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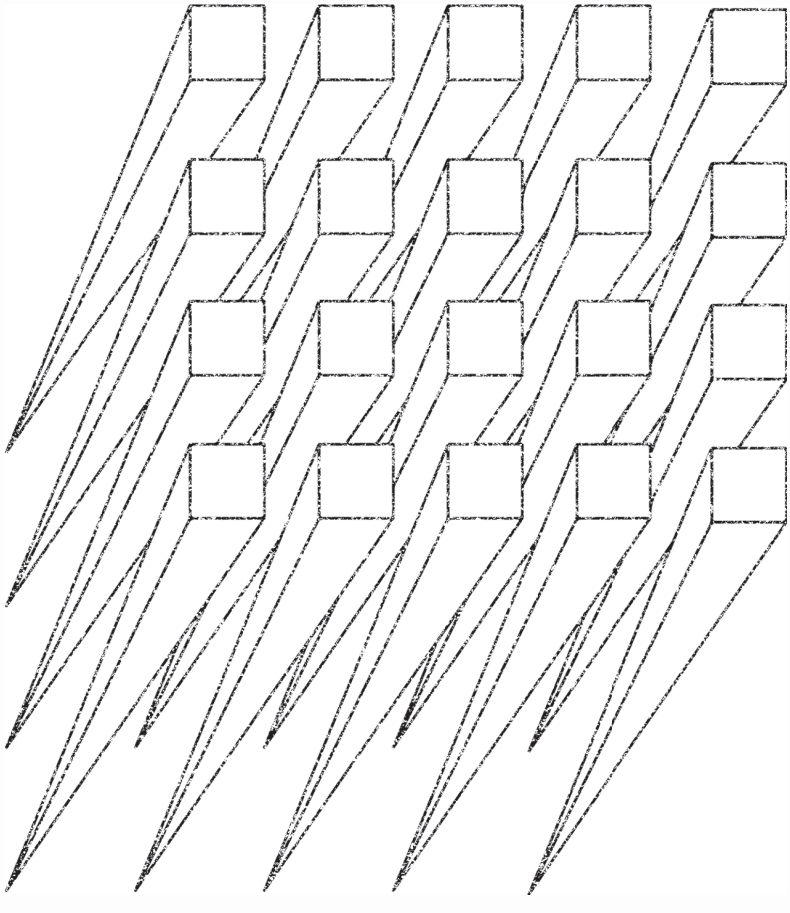

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featuring the work of Haruki Murakami & Philip K. Dick

Haruki Murakami

SUPER FROG SAVES TOKYO

かえるくん、東京を救う

katagiri found
a giant frog waiting
for him in his apartment.

It was powerfully built, standing over six feet tall on its hind legs. A skinny little man no more than five foot three, Katagiri was overwhelmed by the frog's imposing bulk.

"Call me 'Frog,'" said the frog in a clear, strong voice. Katagiri stood rooted in the doorway, unable to speak. "Don't be afraid. I'm not here to hurt you. Just come and close the door. Please."

Briefcase in his right hand, grocery bag with fresh vegetables and canned salmon cradled in his left arm, Katagiri didn't dare move. "Please, Mr. Katagiri, hurry and close the door, and take off your shoes."

The sound of his own name helped Katagiri to snap out of it. He closed the door as ordered, set the grocery bag on the raised wooden floor, pinned the briefcase under one arm and untied his shoes. Frog gestured for him to take a seat at the kitchen table, which he did.

"I must apologize, Mr. Katagiri, for having barged in while you were out," Frog said. "I knew it would be a shock for you to find me here. I but had no choice. How about a cup of tea? I thought you would be coming home soon, so I boiled some water." Katagiri still had his briefcase jammed under his arm. Somebody's playing a joke on me, he thought.

Somebody's rigged himself up in this huge frog costume just to have fun with me. But he knew, as he watched Frog pour boiling water into the teapot, humming all the while, that these had to be thelimbs and movements of a real frog. Frog set a cup of green tea in front of Katagiri and poured another one for himself. Sipping his tea, Frog asked, "Calming down?" But still Katagiri could not speak.

