

## Pilgrims' Progress · *Ralph Lombreglia*

ONCE WE WERE FEELING good, really good. There was no need to align ourselves with people who were doing bad things. Men in brown station wagons meant nothing to us. We learned our lessons as we went along, everything in its own time. What we didn't know didn't frighten us, it made us laugh. We hadn't yet heard of men in crimson berets. We talked a lot, that was part of it—complex propositions with many corollaries tripped off our tongues. We were invited to think, so we thought omnivorously, at random, about anything. It was a wonderful time.

Back in those days we would lie about in bright, open spaces surrounded by pottery and ferns and flowers, listening intently to your voice coming through on the equipment—speaking to us of waves and faith, telling us what to do. Then your voice faded away, replaced by the image of two magnificent breasts on the video monitor. There they are now, flickering on the screen. Magnificent, but not your voice. The equipment still brings in music, but it's different music now.

On the head of the man trotting alongside the brown station wagon: a crimson beret. Worn, it seems to us, as a remarkable innovation in bad faith. The man in the crimson beret asks questions, makes notes, fiddles with the microphone in his crimson bow tie. Sometimes his equipment interferes with our equipment; frequently, now that we mention it. He could have selected a nice gray fedora, a beanie marked with the year he took his degree; even an Australian bush hat would look better. Indeed, we would like to report that we had here the man in the Australian bush hat, tramping through the bush beside the man in the brown station wagon, but we don't—we have the man in the crimson beret, a professor of determinism.

We wonder how the man in the crimson beret got here, so far from anything concerning him, ditto for the man in the brown station wagon, and why they have been visited upon us. It's true they arrived the very day your voice faded away, a coincidence we have asked the poet to meditate upon. The man in the crimson beret maintains it's no coincidence at all. All these recent events are related, he says, each of them caused by the others, and his research will bear this out.

But your voice told us not to believe in things like that. We wonder what the man in the crimson beret is really after with his methodology and his time-motion study of the man in the brown station wagon. He makes us think of the great suffering caused by small minds obsessed with things that don't matter, minds insensible to the meaning of the waves. The man in the brown station wagon doesn't understand the questions posed by the man in the crimson beret, but he plays along and answers them anyway. On the shiny surface of the brown station wagon: a patina of bad faith.

When the particles of sound began to leap away from your voice, we thought: the behavior of these particles signifies the mutation of your voice to a closely related voice-isotope; it does not signify the fizzling-out of your voice. We had determined the half-life of your voice to be 1.5 billion years. Enough time for anyone, we thought. Time enough to enclose within the monkey-grip of the mind the hard little crux of the teachings of your voice. Now we look at the oscilloscopes and weep like children over our stacks of fallacious calculations. Your voice is gone. It was holding everything together. Keeping the faith.

The piranha fish are problematical. It would be difficult to speak up for them. They are so eager, and eagerness of that sort is almost always in bad faith. One might speak up for the piranha and be obliged the next day to make a retraction. But your voice said, *There is much left to learn. Get close to the quixotic piranha.* In the greenish light thrown off by the tank, we stand and ponder these mysterious fish. What could your voice have meant? The piranha snap abusively at the glass of the tank, then they dart jealously away through the bright green water.

The poet has enrolled as a special student in the University, to study wave mechanics. We are using the last of the money to pay his expenses, on the condition that he address himself to our problems once he learns something. We can imagine more promising prospects, but the poet's all we've got. We've managed to get him intrigued by the idea of an empirical science founded upon the very ambiguity of its unknowable subject, elemental matter—being on one occasion a particle, on another a wave. At the micro-bottom of everything is a wonderful root uncertainty not yet appreciated by determinists out in the macro-world. Justifying our instinctive contempt for everything they represent.

I sensed it all the while, the poet says to himself, slapping his thigh, thinking of the new friends he will have in the physics department—the vital young graduate students and the professors still venerable after decades of electron bombardment. Shopping for his textbooks, the poet composes his letter to the Dean, proposing himself for a physics fellowship.

