

planet. He stacks them carefully, like the paleontologist who extrapolates huge structures from ossicles that look to others like faceless dice. But the skeleton the writer of metaphysical tales constructs leans ambiguously out of the fronded swamp of pre-history and into the sky of some future night, where Pegasus has overtaken the eagle, and Orion's great club is canted to the east.

Homage to Poe, Kafka, Dinesen, and Borges

The Melon-eaters

Somewhere, perhaps in a dream of starvation, you have seen such melons. They are called bread fruit. At first glance they look like huge breasts, ample to the hungriest mouth. How, you wonder, can the vines sustain them, or the thin bamboo pickets that bend precariously under the weight of the mother fruit? But look more closely. The pale rind is almost translucent. The interior is not so much flesh as a kind of veinal cloud. This conspiracy of sun and soil is decidedly ephemeral, nothing more than a decorative globing of air, a summer festoon against the dark jungle.

Nevertheless, it is true that on a board, under the single blow of a bulawa knife, the melon will split into succulent red halves. Furthermore, these hemispheres will continue for a long time to rock slowly to and fro like objects of great moment, or perhaps like the inconsolably divided androgynes of Plato's fable. You may even begin to imagine that it is not weight but appetency that keeps them rolling so long on their rinds. Ritually, the natives will not touch the fruit until it is still. Meanwhile the pale seeds glisten in the sun as though smeared with a placental fluid.

Now look at the natives. You find a plumpness that matches the melons. But again, look more closely. The hair, thatched elaborately in curious imitation of the construction of their huts, is brittle and frayed. The amber of their eyes is rheumy. The teeth are ramshackle. And note, the heavy breasts and bellies of the women are striated, as you have seen in the flesh of your own women just after delivery, with a kind of gristly separation of the subcutaneous tissue. These people are starving amid an opulence of bread fruit.

Our captain, a man of considerable presence, was a lover of photographs

—not a photographer, because his favorite subject was himself, posed against unusual landscapes or with colorful natives. Consequently our passage down the east coast of Africa afforded extraordinary opportunities. I shot roll after roll of film. Now that I have had time to study the selection of photographs which he culled from this huge collection, I see that it does foretell the events in Couville. And perhaps some will say that I ought to have detected his fatal impulse soon enough to save him from it. But at that time I was dazzled by looking through his eyes. You see, I was his executive officer and constant companion. The others in the ward-room considered me a toady. Alas, they were right. For he entirely won me over with his flattery. “Mr. Gardiner,” he would say, “you are the only officer aboard of percipience.” *Percipience*. When he found a word like that, mixing plumpness with succulence, he seemed not so much to speak it as to chew it. It came to you wet with spittle, like the morsel a primitive mother has masticated for her infant. “Only your dutiful second in command,” I would say, but I was entirely won over, up to the last steps into the hut. There I parted from him, as you see. I am here. But it was not courage, not the sudden recovery of myself. I merely shrank back.

So one can, if he is percipient, discover the constant image of the photographs which I took under the captain’s direction. It is an arch. It tends to be wide and soft in its slope rather than ogival. It may be a canopy of trees, the entry of a hut, or the arms of two grinning blacks paid to imitate camaraderie. And there is the captain under the arch addressing to the camera a decidedly theatrical smile, like a weary old vaudevillian coming forward under the proscenium for one last antic. But consider these arches carefully. If you lift the plastic pockets of the captain’s photo binder and let them slip one by one rapidly from the end of your finger, you will experience something akin to the crankcard flicks of the old penny arcade. What happens is this: the arches contract and dilate. Tree and sky mouth the captain. So, perhaps I should have seen what was coming, but I did not, until too late.

Melons, then, and arches. And one final ingredient: the bizarre business of racial confusion in Couville. This greatly animated the captain. Here’s what happened. The chief of the local constabulary came aboard to explain the laws. “Whites must not consort with blacks during your stay here. Your men understand that, captain?”

“They can be made to understand it.”

