

My parents, grown huge, large as lighthouses, rose on either side of the white and crumbling column. They threw back their heads and laughed and clapped. They stood in the air and the deafening thunder was their joyous laughter and their clapping, gigantic hands as if they had known everything, *everything* all along. My screaming voice took the shape of a word, that word, "Thieves!" I turned and ran through the trees, holding my ears, closing my eyes, refusing to smell the burning powder, closing, closing into a tiny circle, my mouth filling as if I had bitten my feet and I rolled down the hill crying: "Ladies and gentlemen! Here he comes! The unnatural son of the natural world. Thieves and murderers make way!"

FICTION / JOE ASHBY PORTER

For Nineteen Sixty-eight

1

Such a slipshod slapdash forest of a jungle I'd never seen or imagined or even wanted to—it was partly that it was green and dull grey and partly that it was so hot and wet I'd long ago doffed my pack and my shirt and partly that with every step I took more and more leaves and grass clung to my trousers so that I'd begun to look like a shaggy-legged satyr, and also that it was dead quiet, there were simply no animals to be heard: it reminded me of a bad photograph: things seemed a little greasy, a little slick, like those lights that nag underneath the eyeballs, those almost colorless ones, it reminded me of that French phrase "comme ci, comme ça," a little sinister but more just deadening, just tiresome, the vines I held to pull myself along, even they were almost colorless or changed their little colors and could have gone any which way, I could hardly bear to think about it, "ugh" was the only word for it or "whew," it wasn't particularly sunny but it was hot, and sometimes the vines fell or came apart in my hands and there wasn't a flower to be seen, it all looked cheap and washed-up and passed-over like Florida or Viet Nam or what have you, I half expected the vines to be neon signs with their letters burnt out, I remember I said to myself it was as much a time as a place, a welter of eventless conditions, I said there were none of those difficulties that stand up to be counted but only the kind that glimmer and persist, a low flux of a run-down maze like

a fever with momentary outlines glassily precise but inconstant, there were no landmarks, my age was age as much as strength and yet the fatigue and wonder was more of my mind than my body, it reminded me of the statues in Rome when Dorothea Brooke wandered among them partly because there was no passion and partly because there was a kind of blind shifty clarity, and then the fulsome air, and the decay that made me wonder if my eyes themselves had decayed or something similar, so that I could see the unclean magic of words like "et cetera," the only sound was my struggle, and I thought of any number of emotions but they all seemed inappropriate, with the mud and rubbish hanging to my legs, the vines against my shoulders, here and there the wrong light, it reminded me of mental illness and shell-shock as if my thoughts were slowing down or stopping, the whole thing was like dirty neon somehow, the whole thing was like every step I took, it was like the preternatural vividness of a dead language, shopping lists in a dead language, I trudged on.

2

I broke through into the edge of a rather large clearing in the middle of which I saw rambling flimsy structures like barracks built of unpainted wood and bamboo, some with thatched roofs. There were no shadows because, as I now saw, the sky was overcast with a brilliant grey haze. The soil I stepped onto was poor and sandy and littered with straw and scraps of paper and other refuse. It reminded me of an abandoned fairground. Everything seemed straw-colored. I must have simply stood there without moving for a long time, breathing. There was a soft persistent sound like the whine of a television set. I saw that there were bits of food on the ground, and then here and there about the compound—I called it that in my mind—I saw a number of men sitting and lying on the ground. Unshaven and sun-browned, clothed in little more than faded shorts or loin-cloths, they made me think of Robinson Crusoe, except that they were inactive and unobservant. The few that noticed me showed no sign of interest. It occurred to me that they seem drugged—perhaps by the warmth or the clear hazy light, or even the soft whine. They were thin but not emaciated. I sat down and took off my boots, and then stood and walked into the clearing.

A young woman came forward from among the buildings. She wore a khaki-colored bikini bathing suit. Her body was supple and beautiful, her step light. What struck me most forcibly was the color of her skin: glossy as though oiled, a hard rich copper with purple and orange surface lights. It made a taste like blood come into my mouth. It was seductive but flat and powerful, like the bright skin of a snake. She reminded me of an Arab or an Israeli soldier. On her arms and shoulders and the rise of her breasts

there was what I took to be pollen until I realized that it was dry fine dust. She was—how shall I say it—she was unconcerned. She might as well have been naked. She was a Circe for my time, that was it. The clearing was a compound. I was in a kind of concentration camp. She might as well have carried a machine gun.

I don't know whether I mounted her—that was the only word for it—immediately or not. It was clear that I should do so often and mechanically. The next thing I remember is this: she gave me a tour of the buildings where I would be quartered.

