

The New Thing · *Robert Coover*

SHE ATTEMPTED, he urging her on, the new thing. The old thing had served them well, but they were tired of it, more than tired. Had the old thing ever been new? Perhaps, but not in their experience of it. For them, it was always the old thing, sometimes the good old thing, other times just the old thing, there like air or stones, part (so to speak) of the furniture of the world into which they had moved and from which, sooner or later, they would move out. It was not at first obvious to them that this world had room for a new thing, it being the nature of old things to display themselves or to be displayed in timeless immutable patterns. Later, they would ask themselves why this was so, the question not occurring to them until she had attempted the new thing, but for now the only question that they asked (he asked it, actually), when she suggested it, was: why not? A fateful choice, though not so lightly taken as his reply may make it seem, for both had come to view the old thing as not merely old or even dead but as a kind of, alive or dead, ancestral curse, inhibitory and perverse and ripe for challenge, impossible or even unimaginable though the new thing seemed until she tried it. And then, when with such success she did, her novelty responding to his appetite for it, the new thing displaced the old thing overnight. Not literally, of course, the old thing remained, but cast now into shadow, as the furniture of the world, shifting without shifting, lost its familiar arrangements. The old thing was still the old thing, the world was still the world, its furniture its furniture, yet nothing was the same, nor would it ever be, they knew, again. It felt—though as in a dream so transformed was everything—like waking up. This was exhilarating (his word), liberating (hers), and greatly enhanced their delight—she whooped, he giggled, this was fun!—in the new thing, which they both enjoyed as much and as often as they could. Indeed, for a time, it filled their lives, deliciously altering perception, dissolving habit, bringing them ever closer together, illuminating what was once obscure, while making what before was ordinary now seem dark and alien. This was the power of the new thing, and also (they knew this from the outset) its inherent peril. The new thing, being truly new, not merely a rearrangement of the old, removed the ground upon which even the new thing itself might stand. The old thing's preclusive patterns were like those frail stilts that floodplains housing was

erected on; the new thing joined forces with the cleansing flood. As did they in their unbound joy, having anticipated all this from the start, though perhaps not guessing then how close together delight and terror lay, nor back then considering, as she, he urging, made the new thing happen, how indifferent to their new creation would be both world and thing. Indifferent, but not untouched. All shook and they, the shakers, were not themselves unshaken. This, too, even trembling, they ardently embraced, though perhaps they whooped and giggled less. Scary! she laughed, reaching for him, and he, clinging to her and thinking as he fell that some principle must be at stake, something to do with time, cause, and motion perhaps: So much the better! Thus, even if somewhat apprehensively in such an altered yet indifferent world, they found pleasure in what might in others inspire dread, their own apprehension mitigated by their shared delight in this new thing, their delight dampened less by antique fears of being swept away in metaphoric floods than by their awareness that the new thing did not, could not know them, nor would or could the world in which they had brought it into being. The new thing, which was theirs, was, alas, not really theirs at all, nor could it ever be. Moreover (her logic, this), they had chosen the new thing, chose it still, but with the old thing lost from view, what choice was theirs in truth? Were they not in fact the chosen? And his reply: Let's go back to the old thing, just for fun, and see. And did they, could they? Of course! The old thing was waiting there for them as though neither they nor it had ever gone away, like an old shirt left to yellow in the closet, an abandoned habit, a lost friend discovered in a crowd, a rusting truck at the back of the barn, and they found new pleasure in returning to it, or at least comfort, and something like reconciliation with the entrenched and patterned ways of the world. The old thing reminds me of my childhood, he acknowledged gratefully, and she: Why this appetite for novelty anyway, when we are here so briefly we don't even have time enough to exhaust the old? Thus, they enjoyed the old thing anew and in ways they had not done before, chiefly by way of ceasing all resistance, and they told themselves that they were pleased. Of course, they had to admit, after knowing the new thing, it was not quite the same, the old thing. Sort of like dried fruit, she said, sweet and chewy now but not so juicy as before. He agreed: More like body than person, you might say, more carcass than body. They experimented, giving the old thing a new wrinkle or two, but could not sustain their revived interest in it: it was still the old thing and it

still oppressed them. Back to the new thing. Which was still there and was delightful and exhilarating, as before. They were pleased and did not have to tell themselves they were. What fun! Truly! But the new thing, like the old thing, no matter how at first they denied this to each other, was also not the same as it had been before, he the first to admit it when regret, batlike, flickered briefly across her brow. No, she objected, falsely brightening, it is not it but we who have changed. By going back. To the old thing. Yes, you were right in the first place, he said, we were not free to choose. But we cannot go back to the new thing either. No, she agreed, we must try a new new thing. And so they did, and again, beginning to get the hang of this new thing thing, they found joy and satisfaction and close accord with one another. Out with old things and old new things, too! they laughed, falling about in their world-shaking pleasure. But was this delight in the new new thing as intense as that they'd felt when they'd first tried the old new thing? No (they couldn't fool themselves), far from it. So when the new new thing bumped up provocatively against the old new thing they were filled with doubt and confusion and no longer knew which of the two they most desired or should desire, if either. Out of their uncertainties came another new thing (his handiwork this time), momentarily delightful and distracting, but soon enough this too was replaced by yet another (now hers), itself as soon displaced (both now were separately busy at what had become more task than pleasure), the devising of new things now mostly what they did. By now, even the new thing's newness was in question. I am lost, she gasped, falling to her knees. He called out from across the room: I felt oppressed by the old thing, now I feel oppressed by the new. This is probably, she said, speaking to him by telephone, just the way of the insensate world. We were fooled yet again. No, no, I can't accept that, he replied by mail, else no new thing is a new thing at all. His letter crossed with hers: My unquenchable appetite for novelty is matched only by my unquenchable appetite for understanding. What a clown! I am deeply sorry. Adding: I have now become a collector of old things. There is not much fun in them, but there is satisfaction. But wait, he wrote in his diary. Does not the invention of one new thing insist by definition upon a second? And a third, a fourth, and indeed is this not in fact, this sequential generation of new things, the *real* new thing that we have made? And is that not delightful? He thought, if he tore this diary entry out and sent it to her, he might well see her again and they could have fun in their old new things

way, but the time for all that was itself an old thing now and, anyway, he no longer knew, now after the flood, where in the world she was.