“Good. Now, have you any blacks among your crew?”

“Four stewards. High-calibre serviceable men.”

“Good. These four will be classified as whites for the duration of your call in Couville. They must be particularly cautioned against consorting

with blacks." Here the colonial's red mustache bobbed above a forced smile.

The captain's eyes narrowed. "How will my black whites be treated by your white whites?"

"I suggest the Feyanda district. Here they will be treated very well." From his coat pocket the chief produced a small chart and unfurled it under impeccably manicured hands. "Just here." He circumscribed an area of the city with a band of black ink. "Please keep this."

"Thank you." The captain smiled. "The potency of your laws is amazing. I assume that this alchemy of pigmentation is reversible so that at the proper time my white stewards can be reconverted into blacks."

"Of course, sir." Our colonial bobbed his red mustache for us again and then departed.

In the wardroom galley the captain assembled the stewards and decreed upon them whiteness. They were puzzled, of course. Then as understanding dawned, they giggled. But finally they settled into a kind of sullen uneasiness which displeased the captain. "You refuse to take up the white man's burden?"

"No sir," said Garrett, the chief steward, a black of great stature and dignity.

"What are you saying then?"

"We wish to meet alone, sir."

Quickly the word came that none of the stewards would go ashore, except Garrett, and he only to make necessary purchases for the wardroom.

"Is whiteness so fearful?" When I did not answer, the captain said, "Yes, Mr. Gardiner. Be honest and say yes. It's the color of nothingness. That's why the white man spreads over the globe gobbling up lands and peoples. He can't satisfy his appetite for color." He laughed humorlessly.

But the captain seemed to forget the stewards quickly, and we resumed our photographic quests, urging Kromah, the driver provided by the consulate, farther out into the native sections. Deepening shadows marked our progress. The white teeth of the natives shone brilliantly out of huts so dark that they seemed filled with a kind of gelatinous ink. Melon rinds lay in the black dust of the streets. Flies swarmed over them furiously. On the second day we reached an impasse. The street narrowed. The natives thickened. "Non beyond this," said Kromah. It was near the end of the day. "Very well," said the captain. "We will come here early tomorrow and set out on foot."

I sighed. "Captain, I've already photographed you with dozens of these people. Will they really be any different out at the edge of the jungle?"

"Very different, sir," Kromah interrupted in his loud and intense monotone.

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"Those non city sir, those very fierce."

"Precisely. Don't you see, Mr. Gardiner, there are two kinds of blacks, excluding, of course, Kromah's kind, totally acculturated to the white man. There are the melon-eaters, precarious parasites on the white man's culture, and the hunters out in the jungle still living according to the old ways." I deliberately looked blank. "Where's your curiosity, Mr. Gardiner? Don't you want to study these?"

"Why should I?"

"Because they represent two very interesting cases. The melon-eaters are marginal men, living in the penumbra of civilization. They are no longer what they were, but are not yet anything new. They are pure becoming. Among them we will study the hunger for being. Then we will go to the hunters, the flesh-eaters, and study the mastery of being. Is non true, Kromah?"

But we returned that evening to an unpleasant surprise: Garrett lay badly hurt in the brig, where the officer of the deck had put him for safekeeping. Red mustaches occupied the wardroom demanding that Garrett be turned over to the local authorities. A police boat snarled impatiently on our stern.

"See here, captain," said Sykes—Colonel Sykes he called himself on this occasion—"your ship is harboring a criminal, a steward named Garrett."

"Excuse me," said the captain. "You don't mean criminal. You mean suspect."

"All right, captain, suspect."

"What happened?"

Sykes' story was that Garrett had gone to the red light district in Fey-anda that afternoon and abused a white whore, thus starting a fracas during which several women and Garrett himself had been hurt. He managed to reach Fey-anda landing ahead of his pursuers, and the police boat had been too late to intercept the ship's whaler. "We must have our prisoner, captain. This is clearly a crime against the civil code, not against your military code."