"I know I should have made an appointment to visit you, Mr. Katagiri. I am fully aware of the proprieties. Anyone would be shocked to find a big frog waiting for him at home. But an urgent matter brings me here. Please forgive me."

"Urgent matter?" Katagiri managed to produce words at last.

"Yes, indeed," Frog said. "Why else would I take the liberty of barging into a person's home? Such discourtesy is not my customary style."

"Does this 'matter' have something to do with me?"

"Yes and no." Frog said with a tilt of the head. "No and yes." I've got to get a grip on myself thought Katagiri. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Not at all, not at all," Frog said with a smile. "It's your home. You don't have to ask my permission. Smoke and drink as much as you like. I myself am not a smoker, but I can hardly impose my distaste for tobacco on others in their own homes."

Katagiri pulled a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and struck a march. He saw his hand trembling as he lit up. Seated opposite him, Frog seemed to he studying his every movement.

"You don't happen to be connected with some kind of gang by any chance?" Katagiri found the courage to ask.

"Ha ha ha ha ha ha! What a wonderful sense of humor you have, Mr. Katagiri!" Frog said, slapping his webbed hand against his thigh. "There may be a shortage

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from the stort story collection

after the quake
神の子どもたちはみな踊る

translator _ jay rubin
published _ aug. 2002, knopf

of skilled labor, but what gang is going to hire a frog to do their dirty work? They'd be made a laughingstock."

"Well, if you're here to negotiate a repayment, you're wasting your time. I have no authority to make such decisions. Only my superiors can do that, I just follow orders. I can't do a thing for you."

"Please, Mr. Katagiri," Frog said, raising one webbed finger. "I have not come here on such petty business. I am fully aware that you are Assistant Chief of the lending division of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. But my visit has nothing to do with the repayment of loans. I have come here to save Tokyo from destruction."

Katagiri scanned the room for a hidden TV camera in case he was being made the burr of some huge, terrible joke. But there was no camera. It was a small apartment. There was no place for anyone to hide.

"No," Frog said. "We are the only ones here. I know you are thinking that I must be mad or that you are having some kind of dream, but I am not crazy and you are not dreaming. This is absolutely, positively serious." "To tell you the truth, Mr. Frog--."

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger again. "Call me 'Frog'."

"To tell you the truth, Frog," Katagiri said, "I can't quite understand what is going on here. It's not that I don't trust you, but I don't seem to be able to grasp the situation exactly. Do you mind if I ask you a question or two?"

"Not at all, not at all," Frog said. "Mutual understanding is of critical importance. There are those who say that 'understanding' is merely the sum total of our misunderstandings, and while I do find this view interesting in its own way, I am afraid we have no time to spare on pleasant digressions. The best thing would be for us to achieve mutual understanding via the shortest possible route. Therefore, by all means, ask as many questions as you wish."

"Now; you are a real frog, am I right?"

"Yes, of course, as you can see. A real frog is exactly what I am. A product neither of metaphor nor allusion nor deconstruction nor sampling nor any other such complex process, I am a genuine frog. Shall I croak for you?"

Frog tilted back his head and flexed the muscles of his huge throat Ribit, Ri-i-i-bit, Ribit ribit ribit Ribit Ribit Ri-i-i bit. His gigantic croaks rattled the pictures hanging on the walls.

"Fine, I see, I see!" Katagiri said, worried about the thin walls of the cheap apartment house in which he lived. "That's great. You are, without question a real frog."

"One might also say that I am the sum total of all frogs. Nonetheless, this does nothing to change the fact that I am a frog. Anyone claiming that I am not a frog would be a dirty liar. I would smash such a person to bits!"

Katagiri nodded. Hoping to calm himself, he picked up his cup and swallowed a mouthful of tea. "You said before that you have come here to save Tokyo from destruction?"

"That is what I said."

"What kind of destruction?"

"Earthquake," Frog said with the utmost gravity.

