turning his backside to
this new commotion. D tightens her grip
on Peter's mouth, squeezing his sleepy lips
beneath her fingers. "Sh!" she says. "It's me.
It's Dorothea. You know--Doctor D."

He nods his head; she lets his lips go free.
He whispers quietly, excitedly:
"What's happening?"
"It's an emergency.
There's been an accident. Just follow me."

They go outside; D shuts the door behind.

"Where's Zeke?" he speaks, before she can remind
him to keep whispering.
"He went outside--
last day," she whispers in his ear. "He died."

He pushes her aside and stalks off--straight
into the stable yard where Cat still waits
in terror. Two young stable ladies (barely

in their teens, barely awake, and fairly
sick with fear) are standing next to him,
but all three stand apart from such a grim
sight as the Captain makes in death.
At first,
Peter just halts and stares. But then a burst
of wailing breaks the peace (and must wake all
except the deepest sleepers) as he falls
down on his knees before the corpse. He cries
without restraint; the tears pour from him eyes.

It's too late. Dorothea deems it wise
to let him have his tears before she tries
to reason with him. If the men don't rise
en masse and pour out of their door before
he can control himself, calm down, ignore
his grief, remember that the naval corps
is under his command and that a more
professional response to all his sore
confusion than this bare despairing roar
is called for--then perhaps the threat of war
can be averted, thinks the Doctor. Or
at least there'll be more time to clear the shore
before they try to leave.
The north end door
(the sailors' suite) now opens, just a crack.

Luke's face appears, assesses, then pulls back again. The Doctor sees--and hopes he'll keep the men from coming out, whether asleep or not.

Now Peter's sobs start to subside a bit, and Dorothea kneels beside him, puts her hand upon his back. But he reacts in anger: "Get your hands off me, you heathen witch!"

"Lieutenant--"

"Get away from me!" he screams at her.

"I have to say this," Dorothea perseveres. "Because your Captain's dead, according to the laws you serve, you're in command. You understand?"

"You stay away from Zeke! I'm in command!" he shouts, and roughly shoves away her hand.

He rises suddenly, and when he stands, a little cry escapes from Cat. At that, his blazing eyes turn savagely on Cat, to whom he says, "What are you looking at?"

But Cat can no more speak than look away--

and doesn't know what he's supposed to say,
in any case. He shakes his head and holds
his trembling hands in front of him. Made bold
by this display of terror, Peter walks
right up to him.

"What's wrong, you stupid ox?
I'm talking to you!"

"Peter!" Dorothea
shouts and rises.

"What's the big idea,
mule? You want to make a fool of me?
You better spit it out! What did you see?"

And with these last words, Peter thrusts his arms,
trying to shove Cat back. Of course, no harm
is done (at least, not physically), but Cat
is petrified. Though she's a diplomat
by nature, Dorothea can't let that
go by unanswered. Instantly, she takes
him by the shoulder and (more for the sake
of making him aware of his mistake
than as a punishment) spins him around
and slaps him smartly on the face. The sound
and sting of this report shock him to silence,
coupled with the unexpected violence
of the peaceful D. She grasps him by

his bright red beard, confronts him eye-to-eye, and (as his crimson face turns slowly white) explains:

"Lieutenant, you have zero right to bully or insult or pick a fight with any of my people. You have charge of your own men; that ought to be a large enough responsibility for you. Your Captain's dead. What you're supposed to do is call your men together and explain the situation with a calm and sane expression on your face. So use your brain and get control over yourself. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'm," he says. "Okay."

"Some time last day Ezekiel went outside. Say, noon. He may have been brought out by force, or possibly was carried out unconscious. You can see he wasn't covered. And it seems to me there isn't any possibility it was an accident. It's murder. We have got to figure out who did this. You and I together. Now: inform your crew."

She lets go of his beard, releasing him.

He's calmer now, appropriately grim.
"Yes, ma'm," he says once more and goes back in.

D wishes she were fast asleep again
and dreaming irresponsibly of men
and women whose response to what or when
she thinks or speaks has no effect upon
the dull or dire events descending on
her world. But here is Cat before her now
(above her, actually), and D somehow
has been elected his consoler. So
she wraps her arms about his waist, below
his twisting beardless face, down which great tears
are pouring now. She tries to soothe his fears.

"Why did he say those things?" Cat wants to know.
"Why did he push me?" (Dorothea's slow
soft circles on his lower back--her palms
serene and comforting--attempt to calm
the heaving, trembling giant.) "Why did he
think I knew anything? It wasn't me!"

"I know, I know," she says. "Peter's upset.
He hasn't had time to digest it yet.
Nobody's blaming you."
The yard's begun

to fill with dusk's first workers as the Sun
completes its exit through the mist. It sets
in near invisibility.
                "Go let
the chickens out and get the eggs. Forget
the boars and bucks for now--but milk the goats.
We'll keep the horses in; give them their oats,"
the Doctor tells those who await her word
in these uncommon circumstances.
                Cured
of his attack of tears, Cat wipes his face.
Most of the others move about the place
and tend their evening chores. The Doctor goes
back to the body. But the face she knows
(or wanted so to know) has gone away
forever now--devoured by the day,
erased. It tells her nothing. Could that tale
she told last night have brought this sudden gale?

But no; she draws herself up short. The main
thing now is making sure these men remain
in Blueridge. Everything she does from here
on in must serve that end. She'll make it clear
to Peter and the rest that she's sincere
in seeking justice--and the sooner their
investigation can begin, with fair

impartiality, the sooner peace
can be secured.
Then the abrupt releasing
of the children, suddenly increasing
all the evening chaos of the squawking
hens and roosters--laughing, singing, talking
for the sake of talking as they pour
out of the longhouse from the central door,
not thirty yards away--shocks Doctor D
into a new sense of emergency.

"No children in the horses' yard!" she yells--
which may stop one or two of them, but tells
the rest that there is something there to see.

The few adults nearby instinctively
close in around the body, trying to guard
them from the gruesome sight. But it is hard
to form a proper circle with so few
to form it. One swift eight-year-old breaks through
at once (a lad named San Francisco, who
is justly famous for his deafness to
his parents' orders or requests); he trips
over the corpse (somewhere around the hips)
and lands flat on the ground, then scrambles round
again to tell his playmates what he found

there. One of them responds with, "Cool!"
                                        Inside
the stable, eager for their evening ride,
the horses stamp and whinny, between bites
of oats. Above the din, D shouts: "All right!
I see that Cisco doesn't want--"
                                But right
as she's about to tell the scofflaw what
he's going to have to do without, a shot
rings out.
          No one in Blueridge, or in all
the East, for generations past recall,
has ever heard a gunshot (D, of course,
excepted). Everyone--even the horse,
mid-neigh, the rooster swelling for a crow--
stops short and freezes as a solemn row
of white-skinned sailors, dressed again in shorts,
parades out of the house.
                          The horses snort
again, the poultry go back to their bird-
brained arguments. The humans who have heard
the shot, however, hold their poses while
the Western seamen--military style,
with Peter leading--march into the yard,
then halt. Now Peter points his pistol hard
at Dorothea: nineteenth century,

but made with such precise simplicity,
with no excess of moving parts, that it's
more apt to fire properly than its
more modern progeny.
(Luke stands behind
his new commander--cautious, but resigned
to follow orders for the time. His mind
stays active, his obedience far from blind;
he holds his handgun pointed at the sky.)

"Nobody moves! Unless you want to die!"
the red-haired sailor greets his hosts.
"Could I
just say one thing?" the Doctor asks.
"You shut
your mouth!" he answers her. "You heathen slut!
You freakin' sodomite! And keep it shut!"

And so the Doctor opts to honor his
request--the more so since his pistol is
now pressed against her chest. He orders John,
the largest of the crew, to take upon
himself their fallen chief's remains. John lifts
the load up on his shoulders.
(As he shifts
its weight, a far more numerous force than these

twelve men, with greater capabilities
to rule the earth, regroup and realign
themselves atop their grisly feast.)
                The line
of sailors disappears back down the hill,
the Easterners remaining mute and still
till they are gone. Then Hercules and Boo
and Reed and Juniper and others who
participated in the hunt last night
converge on Dorothea. Little light
remains, so they must move in close to her
to make their presence known. As they confer
in earnest ("Who can shoot?" and "Who can ride?"
and so on), children who are still outside
are hurried in and fed a breakfast plain
and cold, like those they eat in hurricanes.

The mist turns into thicker fog. No Moon
appears. The work goes on in darkness. Soon
a distant shot is heard, and then another,
from the cove below. A prayer to Mother
Moon is quickly raised--but not before
D turns to Cat and says, "Release the boars
and bucks."
        And so a few more moments to
prepare for re-invasion by the crew

of the ill-fated Revelation (who
must now contend with road hogs, all intent
upon their nightly thundering descent
into the hollow, and then higher up
the path, with brawny billy goats who sup
upon the toughest fare) have been allowed.

As Peter leads his men out of the shroud
of low, slow-drifting winter cloud into
the yard before the longhouse, where the view
is less obscure, he is aware of two
or three or four crossbowmen standing near--
and straight ahead of him (not showing fear,
but feeling it, no doubt) the heathen queen
of this perverted land standing between
him and the door. He halts in front of her.

The men bunch up into a knot, unsure
which way to turn, behind him. Luke (aware
how quickly fortune flips sometimes) is there,
his pistol pointed upward in the air--
and now the empty half of that same pair
of hands is also reaching skyward, lest
some bowman might suppose him unimpressed.
John holds the clumsy rifle cross-wise, half-
way up his body, like a sparring staff.

The youngest sailors, Mark and Matthew (sick
with fear, but more afraid of running), stick
together like a pair of Siamese twins
and clutch the two club-like belaying pins
they brought up from the ship last night.
But Peter,
still portraying the unbowed defeater
of a heathen foe, levels his Colt
at D (nearby, another crossbow bolt
is dropped into position) and demands:
"Where is our ship?"
"In transit," D commands
just breath enough to say.
"In transit where?"

There is an awful silence in the air.

"Where you can't find it," D replies.
The barrel
of the gun is raised now, so the peril
D is faced with might be seen, if she
should care to peer down that long cavity
bored in the steel, to where the bullet nests
inside its chamber. "Where?"
D is impressed
with his persistence--and her own insane

resistance to his threats. "I think the main thing now should be to find out who killed Zeke," she says. "We need the whole crew here, to speak with each and every one of--"

"Step aside!" he interrupts.

"I can't let you inside the house," D says. "The children--"

"Count of three!" he shouts.

"No! Peter! Don't!" she cries. "If we--"

But she can't stop him. "One!" he shouts. It is his final word. One missile pierces his left temple and continues out his right; another enters at an angle, tight between two ribs, and lodges in his heart. His body crumples to the ground and starts to spasm. Thoughtlessly, the fingers squeeze the trigger, but it's like a stifled sneeze--a little snap, and then a fizzing noise as damp, loose powder burns and smokes. The boys who carry weapons throw them to the ground. The eunuch hunters rush in and surround them--every pair of Western hands held high

and open. Mark and Matthew start to cry.

