

Mr. and Mrs. C. seldom spoke that morning, which was unusual and not at all predictable. They sat in the breakfast nook, as they usually did, but took their meal in silence, which was not ordinary. Certainly, there were the minor courtesies, a "good morning, darling" (but, strangely, not "darling love"). There was no soft kiss on the cheek, but there was a "yes, please" when Mrs. C. asked Mr. C. if he'd like more coffee. What was remarkable, however, was that Mr. C. took the pot from Mrs. C. and poured the coffee himself. Otherwise, the morning in the nook was very still — solemn but not quite melancholy. The oak leaves rattled outside the parlor window, but in a subdued sort of way, as if the tree were behind another.

Mrs. C. stood politely at the door as Mr. C. put on his coat and hat (Mrs. C. did not help him into his coat nor hand him his hat). When Mr. C. leaned to kiss her goodbye, Mrs. C. stepped back a pace, her cheeks red, her eyes watery. Her embarrassment embarrassed Mr. C., and he grumbled as he stepped out into the shining morning.

The robins, normally so rude and chatty and brazenly coaxing fights with the neighbors, evidently had no desire to herald the morning. They stood in the lawn looking at nothing particular in spite of the sun and the clean air and the sounds of the Stony burbling away east. What was normally the pleasant and brisk ceremonial hour of the day when all shared the bond of blue existence was now just a low thrumming. There was a tremor in the air, lurking behind every tree and mailbox and fire hydrant down Water Street, a cicada zing.

"Hullo, Frankie!" Mr. C. certainly would have called out to the paperboy just then, that is, under normal circumstances. Frankie would have pedaled up to Mr. C., his canvas postbag dangling and bouncing off the rear wheel of his bike, the canvas zipping against the clean spokes and called out a "Hullo, Mr. C.! Strange things happening in the world today! Here's your paper!" and, like a gentlemen hand Mr. C. his paper. It was a nice ordinary little agreement they had. There was no need to fling the paper across the yard. A newspaper deserved respect, Frankie always said, and Mr. C. always honestly agreed.

Mr. C. instead said nothing. Indeed, he seemed to avoid even acknowledging Frankie, and the feeling was mutual. Each passed by the other and a newspaper whisked from the boy's hand into a rosebush.

Mr. C. noted the shared indifference's peculiarity. He might perhaps been able to explain it, were he still around. In so doing, he might have been able to explain his unpredictable flight of fancy just then, just something to beat off the muldrum of the moment, the harsh separation between the paperboy and Mr. C. that was now growing. Frankie had given his bike an extra thrust to flee the percolating awkwardness, the tremor that was stretching between them like a rubber band.

"Wouldn't it be funny," Mr. C. thought to himself, "if Frankie's bike were a fiery chariot led by a team of terrible sun-horses and Frankie was bat-shit out of his element and couldn't control them?" Just as soon as this think was thought that Mr. C. thought next, "I'm not sure sure why I thought that just then. How odd!" Mr. C. turned and watched Frankie turn at the end of the street and disappear. He noticed that Frankie had peeked behind his shoulder at him.

Mr. C. turned right on Fourth toward Main Street. There were others about on their daily, predictable errands. The stores were opening. However, these little scenes, those little frames, the facts of those matters that were ordinarily a tedious yet important part of the life of every scrap of normal routine blended into a careful system of consensus and synchronicity was now unassuming and unfamiliar. For instance, Mr. C. watched Mrs. M. approach from Main Street. A dullness blurred about her like body warmth ruffles, like when someone gets out of a cold lake on a hot summer day, but not in any vital way. She was carrying a single bag of groceries and Mr. C. watched as Mrs. M. with difficulty tried to stop a loaf of bread threatening its way out of the bag, which it did, rolling into the street. It stopped on a catch basin, sitting there, Mr. C. saw, bread on a catch basin. Mrs. M. stared at the bread, forlorn. It was bread on a catch basin, just sitting there, looking stupid and pointless.

How utterly fucking pathetic, Mr. C. thought just then. He next noted this thought's peculiarity.

For one, Mr. C. never swore. Second, such awkwardness, a happy and kind accident of the brand and make

that brings people together, sometimes forever, solidifying lifeong friendships and camping trips, would have ordinarily been charming since Mr. C. and Mrs. M. were in fact lifelong friends, classmates all the way through, and each others' families did go on annual camping trips, the only time of the year they could get silly drunk and howl at the moon. Now Mrs. M. was staring forlornly, contemplating pauses in between shuffling steps before her droopy sad eyes met Mr. C. and the helplessness, his helplessness, was sharp, like a pop of glass when a bulb snaps to life and blows out. It was keen, ice-cold.