"Colonel, I'm amazed. Do you imagine that the Uniform Code of Military Justice of the United States fails of sanctions against the abuse of foreign ladies of the night?"

"I mean, captain, that the offense comes under our jurisdiction. I am

certain that your superiors at the consulate will concur entirely." The red mustache gave a menacing twitch.

"Please be seated, colonel, while I have a word with Garrett."

I accompanied the captain to the brig, where we found the chief steward, his head heavily bandaged. "Garrett," he said, "what the hell happened? There's a bigoted little colonial in the wardroom that would like to have you spend several years in a South African jail."

"I have the right not to speak," said Garrett with great dignity.

The captain nodded gravely. "You certainly do, Garrett. But you may find yourself in front of a Dutch judge who can't remember that you're technically white."

"What do you want to know, captain?"

"I want to know exactly what happened."

"I was shopping where the man told us to go. I had everything on my list but the Edam cheese."

"My God, man, what kind of cock and bull is this? There must be a ball of Edam every six feet in Couville."

"Yes, sir, but a woman told me she could show me a place where I could get big hunks of Edam cheap."

The captain laughed sarcastically. "Mr. Gardiner, of all the expressions you know for that particular article have you ever encountered one more overripe?"

I refused to answer that. Garrett said nothing.

"And you had no idea that she was a woman of the streets?"

Garrett shook his head. "I thought she was talking about cheese."

"So let me guess, Garrett. When she discovered that you wouldn't purchase her brand of Edam, she and her friends fell on you."

"They tore up my market basket and dumped all my good eats in the gutter."

"And you struck back."

"Yes sir. I should have turned and walked off, but they made me mad, hollering about the nigger is queer. And then they went wild, clawing and biting."

"Mr. Gardiner, see that this man is returned to his quarters. And I myself will see our visitor off briskly."

These things were done, but the captain's agitation did not cease. Early the next morning he took Garrett to Sick Bay to have his wounds dressed again. I went along. There were nasty abrasions on both hands and arms, but the ugliest wound was a set of deep tooth marks on the right cheek and ear. The captain examined these closely. "Doctor, there you have the primeval stigmata."

"Yes sir," said the doctor after a considerable pause, "the mark of

Cain." He was a slow southerner and obviously pleased with himself for striking off this spark of learning.

"Yes," said the captain in a kind of rapt whisper. "Until I saw Garrett's wounds I had not realized that God branded Cain with his teeth."

Garrett winced as antiseptic was applied. "Clean him good, doctor. Can you think of anything more infectious than a whore's teeth?"

"Nothing, captain," said the doctor, jabbing his little swab savagely into Garrett's broken flesh. But the steward had overcome the shock of the first sting. He sat stoically still.

Kromah came at ten to the main landing. "We go back to consul, sir. See melon cutting another day."

"No," said the captain, "I've talked with the consul by phone since you left him, Kromah. We've changed my appointment to the afternoon so that we can witness the cutting." That was a lie of course. The last word from the consul was an urgent call for conference about Garrett's case.

Nevertheless, misled by the captain's lie, Kromah drove us out again toward that narrowing of the road which permitted no further passage. As we wound among the shacks of the melon-eaters, the captain peered ahead over Kromah's shoulder with keen anticipation. But something was lacking. For several minutes I could not figure out what it was, and then, with a start I saw. "Captain, you've forgotten your camera."

"Where we're going, Mr. Gardiner, there's not enough light for a photo."

"I could have drawn the infrared camera from gunnery, Captain," I said, pressing shrewdly I thought.

"No, Mr. Gardiner, we need an instrument that records more than light or heat—one for instance that records the smell and the titilation of acidic moisture, records sighs and the taste on the tongue of tongue. A sexasensographer." He paused and probed my eye half-humorously. "Why not an ordinary pentasensographer, Mr. Gardiner?" I shook my head. "Equilibrium, Mr. Gardiner. We need also to record the warping of space—and not merely the liquids of the inner ear running east or west, up or down, but spreading themselves out evenly in the little canals like a dew. Imagine that sensation, Mr. Gardiner."