* * * * * * * * * *

Ezekiel's remains are brought up from
the beach below and buried promptly (some
time after nine) along with Peter's. D
and Luke each speak, but there's no elegy
attempted--just a simple prayer to ask
the Powers That Be for guidance in the task
ahead; for justice, peace, and harmony.
Nobody speaks of love, which seems to be
in short supply this evening.
                                Afterward,
the suite the sailors occupied is stirred
about and searched. The Captain's journal still
lies open on his bed. His pen is still
uncapped, but on the floor. A "window sill"
type teacup, not quite dry, lies by the pen.
Apparently, none of the Western men
considered taking these three items back
with them. D puts them in her riding sack.

After the search, the sailors are confined
to quarters. They're permitted (to remind
them of their hosts' basic humanity)

to keep their denim shorts on, but (to see
they don't start planning an escape) their shoes
are hidden in the barn. No force is used
in so confining them, but every door
is guarded by two hunters, armed.
                                Before
the Doctor leaves, a number of would-be
companions offer to accompany
her north. But she prefers the company
of Lunatic alone, her favorite horse--
the fastest of the lot of them, of course,
and blessed with steady eyes and sturdy nerves,
despite her name. With all the narrow curves
and drifting fog ahead, she says, another
rider would just slow them down.
                                But Mother
Moon and Dorothea know these are
excuses rather than the true, by far
more pertinent considerations she
feels weighing on her now: she needs to see
through all this fog that's gathered round her brain
and cannot dissipate until the strain
of international diplomacy,
keeping her reasoning so narrowly
confined, is lifted. So she needs to be
alone.

But then again, she won't be quite
alone; her chestnut mare, her second sight,
will be supporting her all through the night
ahead. (The legend of how "chestnut brown"
racehorses never let their riders drown
but paddled bravely to the higher ground,
and after the Apocalypse would found
the transportation network of the East,
is kept alive long after it has ceased
to be regarded as true history.
And so the color of that ancient tree--
extinct before the Great Calamity
occurred, in every probability--
is likewise honored still. Thus, Lunatic
and others of her shade are still the pick
of the discriminating rider.)

D
rides off into the deep obscurity
of Moonless mist and soon appears to be
a floating phantom to the two or three
who watch her go. With D upon her back,
by contrast, Lunatic is almost black;
she disappears in darkness long before
her ghostly rider.

Lunatic is more
than just a vehicle to D, however.

She was D's first riding horse, and ever
since, they've been the best of friends. And now
that Lu's outlasted every other plow
or trail horse on Appalachia, she
(at nearly thirty-three) and Doctor D
share a distinction: each has lived to be
the oldest of her kind. Accordingly,
the two communicate non-verbally
and often quasi-telepathically.
Although a so-called "bridle" (really just
a loop of rope) still reins, it's mostly trust
and instinct that connect them. Luna walks
along (or trots, or gallops) while D talks
(or doesn't) conversationally. A word
like mercy-me or what-the-hell is heard
by Lunatic as meaning "Let's go slow
a while and check this out," while fuck, uh-oh,
or holy-shit translates to either "Whoa!"
or "Giddyup!" depending on the tone.

D never feels entirely alone
when she and Lunatic are on the trail
together, even when D's nightdreams fail
to keep her in the here and now. The size
and warmth of Lu between her naked thighs
is comforting, even unconsciously.

Even tonight, when she can barely see
the trail before or underneath them and
her brain's embroiled in trying to understand
what happened hours ago and miles behind
and wondering what she is apt to find
ahead at journey's end, her equine friend
is yet a comfort to her, should she tend
toward madness or despair.
There are so many
layers to her thoughts! To keep, at any
cost, the Westerners from going back
and instigating war, still tops this stack
of layers. Lying just beneath this one,
there is the evidential "smoking gun"
detective layer, where the clues are read.
(Who spoke with Zeke before he went to bed?
Did anybody see him going out?
Now every possibility and doubt
must be explored.) And then there is the <u>why</u>
which may reveal the <u>who</u>: might someone try
to save the people of the East from sure
demise through a preventive act of pure
political expediency? If so,
then why the crucifixion?
Just below
<u>this</u> level, Dorothea's horrors grow,

remembering the many times all through
the years when she made passing reference to
the mad intolerant society
she left behind. And then, more recently--
just hours before the tragedy!--that tale
she told: how could such propaganda fail
to stir up fears? The possibility
that she herself, the famous "Doctor D,"
may have inspired the killing, now presents
itself persistently.
                (In her defense,
we ought to say that Doctor D's intense
considerations all make perfect sense:
a clear mind, unpolluted by emotion,
is the only ship to sail this ocean
of evasive evidence and great
unknowns. She recognizes she must wait
until the time is right for shedding tears
before she gives in to her griefs and fears.
We won't condemn her for a lack of heart
as she exerts such self-control. A part
of her is grieving now, confronting what
we dare ourselves not even mention. But
she keeps that part out of communication
with the rest till her adopted nation
doesn't need her undiluted mind

and she can let her heart come from behind
and pour out all its secret wounds. We ought
to pity her this sense of duty, bought
at such a price.)

There is a minor peak
between the towns of Blueridge and Unique,
too bare and hard for habitation, but
the trail along the ridge includes this jut
of rock. It rises to provide a view
unparalleled here in the South, with two
great oceans visible from that one place--
one to the west, one to the east. To face
the north and ride up to this point when there
is nothing but the Moon and empty air
to greet you is to meet with beauty rare
and sudden. The impression given on
such cloudless nights is of a Lunar dawn
upon a planet rising from the sea.

Tonight, until this height comes suddenly
in view, the air has been entirely
imbued with fog, the Moon in secret hiding.
All at once, as though she has been riding
through a dream, the Doctor wakes into
another world--and the unearthly view
before her shocks, like passing darkly through

one trick of consciousness into a yet
more dream-like state: out of the mist, the wet
and beading Doctor D (whose friend and pet
comes to a halt and stares, as though to get
her own impressions of the sight) is met
with endless star-black sky. A gauzy net
of cloud is cast across the sea--and set
into this net, a million gemstones let
the starlight sparkle back.
                Oh, to forget
her errand and just stand here on this peak
forever! Mother Moon's mirage-mystique,
supreme in overview, beaming her glow
across the ocean, motionless, below--
a sea suspended in its cresting fury,
interrupted in its heartless hurry
by this stolen grace, its face of worry
softened to a dreamy smile! A sea-
white planet in its blanket, thankfully
asleep at last, no longer fitfully
erupting into storm--a perfect place
of peace and pleasure for the human race!
The Doctor soaks it in.
                "Oh, well," she sighs
at last, and Lunatic (who also sighs,
but in her horse-like way) resumes her stride.

And as the horse continues to provide
the onward push, the human disappears
inside herself again. The horse's ears
peer forward at the long descent. (Henceforth
the path is downward, the direction north,
and even Lunatic feels contradicted,
though she's seen no map where north's depicted
in the sky and south beneath the sea.)
The floating cloud now imperceptibly
drifts on ahead, degree by slow degree,
like a receding tide of memories,
away from them, dispersing as it flees--
and as the trail moves down among the trees,
they are escorted by a north-bound breeze
that sweeps the path ahead of them. Unlike
the secrecy that shrouds the woodland hike
up from the sea to Blueridge (hiding its
high terminus until the last), by fits
and starts, Unique already--all these miles
still yet to go--begins to peek and smile
up from the vale below.
                Upon their right,
a steep wood hides the eastern sea from sight
again. The New Atlantic view, in fact,
cannot be seen from any village backed
against the Appalachian hills. The wracked

remains of one such venture--badly smacked
by storm (no foreign army ever sacked
a settlement so thoroughly or hacked
apart its foes so well)--were cut and stacked
and carried west for firewood, but the act
of building on the eastern coast has lacked
enthusiasts for generations.

So

upon their right as they descend the slow
path northward, woodlands rise, while down below,
"between the mountaintop and undertow,"
great swaths of grain and fruit and veggies grow
upon the leftward, westward slopes. (Although
the fertile fields are thus exposed, the hoe
is wielded in October, when they sow
their grain, and then again after they mow
it down in winter's windless peace--and so
before the April hurricanes can blow,
they've gotten in two harvests.) And among
these hillside gardens, all across them, strung
like medieval towers (from which once rung
old church bells with their mighty iron tongues),
stand fieldstone silos filled with grain or dung.
Out of the stony earth from which they sprung
these towers rise.

The cloud has cleared the sea

by midnight or before, as frequently
occurs in winter, all without a drop
of rain. (In summer, showers never stop,
when to the south the tropic oceans boil
and send great banks of steam due north to roil
the seas and stir up storms that strip the soil
right off the hills.) Now for a while, the trail
looks out upon an open sea. No sail
appears--but then, Cecilia wouldn't fail
to cloak their mooring if she could, and so
the ship's invisibility is no
unlooked-for circumstance.
                The root crops grow
among the dales just off this woodland course.
The path grows wider, for the eunuch horse
they use exclusively around Unique--
in harvesting the turnip, carrot, leek;
in plowing up the fields of which we speak;
in every kind of work throughout the week
and every sort of weekend sport they seek.

They do no breeding here; their horses all
are male. They surgically remove one ball,
and then the other, as the colt matures,
with scientific timing that ensures
the largest possible resulting beast.

They are the biggest horses in the East,
perhaps the world. (Of course, they eat more oats--
but then again, who plows the fields? Who totes
the wagonloads of grain at harvest time?
They earn their keep.)
From here, there's no more climb;
it's all on level ground until you reach
the town. And yet the distance from the beach
grows greater as the path moves inward, to
the east, and a protective grove of blue-
green conifers obstructs the ocean view.
Then the expansive grain fields come in sight;
they take up all the landscape to the right--
predominantly corn and oats and wheat,
with border rows of peanuts, soybeans, sweet
peas, and--
Here Luna halts, just where a road
meets theirs, off to the right. She hasn't slowed
in preparation--just stopped, suddenly.
Her nose is raised, her ears are pricked, and she
is silent.
Dorothea sees a rider
in the lane, some distance off. Inside her,
there's that feeling that she always gets
when visiting Unique (and then forgets
about when she returns to Blueridge; then,

when she comes back, it bothers her again):
she's an intruder here, no matter how
they speak respectfully or smile or bow
when she arrives in town. She is not now,
nor will she ever be, more than--at best--
an emissary or a foreign guest.

From here, it looks as though the rider is
a boy of twelve or so on top of his
ordinary (if a little thick-limbed) horse.
It's the "Unique illusion," though, of course;
there are no children here, nor any horse
who hasn't been "improved" with a castration.
So she waits here at her crossroad station
and remembers: while it seems as though
the rider now approaching (moving slow,
examining the northern fields) is just
a hundred yards or so away, he must
be nearly twice that distance yet.
                His head,
of course, is cleanly shaved (these nights, instead
of scraping with a knife, they use a goo
derived from poisonberry thistles to
dissolve unwanted body hair), as is
the fashion for both men and women. His
attention stays diverted till a snort

from Lunatic gives them away (a short,
convulsive gasp, as though the horse has been
holding her breath, as Dorothea, in
her apprehension, has)--and then he sees
the two of them and quickly digs his knees
into his mount and breaks into a run.