This was far too much. Mr. C. turned quickly around. deciding instead to go roundabout, go back down Water Street to Third, and just go on from there, he thought, just go on from there. He felt bitter and violated. Not because of his helplessness — that was inconsequential to the generality of the moment — but because such a thing even happened at all. It was bread on a catch basin and it was stupid looking and shameful and there was no reason for such mediocrity on such a nice morning and what the hell, Mrs. M., damn it, be more careful. And so Mr. C. considered so and so and so forth. Mrs. M. was such a kind woman, hale and matriarchal, but today, right now, it was as though she had just spat in Mr. C.'s face.

Mr. C. fortunately suffered no further encounters; no other neighbors were out. Old Nick, however, was lounging on the D.s' porch, as usual, but not at all interested in pouring his bad hips off the porch in that see-saw metronome way that always (usually) gladdened Mr. C.'s heart, shuffling and bobbing up to Mr. C. for a friendly slap on the belly or a ruffle behind flapping ears. The dog only stared and his tail did not thump.

Mr. C. crossed Third, passed the mill, and came through to Second (it was Second Street in town, but was actually the Dakokee Road, which ribboned its quiet way toward the Stoney and the village beyond). He approached the road doggedly, slowly; he ordinarily walked swiftly, upright, straight and trued, believing and philosophizing often as he walked that walking slow was a sure sign of untrustworthiness, and though of course he never said this out loud ordinarily, he had done so just then.

"People who walk slow for no other reason to walk slow do so because there is guilt in their hearts," he had said and noted the suddenness of this critical irruption.

Mr. C. felt he could sense at the junction ahead a gathering presence, some assembling or congregating in progress. The air seemed to tremor and purr more perceptibly now, or so Mr. C. thought and his intuition had been correct. Down the road were men and they were working within a staging area. There were gestures of deliberation, small faraway flurries of hands and arms, and responding gestures of uncertainty, slow waves and jerks, and it looked to Mr. C. they were building something. Debate did not restrain Mr. C's curiosity, as it ordinarily did (Mr. C. actually usually debated with himself aloud whenever indecisive about any particular thing, a silly foible that, silly as it was, was the reason Mrs. C. thought she loved him most). He turned east down the road toward the men. He saw they were setting up a barrier across the road, old sawhorses and even a log trailer. A man was hammering a notice on an old maple close to the road by the old, long unused toll-booth still standing in the shade, crooked but happy.

The post, in bold black type, simply read:

WARNING
ROAD CLOSED
GO HOME, DAMN IT

Mr. C. laughed aloud. He laughed and turned and looked at the barrier, at the men, but they were all serious, quiet and, perhaps most noticeable, all were keeping a carefully designed and respectable distance from the other, bypassing and pirouetting around an invisible axes like electrons.

A deputy stepped out of the old tollbooth, rifle held flat across his chest. Its barrel dangled limply in the crook of the deputy's arm but, Mr. C. noticed, it was pointed somewhat in his direction. The deputy did not approach Mr. C. He stood ust outside the tollbooth awning, keeping to the shade as if it were some kind of reassurance, protection, an apotropaic.

"Sorry, Mr. C.," said the deputy. "No business in Dakokee today. The road's closed. Go home." His badge caught the sun and twinkled.

Mr. C. pointed at the sign. "What is this?"

"It's a sign."

"No, I mean, what is this about?"

"It's about the road being closed and you going home," said the deputy.

"But why?"

The deputy took one firm step forward. There was something peculiarly menacing about it, the way the deputy's boot crunched in the gravel.

"The road's closed. Go home."

Mr. C. felt unusually angry. There was presently in him a burning desire for challenge. He wanted, or he imagined he wanted, to step outside himself, zip right out of his skin and step out all dripping and spoil the deputy's mood with bodily petulance, wafting of meat, blood and an aggregate of something both somatic and powerfully surreal. He imagined himself doing that, zipping down and out and stepping right out like that. a skull face and wide staring eyes and striding up to the deputy and grabbing him by the ears and shouting something snarky and witty at the obvious strain being pulled between them, trembling, a hard and rough-hewn barrier of its own. He imagined this and noted its peculiarity.

The air seemed to shift just then. Not a change in the wind, but something else — a physical tendency, certainly, but one working on a quite different and generally dormant sense that had now been stirred awake, injected with what can only be described as a supra-consciousness. Were Mr. C. still around, he'd likely describe it as though all perceptive tendencies of the present moment had been popped loose and twisted, one hard braid, a turn of a screw too many cracking the flange and spoiling the equipment and with fierce suddenness rendered inoperable.

One of the men had started singing. Not quite singing, but chanting, strings of verse that was powerfully emotive, even cathartic. It was a beautiful song about the moon and midnight and primordial silence and a perilous bridge. The men around him stopped working, stared at the man, entranced but utterly frightened. The man clapped time, each word falling into place magically and with wondrous and pronounced accuracy, a dream-myth of which only comes from outside time and wakeful sleep.