I did imagine it. It was like floating in space. "Be careful, captain," I said, inadvertently assuming Kromah's stentorian monotone. "The instrument you are speaking of is the human consciousness. But there are places where we must not send ourselves. We must be satisfied to look at them through the long glass so to speak."

He made no comment, but only chuckled ambiguously. Moments later we debouched into a dust so finely powdered that it rose like smoke about

our feet. At our passage, too, fly-blown melon rinds released clouds of black buzzing. Dust and flies, but not a native in sight. "These all ahead in the circle," said Kromah.

"How far?"

"See." Kromah showed us a glimpse of light perhaps a quarter of a mile down the gloomy lane of arching trees.

As we neared the circle we began to hear above the plop of our foot-fall a rumbling of drums, gentle and soporific. And that was precisely the effect on the natives. Perhaps a hundred reclined somnolently along the shaded perimeter of the circle where a grassy embankment rose up from the dusty center. Kromah led us to a spot unoccupied by sleepers. We moved stealthily at his signal, but our arrival was marked. I saw several pairs of sad eyes open and take us in without expression. Our arrival was also noted by the six drummers and by the officialdom of the cutting. These latter, also six, were distinguished by their leather loin cloths and by the long heavy knives which hung from tight waistbands. All others, women as well as men, were clad in a wild variety of garments made of khaki twill: breach cloths, leggings, shorts, skirts, caps, scarves, greaves, and all sorts of bindings and baldrics. One had the feeling that he had chanced upon some defeated regiment of native irregulars, or that these were cannibals who had eaten their victims and dismembered their uniforms.

When the six with knives began to arrange on a long raised cutting board a line of perhaps four dozen melons, the drummers picked up the tempo. The sleepers began to sit up one by one, theatrically, as if aroused from a deep trance and returned to a reality which for some moments was altogether unfamiliar. I smiled.

"Non smile sir."

The tempo of the drums increased. The crowd began to clap and chant. The six did a sword dance, threatening each other in the most unconvincing way, pretending frenzy. Inevitably there came the sudden silence, the halving of the melons with the single flashing stroke of the bulawa knives, and the brief mass scream of the eaters. Then followed the only truly memorable moment of the ritual—an absolute stillness during which the melon halves rocked slowly to and fro, red and glistening, returning to the sun at its zenith an old debt of flesh and blood.

The leader of the six cutters, a gray-haired but muscular black, beckoned us toward the feast. I hung back. The captain did not. Kromah touched my elbow. "Muss go sir." At the table, following the example of the captain, I seized a slice of melon and sank my teeth into it—a swill of insubstantial sweetness, pulpy and veinous, which left on the palate a lacteous aftertaste and in the teeth elusive threads. And the juice,

which was nothing more than a saccharine pink water, ran down our chins and stained our uniforms. It was hard to believe that even the natives themselves could take any joy of this pallid food. In fact, such animation as there was related less to eating than to the skeeting of seeds. At this the natives were masterful. Seeds flew from their lips with amazing force and accuracy. Immense passion went into the great inhalation of breath, into the precise puckering of lips, and into the oohs and aahs that rewarded an especially long trajectory which culminated in a direct hit. No one dodged. In fact, the target, whether man or woman, always wore the missile proudly upon his skin until the spittle dried and the seed fell into the dust. This play went on for perhaps a quarter of an hour and then the circle emptied rapidly.

The captain detained the grizzled leader of the cutters. "Kromah, can you speak with this fellow?"

"Some word sir."

"Ask him what else these people eat."

Kromah and the cutter exchanged words. "These eat insect, too, and tuber and soup from garden reptile."

"Does he preside over ceremonies for these foods too?"

Another exchange, this time more complicated. "He do this for others sir."

"You mean for another tribe?"

"Yes sir, he do other cuts."

"What does he cut for the others?"

"He non say sir."

"Ask him."

"Muss non ask sir. Police chop chop."