Mouth dropping open, Katagiri looked at Frog. And Frog, saying nothing, looked at Katagiri. They went on staring at each other like this for some time. Next it was Frog's turn to open his mouth. "A very, very big earthquake. It is set to strike Tokyo at 8:30 A.M. on February 18. Three days from now. A much bigger earthquake than the one that struck Kobe last month. The number of dead from such a quake would probably exceed 150,000—mostly from accidents involving the commuter system: derailments, falling vehicles, crashes, the collapse of elevated expressways and rail lines, the crushing of subways, the explosion of tanker trucks. Buildings will be transformed into piles of rubble, their inhabitants crushed to death. Fires everywhere, the road system in a stare of collapse, ambulances and fire trucks useless, people just lying there, dying. One hundred and fifty thousand of them! Pure hell. People will be made to realize what a fragile condition the intensive collectivity known as 'city' really is." Frog said this with a gentle shake of the bead. "The epicenter will be close to the Shinjuku ward office."

"Close to the Shinjuku ward office?"

"To be precise, it will hit directly beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank." A heavy silence followed.

"And you," Katagiri said, "are planning to stop this earthquake?"

"Exactly" Frog said, nodding. "That is exactly what I propose to do. You and I will go underground beneath the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank to do mortal combat with Worm."

* * * * * *

"We are the only ones here. I know you are thinking that I must be mad or that you are having some kind of dream, but I am not crazy and you are not dreaming. This is absolutely, positively serious."

As a member of the Trust Bank lending division, Katagiri had fought his way through many a battle. He had weathered sixteen years of daily combat since the day he graduated from the university and joined the bank's staff. He was, in a word, a collection officer-- a post that won him little popularity. Everyone in his division preferred to make loans, especially at the time of the bubble.

They had so much money in those days that almost any likely piece of collateral--be it land or stock--was enough to convince loan officers to give away whatever they were asked for, the bigger the loan the better their reputations in the company. Some loans, though, never made it back to the bank: They got "stuck to the bottom of the pan." It was Katagiri's job to take care of those. And when the bubble burst, the work piled on. First stock prices fell, and then land values, and collateral lost all significance. "Get out there," his boss commanded him, "and squeeze whatever you can out of them."

The Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku was a labyrinth of violence: old-time gangsters, Korean mobsters, Chinese Mafia, guns and drugs, money flowing beneath the surface from one murky den to another, people vanishing every now and then like puffs of smoke. Plunging into Kabukicho to collect a bad debt, Katagiri had been surrounded more than once by mobsters threatening to kill him, but he had never been frightened. What good would it have done them to kill one man running around for the bank? They could stab him if they wanted to. They could beat him up. He was perfect for the job: no wife, no kids, both parents dead, a brother and sister he had put through college married off. So what if they killed him? It wouldn't change anything for anybody—least of all for Katagiri himself.

It was not Katagiri but the thugs surrounding him who got nervous when they saw him so calm and cool. He soon earned a kind of reputation in their world as a tough guy. Now, though, the tough Katagiri was at a total loss. What the hell was this frog talking about?

"Worm? Who is Worm?" he asked with some hesitation.

"Worm lives underground. He is a gigantic worm. When he gets angry, he causes earthquakes," Frog said. "And right now he is very, very angry."

"What is he angry about?" Katagiri asked.

"I have no idea," Frog said. "Nobody knows what Worm is thinking inside that murky head of his.

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The Great Hanshin Earthquake
阪神・淡路大震災

01

also known as the Kōbe earthquake of 1995. Super Frog Saves Tokoyo amoung other stories in the collection 'after the quake' Murakami wrote as a direct response to this catastrophe.

the quake struck at 5:46am on january 17th, 1995. it lasted twenty seconds and registered as a magnitude of 6.9.

it killed 6,400, injured 40,000, and left 300,000 residents of japan homeless.

source_ encyclopedia britannica

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photos 01, 03_ Dr. Roger Hutchison/NGDC, 1995
photo 02_ Reuters, 1995

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Worm?
Who is Worm?