"God Almighty!" the deputy choked. "Get the hell away from him! All of you! Get away!" He seemed to have quite forgotten Mr. C. for the present; his rifle was at the ready, pointed upward, obscene against the purpling sky. For all the beauty, the solemnity and truthfulness, there was a mood, a bad mood that was bad right away and Mr. C. quickly hurried back up the road toward town. He felt better for it at once, like a great pressure had been released, a storm front blowing hard rain and unpoping the ears. But when he was at the top of the road, he turned. The men, deputy included, were all dancing a circle dance about the singing man and the trees leaning over the road swayed and trembled, buzzing and jerking as if being pulled by unseen wires.

Mr. C. quickened his pace toward Main Street, eyes straight, his ears fluttering inside his head at the lingering crooked stillness. He was confused by the spectacle he had just left but, strangely, and with equal suddenness, it did not seem to him at all particularly extraordinary. He was for the most part undeterred and even chuckled at the sheer creativity of it all.

"What a beautiful song that was. Dying moons and midnight alchemy and perilous bridges! Who would've

thought a dumb Stonie could sing so! Why was the deputy so upset? No call for that sort of reaction. That was just a man finally falling in love with the world. Well, I didn't get my newspaper so I guess I'd better go into town for it," he decided finally. He whistled a scrap of the song about dying moons and midnight alchemy and perilous bridges and wondered why the road to Dakokee was closed and why, of course, the deputy was so frightened by the singing man.

Main Street was unpredictably, or rather uncharacteristically, inactive. The baker was, strangely, closed. No deliveries were coming to our out of the elevator. The opera house doorman was not at his post. Where there were people there seemed to be, like the Dakokee roadblock, an immaterial barrier. It was felt each time Mr. C.'s eyes fell on someone, a passersby on the road or sidewalk. It was like a protuberance, a catch in one's step, something sticking out and prickling, small static shocks like someone or something were flicking tiny bits of wood or beads.

Mr. C. found that the sunlight was creeping into and dappling spaces it would not ordinarily creep and dapple into. Mr. C. stood there awhile considering this. He considered how the sun generally did not fall upon the cafe facade the way it was falling on it now. Either he never noticed this or this was some unpredictable anomaly, a twist of physics caught at precisely the right moment. He watched the light move slantwise, tracing a path until it glinted in the front window in tight focus like a magnifying glass, shining like a little star. This seemed to beat off Mr. C.'s melancholy somewhat. He even felt, for whatever reason, a growing nostalgia. He felt, for instance, a yearning for scenes he had never even experienced: a group of young women with lillies in their hair crowding and giggle under a parasol, or a man in wool pants striding down the center of Main Street with a shining axe bouncing on his powerful shoulders, catching sunlight on its keen edge, or of the sound of reed-pipes fluting in dark, waxy bushes, or a library with old texts and illuminations and scrolls holding within them something quite important but whose true noesis was quite forgotten. These thoughts seemed to want to fall right out of the air into the present moment all of the sudden. This was all quite unusual, for Mr. C. was ordinarily not the sentimental type. In fact, he avoided sentimentality when he could. Even the hills away north was with the sun's rising taking on a subtle transformation.

"The strange thing is, over there should be a waiter with too much starch in his collar serving biscuits on little pink plates, and over there," he pointed toward the elevator, "should be a red-faced deliveryman — Mr. S. I believe his name is — should be heaving — all by himself, mind you, for he is quite strong — big wooden boxes and bushels onto his wagon as his horses, I think their names are Bill and Starboy, should be slurping at the trough." He pointed toward the Masonic temple. "And over there should be those old freemasons arguing and ogling the pretty girls from the beauty parlor, and there, right over there, should be the butcher posting the day's prices. But there are none of this. There is no one there."

He felt himself come suddenly alive, zapped with impossible color. He said: "Wouldn't it be interesting if instead of these things there were in its place strange horsemen in long travel-worn cloaks casting tall shadows across the road riding toward a red dawn, and over there Celtic sorceress-queens with silver gauntlets and golden-red collars demanding fealty and the heads of dragons, and over there a full-bearded satyr with mossy horns, and instead of the smell of fresh manure that I'm smelling now, or the pastries from the bakery that's oddly closed, or those fucking fumes from the paper mill, I smelled instead blood and seawater and graveyard earth?"

He stopped. "Oh, what are these nonsense thoughts? Why am I talking like this?"

Then, "I hope Mrs. M. got that stupid bread off the catch basin."