Then the cutter spoke without interrogation. Kromah answered.

"What was that?" asked the captain.

"He say you come to other cut. I say non come."

The captain nodded. "Where does the other cutting take place?"

"He non say sir. In jungle, or police come chop chop."

The captain glanced at his watch. "We'd better get back to the consulate, Kromah. Please thank our host for the bread fruit."

In a spacious white stucco building the consul received us brusquely. With him was Colonel Sykes, his mustache twitching impatiently.

"I assume you were delayed."

"Yes, consul. We had an appointment out in the native quarters for the noon melon cutting. That explains the appearance of our uniforms, which I hope you will excuse." The captain plucked his britches regretfully.

"The case of Garrett," said the consul with ferocious loudness as though sweeping with his voice the smirched air.

"Yes," said the captain. "Well, you and the colonel will be pleased to learn that I have persuaded Garrett not to press charges." He nodded lightly at the consul and Sykes. A pained incredulity crossed the consul's face. He must have thought that he was dealing with an utter fool, the archetypal American naif.

"Captain . . ." began the colonel strenuously.

"Please, John." The consul raised his hand. He spoke slowly, as to a child. "The charges in question, captain, are being brought *against* Garrett, *against* Garrett—resisting arrest and aggravated assault."

The captain shook his head. "I'm amazed, consul, but if that's the case, then we'd better have a private word. You see, I have been serving informally as Garrett's legal counsel."

The consul fussed about his desk for a moment. "Colonel, in the interest of expediting this case, would you please allow me a moment with the captain. I assure you we will arrive at a quick issue."

"The man is playing the fool. I will not be put off," said the colonel, but he did march out.

"Now captain . . ."

"Just be quiet a minute, consul. I have questioned Garrett closely, a man of great honesty. Whores in the Feyanda district, recommended incidentally by the colonel to my stewards, enticed him to their quarters and attacked him when he rejected their offers. Consequently, under absolutely no circumstance will I turn Garrett over to the local authorities. You understand that?"

The consul was set back by the captain's sudden change in character, but he managed to speak with a suitable sternness. "You wish me to inform the local authorities that they must make the arrest without my assistance? You understand that the charges might then extend to those protecting the criminal?"

"If the police boat approaches within 300 yards of my side I will blow it out of the water." The captain leaned forward. "You see these, consul?" He pointed to two of the dozen or so ribbons above the pocket of his blouse. "Purple Heart, Medal of Honor—the Coral Sea. And you know, consul, I yearn for one more good whiff of gunsmoke and carrion." He rubbed his hands together. "Is there a Dutch man-of-war nearby we could call in? Are there any shore batteries?" He turned briefly to me. His eyes glowed madly. "Mr. Gardiner, prepare a fire grid of the city. We'll lob a few shells into the police garrison. We'll send in the motorboat for you and your staff, consul. Cover it with the three-inchers."

"Stop it, captain. You must turn the man over and you know it."

"I will not, consul. Question. Isn't it your job to represent American citizens here? Why are you playing toady to a hash of Dutch and British bigots, cravenly assisting in the most errant miscarriage of justice? What do they pay you for that kind of work, consul?" That flayed away the professional exterior of the consul. He shook his fist. "I'll have your ass, captain. I'll send an urgent dispatch to the Commander of the Sixth Fleet."

The captain nodded. "Admiral Gaines is one of my old mentors, consul. But you're right. You could make trouble." He paused. "Let's look at things another way. My guess is you're about 50, consul. I also guess that if you were having a promising career with the State Department you would not be in Couville. And you know, consul, the times being what they are, sentiment ripening, cases which involve injustices to blacks can be very ugly. You have my ass, I have your ass. Why don't we try a different way?"

"What?" said the consul almost abstractedly, the flush of anger drained from his face.

"Well," said the captain, also much subdued, "suppose I charge Garrett with, say, absence without leave and conduct unbecoming—offenses too serious for captain's mast. I appoint Mr. Gardiner to conduct a summary court martial. Mr. Gardiner will receive depositions and statements from the colonel and others. The trial will be concluded at sea after our sailing. I will send you a report of the powerful punishments which Garrett is to undergo."