The thundering approaching hoofbeats stun,
then panic Lunatic into a spin.
As Dorothea tries to rein her in
and calm her ("Easy, girl," she says), she hears
the eager eunuch rider shouting cheers
as he comes nearer:

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Lad!

It's Ladislaw--her youngest son. So glad
to see her! Once again, a strangely sad
and happy feeling fills the Doctor's heart.
She can't afford to let her tear ducts start
up now, however; she has work to do.
And so she reins in her emotions, too,
along with Lunatic ("Just take it easy,
girl," she says again), and puts a breezy
attitude and jolly smile upon
her face as Lad pulls up.

The horse he's on

weighs twice as much, at least, as Lunatic
(who is his great-great-grandmother); his thick
imposing figure stands a full head higher--
making Lunatic a good deal shier
than she normally would be with Lad,
whom she has known for twenty years. (She's had
no opportunity to learn to trust
his monstrous horse.) And certainly Lad must
weigh twice or thrice what Dorothea does
by now. When he was five or six, he was
a big boy for his age--and now, at "eight
foot plus" and nearly twenty-three, his great
size is a wonder even here. Above
his mother, Lad looks down with glee and love.

"Hey, cowboy!" Dorothea says. "Where did
you get that little colt?"
And like a kid
of five or six, Lad giggles. "He's a horse!
His name is Donkey Oaty!"
Lad, of course,
has no idea why they do, but knows
that people laugh at that sometimes, and those
are happy times. D reaches up and strokes
the giant horse on his great nose and jokes
a little more: "He's looking kind of thin.

Are you remembering to feed him?"

In this light, the Moon behind him, Doctor D can look into Lad's face quite easily, with no discomfort; when it's shaded, she is not so painfully aware of what a mirror image she encounters. But in stronger light, seeing her own small face implanted in that fleshy, towering place, watching those childish phrases forming from a mouth so much like hers, she feels a dumb and numbing horror, hard to overcome.

"He's eating like a horse!" Lad cries, and they both laugh.

"Oh! Happy Solstice, by the way," his mother tells him.

"That was yesternight," Lad says, correcting her.

"Oh, yeah; that's right. And so I guess it's <u>not</u> a holy night."

"It is so, too!" Lad says. "It's Boxing Night!"

"Oh! I'm surprised," says D. "I thought you guys abolished Boxing Night."

(The Doctor lies
in saying she's surprised. She knows Cas tries
each year to have the brutal custom banned--
but always fails, and it goes on as planned.)

"They wait until an hour after lunch--
so no one upchucks when they take a punch."

"But you're not boxing, are you?"
"Casaubon
won't let me."
"Good! He shouldn't."
"Oh, come on!
I'm old enough! I'm almost twenty-three!"

"But you're not fool enough," says Doctor D.

"That's what Cas says."
"Well, he and I agree
on that. It takes a very high degree
of foolishness to box, and thankfully,
you haven't got it."
"He takes care of me,"
Lad says, of Cas.
"Yes, Ladislaw; I see
that well."

"I'm his responsibility."

"Is he at home?"

"I think so. Probably."

"Well, let's go visit him."

And so they ride
into the village proper, side by side.
As they approach it, there's that odd sensation
once again: at first, the situation
seems approximately opposite
to what it really is. The houses, it
appears, are tiny box-like things--a long-
house chopped into a hundred bits along
the bottom of the rising hill ahead.
The crowd moving among them looks well-fed
but normally proportioned.

Then, instead
of coming up among the people at
the point you would expect to, there is that
disorienting moment when you know
you still have eighty yards or so to go
before you're there. The house-fronts rise, and so
do the inhabitants. You're shrinking.

"So--
did Cas do well this evening, with his bow?"

D asks.

And Ladislaw remembers: "Oh!
He won!"

"Out of how many?"

"I don't know;
about a hundred. It was great!"

They slow
down now, up on their horses, as they go
among pedestrians. But even though
Unique's bald barefoot citizens have no
four-leggéd creatures under them, their eyes
meet Dorothea's (as they realize
it's her) on more or less the level of
her own; the tall ones peer down from above.
Beneath their gaze, the Doctor feels a stony
chill inside--a small girl on a pony
who has wandered inadvertently
into a land of giants.

Thankfully,
she starts to see some faces--two or three
or four--of some familiarity
among the milling holy-nighting crowd.
Some smile and wave. One woman calls out loud,
"Hey, Doctor D!" (A former student; she
lived back in Blueridge until recently.)
"Hey, Happy Solstice!"

"Hey there, Melody!"
D calls. "How goes the entomology?"
And Melody holds up both thumbs.
But she
becomes uncomfortable, it seems to D,
from the attention this exchange has brought
from others of her kind. Although she sought
the contact (it was Melody who thought
to greet her), now she moves away and out
of sight, her face flushed with confusion, doubt.
The other residents confine their greetings
to a simple nod, as other meetings
draw them back. A few just stand and stare
at Doctor D, appearing not to care
if this seems rude.
As D and Lad turn to
the left and clop along the avenue
that fronts the endless row of solid squared-
off dwellings set into the hillside (bare,
pristine, imposing), D becomes aware
of cooking odors drifting through the air,
of hardwood smoke and steaming greens and spice.
But not a trace of meat--not even mice;
no eggs or milk, no sizzling fat or searing
flesh, no cheese soufflés. Up from the clearing
where the feast fire burns, the fragrance D

plainly discerns is grain (there's hominy
and millet, barley and brown rice, as well
as the "big three"), together with the smell
of arthropods of nearly every kind.
It's after midnight, yet they haven't dined.
The very flavor of the air reminds
D of the differences one often finds
between two cultures--even those aligned
so closely by geography, defined
by climate and religion, intertwined
by family ties--when altered states of mind
intrude with new traditions, redesigned
beliefs.

The scale of the houses--lined
up like a row of soldiers on their right
as they move past them--makes D feel (tonight,
as always) an intruder among strangers.
They have built according to the dangers
of the typhoon season, naturally,
into a western bluff, but being free
of fertile residents, the walls are thick
and tall--ten feet in height, composed of "brick"
(cut stone the size of cinder blocks)--and they
are twenty feet across, each with a gray
door standing four feet wide, on either side
of which two small square windows seem to hide

beneath the rafters, several feet above
the ground. The roofs are three feet deep.
                                Some of
the houses share a common wall with their
near neighbors, although most have open air
between them. Here and there, a cut-stone stair
cuts up between two of their number, where
it offers access to a garden there
up on the roof. Each dwelling holds one pair
of maids or eunuchs--or (not all that rare)
a combination of the two. But there
is nothing like the crowded "breeding lair"
of Blueridge at Unique. The rooms are spare
and spacious, with a desk or two, a chair
for each inhabitant, and (if they care
to sleep together) one large bed.
                                "Has C
or Uncle Bette been up here recently?"
the Doctor asks her son--just casually.

"Nuh-uh," he answers her, as though there had
been nothing odd about the question.
                                Lad
and D continue till they come upon
the fieldstone house Lad shares with Casaubon.
It's broader than the others, but it's not

as sleek or elegant--and not as hot
as most, since all of its six windows are
removable, and "come out with the stars"
except in direst weather. Its "bizarre"
(translation: slightly different) look has been
accepted by its neighbors, since within
its walls not only live the rather thin
and relatively small (just seven feet)
herbologist and his gigantic sweet
and simple brother, but throughout the suite
a pharmacopoeia of cures--discrete
to every ailment--lines the walls and hangs
from every rafter. All the aches and pangs
and maladies endemic to Unique
are treated here.
(Although his patients seek
him as a "doctor," none among them speak
of Cas as such, since at this time, in this
part of the world, that term's become the kiss
of death to serious practitioners;
its only common usage now refers
to "Doctor D" of Blueridge, who--her son
himself concedes--would hardly be the one
to seek out in a case of medical
emergency. In his ironical
insistence on the designation "shaman,"

Casaubon exhibits an uncommon
sense of the ridiculous.)
As Lad
leads Lunatic (who feels more than a tad
like Doctor D: a small girl lost) away
to munch upon an equine lunch of hay
and water, Dorothea enters through
the open doorway. She's aware of two
large figures by the desk, one sitting on
the bench-like bed. She waits--but Casaubon,
without so much as turning to the door,
beckons her in and goes on as before
with his near-finished consultation:
"More
plain water, every time you eat," he tells
his female patient. "Stay away from shells--
and grasshoppers, especially--until
we get the bleeding down. And here: one pill,
three times a night. Eight hours, ideally.
You'll let me know if it gets worse. I'll see
you in a week."
The woman stands up, shakes
his hand and thanks him. Then she somehow makes
her way past D without appearing to
acknowledge her, though it involves a two-
step side-to-side maneuver. Casaubon,

once his eleven forty-five is gone,
comes forward with an easy, smiling grace
and no excitement on his placid face.
He takes his mother's hand politely. "I
am--honored--by your presence." There's a wry
suggestion of a question in his greeting.

(Why must it be like this? Every meeting
they have had since Cas "recruited" Lad
from Blueridge--nearly five years now--has had
this maddening formality, this nice
hostility.)

"Some medical advice,
perhaps?" The shaman casts his emptied hand
in the direction of the bed. "I'd planned
on taking lunch at half past twelve, but I
could easily accommodate--for my
esteemed progenitor--"

But D says, "No.
No, thanks; I'm fine. There's been a murder."

"Oh."
The smile drops quickly from his face. "Oh, dear."
His eyes move off, then back again. "Well, here;
sit down."

He pulls the chair out opposite
his desk, and D sits down. The desk is lit

by one large hurricane hung from the ceiling
overhead. Whatever Cas is feeling
now (it's always hard to tell), it's clear
he's been unpleasantly <u>surprised</u> to hear
this news. He sits across from D, behind
the desk, and stares in wonder; just behind
him stands a polished eunuch skeleton,
like an assistant.
                Dorothea's son
is fully lit now, and he has begun,
as always, to remind her of the boy
she mated with that night (had he enjoyed
it?) twenty-seven years ago: José.
A sickly lad, he'd died during the day
just two months later, never even knowing
he had fathered anyone. The glowing
lamp delineates <u>his</u> features now;
there's not much Dorothea there.
                "But how?
And why? Who was involved?"
                Even the way
he wears his hair reminds her of José,
since Cas, despite the universal fad
(extending even to his brother Lad)
for shaven heads, prefers it long and tied
back in a ponytail and amplified

with curling forest vines.

"The man who died was an explorer from the West. He came by ship. He just arrived last night. His name was Zeke. Head of a crew of thirteen men. ... And so Cecilia hasn't been here, then?"

She pulls her riding sack off of her shoulder.

"No. Not for some weeks." Her son looks older now; the lines around his mouth are tight. "What do you mean, 'the West'?" His eyes are bright beneath the lantern.

"Colorado."

"Oh. My god. Then they must be invading."

"No. It was a peaceful mission--up until last day. During the day, somebody killed the Captain. Dragged him out and left him in the Sun to fry."

And now she reaches in her riding sack, pulls out the window cup and sets it on the desk. He picks it up and smells it.

"Deathwort. Marijuana. Hops.