“Pursue the matter back far enough,” writes the poet, “and poof!—the grounds for the standard appraisal of material reality vanish. Even a swift macro kick from Dr. Johnson’s boot has no substance in microreality. In hounding matter down to its secret heart, materialism unties its own knot. A world of tangible things can never command our faith.”

Replying, the Dean wonders, “If there were only ethereal where would you all be, postulants and novices?”

René, the cat, has shown a marked interest in the piranha fish, coupled, we feel sure, with his customary naiveté. René’s quotidian relations with the world are an inspiration for all of us, steeped as they are in plain, timeless good faith. He cannot see in the piranha the unwitting embodiment of a nasty strain in the universe. They can’t help it, but these fish are real abusers. They take more than they need, they take more than they want. They take until everybody feels sick about everything and then they take some more. We caution René against any involvement with the piranha.

The poet’s courtship of Anna has occasioned a general merriment. In these days peppered with portent, any bid for Anna’s heart is a welcome diversion. The air buzzes with news of it—everyone has seen or heard something. The poet is generally thought to be the wrong man for Anna, and his presentation of himself has won him no new supporters. Daily he installs himself beneath her balcony, his passion bruited in her high window by loud love music from an AM/FM/cassette unit. There are those who feel sorrow for the poet, obliged as he is to place the unwieldy parcel of his affections upon Anna’s doorstep ogled by all the rest of us, and there are those pitying Anna who must refuse delivery altogether or else accept that which is anyway too large and misshapen to go through her door without being broken. Naomi, for one, expresses disgust that this is what women must still contend with: inept poets full of vague desire.

But really, we know Anna better than that. It would suit her fine to dally for a time with the poet, get a grasp of his syntax. In truth, the dalliance of Anna is nearly a category of faith for us, a known quantity in the uncertain flux. But the poet is not the man for it. He is a soft, timorous puff of a thing. He would burn fast and bright rushing through the heady atmosphere of Anna.

Tonight, a dream featuring a scorching desert sequence. There is a huge pyramid, on one face of which is etched the legend BAD FAITH. On the other face GOOD FAITH is inscribed. The pyramid has only two faces, which does not seem strange. Two long driveways lead up to the pyramid, originating from the southeast and southwest and ending at two garage doors mounted at the bottom of each face. Our job is to trick the man in the brown station wagon into driving into the BAD FAITH side of the pyramid, thus declaring the nature of his filthy business. Anything goes, except for changing the signs which would be in bad faith and besides would take too long because *here he comes*.

The man in the crimson beret charges that we intended from the very beginning only to co-opt the piranha, and that co-optation categorically takes place in the absence of good faith. A nauseating smugness comes over his face when he makes these accusations. There is, in fact, a particle of truth in what the noisome meddler says. What we were always after was the energy of the piranha, which is basically good natural energy with a bad vibrational patina on it. Just how bad we later found out. But our intentions were never other than to work with the piranha until we understood the paradox of natural goodness crusted over by badness. Until we could improvise an alignment with their quixotic natures.

But you didn't know how, says the man in the crimson beret, you didn't think it through, you had no plan. Not having a plan doesn't sound like good faith to me, he says.

Well, birds must be incomprehensible to snakes, too, when they fly. To reiterate: we act in good faith, it is not possible that we act otherwise. Our actions are informed by the root perception of the transubstantial simultaneity of things, instilled in us by your voice. We don't bet against futures, we let them be. Premeditation just makes us dizzy. It's not in us to do it. Every desire and inclination turned out like a pocket and poked through

for *effects and results* . . . who could stomach such niggardliness? But out in the macro-sequential space occupied by men in crimson berets, causal is king. They believe in it, and if you believe in something it's the case, we've learned that.

Sometimes the music confuses us. It's too chaotic, too loud, it comes on at the wrong time. It may be that we're in the mood for soft structures and we get instead this very intense, insistent stuff at loud levels. It behooves us to try to appreciate whatever comes on, but part of it is knowing when it's just not happening. The radio is not here to torture us.