The consul smiled wanly. "Nicely invented, captain, but it won't wash with these people. They'll eat me alive."

The captain looked searchingly at the consul, then he said, "If you send the dispatch, consul, Sixth Fleet will eat me alive."

"Turn him over," said the consul.

"The question is whether one wants to be eaten from the outside or the inside," said the captain. He sat still for some moments looking intently at the consul, then he seemed to drift off.

"Are you reconciling yourself to the inevitable, captain?"

The captain shook his head absently. "Actually, consul, my old war-dog braggadocio of a moment ago put me in mind of Okinawa again and the kamikazes."

"Is that so, captain?"

"Yes. At the time, consul, as you can imagine, I hated the kamikazes. Later I pitied them, poor little yellow boys strapped in halfgassed Zeros by their evil elders. But now I see that neither sentiment was appropriate. Think of it, consul—diving down those smoky skies toward the black mouth of a man-of-war's stack. And if you made it . . ."

The consul shot me a curious look. I said, "If you made it, captain, you never knew it. So it didn't do you any good—unless you're prepared to believe that you soared out on the other side into an imperial paradise where your warrior ancestors welcomed you as a hero."

The captain smiled. "Mr. Gardiner keeps me rational, consul. I'll consult with him about the disposition of Garrett."

"I'm afraid, captain, that I must have your commitment, at this very moment, to turn Garrett over to Colonel Sykes."

The captain said nothing to that. He stood and extended his hand. "Forgive words spoken in heat, consul."

But there was no heat in that room. This was not your equatorial Africa of slowly turning fans. Outside the window all was bright and temperate. From clay pots hung the blood bells of gorgeous fuchsia.

The dispatch came the following morning from Admiral Gaines: "Relinquish immediately Henry M. Garrett to W. John Sykes, Chief of Constabulary, Couville. Right to counsel and all other legal protections guaranteed Garrett." The firm but moderate tone of the dispatch assured us that the consul had had the decency, perhaps even the compassion, not to send the admiral an inflammatory message. The captain said to me, "We're moving our ETD up one day, Mr. Gardiner. We sail tomorrow at dawn. In a few minutes I'm going to take the motorboat in and wind up a couple of things."

"I'll go along."

"It's not necessary, Mr. Gardiner."

"Yes, it is necessary."

He looked at me sharply. "Very well."

I thought that we might be intercepted in the harbor, but the police boat did not come out. I thought we might be arrested when we put in, but there was Kromah waiting for us, according to the captain's instructions, as though nothing were amiss. Sometimes I have thought that Kromah had entered a subtle conspiracy with his jungle cousins, that he only pretended to oppose the captain's desire to penetrate the mysteries of the flesh-eaters. But who can see behind the black mask of the house nigger?

We went to the melon-cutting ceremony, of course. The drums beat, the sleepers arose from their ersatz trance, the great bulawa knives flashed up and down, the circle filled briefly with silence and the rocking glisten of the melons, the eaters rushed forward, and presently the air was lanced with seeds. Then the captain talked again through Kromah to the grizzled leader of the cutters, as I knew he would. He wished to

arrange to witness the other cutting ceremony in the jungle. "Muss non go," said Kromah. "Police chop chop."

The cutter was willing to take the captain to the jungle ceremony. He required no money.

"Kromah non go."

"That's right, Kromah, you stay with the car. Otherwise these people might eat the tires. Mr. Gardiner will stay with you."

"No, captain, I'll make the show."

"Very well." The captain gave me a look of mild surprise.

From the clearing the cutter led us onto a path that passed again under a dark arch of trees. The path was straight. It did not twist among the trees. It seemed older than the trees. I said, "Captain, fortunately this is an easy path to retrace. It's not too late to turn back."

"What's behind us, Mr. Gardiner?"