They were, as I have said, low and barracks-like and flimsy; they surrounded a number of interior courts open to the sky. There were no single rooms, only narrow meandering corridors. As we walked through them she indicated with a cursory gesture the sleeping accommodations: rattan mats scattered about the floors, a few cots, a hammock, here and there banks of shelves attached to a wall. Many of the men lay inside—we had to step over several as we made our way along—but the place was far from crowded. We paused long enough for one of the men to have his pleasure of her, and then proceeded.

Probably because of the fine sand the buildings stood on, they seemed strangely clean like things in the desert or on the seashore. The matter still clinging to my legs had dried and lightened. I felt the sort of euphoria that comes at the end of long fatigue and sleeplessness. I watched the woman's waist as she walked in front of me. When she spoke she hardly deigned to glance at me. She was mine as entirely as she was the rest of the men's, and we were hers. There was something that had been in my mind and it was gone and I could not imagine what it had been. I listened to the thin whine and the soft foot-falls of our naked feet. When any of the men glanced at me there was nothing at all in his clear eyes.

Finally we came out again into the compound that surrounded the buildings. As I could see, the brilliant sky was a grey very slightly blacker than it had been before. The two of us stood there together side by side for a long time.

I noticed that the stockade was bounded with a high woven bamboo-and-grass wall above which I could see the tops of palms and other trees and the tangle of vines. I realized that each detail of this vista, and of everything else in the enclosure, would become unspeakably familiar to me, more familiar than my own body, than my own face, which I was already beginning to forget. Most familiar of all would be the woman beside me who had locked herself in my attention with her negligence and her coppery eyes. I stood breathing. There seemed a peculiar right in all the wrong. I had no sense of direction and I hardly cared. I had a sort of equilibrium, at least I had that.

3

But things did not come entirely to a halt: as I stood there gazing over the littered sand I noticed a disturbance at the edge of the compound. I saw that there was a place where the wall had been pushed down or had simply dropped inward so that it lay flat on the ground. And there I saw a cluster of women, not like the woman in the camp, but pale and turbulent with their colored rags. They seemed to have just discovered the opening in the fence, and to be hesitating between attack and retreat. They reminded me of animals thronging to the edges of a circle of firelight. They pushed one another and chattered and stared. Their clothes were in rags and they seemed to be carrying primitive weapons, blow-guns perhaps, bows or spears or even stones. They were brave and frightened. What shook me was the realization that they with their pale and soft skins and their savagery might have represented rescue for me and the other men, a primitive and turbulent rescue crowded there in the opening of the fence. I would have beckoned to them or laughed aloud.

I could see that it was very slightly darker. Perhaps the soft whine was deepening toward a noise like thunder very far away or the whisper of an airplane. Perhaps the air had cooled by one or two degrees. I was alert now. My diffused attention was concentrating decisively. I looked before me and I saw a band of women crouched like a pitiful war-party in the opening of the stockade, wearing their courage like gaudy rags. It was intolerable. In my heart I begged them to rush into the compound. I looked at their dark eyes and their tender white skin. They were shaking their weapons and chattering ominously there in the opening of the stockade.

4

Many things are hard to remember and harder to understand or to deal with. Especially the ones that surround and hold the others. A glove can enclose a hand and at the same time, or even if it's empty, hold an orange in its palm. But one time stands out clearly from the others. It was late at night and I had finished the chores that then filled up most of my waking hours. A few hours before I had spoken with a certain person about a matter of some importance; we had reached no decision, and had arranged to talk again soon. Now I wandered out onto my porch or patio under the open sky to think. The weather was typical of that part of the country and that season; there was a little wind.

I sat down and smoked a cigarette or two at my leisure. The stars were very bright and clear. They made me think of silent machine-gun fire scattered above me. Nearby was a sound like a soft foot-fall. I watched the sky for a long time until like a jungle my difficulties grew up around me again, demanding attention, which I gave—resignedly, and with good humor. At length I put out my last cigarette and returned to the house. I remember

that before I went to sleep I looked out my window. Under the bright sky
I saw the trees begin to shake.

POETRY / AMMONS, McPHERSON, LUX,
McCORD, NELSON, ORLEN, TALARICO

Continuing / A. R. Ammons

Considering the show, some prize-winning
leaves broad and firm, a good year,
I checked the ground
for the accumulation of
fifty seasons: last year was
prominent to notice, whole leaves
curled, some still with color:
and, underneath, the year
before, though paler, had structure,
partial, airier than linen:
but under that,
sand or rocksoil already mixed
with the meal or grist:
is this, I said to the mountain,
what becomes of things:
well, the mountain said, one
mourns the dead but who
can mourn those the dead mourned;
back a way
they sift in a tearless
place: but, I said,
it's so quick, don't you think,
quick: most time, the mountain said, lies
in the thinnest layer: who
could bear to hear of it:
I scooped up the sand which flowed
away, all but a cone in the palm:
the mountain said, it
will do for another year.