What a bad day it was, the day we fell in with a burly motorist, and a pedant, and these intractable fish. There it is—the corrosive irony of questionable alliances. So at first we just made up a whole raft of new uncertainty jokes and went on our merry way. Ours, after all, was the simple condition of having the greater magic. Good faith made our hearts light and clear, we were fearless and anyway from another realm. Good faith buoyed us up. We had been in a green open space where there was water, and with one ear we hearkened to the general modulations of a voice which until just that morning had been speaking to us. We had been floating in a little pool far away from the main stream and we didn't question the unusual buoyancy we enjoyed there, listening to a voice which while we were in the water was in the water and when we were in the air was in the air. We were invincible. We were illicit bathers in a back eddy guided by a voice whose way was wave propagation. Determined rockslides of worldly events tumbled one after another off in the distance, but in the waves all was sweet interpenetration. We were naked trespassers, but the slow shutter of causality would never take our picture.

Another dream. In this one we are on a Quest. The object of the Quest is unknown, though it is said to be golden in color or perhaps silver, probably metallic in nature but possibly wooden. The man in the brown station wagon has been sent ahead as a scout; the rest of the expedition follows on camelback. The man in the crimson beret has been brought along as Quest-historian and also (this is a secret) as a possible sacrifice to the occasional rude tribe, should the need arise. The man in the crimson beret wants to know what we have there in those wet saddlebags. He asks us to swear that all dealings with the native peoples will be conducted in

good faith. We promise him a decent cut of anything we make on a deal with the natives.

We stop to make camp, and ask the poet to assist Anna in the watering of the camels. An hour later they return in the company of a rude tribe. We gesture magnanimously in the direction of the man in the crimson beret. The natives seem to think that he is our king. During the confusion a great breach of decorum occurs. A tribesman begins to fiddle with Anna, who fiddles back — an even greater breach. The poet seizes the tribesman by the throat and hurls him to the ground. The tribesman places a kick to the midsection of the poet. Four breaches of decorum, each larger than the last. Now there is nothing for it. Quickly, without warning, the entire contents of one wet saddlebag are deployed about the person of the errant tribesman. After he is gone, his fellows — now our servants — usher us into the presence of their Chieftain, an amiable gentleman with a remarkable command of our language. The Chieftain correctly supposes us to be on a Quest. After the obligatory shilly-shally, he concedes that there are no silver or golden objects on the premises. However, in the vault, awaiting our generous appraisal, are two magnificent breasts, soft in texture and available as Quest-objects.

A dismal moan goes up from the members of our crew. Tactfully, it is suggested to the Chieftain that *he believes* two magnificent breasts to be in the vault. The doors of the empty vault are thrown open, its false rear wall sways in the hot desert wind. On the sandy floor of the empty vault: a patina of tire-tracks. We offer the Chieftain tape recordings of our music in return for initiation into the mysteries of his faith. Later, we wave goodbye to the natives who are scratching the image of a brown station wagon on the walls of their huts with sticks.

At the Symposium on Bad Faith, a snafued agenda even before the gavel goes down. The man in the crimson beret is boycotting the Symposium, and has denounced the proceedings in a telegram to the chairperson. “The Symposium is founded upon a false category,” telegraphs the man in the crimson beret. “There is no such thing as Bad Faith, only the absence of Good Faith.”

The depths to which professional jealousy has brought the man in the crimson beret, we all think. A textbook example of Bad Faith. Naomi, the chairperson, flings her papers onto the roundtable and storms out.

On Naomi's agenda, the Symposium is to open with highlights of the poet's work in wave mechanics, since the dual nature of elemental matter testifies so eloquently to the thread of Bad Faith that runs through the entire universe.

For his part, the poet has an abysmal feeling about this sudden ugly turn in the tone of things. He didn't want to open the Symposium, he didn't even want to attend the Symposium. He will never be able to get along with these people. Anna is so different, not like them. He would like to go home with her right now and never see another Symposium. Naomi's misinterpretation of his work is totally unacceptable, but he is no less loath to alienate Naomi than to endure the horrible irony of an ideational alignment with the man in the crimson beret. He thinks perhaps there is indeed some small smudge of Bad Faith on the very structure of the imagination, else why does every little thing we conceive grow up to tyrannize us?