"Garrett's behind us, captain, with nothing standing between him and the Dutch but you."

"Remember that, Mr. Gardiner."

"I am remembering it, captain, but you seem to forget it." He didn't reply to that, but after a while he said, "I have discovered my vocation, Mr. Gardiner. It is to learn why men eat each other."

I laughed. "All the thinkers of the ages haven't found the answer to that question, captain."

"They didn't look in the right place."

"The jungle?"

"Yes."

"It's not necessary to come out here to the jungle, captain. Study the colonel. Study the whores in Feyanda. And yesterday you wanted to eat the consul. Study your own heart."

The captain smiled. "Surely, Mr. Gardiner, you will excuse me from the study of the colonel for the mere asking. As for the whores of Feyanda, I fear they wouldn't find me as tempting as Garrett, the black white man, and therefore wouldn't show me their teeth. And my own heart, rank with Japanese carrion? Who would learn anything from it, Mr. Gardiner? No, my appointment is with the flesh-eaters out here in the jungle. But it is not your appointment, Mr. Gardiner."

"I am with you, captain."

"Then march on, Emmanuel."

We heard a noise ahead like the whine of gnats. As we approached, it deepened and became human. Presently the path turned abruptly and we walked out upon the edge of a clearing. In the center a dozen wailing dancers performed around a smoky fire. They were masked as panthers. From time to time one of the natives sitting along the grassy perimeter of

the clearing echoed their wailing. It was not fierce, but there was something in it so profoundly exigent that it made me shudder.

So it was a circle much like the other, except that the fire replaced the long melon table, and a hut with an arched thatch roof stood just behind it. Did I remember then all those arches—arm, door, tree—which my weary eye had centered in the captain's lens? Did I take from the intensity of the captain's face sign and signature of this last, this darkest arch? Yes. Nevertheless, and no matter how futilely, I held my hand out. "This is as far as we go, captain." I had at least the energy of fear. But I expected our guide, the grizzled cutter, to shout for the panther men to seize and bind us. I was mistaken. He showed no signs of misgiving and waited patiently while the captain and I exchanged final words.

"We must turn back now captain, for Garrett's sake if for nothing else."

"Mr. Gardiner, don't let the Dutch have Garrett. Take any steps necessary. That's an order."

I flared up—fear again, not courage. "You're the one who's got to take care of that, captain, instead of indulging yourself in this jungle idiocy!"

"Jungle idiocy?" The captain looked at me with frowning disapproval. And, yes, he was right. Whatever one chose to call what we witnessed, it was not idiocy. Just at that moment the panther men, widening the round of their dance, touched with high-arched feet the edge of the narrow circle of greensward where we stood. They brought their knees high and ducked their heads low in a curious pantomime of stealth, wailing all the while as though the extremity of their need cruelly deprived them of the cunning required to satisfy it. Behind leaped the fire, making red tongues against the morning sunlight. And behind the fire stood the thatched hut. And in my mind's eye passed, like a flickering nightmare, the endless series of arches I had seen through the captain's camera. But about that he was also right. No camera could record the images of this scene. It might catch the blackness of the panther men and the sun-paled fire with the hut shimmering behind, but not the sub-human wailing, not the wraith of smoke that tickled the nose, moistened the eye, and caused the tongue to explore fearfully the roof of the mouth, and certainly not the frightening hint of vertigo I felt as the panther men began to circle back now closer to the fire and the hut. I seized the captain's arm as firmly as I could, but he obviously felt the palsy in my grip. "Steady, Mr. Gardiner."

"Why are we here, captain?" I tried to make the question stern and challenging, but my voice shook.

"For this, Mr. Gardiner." He took in with a sweep of his free hand

the whole expanse of the clearing. The grizzled cutter followed this gesture with interest.

"You knew this is what it would be?"

"Not exactly, Mr. Gardiner. It's the fate of the initiate to go blindly into the rite."