Mr. C. shook the visions from his head and crossed Main Street to get his newspaper. He passed the dry goods store, said "Dry goods" quietly to himself and wondered, all of the sudden, for no particular reason, what would happen if everything dry in the world — dead summer grass, our grandfather's hands, birchbark, corn grits, papyrus scrolls, the shelves the papyrus scrolls rest in, photons, moon craters, cracked leather (the actual cracks, not necessarily the leather), sawdust swirling from the sawmill, an old dog's nose, and the sheer faces of monument mesas baking happily in the greasy sun — became good, virtuous, honest, of high moral bearing

and rigid gumption and were suddenly reversed, entrophied and grown from its tertiary disintegration and dehydration into numinous and terrible kratophonies. He then, for not particular reason, imagined a sudden whirlwind blowing out the storefront glass and the whirlwind stepping over and in and, pirouetting in careful rhythm about the center of the store, sending out "the dainty things that women love here in abundance, delicate hosiery, lacy lingerie, fascinating veils, perfectly fitting gloves, whatever your fall wardrobe needs, you can get it here at its best for the least money" and these items danced out and coagulated into the woman he remembered in the advert, sitting on the floor cross-legged, hair swept to one side staring out with ink-eyes and full ink-lips, a strange and grand typographic aphrodite. He imagined what might happen if she walked about on those dark legs, puffing purple spells in peoples' faces.

"What on earth?" Mr. C— said.

Mr. H— and Mr. G—'s printing office was just next door. Mr. C— was pleased to find the door open. He took a penny from his pocket and looked and it for some reason reminded him of a magic bivalve seashell. He recalled his Coleridge just then, saying aloud, "We were the first that ever burst / into the silent sea." A most peculiar thought, Mr. C— thought and walked on in.

There was no one at the desk. Mr. C— thought he heard talking, some quiet discussion coming out of the walls, noticing then he was indeed hearing from the cellar stairs nearby a discussion that was indeed quiet. The barrow-stairs creaked as he descended into the cool rocky cellar that smelled of the skins and scales and horns of ancient marine things, a primordium pondwater tang. The press room was very dark and the Hoe press was silent as a sarcophagus but it was glowing. In each corner of the room was a golden oil lamp alit, casting on the walls vaudevillian shadow-shows. Surrounding the Hoe press were Mr. H—, his two printers, and some others. They were whispering urgently in file, like a game of Telephone, each responding to the other either in rebuke or agreement. They did not appear to notice Mr. C— until he said:

"What are you doing? What are these golden lamps for? May I buy a paper?"

"It's a Sacred Quaternity," Mr. H— said, turning round. "Please don't disturb it. Yes, you may buy a paper."

"Why do you have a Sacred Quaternity in your press room?" He handed Mr. H— a magic bivale seashell, that is, a penny.

"I don't know!" Mr. H— said, throwing his arms up. "That's what we've been discussing quietly all morning. It seems people have heard the news and here we all are now trying to figure it out." He hesitated briefly, then asked, "Have you, have you seen anything out of the ordinary today?"

"In the space of three short blocks, I have already seen your boy Frankie ride by on his bike wreathed in flame, Mrs. M— was carrying a shopping bag of the scalps of Tartars and wool of bat and toe of frog. I have seen dark men in dark cloaks and witch-queens and giant lumberjacks and a satyr, or maybe it was a centaur, at any rate a lady-killer. A creeping whirlwind came out of the alley and knocked off the dry goods next door. That woman in the advert was there, puffing purple spells in peoples' faces. And all that is dry in the world became good. The sun broke its arc and glinted off the cafe window in a way I never in my life noticed. I have, being responsible, noted the peculiarity of all these things."

"Hmm," Mr. H— said.

"Mind you, I didn't actually *see* these things. It's more like, like—"

"More like it's something that otherwise should normally be there."

"I never thought of it that way, but yes, that is precisely it. Oh, have you by any chance heard distant bells and chims and deep thrummings coming from the hills and behind the trees and bushes and fire hydrants?"

"All morning," Mr. H— replied. "It's not normal."

"I think it's normal," said someone by the press.

"Wait your turn," said another. "You are in a Sacred Quaternity."

"Anyway, may I have my paper?" Mr. C— asked.

"OK, but I have to warn you: you'll complain. Mr. H— handed him a sheet hot off the press even though the press was as silent as a sarcophagus.

Mr. C— stood by a lamp and looked over the broadsheet. The circle of people around the press resumed their quiet discussion in file. Mr. C— thought he heard mentioned a "cartadaemonicon" and wondered whether this was why the press was, in spite of its silence, glowing eerily, with a kind of living vitality, like those mushroom rooms in the deepest caves.