El Niño mint," he lists them off, then stops
and sets it back before her.
"Deathwort," she
repeats.
The shaman waves dismissively.
"It's just a sleep-inducing blend, in my
opinion. It's Cecilia's work--and I
myself prescribe a similar infusion
when the case is chronic. There's confusion,
dizziness, and so on if one tries
to walk around and fight it; otherwise,
it's harmless. For insomnia, it's just
the thing. Very effective."
"Then it must
be just coincidence," says Dorothea.

Casaubon considers an idea
while his eyes still rest upon the cup.
"But then again," he says, not looking up,
"the life of one man or a dozen, when
compared to several thousand women, men,
and children..." Here he trails off--and then
looks up again, meeting his mother's eyes.
"But Dorothea: why were you surprised
I hadn't seen Cecilia here tonight?"

Thinking so calmly how Cecilia might
have done the deed herself! The very sight
of Casaubon's detachment brings a light
disorienting feeling and a slight
unreal numb sensation to his mother.
He's my son, she thinks, and yet another
species altogether.
                She goes on,
however, to detail for Casaubon
the bare particulars: the night before;
this evening's rude awakening--the gore
and horror of the Captain's crucifixion
(Cas absorbs it like an old nonfiction
text, with fascination but no more);
her quick decision, with the threat of war
at hand, to send the ship away, with C
and Bette to sail it to Unique, where D
would meet them; the unfortunate events
that led to Peter's death. She has the sense
that Casaubon's emotion, as her brief
account concludes, is satisfied relief
that the invaders are now under guard.

Though Ladislaw has come in from the yard,
he sits apart, off on the "sleeping bed"
against the further wall. The shaman's head

is bent in thought. Lad knows enough to stay
out of the way when he's in conference; they
have worked this out before. He must delay
his interruption.
                Now the shaman's gray
face lifts back into light. "Well, I would say
it's likely Bette and C will be away
for some time, Doctor. We must hope and pray
for their safe passage to whatever may
await them in the greater world. Convey
my sympathies to Cat--and have him pay
a visit to our village in the way
of insect husbandry; our Désirée
and Melody would love to share a ray
or two of light with him, I'm sure. If they..."

The shaman pauses here; another thought
has intervened. "But that, of course, is not
the critical concern. You haven't got
an herbalist at Blueridge now, and C
did not apprentice any after me."

"I'm sure Cecilia will be back before--"

Her son continues, choosing to ignore
this wishful interruption: "I suppose

I ought to plan a weekly visit; those
inevitable medical concerns--
the fevers and infections, breaks and burns--
can't be expected to abate. Disease
will have its way, as will those pregnancies
endemic to the breeding colonies."

"The 'breeding colonies'?"
"Exactly. Please
don't let this languish unattended to:
it's critical--imperative--that you
come up with an apprentice for me here.
It's going to take at least a solid year
of constant training, during which I fear
that Blueridge may, without a shaman near
for those emergencies that tend to rear--"

"But aren't there any candidates right here
who might be suitable for a career
in medicine? I'd think it would be clear
enough to you, if any should appear
to have a gift for it."
Cas sighs. "My dear,
dear Doctor. You must realize that we're
a Separatist community. The mere
location of a maid or eunuch here

would contraindicate him as a peer
for any of your aunts and uncles."
("Aunts
and uncles"--with the aunts pronounced as ants--
is an expression that our readers from
the past may understand best as in some
ways similar to "Uncle Tom," as that
term was applied to "Jim Crow" blacks, their hat
in hand, who grinned and scuffed their feet when they
would meet with white folk in the street. The way
our Casaubon tosses it out, without
a sneer or intonation, leaves no doubt
as to his permanent regard--or lack
thereof--for maids and eunuchs who, like black
folk of a hundred fifty years ago,
accept the old familiar status quo
without a whimper.)
"It's absurd, I know,"
he says. "We obviously need to breed
more reproductive humans--plant the seed
and till the soil and so on--but the creed
of Separatism tends to supercede
concerns for Vast Humanity when it
competes. I don't think anyone would quit
Unique for Blueridge who has made the split
with mixed society. I'm sure you see."

But this is all too much for Doctor D.
She stands up, takes the cup and puts it back
beside Zeke's journal in her riding sack.
"Well, Casaubon, if either C or Bette
should cross your path, I hope you won't forget
to tell them I was here. And if you see
a sail--"

"I'll send you word immediately,"
Cas says, now standing up himself. "Or I'll
ride down, if time permits." A cordial smile
is back upon his lips as he holds out
his hand. "I'm very much concerned about
these matters, and I hope you have no doubt
of my great eagerness to help."

She shakes
his hand (and something in the action makes
her think of milking goats) and turns to go.
But there is Ladislaw, a look of woe
upon his face--still sitting, and thus low
enough for D to see him eye-to-eye.
He looks as though he is about to cry.
"But Mommy, aren't you going to stay for lunch?"

"I'm sorry, Lad," she says. "I've got a bunch
of business to attend to. Maybe next
time. Next week, maybe."

But he still looks vexed.
"That's what you always say," he moans, his voice
exactly like a child's.
"I have no choice,"
his mother tells him.
"Yes you do!" her son
insists.
Behind her now, the other one
says, "Doctor, have you eaten anything
this evening?"
"No," she says.
"Well, let me bring
you something." And he goes outside, not waiting
for an answer.
Now the penetrating
gaze of Ladislaw--uncalculating,
innocent, uncomprehending, hating
her and loving her--goes on berating
her for all her haste. The unabating
duplication of her features, stating
unequivocally her fault, is fating
her to this encounter, situating
her before this magic mirror, rating
her a fraud.
She rests her hand against
his cheek, and in a moment more it's rinsed

with infant tears. Despite what she might want
to feel, all down her limbs, as if to taunt
her conscience, sprout a thousand little bumps
of "gooseflesh," as a deep revulsion trumps
whatever motherly emotions she's
supposed to be experiencing. (These
should not include disgust or pity. When
the bird called "goose" lived here on Earth with men,
did it inspire such feelings?)
                                Thankfully,
the older son returns in two or three
more minutes with a sandwich lunch (tortilla,
pita, or chapatti--Dorothea
doesn't even look at it) wrapped neatly
in a napkin. Soon she is completely
free of Ladislaw and Casaubon
and the Unique experience. Once on
the trail back home, she and her horse begin
expanding, step by step, till they again
are in correct proportion to the Earth.

* * * * * * * * * *

The Doctor scans the sea for all she's worth
whenever it appears. The Moon is high
now and the air is relatively dry.

A brilliant silver sheen spreads out across
the waves; she squints against the gleaming gloss
and tries to fathom sails--but all to no
avail. Where did the Revelation go?

At last, she even pauses on that peak
that reaches to the sky between Unique
and Blueridge, peering out into the blue-
black New Atlantic, looking for a clue
in that unlikely lifeless view. A few
stark foothill islands poke their heads up through
the sea, like ghosts of "sharks" (those monsters who,
in ancient times, pursued and sometimes slew
unlucky sailors when they fell into
the ocean); nothing living, nothing new.

Now, as she winds her way back home among
the dead and living trees (some bare, some hung
with armored cones and needles), she can hear
Cecilia whispering from some place near--
a choking croaking in her seaward ear:
"The worst has happened now. The Captain's dead,"
the rustling forest whispers. "Keep your head."

And all around her, in the naked trees,
she sees him hanging with his crooked knees

directed westward. But elusive; he's
peripheral. He disappears--the breeze
disintegrates him--at the moment she's
looked up to see him.
                Still, her eyes stay dry;
her nerve stays resolute. She can deny
these whisperings and visions. She can try,
at least.
        But now Cecilia whispers in
another key--and so another Sin
is brought to light--as other words begin
to stir up through the woods, from years before.
They say, "I love you, Dorothea. More
than anyone. I love you."
                And a sore
spot in the Doctor's heart begins to gore
her. Famous for her courage, she'd been base
and cowardly that time, afraid to face
that other heart inside its giant case.
Her dainty distancing, her lack of grace--
leaving her best friend in that lonely place
to hang suspended there in outer space
while <u>her</u> enchanted life went on apace--
brings shaming blood into her burning face
as she rides on to Blueridge. She must brace
herself against this flood of feeling, chase

these memories away, try to erase
them. Temporarily, at least.
                But there
are more words wisping through the midnight air
along the wooded trail that leads back home.
And now Cecilia's voice, that little gnome-
like scratching sound, is saying, "It's too late.
It's too late now. I hate you. Now I hate
you."

And to shout these sounds down, suddenly
the Doctor speaks out loud, with clarity
and even eloquence--rehearsing just
exactly what she'll tell those men whose trust
she's going to have to earn--but with such force
that she upsets the unoffending horse
beneath her: "Gentlemen!" she cries. "I beg
your patience!"

Lunatic's southwestern leg
(which is to say her right front) veers off course
and catches. Dorothea's quick remorse--
seeing her sudden outburst as the source
of Lunatic's misstep--brings back her focus
to the here and now and clears the hocus-
pocus of hallucination, sight
and sound alike. The silver-shadowed night
resumes its shape. Cecilia and Zeke

under this influence now cease to speak
or hang from trees.
"I'm sorry, Lunatic,"
D tells her mount (which seems to do the trick;
Lu gets her footing back). "I thought a quick
rehearsal of my speech might clear my mind.
I didn't mean to shout. That wasn't kind."

The horse snorts understandingly, and D
continues to rehearse--but silently.
Arranging the unpleasant news to suit
her guests (or prisoners) demands acute
deliberation. It's a vain pursuit,
of course, she understands. She'll need to gauge
their mood (or moods), whether of fear or rage
or something else, and speak accordingly--
and most importantly, allow them free
use of their <u>own</u> tongues to harangue or question
<u>her</u>. She'll need to seize every suggestion
they come up with and embrace it, thus
negating any sense of "them and us"
they naturally would harbor, to convince
them they are allies now and to evince
a sense of common purpose. Otherwise,
she's bound to lose them. It would not be wise
to walk in with a speech prepared. But just

to go through these familiar motions must
be useful in eradicating ghosts;
so she goes on.
The sailors' Eastern hosts
observe a tomb-like silence as they stand
outside the longhouse, even as they hand
them in their after-midnight dinner and
clear out their empty plates. It isn't planned;
it just seems more respectful to the band
of men who struggle, in this foreign land,
to mourn their losses while the shifting sand
of fortune crumbles under them. This bland
funereal approach they understand
and value. Luke--who has assumed command
without a hint of struggle--takes his cue
from the subdued demeanor of the two
armed guards. (All of their visits to the loo,
he notices, are made without ado,
the guards allowing anybody who
steps out the door to make the journey to
the outhouse without fuss or overview.)
The wee small hours are spent in a review
of circumstances gone so far askew
that they must reconsider now anew
the very nature of their mission. Who
are they to serve now? What are they to do?

They take their time tonight and talk it out.

When Dorothea rides in view, no shout
of greeting breaks the stillness. Mother Moon
stands guard above the silent village. Soon
the eastern sky will start its lightening,
surprising some doomed creatures, frightening
the wiser ones into retreat. But for
these last few hours of harmless darkness more,
the scene's portrayed in soothing black and white--
the false security of deepest night.