By now the panther men were in a tight circle about the fire passing, it seemed, between the leached flames and the columns the sunlight made of the smoke, and wailing inconsolably. For the first time the grizzled cutter shuffled his feet with a hint of impatience. "Don't go, captain," I said shaking his arm. "Don't go. Remember the pictures I took of all the mouths. Remember the tooth marks in Garrett's head." I think I attempted a sibylline whisper.

"Be still, Mr. Gardiner."

"Captain! Remember Garrett, who has polished your shoes, made your bed, and cooked your food for four years. Remember, you are the captain of our ship."

"I'm detaching myself from the ship, Mr. Gardiner, leaving it and Garrett in your good hands. Go back and make ready to get underway. Weigh anchor at 0600 tomorrow." I was trembling. He laid his hand on my shoulder. "Be still, Mr. Gardiner. Some day not long from now, when you have rounded the rough seas of the Cape of Good Hope and sailed northwest to the Caribbean, you will look down from the bridge into blue water and see clearly the perfect image of all this." His voice did not shake. His eyes did not flash. To all outward appearances he was perfectly sane. Nevertheless, when he pulled away from me and started toward the center of the circle, I dashed after him and grabbed his arm. Yet I never spoke to him again. We stood there together one step down the declivity toward fire and hut. But what I felt pulling me was nothing so innocent as gravity. It was the hollow yearning of the hut's mouth, sucking at my bowels. And suddenly I knew why the split noon melons always rocked with uncanny moment, with fatal appetency. And knew, too, why they were, though red, so watery—blood and balance pre-empted by some ancient failure of the vine's will. I let the captain go. I turned and labored back over the lip of that little hillock as other men labor to climb mountains. It was long, very long. Sometimes I seemed not to move at all. The sun stood up over the tops of the trees and fixed upon me its great bright eye. But I labored on.

I reached the straight path at last and ran down it without looking back. Perhaps the panther men raised a triumphant cry. But I did not hear it. My own breath, so narrowly reclaimed, came in sobs and filled my ears.

Across the water, in Sierra Leone, bougainvillea hang in profusion from the walls of the city, their reds deeper even than those of the fuchsia in Couville. I can also see through my binoculars blacks working on the docks. They are glossier than the captain's dusty melon-eaters and smoky panther men. They glisten. It is hot here. Tomorrow the new captain arrives by plane. The same plane will fly Garrett to Couville to face his accusers. I offered to slip him ashore here to fend for himself among his fellow blacks, but he refused. The jungle frightens him. He prefers, as a white, to face the Dutch court. They will eat him alive. So in the end the captain was wrong. Garrett did not refuse to take up the white man's burden. Thus we have lost one black to the whites and one white to the blacks. *Ave atque vale*, my gallant, my sacrificial miscegenators.

The new captain will hold an inquiry. I will tell him that my captain was captured by evil natives, panther men, and that I barely escaped with my life. I will tell him that I set sail as ordered by my captain against my better judgment but in passionate respect (shall I say reverence?) for his final words. In short, I will play the fool, addled by African mysteries. They cannot court-martial me. But neither can they ever again trust me at sea. They will find me serviceable in, say, the communications office of some out-of-the-way base, an auxiliary air station in Florida, where the windows are wreathed in morning glories. I will be a man of mystery, career wrecked by curious occluded events in Africa—best left alone.

So, I have had heroic moments: walking to the edge of doom with the captain, sailing with a fugitive under the guns of the Dutch. Naught availeth. I leave them to their destinies in hut, in prison, in black maw. I have only a few years of service remaining. However uneasy the peace, I savor it, knowing that the ages of cannibalism are in the offing.

Circle

"I saw Eternity the other night / Like a great ring of pure and endless light," says Vaughan in "The World." And no doubt the shells of atoms are equally luminous. But spectroscopy and microscopy notwithstanding, the Pascalian declaration of our disproportion remains true: neither stars nor mites are truly within our ken. We seek protected intimacy, run from womb to cave. "For when it is experienced from inside, devoid of all exterior features, being cannot be otherwise than round." ("The Phenom-