"

Few have ever seen him. He is usually asleep. That's what he really likes to do: take long, long naps. He goes on sleeping for years—decades—in the warmth and darkness underground. His eyes, as you might imagine, have atrophied, his brain has turned to jelly as he sleeps. If you ask me, I'd guess he probably isn't thinking anything at all, just lying there and feeling every little rumble and reverberation that comes his way, absorbing them into his body and storing them up. And then, through some kind of chemical process, he replaces most of them with rage. Why this happens I have no idea. I could never explain it."

Frog fell silent watching Katagiri and waiting until his words had sunk in. Then he went on: "Please don't misunderstand me, though. I feel no personal animosity toward Worm. I don't see him as the embodiment of evil. Not that I would want to be his friend, either: I just think that as far as the world is concerned, it is, in a sense, all right for a being like him to exist. The world is like a great big overcoat, and it needs pockets of various shapes and sizes. But right at the moment, Worm has reached the point where he is too dangerous to ignore. With all the different kinds of hatred he has absorbed and stored inside himself over the years, his heart and body have swollen to gargantuan proportions—bigger than ever before. And to make matters worse, last month's Kobe earthquake shook him out of the deep sleep he was enjoying. He experienced a revelation inspired by his profound rage: It was time now for him, too, to cause a massive earthquake, and he'd do it here, in Tokyo. I know what I'm talking about, Mr. Katagiri: I have received reliable information on the timing and scale of the earthquake from some of my best bug friends."

Frog snapped his mouth shut and closed his round eyes in apparent fatigue.

"So what you're saying is," Katagiri said, "that you and I have to go underground together and fight Worm to stop the earthquake."

"Exactly."

Katagiri reached for his cup of tea, picked it up and put it back. "I still don't get it," he said. "Why did you choose me to go with you?"

Frog looked straight into Katagiri's eyes and said "I have always had the profoundest respect for you, Mr. Katagiri. For sixteen long years, you have silently accepted the most dangerous, least glamorous assignments—the jobs that others have avoided—and you have carried them off beautifully. I know full well how difficult this has been for you, and I do not believe that either your superiors or your colleagues properly appreciate your accomplishments. They are blind, the whole lot of them. But you, unappreciated and unpromoted, have never once complained.

"Nor is it simply a matter of your work. After your parents died, you raised your teenage brother and sister single-handedly, put them through college and even arranged for them to marry, all at great sacrifice of your time and income, and at the expense of your own marriage prospects. In spite of this, your brother and sister have never once expressed gratitude for your efforts on their behalf. Far from it. They have shown you no respect and acted with the most callous disregard for your loving kindness. In my opinion, their behavior is unconscionable. I almost wish I could beat them to a pulp on your behalf. But you, meanwhile, show no trace of anger.

"To be quite honest, Mr. Katagiri, you are nothing much to look at, and you are far from eloquent, so you tend to be looked down upon by those around you. I, however, can see what a sensible and courageous man you are. In all of Tokyo, with its teeming millions, there is no one else I could trust as much as you to fight by my side."

"Tell me, Mr. Frog," Katagiri said.

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger again. "Call me 'Frog.' "

"Tell me, Frog," Katagiri said, "how do you know so much about me?"

"Well, Mr. Katagiri, I have not been frogging all these years for nothing. I keep my eye on the important things in life."

"But still, Frog," Katagiri said. "I'm not particularly

strong, and I don't know anything about what's happening underground. I don't have the kind of muscle it will take to fight Worm in the darkness. I'm sure you can find somebody a lot stronger than me—a man who does karate, say, or a Self- Defense Forces commando."

Frog rolled his large eyes. "Tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri," he said, "I'm the one who will do all the fighting. But I can't do it alone. This is the key thing: I need your courage and your passion for justice. I need you to stand behind me and say, 'Way to go, Frog! You're doing great! I know you can win! You're fighting the good fight!'" Frog opened his arms wide, then slapped his webbed hands down on his knees again.