The poet has prepared a long paper to read at the Symposium, in which he adumbrates the New Prosody, based on wavelengths. Someone has scratched it off the agenda. The crowd calls for the poet to answer the charges of the man in the crimson beret. The poet takes the stage. The spotlights blind him.

"Once, we were feeling good," says the poet, gripping the podium. "Really good. There was no need to align ourselves with people who were doing bad things. I say we can get that feeling back. Somehow. I guess maybe in a way I think I sort of agree with the man in the crimson beret. You know, Einstein said, 'God is subtle, but He is not simply mean.' I think by 'God' old Einstein meant 'dual nature,' switching back and forth deep down in there between particles and waves without any rhyme or reason. By 'simply mean' I think he meant 'in Bad Faith.' Just because everything is uncertain doesn't mean it's bad.

"Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, 'What about the disintegration of the voice, the sudden arrival of the two men, the appearance of the breasts, and the quixotic natures of those piranha fish gobbling up everything that even comes near the tank?' Well, I think the old voice would have known what to say about that. And that's what we should be thinking about here today at this Symposium. Things have gone and gotten real complex on us, but everything's still in Good Faith. You know what I mean. Thank you. Thank you very much."

When the booing dies down, we hear a sound something like the throaty rumble of a motor. It is Anna, lounging across two chairs in a loose kimono, laughing her most earthy, knowing laugh. “Even if had in complete Bad Faith,” she says to the crowd, “a good time is a good time.” Pencils scratch in concert all over the hushed auditorium. “Bravo,” someone calls out.

The poet smarts to hear Anna adopt such an untenable position. What a wound, to think he may have been merely a good time. But the air is now magically clear, the Symposium can begin.

We have arrived at an understanding with the man in the crimson beret. We don’t like him, and he doesn’t like us. It’s a sad but also a sweet reciprocity. The rooms of mutual animosity are easy to live in, not like the stark hallway of unrequited attraction with the bare bulb of spurned affections burning. We feel beastly about it, but the man in the brown station wagon has to go. When he attaches himself to us, he must be rebuffed. When he buttonholes us, he must be given the cold shoulder. He must be turned off when he comes on, but how do we tell the man in the brown station wagon that we feel nothing for him whatever, or, Naomi wants to add, if we feel anything for him at all it is simple disgust? He wants to be part of our gang, hang with us. It cannot be, and his failure to see that it cannot be is only additional assurance that it cannot be.

But every day he shows up. His presence does not excite us as our presence evidently excites him. He says he wants to join our crew, help us keep the faith, but he is completely insensitive to our vibration. Repeated encounters with him are giving all of us an abysmal sensation. We don’t pretend to care for the man in the brown station wagon, that would be in bad faith, and we’ve dropped every hint we can imagine. He says we’re just like the man in the crimson beret, spending a lot of time talking about irrelevant things. But even irrelevance is, for him, irrelevant.

The most fascinating presentation of the Symposium on Bad Faith was certainly the lecture with slide projections, “Archetypal Forms of Faith, Good and Bad,” delivered by Sylvia, one of Naomi’s friends from college. Summarizing the current literature, Sylvia showed archetypes of Bad Faith to include: men generally and brown station wagons specifically, piranha fish, crimson berets, and poets. Among the best-known arche-



types of Good Faith are found: women generally and breasts specifically, music, flowers, and native peoples.

Of special interest was an overview of Sylvia's personal contribution to the field, her work with "arbiter objects"—those things which have been shown to act as conduits of archetypal energy. Most often "arbiter objects" serve as permeable membranes between stable sets of archetypes, but frequently they function as archetype-transformers, actually converting one species of archetypal energy into another, good to bad or bad to good, sometimes leaving to the formation of energy enclaves or "faith clusters." Depending upon which way the conversion is going, such "clusters" are classified as either "dry" or "wet."

Sylvia characterized our present situation as an excited equilibrium tending toward high-energy "cluster" behavior, and appealed for additional funds with which to carry out further "arbiter object" investigations. She concluded her talk with a review of only the most well-verified "arbiter objects," and the properties whence they derive their special power. The list included: pyramids with two garage doors (dual nature of consciousness), particles and waves (dual nature of matter), radios (reception of waves), and your voice (dispersion of particles).