"What the hell is this drivel?" Mr. C— suddenly interjected. "You call this news? The type is all different, some archaic cuneiform, and what's this headline here about ideogrammatic death-gods? That's unusual and not at all like your paper. I have a mind to put on my mean-pants and fire off a letter to the editor. That's you, Mr. H."

"I would be happy to print it if you did," Mr. H— said in good faith.

"And why is there where normally would be the market prices or here the church directory and there the William Sullivan & Son's funeral parlor advert and," he turned to an insid epage, "there the the dry goods store ad with that woman there are instead therianthromorphs and gnostic formulae and parietal mythemes?"

"I don't know but if you want the news, that's how you'll have to get it. Now if you will excuse us, we were just about to sacrifice a scapegoat of newsprint sheaves to my iron furnace press. I'm not sure why exactly; I just think it's something that needs to be done. If you're going to join us, then get in the circle. Otherwise, you'll have to leave. This is a Sacred Quaternity, even if it is in the basement of my printing office."

Mr. C— folded the paper neat and thrust it under his arm, went upstairs, stepped out of the printing office, and walked two blocks west toward the cemetery atop the hill. A smoky shadow hovered and clung the graveyard, just stopping at the fence. Gnarled oaks from time immemorial peeked out of the gloom, standing sentry. Wails and cries mixed with hero-songs and Orphic poetry could be heard from within the shadow billowing like an infernal big top, and all the sounds converged to a single point and diverged once more as a huge trembling gong.

Mr. C— entered the telluric domain and read his paper (or tried to read it) by the light of a chirping will-o'-the-wisp. When he had finished, a psychopomp cloaked in the hide of an ur-boar led Mr. C— out of the cemetery. He had gotten turned around and was a bit befuddled by his new and unexpected surroundings, so he was lucky the psychopomp was there to guide him out.

Outside the gate, Mr. C— pondered all this for a moment. The trees were cheerful again, swaying in the morning breeze. The cool sun dappled onto the grass in a billion needles. The jays cried out cheerfully and obnoxiously. Everything was as it should be, as it normally was.

"How weird!" Mr. C— said aloud. "I really must have zonked out just then. Ha ha! Good thing that ferryman was there to lead my dumb ass out."

He turned north now to pick up, as he usually did, the day's mail. As he strolled leisurely toward the post office, daydreaming in intensified trajectories, he imagined more ridiculous things.

"Wouldn't it be funny if going to pick up the day's mail as I usually do I instead saw not the postmaster (which was actually Mr. H—, but who left the charge to his son so he could run his paper), there was a minstrel with a silver harp inlaid with moon-pearl and instead of paper envelopes and stamps and return addresses and other such dispatches there were winged words fluttering lazily like moths into mailboxes or weaving and diving like swallows for the express? Maybe!"

"But no, of course not," he said just then, more seriously. What unusual thoughts, at a time like this."

Mr. C— picked up his secret codices and cryptograms and other uncommon ritual fragments. That is, Mr. C— collected his mail and turned for home.

He crossed Main Street. He began, just then, to feel dreadful, like how he felt on the Dakokee road, that sense of forboding, a flash, a very quick yet blinding flash, of a particular and certain kind of evil. The thrumming picked up again, a bit more intense now, hiding behind and between the silences of the trees. There was that prickling and crackling again, like someone spitting seeds at him.

He saw his daughter just then. She was coming west from Dakokee (she lived there with her husband, whom Mr. C— normally much admired but now imagined he hated him as a murderer). They passed by the other and neither of them acknowledged the other. Neither said a single word. They just passed each other by, going their separate ways. It was not for a lack of effort; Mr. C— just did not seem to know what to say. There was a glance, out of curiosity, common acknowledgement, but no familiarity. That was it, Mr. C— thought. There was just no familiarity.

It was all completely unexpected. What would her mother have said in his place?

Mr. C— stopped. He suddenly realized, out of the clear blue, just then how much he loved his wife. With all his heart. With all his goddamn heart, he thought (uncharacteristically swearing). But he felt a simultaneous dread, too, not knowing, for some reason, what on earth she might do next.

He now found he was imagining Mrs. C— in an odd sort of detoured prism. He imagined then how she might be shopping, perhaps picking something up from the pharmacy while he himself chatted with the baker outside his shop or with siblings Miss and Mr. R— at the elevator by Paint Bridge (grinding every Thursday! the advert would say). Or the opera house doorman up the block. The conversations would have been polite but uninteresting, but at least certain and predictable, defined and quickly forgettable. They all would have known the topics of conversation ahead of time, clear and formulaic. It was a code shrewdly situated, the bedrock of a proper town life. If only they could chisel this law out in stone, maybe in Latin, and set it up in the center of town to make it quite official, a testament and obligation. Then he would have found Mrs. C— again, coming out of the pharmacy, right on cue.