The doormen merely nod at her as she
dismounts and puts her horse to bed. To be
back home again in Blueridge usually
provides a feeling of relief. But not
tonight. Tonight her skin feels thin and hot,
and yet the cool breeze blowing up the hill
from down below--the dead sea (breathing, still,
after these lifeless generations) chill--
imbues her heart with thickening blood. The ground
beneath her feet, although there is no sound
of seismic restlessness, begins to pound
now--softly, like a heartbeat. She can feel
it in the shallows of her soles, more real
(or no less real, in any case) than her

own heart. This island is a prisoner,
she thinks, cut off from its own kind, but still
alive.

It takes heroic force of will
for her to push open the door upon
the Western sailors' quarters. She's been gone
all night, and they have waited, as for dawn.
They've moved four of the beds into a square
and sit there patiently under a bare
lard-burning lamp hung from a rafter, where
to all appearances they have been deep
in conference for some time. There, in a heap
before them on the floor, their shorts are lying,
like the embers of a campfire dying.
They are nude again, as they had been
the night before. The Doctor can't begin
to understand it, but she senses there
has been some change.

The men exchange a stare
with her. D tries to speak, but finds her throat
is swollen--and the men's white faces float
before her, and her mouth won't work. Luke stands
without a word (no questions or commands
are needed now) and goes to her and throws
his arms about her as the lantern glows
above. Although he's shorter by a head

than D (and lighter, probably), instead
of feeling like a child beneath her, he
seems more substantial than a man as he
enfolds her now and holds her up, a Rock
of Ages in this age of scorch and shock
and sudden storm, and Dorothea cleaves
to him and sobs.

A helpless shudder heaves
through her from head to toe and so bereaves
her of all self-control. Of course, she grieves
for poor Ezekiel--but she also grieves
for these young men, whose Captain's murder leaves
them prisoners of war forever; grieves
for Peter, whose rash act, she now believes,
she might have stopped. Confusedly, she grieves
for Uncle Bette and C, whose absence leaves
so vast a vacancy beneath these eaves--
but no finality. And then she grieves
all for herself.

It's been so long since tears
like these have poured from D! For thirty years,
it seems, her eyes stayed resolutely dry;
now suddenly all she can do is cry.
How can she stop this flood? She doesn't try,
not really, but is nonetheless dismayed
to find she's lost the knack. She's half afraid

it will go on forever, till it dries
her body out completely and she dies
of dehydration.
But eventually
her sobs and moans subside. She finds that she
is seated now, with Luke's surprisingly
long arms still holding her, upon one of
the beds, surrounded by these men--this love--
here in the aftermath of her distress,
her hands and face a sticky, gooey mess.
One of the men (whose name she can't recall
just now) hands Luke a towel, and after all
the fuss, she feels ridiculous. But no
one minds.
"Thanks, Luke," she whispers. "I am so,
so sorry. I can't tell you--"
"Yeah, I know,"
he answers. "We all know. Nobody blames
you, D."
(She tries to think of all their names.
There's Luke, of course. And Matthew, Mark, and John.
Alas, the other seven names are gone.)

"And so--are you the Captain now?" she asks.

He takes her hand and holds it, while she basks

in the proximity of these young men,
who seem like family now, somehow. But then
Luke shakes his head.
"We took a vote tonight,
and we elected you. If that's all right."

And for a moment, D's afraid she might
succumb to tears again--but doesn't, quite.
"I couldn't find your ship," she says. "It wasn't
where it was supposed to be."
"That doesn't
matter now," Luke says. "I mean--of course
it matters; we should look for it, of course.
But what I mean is, we've decided not
to go back home again. Just--for a lot
of reasons. So we'd like to immigrate,
if that's okay."
"Oh. Yes! That would be great,"
the Doctor says. "It would be more than great,
in fact. It will be."
"If you want to wait
and see what everybody says--"
"Oh, no;
it isn't that. It's just that there is so
much I should tell you, that you need to know."

"Okay."

"But wait a minute. First things first.
I'll be right back."

The Doctor, with a burst
of energy born of new hope, now goes
and gets the "antler pipe," reserved for those
occasions--rare as frost--when history
is made, great fortune comes, or tragedy
is narrowly averted. It is long
and fragile-looking but is very strong
in fact and has been dropped on more than one
occasion and has lain out in the Sun
all day within the Doctor's memory.
It has the look of driftwood from the sea--
but never saw the ocean, probably.

The male "deer" (a beast that went extinct
back in the Twenty Thirties--often linked
with pioneers, though it was even more
ubiquitous during the long "Cold War,"
when agriculture flourished) every spring
would grow a "rack" upon his head--a thing
like sprouting springtime branches, many-pronged--
which signaled to the doe how much he longed
to mate with her. (If you'll forgive the corny
adjective, it told her he was horny.)

Antlers had another use as well:
on those occasions when more than one swell
aspired to the same fashionable belle,
a sort of jousting match took place where two
or more four-footed Romeos would do
mock battle with each other, locking racks
and throwing rivals to and fro, their backs
and haunches straining, till the one remaining
claimed his prize (the runners-up complaining
of a headache). Gentle herbivores
whose ordinary way of settling scores
was fleeing them in wide-eyed panic, bucks
would nonetheless engage to try their lucks
in these symbolic combats every year
of their romantic adult lives.
These deer
were capable of <u>ceremony</u>, then.
So how appropriate that human men
and women of the current age should take
this ceremonial symbol now to make
their own dear ceremonies all the more
symbolic!
(While whoever thought to bore
a tunnel from the tip down to the hole
at the attaching end and sculpt a bowl
for burning weed just where it joined the head

in ancient daylight times is long since dead,
it's been suggested that a red-hot wire
"coat hanger" is what she used, with fire
close at hand.)
A font of bubbling joy
is felt by everyone as they employ
the antler pipe in its immortalizing
function, setting fire to the rising
hour. And yet no laughter or broad grins
flare up to brighten the despond of Sins
(or mortal error) that has brought them all
together in this tragedy, this fall.

The Doctor's thick converging thoughts recall
her to her duties even as they smoke.
She has confined herself to just one toke
but holds it in her lungs until the other
members of her family--her brother
pioneers, survivors--have partaken.
She exhales at last, the long forsaken
flavor just a puff of dust she tastes
upon her tongue. She clears her throat and wastes
no more deliberation on the course
her talk should take.
Instead of trying to force
her narrative into sequential order,

she begins it at that natural border
where the Moonlit innocence of youth
encounters the disruptive dawn of truth
and separates the peaceful realm of dream
from harsh reality--that ragged seam
that never can be sewn up tight, but might
be made to fit all right, just where the night
surrenders to the day.
                She starts in, then,
with that old tale Cecilia whispered when
D lay reviving from her time at sea
and this Moon-worshipping society
was new to her--as new as life would be
to one who'd passed from womb to infancy.
It is an old but not quite ancient tale,
no doubt invented in some wailing gale
of early post-Apocalyptic times
to calm the children with new nursery rhymes
to tell between tornado and typhoon--
the legend of the Islands of the Moon:

X. THE ISLANDS OF THE MOON

The islands of the Moon, our children say,
are made entirely of snow. They say
the people there traverse the sea by sleigh,
their oceans being made of ice. That way,
they fly from isle to isle with perfect ease
and get around as freely as you please
without a drop of sweat or toil. Disease,
these younger children all suppose, is quite
unknown there. The cool, sweet air of night
is sparkling, energizing--and delight
is pretty much a constant state. Their snow-
flakes are the stars we see at night. So slow
and gentle are the winds that barely blow
up there that we on Earth don't even know
when they are blowing--gradual and calm
and smooth as ice, a soft and soothing balm.

The older children don't believe that there
are people living on the Moon. The air
is much too cold, these older ones insist
(assuming airs of serious scientists),
for human lungs to breathe. Your blood would freeze

and you would turn into a rock! No trees
could grow, and so you couldn't even cook!
Before they've even learned to read a book,
they know these things--and laugh derisively
at their young siblings' crude mythology.

And yet they still personify the Moon.
In Twenty Thirty, on the afternoon
the Flood began on Earth, a silver-gray
or grayish silver cloud above the spray
of bubbling, boiling ocean covered, they
believe, every square inch of sky. (That may
be true. Who knows?) The Sun and Moon were thus
cut off from view of humankind (or "us")
and had a war of wills up there above
the atmosphere.
                The Moon had a great love
for Man, a mother's love. Not so the Sun;
the Sun was irked, annoyed at what we'd done,
what we ungrateful human beings had done
to Earth--polluting all its waterways
and every patch of land and air, to raise
up from beneath the Earth's protective crust
a slew of chemicals the Sun had <u>just</u>
been burying (a billion years ago)
so life on Earth could flourish! Now the snow

was melting and the plants could hardly grow
because of all those chemicals. And so
the Sun was pitiless.

"They've got to go,"
he said to Mother Moon. "They'll never know
what hit them. Presto!"

Mother Moon said, "No!
Wait! Not so fast. Let's make a deal."

"The hell
with that!" the Sun replied. "Let rivers swell
and mountains fall and forests burn!"

But Mother
Moon kept fighting with her older brother--
or her husband, as some versions make
the Sun: "Let's give them one more chance!"

"We'll bake
the bastards where they sit! The earth will quake,
the winds will howl, the oceans leap across
the continents! The rains--"

"Who made <u>you</u> boss,
you great big ugly hot-head!" Moon cut in.

This interjection stuck him like a pin.
"What do you mean?" he asked, deflating just
a little.

"We are partners; so we must

reach an agreement first, before we start
Apocalypsing." Moon spoke from the heart.

"'Apocalypsing!' Silly--no such word
exists; your use of language is absurd."

"You rule the day," Moon said. "I rule the night.
We must agree on terms; it's only right."

"You 'rule' the night!" he mocked her, out of spite.
"Oh, my! I'm trembling! I quake with fright!
The mighty Moon rules all, from her great height!"

"Oh, good. Resort to sarcasm. That's right,"
the Moon put in.
                "Oh, Moon! Your beam so bright!"
he kept on mocking. "Spare your faithful knight,
Sir Sun, who humbly bows beneath your light!"

"Why not destroy me, while you're at it? Smite
me! Go ahead; you know you want to." White
with fear, Moon kept a resolutely tight
rein on her tone of voice.
                This stinging bite
of Mother Moon's served only to excite
the Sun into a rage. Aflame with fight,

he bellowed like a blast of dynamite:
"How dare you speak to me that way! I might
just take you up on that! I really might!"

"Well, go ahead. I dare you. I invite
you. Kill me."
Knowing she was in the right,
concerned above all things about the plight
of humankind, the Moon was brave that night.
She stood up to the Sun, and she was quite
undauntable in our defense, despite
the Sun's wild fury.
"You're a paper kite!"
he howled at her. "A silly satellite
who floats a mile above the sea at night--
just high enough to catch a little light
from me! The Sun! The succor and delight
of everything that lives! The birds in flight!
The fish that swim! The mammoth and the mite!
The unbeliever and the proselyte!"

"And now about to be the scourge and blight
of those same creatures," Moon rejoined, a slight
sad tremor in her voice. "Well, if it's quite
all right with you, I'd just as soon unite
with those expiring souls, the very sight

of whom you find so hard to bear."
And right
there, Moon accomplished humankind's respite
from ruin. If it doesn't sound too trite
to say, it was Moon's soft reply that turned
away Sun's wrath. His fiery heart, which burned
so bright in anger, now was touched with pity--
even as the country, town, and city
flamed and shook and drowned beneath the gray
or silver cloud that shrouded Earth that day.