"In all honesty, Mr. Katagiri, the thought of fighting Worm in the dark frightens me, too. For many years I lived as a pacifist, loving art, living with nature. Fighting is not something I like to do. I do it because I have to. And this particular fight will be a fierce one; that is certain. I may not return from it alive. I may lose a limb or two in the process. But I cannot—I will not-run away. As Nietzsche said, the highest wisdom is to have no fear. What I want from you, Mr. Katagiri, is for you to share your simple courage with me, to support me with your whole heart as a true friend. Do you understand what I am trying to tell you?"

None of this made any sense to Katagiri, but still he felt that—unreal as it sounded—he could believe whatever Frog said to him. Something about Frog—the look on his face, the way he spoke—had a simple honesty that appealed directly to the heart. After years of work in the toughest division of the Security Trust Bank, Katagiri possessed the ability to sense such things. It was all but second nature to him.

"I know this must be difficult for you, Mr. Katagiri. A huge frog comes barging into your place and asks you to believe all these outlandish things. Your reaction is perfectly natural. And so I intend to provide you with proof that I exist. Tell me, Mr. Katagiri: you have been having a great deal of trouble recovering a loan the bank made to Big Bear Trading, have you not?"

"That's true," Katagiri said.

"Well, they have a number of extortionist working behind the scenes, and those individuals are mixed up with the mobsters. They're scheming to make the company go bankrupt and get out of its debts. Your bank's loan officer shoved a pile of cash at them without a decent background check, and, as usual, the one who's left to clean up after

him is you, Mr. Katagiri. But you're having a hard time sinking your teeth into these fellows: They're no pushovers. And there may be a powerful politician backing them up. They're into you for 700 million. That is the situation you are dealing with, am I right?"

"You certainly are."

Frog stretched his arms out wide, his big green webs opening like pale wings. "Don't worry, Mr. Katagiri. Leave everything to me. By tomorrow morning, old Frog will have your problems solved. Relax and have a good night's sleep."

With a big smile on his face, Frog stood up. Then, flattening himself like a dried squid, he slipped out through the gap at the side of the closed door, leaving Katagiri all alone. The two teacups on the kitchen table were the only indication that Frog had ever been in Katagiri's apartment.

* * * * * *

The moment Katagiri arrived at work the next morning at nine, the phone on his desk rang.

"Mr. Katagiri," said a man's voice. It was cold and businesslike. "My name is Shiraoka. I'm an attorney with the Big Bear case. I received a call from my client this morning with regard to the pending loan matter. He wants you to know that he will take full responsibility for returning the entire amount requested, by the due date. He will also give you a signed memorandum to that effect. His only request is that you do not send Frog to his home again. I repeat: He wants you to ask Frog never to visit his home again. I'm not entirely sure what this is supposed to mean, but I believe it should be clear to you, Mr. Katagiri. Am I correct?"

"You are indeed." Katagiri said.

"You will be kind enough to convey my message to Frog, I trust."

"That I will do. Your client will never see Frog again."

"Thank you very much. I will prepare the memorandum for you by tomorrow."