During the standing ovation for Sylvia, the man in the crimson beret was seen slinking guiltily out through a rear door of the auditorium. A glutton for symposia, he couldn't stay away.

The man in the brown station wagon has taken to wearing a crimson beret, and the effect is devastating. He is a fool's fool, a cipher, but his intuitive grasp of the perverse is uncanny. We were all unnerved when first we saw him in it. More than any other development, this new beret captures the essence of the direction things are taking. Now a brown station wagon runs amok in our city, its driver primping in the rearview mirror. Most unsettling of all is the impact on the original man in the crimson beret, whose object of study has become a large, hairy simulacrum of himself. The new beret has hurt him sharply. No amount of faith in his methodology could have protected him, and therein lies the failure of the social sciences.

Following months of lobbying and petitioning and legal action by Naomi and her activist friends, the city council has banned vehicular traffic

on the streets of our city. Downtown is a pedestrian paradise. We never realized how many people live here, and now they all manage little shops. In every citizen was dwelling a tiny merchant, afraid to come out with all the cars. On thoroughfares formerly ruled by deadly machines, we stroll amid a gentle renaissance of arts and crafts. There must be huge secret kilns in the hills where all this pottery is fired. A panorama of painting, sculpture, and belt buckles rewards each scan of the eye. In macramé trusses, ferns and flowers hang from every traffic signal. Our shopping bags grow heavy. The black petroleum-based crustaceans living in our lungs retreat before a resurgence of healthy pink cells. In cafés and bistros, happy people discuss the cultural contradictions of capitalism.

Then, in defiance of every affinity grouping, there is an instance of bad faith, aurally presaged by the rude roar of a motor. The man in the brown station wagon careens onto the strip in his rig, his crimson beret cocked at a rakish angle. The trendy boor is wearing a piranha T-shirt. Pedestrians leap like electrons onto the sidewalks. His fiery car screams down the boulevard. Great waves pound inside its rear fish tank compartment, the water dense with piranha fish. He doesn't know how to handle piranha, the oaf, they're too crowded, becoming crazed.

Torquing into a powerslide at the end of the block, the brown station wagon disappears from view after sloshing from a side window a green-black wave of beached piranha onto the sidewalk. Even wheezing their last there on the concrete, the piranha snap abusively at the smart shoes of passersby. In his notebook, the man in the crimson beret makes the entry, "Always true to their quixotic natures, these amazing fish are the very paradigm of self-actualization."

At breakfast, the poet reports a dream in which the substance of reality was revealed to him. In the dream, the poet was out walking in a green open space when he came upon the brown station wagon parked gleaming in the sun. On the lowered tailgate the man in the brown station wagon had erected a huge electron microscope. Wearing a white lab coat, the man in the crimson beret was monitoring banks of meters and oscilloscopes set up on a picnic table next to the car. In place of his eyes were the undulating green waveforms of the scopes, reflected in his silvered sunglasses. That image in particular haunts the poet.

Then the two men stepped away from the electron microscope and in-

vited the poet to look. In the viewfinder he could see that the subatomic particles were actually miniscule piranha, waves of them, the real building blocks of the universe. As he watched, the poet began to perceive the basis for a conceptual breakthrough in wave mechanics, the resolution of all our difficulties. It was unbelievably simple. The technician in the crimson beret explained that the piranha particles were beginning to show strong bonding behavior, achieving a cohesion indirectly proportional to the level of the larger disintegration. Gesturing to the flickering screens, he said, "The piscatorial alignments are simply stunning," and his vivid dream-voice awakened the sweaty poet, who cannot now remember what the breakthrough was.

We all nod our heads and murmur thanks for the benefit of this important dream, though we had better expectations for breakfast than to ponder again the flavor of doom. From behind the closed door of the rec room, we hear the splashing and general commotion of the tank.

The landlord arrives. It seems he is perpetually arriving, or perhaps he never leaves. In any event, he wants the money. As it happens, money is no longer part of the currency we are dealing with here, but we are not so far gone as to think we can offer the landlord particles, or waves, or even the two breasts, assuming we knew where they were.