"Maybe I just haven't been living well enough for us both," he said aloud. "Not well enough for us to be at such lengths, sparkling and crackling like insect stings between us. We're old dusty bugs being slowly zapped to sleep." It was not indecision that prompted this monologue, however. Nonetheless, Mr. C. noted its peculiarity.

The dread did not seem to dissipate. In fact, it only seemed to grow as he approached his own door. He looked at his house that he had lived in all his life. It looked dumb and unfamiliar now. He crept the porch steps, burdened, shoulders heavy, just a little bit heartbroken, as if all his previous musings, peculiar as they were, were now a distant and hazy memory. He stepped inside and sat in his chair at the kitchen table and sat there silently until dinner.

Dinner was nice enough. It was the usual fare, highly unpeccable, very predictable. But it tasted somewhat different, like Mrs. C— used too much or not enough of something or some new seasoning that Mr. C— was not quite so fond of. He chewed the food in silence. Mrs. C— took small sips of tea, holding the cup close to her chin. Both looked at everything in the room except each other.

They both looked, simultaenously, at the clock, at the kitchen sink, the stove, the coffeepot, the ice box, out the window, at the aloe plant Mrs. C— used, at a spot on the kitchen floor Mr. C— had known since childhood, indeed as something as recognizable as the hem of his mother's skirt when he traipsed alongside her at the dry goods store. In perfect syncnchronization, like the parallax of the full moon now rising, they both looked at two portraits on each side of the French doors, French theater adverts reading "*Passez musacdes*" that Mrs. C— had bought long ago in Paris, and had framed and hung proudly. They looked at the bookshelf, but only the top half. How still and incurious it all seemed, Mr. C— though, how banal and drear in spite of all the impossible color.

If Mr. C— were still around, he could likely explain why his imagination seemed to run wild again just then, but it was likely he was just livening things up, lifting up his shoulders, mending his sour heart. Yet, Mr. C— thought just then that it might be better if instead of a door flanked by those portraits and the top-half of a bookshelf, instead of a clock and a kitchen sink and a coffeepot and ice box, there was instead an airy observatory, vaulted with glistening steel and exactly 1,288,732 rivets. Maybe over there would be an ornate lecturn holding a big dusty, cracked leather tome of Pythagorean geometry, and over there a long, very long counter with glass globes and decanters, here and there barrels of moon rocks and moldavite, and just over there a forge with a spiraling flue and vents showering out blue sparks. And all over the place a mad maze of rafters, tangled and knotted around a huge sparkling refractoscope resting upon a heavy brass tripod, not so unlike the legs of the golden oil lamps of Mr. H—'s Sacred Quaternity, the huge glass pointed to the heavens, the open roof above, with startling and defiant precision.

This, of course, was all absurd. Finally, finally, he looked at Mrs. C— across the table. He was unsure why he had said what he was about to say just then. The truth of the matter was that what he was about to say never actually happened; at any rate he did not remember it happening. It might have been a test.

"I imagined last night that you did not love me." Then he remembered that he had, in fact, imagined this last night and had noted it peculiarity.

Mrs. C— looked at him. Her eyes were not watery like they were that morning. They were now hard and keen.

"How foolish you are," she said.

Mr. C— dropped his fork. Its clatter on the plate was mean. He puffed: "Foolish am I? As if I can help what I imagine."

"You are simply impossible."

"Nothing is impossible," Mr. C— retorted.

"That's what I said," Mrs. C— retorted back.

Mr. C—'s heart shriveled like a dead mushroom. At least he imagined it did. Except it felt very much that his heart did in fact shrivel like a dead mushroom. He groaned and with his hands covered his eyes.

"No truer word, save God's, was ever spoken, than that the largest heart is soonest broken," Mr. C said then, rembmring his Landor.

Mrs. C— looked confused. "You are being unpredictable."

"*You're being unpredictable!*" Mr. C— hollered suddenly, unexpectedly. Then Mrs. C—'s eyes suddenly and unexpectedly went kind. They were now pitiable, like she had somehow noticed, picked out, dissected and recognized the core of Mr. C—'s frustration and sudden outburst.

She asked quite sincerely, "How do you feel right now, dear?"