The Sun remembered how it was with Earth
three billion years ago. Right from its birth,
the Moon had stayed close by its side and kept
it company while lifelessly it slept--
and waited for the animals and plants
to start developing. She had enhanced
the midnight sky with that enchanting sphere
when only smoke and molten rock were here
to see her patient vigil in the sky.
She <u>was</u> Earth's mother; true. Sun heaved a sigh.

"All right, all right," he said. "We'll let them live
by night, if they can manage it. You'll give
them light. Those ultraviolet rays won't do
them any harm once they've been bounced off you,

even without an ozone layer."

"Can't we just restore the ozone layer? Grant them--"

"What? Free will, without the consequences?"

"No, you're right; once they've regained their senses, they should learn their lessons, more or less. ... And all the snow and ice is melting?"

"Yes--quite quickly, now."

"Could I just--take it, then?" asked Moon.

The Sun was flabbergasted. "When?"

"Right now, this instant, while they're all distracted!"

So she caught him in the right mood, acted quickly, and achieved her objects: Earth was saved, and Moon obtained a planet's worth of ice and snow.

That's how the kids of five or six explain it. Once they've been alive a little longer and they've seen the way the night sky changes as the length of day and night trade places and the constellations

go through their involved reorientations,
they apply their new astronomy
to this old fairy tale. It's then we see
a variant that toes the scientific
line (inclining less to the terrific
or fantastic) but still rests upon
the unexamined premise that while gone
from Earth, the bright white snow of former days
goes on above:

The Moon's snow melts away
in summer, incrementally, until
the autumn Equinox, when time holds still
for just one night of neither wax nor wane;
then on the first autumnal night, it gains
a tiny bit of hard-won girth and light,
and so on, on each subsequent fall night
on through the winter. Mother Moon grows bright
and white when "snowing"--though the gain is slight
as we approach the vernal Equinox,
in March, when once again the growth rate locks
at neither loss nor gain for just one night,
in spring. In summer, in among the "fright
night" hurricanes and forest fires, you might
look up and see the haggard, care-worn face
of Mother Moon with here and there a trace
of Lunar surface poking through the snow

upon her islands, or a patch where no
bright ice protects the Lunar sea--although
in winter she's as white as white can be.

By then they're reading books promiscuously;
not only science, math, and history
but also works of fiction: mystery
and horror, science fiction, fantasy--
and even some romance, since puberty
is on its way.
Our university
begins accepting students who might be
as young as ten or twelve, but generally,
they're in their early teens when formally
their freshman term begins, and normally,
a student earns her bachelor's degree
at seventeen. By then, ironically,
assuming she's developed sexually,
she will have had at least one pregnancy
and probably will know maternity
(or fatherhood, if she's a boy) and be
a bachelor no longer.
Once they go
to university, they undergo
a sort of metamorphosis (or so
they dream) of understanding. Once they know

the universe is so complex, they show
their steady grasp of it by letting go
of all their childhood lessons. Here they throw
out with the metaphoric bath the snow
that's melted from their Lunar isles. A slow
but sure disdain of worship starts to grow
in their evolving thoughts, and even though
they may still mouth the hymns of praise, there's no
more private prayer to Mother Moon. Her glow
becomes reflective in the ebb and flow
of tides of knowledge, in the to and fro
of college life. Drowned in the undertow
of myth, those infant tales of long ago
wash out to sea.

A sort of quid pro quo
where Science takes the place of God is oh
so common with these children then. "The foe
of reason" is their view of faith--the blow
delivered to all progress (as they know
from history) throughout the ages. Lo!
The voice of Science speaks and they bow low
below her. Unto Science they bestow
all their religious fervor. Row on row
of elemental tables, where the hoe
of scholarship prepares the ground to sow
the seeds of scientific breakthroughs, feel

these scholars' eager eyes and knees. They kneel
and toil across the virgin soil of this
new god and so achieve a kind of bliss.

But by the time they graduate, a new
and truer understanding filters through
this phase. Perhaps it is the point of view
of parenthood that turns the trick. The kind
of love a parent feels can't be defined
in footnotes, yet its fact defies the mind:

A mother loves her child; this much we grant.
She is an animal. (Perhaps a plant
may also love its young, but that's another
matter; let us say a human mother.)
If an organism thus composed
of chemical ingredients--supposed
to be no different structurally from those
in fallout, iron ore, or shit--emits
this undetectable emotion, it's
no mighty leap of faith to posit that
a satellite of rock (whose habitat,
a hundred thousand miles above the Earth,
in constant orbit, boasts a chilly dearth
of oxygen and gravity) is worth
a look in terms of its capacity

to love. It would take grand audacity
on mankind's part to say, "Moon has no heart
and therefore cannot love." Not very smart,
nor very scientific.
                But this line
of fine Socratic reasoning, divine
it as we may, still lacks the power to move--
to touch the hearts of those deep in the groove
of scientific records, trials and proofs.
And yet beneath their long-loved longhouse roofs
at day, they feel this power science can't
address. Perhaps their worn-out mothers grant
them study time and lend support when they
might be more useful in some other way--
in supervising younger siblings, say,
preparing food, or doing chores which may
be logically more pressing than perusing
ancient texts. But there it is, refusing
all denial: Love, the force that blows
through all constraints of math and physics, grows
beyond itself and keeps expanding on
and on, all through the night and past the dawn,
supporting them in all they undertake,
sustaining them--for what? For its own sake.

Great Love! Although the intellect resists

such passion, something in the soul insists--
and lo, those tales so long ago dismissed
come glowing through the academic mist
these nascent botanists and herbalists,
zoologists and entomologists,
astronomists and meteorologists
have raised in clouds about them as they kissed
the foggy feet of Science. They persist
in dormant memories that don't desist;
they persevere in dreams that won't untwist
themselves from that insistent infant fist
that holds them tight and snug. They preexist,
thus antedate the late harsh "realist"
approach that casts Man as the hapless grist
the mill of life will blindly grind.
                The mist
of scholarship departing, then, the tryst
between the head and heart (which tops the list
of apt appointments graduationists
should make) is made at last. Here we enlist
the kindly cosmic cardiologist
who understands the heart--the harmonist
of heaven, Mother Moon--for an assist
in this encounter of spare parts. The gist
of their first meeting is as follows: kissed
at last by loving Lunar lips--long missed

in hurried, harried headlong rationalist
pursuits--the mind becomes emotionalist,
the heart a hearty intellectualist.
(We've seen the steam rise where the snow has hissed
upon these brows and breasts.) "Whoa! You exist!"
they both exclaim in wonder. Clasping wrists
(in a triumphant diplomatic twist),
the head becomes the heart's ventriloquist
and vice versa.

Deft diplomatist
and able acrobatic alchemist,
our Mother Moon serves both as catalyst
who turns these often base obstructionist
opponents into gold and dramatist
who casts them on the stage, antagonists
no more--all from her airy aerialist
environs in the sky. The head and heart,
who never were designed to live apart,
become as one.

In retrospect, it's odd
that one could think a fissure between God
and Science could exist. The thought offends
the heart with which encumbered mind contends,
as love's pure logic pains the head. It ends
with Mother Moon and Science being friends--
which they have always been, of course we know.

The childhood tales recalled from long ago
are passed along intact, in fact. There's no
crosswind of contradiction felt. And so
we still believe, no matter how we grow,
the islands of the Moon are made of snow. ...

Last night (can it have only been last night?)
I spoke some time with Zeke, under the light
of Mother Moon, and he revealed to me
a sort of an epiphany that he
had just experienced. While gazing at
her gracious face and realizing that
(here in the East) we center all our sense
of worship there, the mere coincidence
of place was suddenly eclipsed and sliced
through with a revelation: Jesus Christ
and Mother Moon, it dawned on him, are one.

He smiled in saying this, as though in fun;
so I admit that when your Captain spoke,
I thought he must be trying to make a joke.
He knew that I had lived under the yoke
of Christianity for sixteen years,
then risked my life to cross a sea of tears
against all odds (even before I told
my tale at last night's feast) to flee the hold

of your Messiah, threatening his flames
of Hell and nonstop gnashing teeth with claims
of sheer celestial supremacy.
That this tyrannic goon could ever be
mistaken for our Moon just seemed to me
ridiculous.
But then Zeke made it clear
he spoke in earnest. He was quite sincere.
He said he saw how Christianity
had always had--from the Nativity
up to the night that followed Calvary--
nocturnal themes. He said, "It seems to me
that reproduction we so often see--
the midnight Garden of Gethsemane
where Jesus kneels, his hands upon a rock
lit by the Moon--which morphed into a stock
representation, seen on everything
from calendars to gravestones--with that ring
of Lunar light reflecting crown-like from
his brow--if I remember, it was some
old German painter--"
"Heinrich Hofmann," I
put in.
"Exactly. But that midnight sky!
That attitude of worship where the guy
is gazing so intently at that high

point where the Moon breaks through the clouds! A spy
from Heaven peering down on Earth! The eye
of God! The window where the angels fly--"

"Except if Jesus <u>were</u> the Moon, then why
would he be praying to her?"
God knows why
I argued with him; silly to deny
something so obvious. His wry reply--
"You mean the Moon would never deify
herself?"--might have allowed me to get by,
had he not added "Doctor?" with a sly
true-pointed glance. And then I knew that I
might just as well give up.
It baffles my
imagination how--with every tie
to Western culture and its central lie
that casts Jehovah as the Cosmic Fry
Cook who, without the least regretful sigh,
sends souls into the bubbling brimstone pie--
your Captain still could hear the plaintive cry
of good Saint Jesus, while the Elders vied
vaingloriously for power. To defy
that din and still take in those words of worth
about the realm of Heaven here on Earth,
he must have had a rare ability

to spot the flower floating in the sea
of toxic dogma that perpetually
besets those shores. That you should turn to me
to take his place brings great humility--
an unfamiliar foreign state to me.

I left your country back in Sixty-eight.
I gather that some time between that date
and when you men were born, the custom went
from naming from the Older Testament
to naming from the New. Perhaps that shift
might indicate the dawning of a rift
between the eye-for-eye and tooth-for-tooth
of old and the triumphant cheeky truth
of Jesus, with his love for enemies
(whether Samaritans or Pharisees)
and his unfailing faith in empathy's
redemptive power.
                Damn. I'd wanted so
to talk like this with Zeke! We'd planned to go
this very evening after breakfast, just
the two of us, up to Unique. I trust
you men would have employed your time while we
were gone in the renewed society
of those young ladies from last night, to see
if possibly familiarity

might breed content. ...

The village of Unique:
our nearest neighbor, just beyond that peak
you see due north of here. It's time to speak
about that place and what it's going to mean.
It's not a subject I've been very keen
on opening, but--well, I guess it's time.
I had the opportunity, and I'm
afraid I let it pass, to talk with Zeke
about it. I have two sons at Unique,
both eunuchs. It's a bigger town than this;
in fact, it's more than twice our size. I miss
my boys, of course, but--

Well, there's been a trend
in recent years (God knows where it will end)
among the maids and eunuchs to break out
and form their own communities. No doubt
it's troublesome for them to have to deal
with creatures so much smaller, whom they feel
(quite naturally) to be their physical
inferiors. There is a mystical
belief among them that the Moon intends
for them to live apart. I've seen no trends
toward starting up a new <u>religion</u>, but
there's no denying a new <u>culture</u>--what
they call a "Separatist" society.