It's a sobering moment, as this mundane problem of the money yields up a sudden perception of our larger, irreversible dilemma. Once, we were feeling good, really good. We were impervious to the bad faith of the landlord's rent, the brown station wagon, the crimson beret. Then your voice faded away, and now we can't turn around without something coming home to roost. The interference from the academy and the highway has been in itself only a minor annoyance. Much worse is what has emerged as *The Problem of Ourselves*. We wanted to work with the piranha, unlock the natural mystery of their material determinism, but the piranha are, through no fault of their own, essentially ichthyic subscribers to the causal universe of the beret and the station wagon, and so we had to, so to speak, put on waders and get right in there, and once we did that . . . *we were in there*.

Standing in the foyer waiting for the rent, the landlord wants to know, What is behind that wet door? We invite him inside to have a look for himself, sensing even as we do so that this is the beginning of the end. The

future does not feel like a genuine category presented to us in good faith. Opening the wet door for the frightened landlord, we try to concentrate on the natural inevitability of endings.

At dinnertime, René, the cat, is missing. Throats are cleared. The backs of our hands examined silently. The sound of waves from the other room, splashing against the walls of the piranha tank. Glances in the direction of the equipment, the silent loudspeaker and the video screen where the shiny image of two breasts is undulating. Our best Bordeaux unstoppered. To René.

In those last days your voice was distorted and strange. It's a sickening thought, but perhaps you never mentioned "piranha" at all. "Piano," you may have said, or "Pandora."

Though it feels like plucking at straws, we have placed an advertisement for a wave mechanic. Maybe we should have done it sooner. In our own defense, time has lost all meaning for us. The poet proves to be interested in purely theoretical issues, except where Anna is concerned, and he shows no aptitude whatever for the equipment. After all the money we've spent on his tuition, even tuning the radio is beyond him. Meanwhile, the piranha have eaten everything in the place. Already their little vestigial legs are growing into healthy pink limbs; soon they will clamber out onto land.

The newspaper containing our ad has just hit the streets when the first applicant arrives. It is the man in the brown station wagon. To be fair, his crimson beret and bow tie look good with his sharp-creased gray coveralls. Smug as can be, he holds up a clipped copy of our ad. From the doorway his brown station wagon is plainly visible parked at the curb, the rear compartment loaded with bundled newspapers. We say no, there has been a mistake. With a wicked smile he presents his wave mechanic's certificate—notarized, unexpired, embossed with the seal of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Institute. We have no choice but to audition him. He trundles in his gear, arranges it next to the sofa. Even in the first unclasping of his tool chest we perceive the assurance born of a lifetime spent with hardware.

Looks like every wave in the place is out of whack, he says. We agree

that virtually any wave he might choose would benefit from adjustment. But work on the voice, we say. Make the voice come back. With a stubby hand he signals us to relax. Selecting several exotic instruments, he bends to his task. We exchange glances of approval amongst ourselves as he plies deftly the tools of his special trade.

Having a real pro working on the waves sends a tingle through all of us, not unlike the soporific thrill of massage. As he labors, wavegrease soils his hands and face. He seems to revel in it. At intervals he stops to mop his brow with his beret, smiling blankly in our direction, up to his elbows in the equipment. He is a man not without his talents, he could make a genuine contribution, we haven't seen this side of him before. Privately, the poet expresses regret that the man in the brown station wagon is such an inveterate determinist, a crusty member of the old guard, clinging to the old ways. But Anna speaks up to praise the fortitude of superannuated tradespeople, their prodigious exertions and long days leaving neither time nor strength for the genteel enlightenments of their employers.

We think the man in the brown station wagon must be getting close to a breakthrough there with those waves. Any moment the loud, clear report of your old familiar voice will testify to his skill. And indeed, in waiting so intently for the sound of your voice, we miss his game entirely. Suddenly, bright video light washes the room a garish blue. The man in the brown station wagon has been struggling not with your dying voice but with the magnificent breasts on the screen! Looking up, we see that he has brought the breasts into spectacular focus. The clarity and dimension, the contour they have!