"How do I feel? How do I feel? I feel-, I feel-," Mr. C— began to stammer. Then, "Oh, blow! Fucking shit! How do I feel? Well, I'll tell you how I feel! I feel this fucking fresh fish and asparagus and sweet potatoes," his chest began to heave. "No! It should be golden cheeses and there should be comb dripping with the honey of many impossibly colored wildflowers, and there should be thick milk, and over there should be a heavy silver platter polished to mirror groaning under the weight of fat fucking figs and blue grapes dripping and bursting and apples sweet like the dew in the eaves of a midsummer hangong on the eaves of a dark pine forest, like the old, half-cocked tollbooth on the old Dakokee Road and, and, there should be over there, *right over there*, a tripod with a cauldron steaming rejuvenating poison, wrought of undersea ur-jewels, stony obstetrics of the mater genetrix, litchic, chthonic and oh fucking shit, so pure, with enchanted flames simmering the First Water caught from the falls and rapids of the Glass Mountain at the Center of the World, with white lillies, like the lillies I saw in the shining hair of the naiads giggling in front of the millineary that I saw today, lilacs, tinctures of black rose and saffron, the wafting foam and vapor melting the bone marrow of mortality!" He stabbed a finger across the table at Mrs. C—'s tea cup, still held near to her chin. "And that dainty teacup should be a horn, yea, the cruel horn of the Calydonian boar, wrought of moonsilver — look! look at it rise now! — inlaid with infernal gems, like the ones I saw gleaming in the underearth of the cemetery — thank God that psychopomp found me! — and it should be filled to its studded brim with mead brewed from the amenones of Atalanta — see, I can remember my Ovid! — and-," Mr. C— suddenly stopped.

"I saw our daughter today and walked right by her." He sighed. "But you see," he said calmly, "I know this is all quite ridiculous. I don't know why I'm imagining these things. I'm not sure why I'm imagining all this, and it really is only just my imagination. I know it can't be, even if I imagine it that way, even if it's not, it just all seems so strange and uncertain."

"You have been very unlike yourself," Mrs. C— said patiently. "For a few days now. At first it was awkward and you teased me about it. But it's just a bad turn, honey."

"I guess I am impossible."

"Remember what the doctor said. Remember what he said? If your daydreams and fancies get feverish? You're not the only one. The whole town is infected. You have to dull your wits, dear. That's what the doctor said. I'll get your old calculus textbook out."

"What on earth are you talking about?" Mr. C— said. "What is this?"

"Oh, dear. You poor thing. The doctor said if you start to become clever or innovative or suddenly and unexpectedly poetic or inclined to musical composition that you should do some math to bring the fever down." Mrs. C— had the textbook, a big heavy thing, in her small thin arms, an old edition of Chisholm's *Infnestimal Calculus*. She set it down in front of Mr. C— along with a pad of paper and pencil. "It's important you control your symptoms."

"Symptoms?" Mr. C— said. "What do you mean, symptoms?"

It was Mrs. C—'s turn for outburst. "Heavens!" she cried, exasperated, tired of the charade of patience. "When will it end! All week you've been droning on about secret symbols and primordial chaos and cosmic eggs! Marine monsters and berserker warriors and the eternal present, *samhara* or some damn thing! It's enough to drive a person crazy!" She sat down again and dropped her head into her hands and began to sob, her shoulders trembling. "When will it end! I miss you! You keep saying it's just your imagination, like you know what's going on, but then you don't know, you seem to not know. I don't know!" She looked up at Mr. C—, snuffling, her hair messy, her eyes wide and pitiful and beautiful. "How frightening it must be to be sick with such stories and inspiration! How I miss your routines and insipidity, the monotonous ways you used to go about your day, getting the paper from Frankie, walking into town, getting the mail, coming home. I miss the way you would debate with yourself out loud whenever you were uncertain about something, and sometimes I think that's why I love you most! I miss you!"

"Now there, my dear, indeed, my dreadful queen," Mr. C— assured his wife, who had just then looked at him suspiciously. "It's so bad as you make it out to be. Really, it's not so bad as all that." He stood up, walked over to his wife, and kissed her messy hair. "I know it's my imagination. I'm just now sure why I'm now imagining it."

"It's because-," Mrs. C— started, but gave up.

Mr. C— did some calculus as Mrs. C— cleared the table. He bat the pencil against his chin. Mrs. C— went into the livingroom to read. The moon had risen full out of the hills and fell through the window. Squares of white cold lighth stretched across the floor, reaching full length as the evening approached midnight. Mrs. C— closed her book and set it on the nightstand. She seemed to consider the moonlight for a while. Then she took a shawl and wrapped it about her shoulders and walked to the front door. She looked at Mr. C—, involved in theories of continuous change.

"I think I'll step out for some fresh air. I'm glad to see you quite yourself now," she said and smiled.

"At this hour?" Mr. C— asked. "That's quite unusual for you." But Mrs. C— was not gone long before she was back in the doorway. She was standing there, silent, studious, trying to work something out in her mind. She seemed as if unaccustomed to some kind of fleeting yet highly novel moment that she had just now experienced and whose mystery she was attempting to unravel.