These Separatists form the majority
of maids and eunuchs now. As you shall see,
nine of the twenty-seven townships we
have on these islands (a minority,
you might suppose, but in reality,
they now account for half the population)
are Separatist communities. A nation
all its own, with its own unity
of purpose.

Every new community
that's come about since Twenty Seventy
has been (initially, primarily--
but then eventually, exclusively)
composed of maids and eunuchs. When Unique
was formed, eleven years ago this week,
it was the first to write into its laws
a case-specific anti-breeder clause,
prohibiting not only habitation
but, without a proper invitation,
any visits lasting more than twenty-
seven hours. I'm sad to say that plenty
more such laws have been enacted now,
in other towns. And so you gather how
Unique's no longer so unique.

Allow
me to back up a bit. When I gave birth

to Cas and Lad, the incidence on Earth
of eunuchism was at two in three.
By now, I think that figure has to be
well over three in four. And if the trend
continues unabated, by the end
of the next century, the incidence
will be up in the ninety-odd percents.

And it's a world-wide trend; make no mistake.
Out West, it may be easier to make
believe it isn't happening, because
of all the customs and religious laws
that make the overall percentage seem
much smaller than it is. But that's a dream.
The horse-feed diet they endure, the high-
risk work they're forced to do, the lack of dry
safe housing during hurricanes, and so
on, keep their numbers relatively low,
once they've developed into full-fledged "blanks."
But oftentimes before that happens--thanks
to a religion that regards the start
of "blanking" as the turning of the heart
of God against the soul that occupies
the body--the devolving eunuch dies
most unexpectedly. The family tries
to make it look as though some toxin or

bacteria or slip above the shore
has done the poor boy in. Once he has died,
his story ends--whether in suicide
or in a retrograde infanticide
enacted by his closest "loved ones," no
one sees or dares to speak of.
                                Even so,
the incidence of infertility
and giantism there across the sea
is clearly on the rise. Eventually,
it will wipe out Christian society
along its current lines--
                            Or possibly
one night an insurrection will begin
among the blanks to do the breeders in,
in one grand bloody massacre. No Sin
shall go unpunished if the eunuch slaves
revolt. If even <u>one</u> of them behaves
like Spartacus, the spark could well combust
into an all-consuming flame. But just
what sort of warped society (will books
be burned? and worn-out breeders hung from hooks
and pummeled?) might emerge from that, I dread
to think. Perhaps they all will end up dead.

At least, here in the East, the eunuch mind

has always been respected, and a kind
(if not completely empathetic) give-
and-take has generally stood fast. We live,
in Blueridge, side by side. Perhaps that's why
the Separation here has been so dry
and bloodless. Yet it's futile to deny
that we have made some major blunders. I
myself have turned away a fool-blind eye
on more than one occasion, just when my
perspective might have helped to keep the fold
together, working toward a common goal.

I was obsessed at first with trying to
reverse the curse of atrophy. It's true
our births outnumber deaths now. Our technique
in bringing this about (if I may speak
of it as a "technique") has been to be
encouraging a state of pregnancy
in girls incessantly, by constantly
reminding them of the inherent joys
of mating with our many men and boys--
and rather underplaying all the risks
such trysts involve: the childbirth deaths, in brisk
succession, every year; the babies born
deformed or dying, whom they'll have to mourn
with heavy breasts before their milk's begun

to flow; and those who'll die before they're one
or two years old.
                We've had success. But all
along, from underneath, as if to stall
this progress in repopulation, there
has lurked the Antipropagation, where
an ever greater portion of our breeding
stock becomes incapable of seeding
ovaries (or, in the female case,
of being seeded): we have had to face
a situation where sterility's
become the norm throughout humanity
and the capacity to reproduce
is the exception to the rule.
                            No use
in wishing for a bygone time. But now
that it's too late, I start to notice how
inadequate our doorways and our beds
(their feet stick out by day, they bump their heads
by night) must be for them. I should have seen
that long ago, and understood how mean
it was to make them listen to us pet
and pound all day, while they were trying to get
their sleep. Our grunts and groans and moans (forget
about the smells) were bound to be annoying:
after all, we small fries so enjoying

daytime ruts, at night would be the weak
link in the chain of work. I think Unique,
considering the circumstances, was
inevitable.

Anyway, because
of this development, we have to face
a different future for the human race
than we had formerly imagined. We,
the "breeding class" of their society,
will have to learn how to negotiate
their outsize giant world and trust our fate
to them, like children.

Rather, I should say,
a portion of our offspring will. The way
things stand, most of our progeny will be
themselves great giants--a society
of heirs without the capability
of passing on their portion through their genes.
They naturally will look for other means
of doing so. And so, as they transmit
their legacy, it will be scaled to fit
the scope and temper of humanity
at large; it would be mere inanity
for any miniature minority
to try to force them all to compromise
their vision to include a smaller size. ...

Perhaps I do exaggerate a bit.
They'll all have "breeder" parents; therefore, it
can never be an airtight separation.
Still, they strive to build a sovereign nation
on these isles, with eyes toward domination,
and I see no signs the situation
may reverse.

But then again, there are
some indications of a future far
more healthy for its adult citizens,
among these otherwise alarming trends:
we recognize the incidence of heart
disease in maids and eunuchs, which now starts
to be their leading cause of death, as an
example of the way a sterile man
or woman oftentimes will live into
a "middle age" phase, after passing through
the labyrinth of ailments that do
most breeders in before they reach that state.
On average, they live from six to eight
years longer than their fertile kin. Less prone
to fever, cancer, or a broken bone
(infections leave them generally alone,
or anyway, alive), our future masters
may be more equipped for health disasters
in the nights to come--unless the seas

eat through more nuclear facilities
and toxic waste dumps, whereupon disease
may have a renaissance of sorts; but we
survivors have lost the ability
to circumvent such dire events as these.

"The People" of the future, then, our heirs,
may have more strength to cope with coming cares.
And that hormonal madness we must bear
from adolescence onward won't be there
to bother them. Nor will the agony
of childbirth. Or stillbirth.
                                Maybe we
get so distracted by our blood-deep passions
(rushing in irrational rash rations
from our raging glands) that we go blind
to visions rising from a steady mind
and heart. How must they view our starts and fits
of biologic anti-logic? It's
a curious question. Maybe all these years
we've been imagining ourselves as peers
of theirs--with the advantage of a view
they can't perceive, which we attribute to
our gorgeous full-fledged gonads--they, in turn,
have stood by with a will-they-ever-learn
perspective, waiting for some sign that we

might wake into a fuller sympathy.

I have been such a fool. I'm still a fool.
I make my speeches and I teach my school,
and yet somehow I never really learn.
Of course, I was the first in line to earn
a doctorate degree--the first, and last!
Absurd. When I think back upon my past,
I feel my face go hot. That person, "Me,"
is so embarrassing a mystery!

Sometimes I look into my little mirror
trying to fathom her, but I'm no nearer
now than I have ever been to seeing
to the center of that human being
looking back among encircling wrinkles;
I feel closer to the star that twinkles
first when night comes on than to the face
I'm holding in my hand. "What is this place?"
I ask her. "Where am I? And who the hell
are <u>you</u>?"
        When I arrived, when I first fell
half-dead upon these shores, a little three-
foot-something orphan child stood next to me
with gold green eyes of such intensity
that her miraculous precocity

was more than evident--even to me,
in my delirium--and I could see
that she was more than just a prodigy;
she was a genius of the first degree.
She later would be simply called "Aunt C."

I started noticing another child,
a friend of hers. Though he was just as wild
as she and clearly just as out of place
(the humdrum running of the human race
held little interest for the boy), his style
was just her opposite, his constant smile
and constant chatter a contrasting foil
to her incessant silent scowl. The toil
and study that he undertook, in soil
or rotting log or desiccated book,
was tossed off with so casual a look
and air, the inattentive failed to see
his brilliant gift for entomology
and all the arts of insect husbandry
that fed the fabulous gastronomy
evolving at our fires and tables. Yet
his highest title has been "Uncle Bette."

Our two most gifted scientists, in other
words, that pair who by the grace of Mother

Moon were born upon these isles, were done
away with, tossed into oblivion.

And then--just hours ago!--what was the share
I gave them in this evening's sad affair?
Summarily dispatched them, like a pair
of new lieutenants. Mother Moon knows where
they've gone. When I went looking, at Unique,
no one had seen them--no one who would speak
to me about it.
As to who killed Zeke,
despite some clues, I still am at a loss.
But it was I who hung him on his cross. ...

I don't just mean that tale I told last night.
That wasn't right--nor was it very bright,
under the circumstances. But before
you gentlemen had even seen our shore,
before you raised a sail or dipped an oar
into the slimy brine, I went before
you and prepared the way. I did no more
or less than set the stage for bloody war
by seeding prejudice and hate.
I was
the source of every tale--and so, because
I was, I seemed to think that all I had

to say was, "Hey, just kidding." Nothing bad
would happen. What a fool! A perfect fool,
without the common sense or right to rule
over a classroom, much less-- ...
                                Yes; what's done
is done, indeed. And I'm the only one
who possibly could introduce you to
the Appalachian people. All of you
should take a tour with me tomorrow through
the country. It will take a week or two.
Or three. Perhaps by introducing you
as deft defectors who've crossed over to
the free side of the sea to find a true
believers' paradise, we can undo
whatever rumors might precede us. You
could be presented as a maverick crew
of refugees--escaping captives who
have braved the briny waves-- ...
                                Touché. How true:
whatever false advantage we'd accrue
dishonorably could easily undo
our honest ends. I ought to take my cue
from you, Luke. And I shall--I promise you.

Perhaps we'll find your ship somewhere up north;
the fog was pretty thick when she set forth.

I'm thinking of Bette and Cecilia, too;
they are a grossly inexperienced crew.
We'll pray for them.
                In ancient Greece, to be
exiled--cast out of one's own land, set free
beyond the sound of voices speaking in
one's native tongue--was reckoned to have been
the very worst of punishments, since it
consigned the prisoner to Hell but let
his heart continue beating here on Earth.
It was thought worse than death, harder than birth.

Of course, back then a language didn't go
much further than the nearest hill, and so
you would be rendered dumb, essentially,
by just a few days' journey via sea
or land. The English tongue's hegemony
here in this hemisphere is ancient now--
but lately it's been demonstrated how
a common language need not indicate
a common culture. Sadly, it's too late
for Zeke and Peter now, but I feel sure
it's not too late for you. You will endure.

The first one hundred miles are easy. Ferries
operate all winter. One that carries

grain and lumber (trading corn and oak
and pine and soybeans with the northern folk
across the dire Straits of Roanoke)
has been in operation forty years!
Our horses are good swimmers; have no fears
on that account. You'll be amazed: as long
as they can see the other side, they're strong
and sure. The Alleghenies represent
no threat to them. Some years ago, I went
from here up to the channel in a mere
five nights, my chestnut had so little fear.