Then the lascivious man in the brown station wagon manipulates the radio. Furious rockabilly music erupts from the loudspeaker, the same loudspeaker that used to convey your gentle voice. He begins a lewd mountain dance while staring up at the breasts on the screen. In a trice, Anna is up and dancing too, bumping hips, twirling around, stepping like a devil with the man in the brown station wagon. Naomi utters a cry of disgust; our hearts go out to the broken poet. We avert our eyes, noticing only then the man in the crimson beret staring in through our picture window, rapt.

Dropping off to sleep, we can hear your voice again, many of your voices, speaking to us in unison, calling us to attention, uttering pro-

legomena to the argument we have with the world. Your voices sound like the radios of many fire engines, cryptically assessing the situation. Your voices say that the brown station wagon will explode, the waters of the fish tank will boil, the man in the crimson beret will be destroyed when the strongbox containing his research falls on him from the seventh floor of his apartment building. Everything will be all right, your voices say, but they are not really your voices. Then some raucous music comes on, waking us up.

Tonight, a big party. A blowout, everybody invited. To celebrate the nuptials of Anna and the man in the brown station wagon. Eight till whenever, we say in the invitations. Bring your own, there's nothing left here.

The weeping poet has been sequestered all day in his room, laboring to apply the New Wave Prosody in an epic poem which likens the disintegration of your voice to his betrayal at the hands of Woman. So far only a couple of quatrains pushed out beneath his door, and not very good.

Naomi and her friends from college have decorated the place with anchors and buoys and fishing nets. The party has a maritime theme. The big boat has been hauled out of the garage and set up in the living room. We all wear bell-bottom pants and sailor shirts.

The first guests arrive in a brown station wagon decorated with ribbons and balloons. Anna almost an apparition in her long white gown. The man in the brown station wagon fully in the spirit of things, a scarf around his head, patch over an eye, gold hoop earring in his ear. Look sharp, you lubbers, he says, hugging everybody, scratching all the women with his unshaven chin. Congratulations, lovebirds, we say. Help yourselves to the radio, anything you like. Furious rockabilly music erupts from the loudspeaker. Wild dancing.

The man in the crimson beret shows up with his date, a svelte graduate student. I'm fascinated by you young people, he says, specifically by the lengths to which you will go to have a good time. Party behavior intrigues me, he says. There's something about a big party like this that's, well, not entirely in good faith, if you know what I mean. Fascinating.

We do our best, we say, shouting above the music. Glad you could make it. Put the beer in the refrigerator. No, not that door, the other door.

The wet door isn't the door to the kitchen? he asks slyly.

No, definitely not.

The party is a monster, the place is jammed. Everybody was able to make it. It almost feels like the good old days, but nothing can stop us now. At midnight, the members of our crew take up the oars, jump into the boat, clack the oars together for attention. A little medley from *South Pacific*, we announce to the crowd, rehearsed especially for this occasion. The man in the brown station wagon waltzes Anna to the center of the room. Wild cheering. The poet is crouched behind the boat, waiting for the signal. We break into song. Everywhere, singing and merrymaking. That's the signal. The poet unlocks the wet door, throws it open, pulls the rope attached to the plug on the piranha tank, jumps into our vessel.

Screaming, splashing, lifeboat ethics.

We paddle about on the roiling waves, arrows of paradox quivering in our breasts. Piranha clinging to our oars like wriggling jewels. A snatch of crimson cloth and a black eye patch float up alongside the boat, not so rewarding as we might have imagined. Piranha leap in great numbers out of the water, snap abusively at the breasts on the video screen, then swim away nasty and miserable. Their frustration our single satisfaction.

The party is over. The waters grow calm, except for an area of effervescence off in the corner. We paddle over, pull the boat up alongside the submerged loudspeaker. Steam is hissing from the wet equipment, and sparks spurting. Bubbles from the speaker are rising all around the boat. A sound accompanies the bubbles, but we can't make it out. We touch one end of an oar to the underwater speaker, touch the other end to the boat so as to feel the vibrations transmitted through the hull.

Syllables.