"How odd!" she said and stepped back out. Soon she was back. She said "How odd!" again in the same manner as before and stepped back out. When she repeated this performance a third time — "How odd!" — and returned once more to the porch, Mr. C— set his pencil down, pushed the calculus aside, and said, when Mrs. C— was back in the doorway, "What are you doing, dear? This nervous pacing is unlike you. Are you feeling well?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm beginning to feel...an imperfect sense about things around me. A very modest sense that something or someone is standing outside our door and humming a tune, but the humming is deep and sonorous, like a bass string being plucked underwater. The second time I stepped out I thought I felt both a strange fascination and then a prickling dread, as if someone were flicking orange pips at me. I felt almost as if there was an evil presence nearby, a daemon, but it was fleeting. The third time I felt quite outside myself, some ruin of allegory remarking candidly upon a lost golden age. I don't know why I thought these things, but I noted its peculiarity."

"Some difficult calculus will help all that," Mr. C— opined, trying to be helpful. "Then some rest, my dear qu- I mean, my dear."

Mrs. C— would not have it. She balled her fists, stuck them at her hips, and called out, "*Never!*" then sprang back out the door with surprising and unexpected agility. She began to noisily march to and fro along the porch and Mr. C— watched her cross the doorway as she made odd exclamations about indigo seas and ocean-sweepers and the three silver earth-shaping waves and other such things.

Mr. C— threw his calculus textbook clear across the room, through the French double doors. It crashed through the breakfast nook window and the music of the explosion was pure, liberating bliss.

"Indigo seas! *Pasaz muscades!* Marvel and moonlight and alchemy!" And he too stepped out into the night.

Mrs. C— greeted him with shining eyes and grasped his hands in hers with startling and sudden strength and love. "Blaze of moon upon the stony ruins, wandering boarders in the machine, what does all this mean? The thoughts have come quite all of the sudden! There are wars in heaven, see!" Mrs. C— pointed toward the eastern hills, dark and pressed a deeper black against the stars.

"I see a Zodiac Light!" Mr. C— cried joyously. His voice was suddenly deep, rumbling, a mariner's voice.

"Yes!" Mrs. C— cried.

"And the twelfth Winter Planet behind the Second Belt of Orion!"

"Indeed!"

"I see cosmogonies, and over there I see theogonies and over there dread numinosity!"

"Sure!"

"I see it all my echoing song." Then he said, a little bit uncertain, "But are you feeling well?"

"I have never felt so grand in my life. Don't you see? It's not our imagination. It's all real, all of it."

Mrs. C— squeezed Mr. C—'s hand and he, laden with mariner's accoutrements as he was, knelt down on a shaky knobby knee. With his cheek he brushed her hand and kissed it. They stood beside each other and talked — sang — of the purple midnight, the cascading zodiac light bringing with it the sound of the burbling Stony nearby, and of the pinwheel galaxies turning, encircled by whorls of raining butterfly star-sparks, blue and buzzing and droning, bursting and popping like the holiday shows the town hosts every year. Mr. and Mrs. C— stared and stared and stared, trying in their sudden and unexpected togetherness not to blink, watching the fathoms deepen, the stars move, arcing by on their unfamiliar paths, bat-shit out of control and Mr. C— laughed about Frankie, and so did Mrs. C— when he told her what he had seen earlier that morning. They watched the scenes play by on a Tyrian weave, monsters and hunters and snakes, scorpions, martyrs and apothecists with all their own heroic knowledge.

But for Mr. C— the mood sadly did not last. He sighed.

"What is the matter?" Mrs. C— asked.

"I feel a listlessness now. An open nothing which carries a terrible sense of falling, but I am falling into a warm darkness, turning and turning, or as if pulled out of a deep pool and careening upward." He was now a little concerned. "I feel as if I will strike the sea full-on and be a victim of the breaking waves' onslaught. I felt it earlier and it was not pleasant."

Mrs. C— was quite a kind woman. "Don't be so unsure of yourself. That won't do." She thought a while, then, "Suppose I were to turn myself into a comber, a cormorant, a bunting. Then there will be no need to feel so floundered and shipwrecked. I could fold you in my newfound wings and carry us both away, with you flapping like a fish in my beak."

Mr. C— laughed. "Ha ha! What an unlikely and unpredictable thing for you to say! So be it — but hold the fish! I shall follow suit and the silence will be more quiet then."

Their legs fluttered, sputtered, tightened into their torsos. Mr. C— felt his toes tickle as they spread out, webbing and curling into tiny claws. Mrs. C—'s lifted her arms and blew at the coal-black wing feathers now peeping out. They clucked playfully at each other, clicking their silly new beaks against the other. They hopped onto the porch rail and waddled and shifted, watching the moon. Then they dropped and took flight. They turned north for the old marshes away behind the hills, once wed and still wed and forever keeping their familiar bond.