But the Potomac Channel is the same,
to them, as trackless sea. And who can blame
them, when they look out on those crashing waves
that guard the northern coast? They're not so brave
as to be reckless. As to who resides
upon those islands on the other side--
well, rumors do abound. The channel's wide.

In ancient times, some maps would indicate
a serpent coiling all around a gate
with pointed spears on top, and there would be
a legend: "Here Be Dragons!" History
does not record what happened to the men
who headed through those guarded gates back then. ...

There isn't any way to tell the truth
except to tell the truth.
                My name was Ruth
on Colorado, and the man we mourn
tonight--Ezekiel--was my first born.
I knew it from the moment he arrived.
I knew my little baby had survived,
and here he was, a man. I was so proud--
and terrified! How could I talk out loud
and walk around and tend to all my duties
as your host, my heart so filled with beauties
and regrets and wonders? I don't know.

I so wish I could ask him, "Did it show?"
But that's a question I must now forego
forever. I kept silent, even though
I had an opportunity, just after
midnight, as the hoots and shrieks and laughter
of the lovers drifted outward and
we found ourselves together, hand in hand,
alone. I was afraid, I realize,
now it's too late. Afraid he would despise
me for abandoning him all those years
ago, condemning him to shed his tears
alone in that harsh wilderness I fled.
Allowing him to think that I was dead,

when all the time I prospered in this place
just on the other side of Jordan, face
to face with Mother Moon. That's what I thought.

I don't know who is buried in that plot
where RUTH is carved in stone, marking the spot.
Perhaps it isn't anyone at all.
Zeke told me that his mother took a fall
one night while gazing at the Moon above
the sea, and that the tattered remnants of
her body weren't discovered till the Sun
had done its work on them. Perhaps someone
from some near village happened to wash up
on shore next night, and when they picked her up
in pieces it was just assumed that she
was me. Perhaps my husband, glad to be
relieved of me, ordered some underling
to fill a coffin full of dirt--a thing
he certainly had sway enough to do--
and tell that tale about a body to
whomever should inquire.
                So it's true,
I lied a little bit last night when I
told my great epic of escape. A lie
or two, I mean, before the part where I
pushed off from shore that day--but not in my

account of my odd odyssey upon
the sea and my arrival here at dawn
some thirty years ago. Incredibly,
all that was accurate.
                But obviously,
escaping pregnancy was fantasy.
My womb was ripe, my full fertility
a fact of life; it took but two or three
unpleasant episodes to plant in me
the seed of motherhood. It may well be
that if I had been capable of prayer
at that time in my life (back then, back there),
I might have prayed for pregnancy to come--
since that was what provided me with some
small measure of relief. The weekly matings
I had suffered ceased. Then came the waiting.

Any of you men remember Zeke's
Aunt Esther? ...
            Thank you, Luke. I think it speaks
well for the two of you, both you and Zeke,
that you should recognize and understand
her influence, although she stayed on land
her whole life through.
                I don't remember <u>meeting</u>
Esther. We were babies then, still greeting

one another in another tongue--
"the language of the angels," as the young
unlettered syllables of infancy
are sometimes called. And I suppose, since we
were raised in tandem and perpetually
together, it was natural that she
and I should not act individually
so much as like a single entity.
I laughed when she laughed, cried when she became
upset--and when we slept, it was the same:
our heads began to nod; we drifted on,
I would imagine, every dusk till dawn,
inhabiting each other's dreams.
                                Of course,
as we grew older, the dividing force
of our distinctive families had its sway.
Our mothers were some distant kin, but they
had married very differently: my mother
was my father's only wife, and other
than myself, they had no children. He
raised pigs and butchered them; apparently
he had no higher aspirations. (He
was forty, I was twelve, when he passed on--
tuberculosis. Mother, too, was gone
just one year later, but her malady
was never diagnosed. She suddenly

grew thin; some kind of cancer, probably.)

But Esther's family was enormous: four
wives, thirteen children. Maybe there were more
than that; I'm not quite sure. Her father was
an Elder with connections, and because
of these, his girls all married Elders when
they reached their early teens. All of the men
they married were past thirty and had one
or several wives already.
                I've begun
to skip ahead, though. What I meant to say
was--everything we did went "all the way."
Despite our vastly different peers and spheres
at home, we kept so close through all those years
as we were growing up (more like two twins
than friends), the Elders warned us of the Sins
of what they called "unreasonable devotion."

It was such an arbitrary notion--
that a quality supposed to be
beyond the reach of intellect and free
from anything but heart and faith could still
be overdone. To exercise one's will
was error, so they said--and yet to hand
it over to another's sole command

was even worse (except to God or Jesus
or an Elder of the Church).
They'd tease us
with these warnings when we were but four
or five. As we grew older, there were more
such warnings, tinged with more severity;
their arguments had no more clarity
than they had ever had, however.
Here
I showed myself quite different from my dear
companion growing up: I argued and
enraged the Elders, till a chastening hand
across my mouth decided the debate.
But Esther's style--to smile and nod and wait
till we were all alone to offer her
opinion--saved her face. Her viewpoints were,
if anything, more radical than mine
(her sense of the ridiculous was fine),
but she had sense enough to keep them to
herself when a contrary point of view
would only bring "the wrath of God" up to
the boiling point. I saw it in her eyes
when we were being lectured, that the lies
and contradictions raining from the skies
upon us may have caused her some surprise--
but she kept still. And so you might surmise,

observing: Ruth was smart, Esther was wise.

And yet we both were reckless, each in her own way, and--after Esther married--were less careful than we should have been. But when they caught us in the act, I was by then regarded as "the wicked one." So I withstood the tooth-for-tooth and eye-for-eye, while Esther stood the pain of standing by and witnessing the scourge. I couldn't blame her for her passive role. No trace of shame clouded her face from where she watched within the mocking crowd--no consciousness of Sin--only a steady, patient gaze that fell on me like gentle tears, and I could tell she knew my pain and stood beside me in her heart. Without her love, I can't begin to think how I'd have borne it.

But, as things turned out, those few preliminary stings were but a prelude to the torture to ensue. As I've confessed, I lied to you last night, in little ways and large. One of the larger lies I told was that my love was kept out of my sight. If that were only so! But I was not alone--just lonely.

There she was, each night. We lived together
in our husband's house; we ate together,
worked and washed and worshipped God. But whether
it was six o'clock at dusk or six
o'clock at dawn's first light, we heretics
were watched. Our husband's fourth wife was assigned
to me, his second wife to Esther--kind
of an eternal guard for each. (His first
wife filled in all the gaps. She was the worst
of all--consumed with jealousy and gall
toward every woman in the world. The Fall
of Eden was a personal event
for her; so she had reason to resent
each tempting, snaking female form that went
before her husband.)
                What this vigil meant,
it seemed, was that my constant punishment
was going to be, wherever Esther went,
I would be seeing her, smelling her scent,
hearing her voice, yet not allowed to be
in touch with her--in thought or bodily--
despite such intimate proximity.
And that was what was torturous to me.

As it turned out, Esther conceived a child
around the same time I did. (I went wild,

imagining our secretly reviled
old master smothering poor Esther, lusting
over her--perspiring, groaning, thrusting
his unwelcome wand into her magic!)

Esther's pregnancy met with a tragic
end: her child, a girl, was born without
a set of arms and feeble lungs. No shout
or cry ever emerged from her; she died
an hour later--whereupon I cried
so violently that it brought my labor
on.
   What pain! A demon with a saber
thrashed about inside. Compared with this,
my scourging was a winter picnic. "Bliss
of motherhood," my ass! You men can never
know.
     My baby was as strong as ever
came out of a human womb, however.
Curling locks were plastered to his head,
as black as night. His face was fiery red,
his mouth wide open in a wailing rage,
once he'd escaped his late placental cage.

He needed no encouragement to suck;
he latched on like a viper. ("What the fuck

is this?" I thought.) But then he wanted more,
after he'd sucked my nipples dry and sore--
and so, at the suggestion of the second
wife, who guarded Esther, she was beckoned
to my bedside and my baby placed
upon one of her ready breasts.
                I faced
them there from where I lay; I watched, my head
as light as midnight air, while on my bed
my Esther sat and nursed my baby. How
can I describe my feelings? Even now,
I see them there. At last I was allowed
to look upon my love and she allowed
to look at me! Just at that moment, I
believed that then--don't ask me how or why--
the whole world would be right again; the sky
would clear, and we could be as close as we
were near.
        But that, of course, was not to be.
A competition now between wives three
and five (that is, between Esther and me)
was carried on by proxy--by wives two
and four, our guards. They started in anew
to watch their rivals with suspicious eyes,
to undercut them and to criticize
their nursing, arguing at every hour

of the night about whose milk was sour,
whose was sweet. (Wife number one achieved
some satisfaction then as she perceived
the swelling of the ranks of the aggrieved.
No one was happy, so she now believed,
and so her post of martyr was relieved
of part of its peculiar loneliness.)

Meanwhile, with every secretive caress
Esther and I exchanged, passing our baby
back and forth, the flame kept burning. Maybe
it was worse this way--to have this ache,
this tease, between us. How my heart would break
each day as I lay trying to sleep! And then,
after another night, it broke again.

I tried to justify our life like this:
sharing Ezekiel meant that we could kiss--
at one remove. The lips I kissed were kissed
by Esther and by no one else. We missed
no opportunity to demonstrate,
each to the other, how this secret state
existed right beneath the noses of
our jailers, freeing our imprisoned love,
if only momentarily.
But I

was going mad. Think what you want of my
impatience--or my cowardice, I ought
to say--the lack of constancy I brought
to my relationship with Esther. I
could not go on.

I never said good-by
to Esther. Or to Zeke.

You men are my
redemption, in a way--my last abiding
family. The thought of your residing
here on Appalachia is the hope
of happiness I hold tonight, the rope
you've tossed me as I thrash about amid
these crashing waves.

What other people did
or didn't do a hundred years ago
has brought us to this island world we know,
where dragons curl about the gates we sail
into. Our ship may wreck, and we may fail;
there's still that possibility. Yet we
go on, despite the night's uncertainty--
and doubtless what we do with what we've got
will make or break the future for the lot
of humankind.

But hey--no pressure!

Thank

you for your offer of a Captain's rank.
I'd like to "pass" on that and ask another
rank instead, if that's okay. This other
rank suggests a closer tie. You men
are truly brothers now, much more than when
you first set sail--more than mere countrymen
or comrades sworn to service. You are brothers
now by blood. By land or sea, no others
who have come before or who may come
again can be what you have now become
to one another. Could you possibly
consider me your mom? I'd rather be
your mother than your Captain, actually. ...

Well, good; I'm glad we got that settled, then.
You'll be my children, rather than my men.

But now I see our little windows growing
light. The curtains, thin as hope, are glowing
red, as night dissolves to ash. Today
we need our rest. Let's leave it there, and pray
that sleep may bless us with its sweet release.
We'll pass around a little pipe of peace
(this one was fashioned from an old boar's tusk),
and then it's off to bed.
                We rise at dusk.

*

THE END