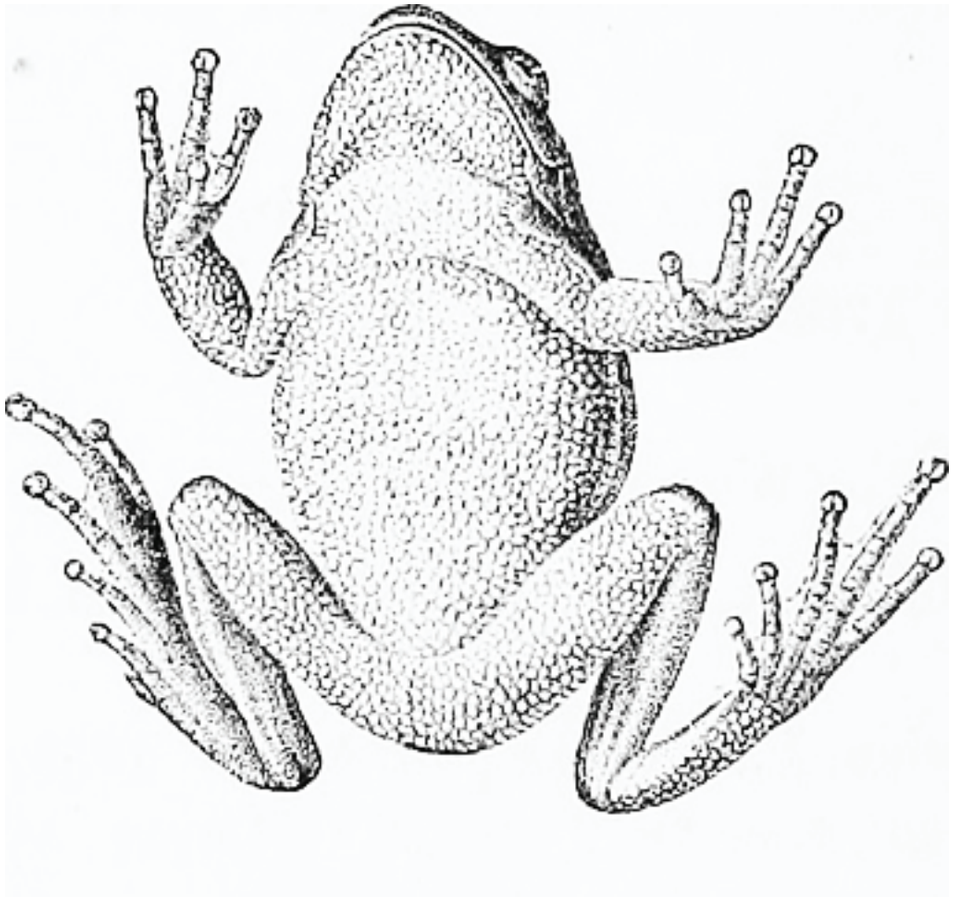
"I appreciate it," Katagiri said.

The connection was cut.

Frog visited Katagiri in his Trust Bank office at lunchtime. "I assume that Big Bear case is working out well for you?"

Katagiri glanced around uneasily.

"Don't worry," Frog said. "You are the only one who



can see me. But now I am sure you realize I actually exist. I am not a product of your imagination. I can take action and produce results. I am a living being."

"Tell me, Mr. Frog," Katagiri said.

"Please," Frog said, raising one finger, "call me 'Frog.'" "Tell me, Frog," Katagiri said. "What did you do to them?"

"Oh, nothing much," Frog said. "Nothing much more complicated than boiling Brussels sprouts. I just gave them a little scare. A touch of psychological terror. As Joseph Conrad once wrote, true terror is the kind that men feel toward their imagination. But never mind that, Mr. . . Katagiri. Tell me about the Big Bear case. It is working out well, I assume?"

Katagiri nodded and lit a cigarette. "Seems to be."

"So, then, have I succeeded in gaining your trust with regard to the matter I broached to you last night? Will you join me to fight against Worm?"

Sighing, Katagiri removed his glasses and wiped them. "To tell you the truth, I am not too crazy about the idea, but I don't suppose that's enough to get me out of it."

"No," Frog said. "It is a matter of responsibility and honor. You may not be 'too crazy' about the idea, but we have no choice: You and I must go underground and face Worm. If we should happen to lose our lives in the process, we will gain no one's sympathy. And even if we manage to defeat Worm, no one will praise us. No one will ever know that such a battle even raged far beneath their feet. Only you and I will know, Mr. Katagiri. However it turns out, ours will be a lonely battle."

Katagiri looked at his own hand for a while, then watched the smoke rising from his cigarette. Finally, he spoke. "You know Mr. Frog, I'm just an ordinary person."

"Make that 'Frog,' please," Frog said, but Katagiri let it go.

"I'm an absolutely ordinary guy. Less than ordinary. I'm going bald, I'm getting a potbelly, I turned 40 last month. My feet are flat. The doctor told me recently that I have diabetic tendencies. It's been three months or more since I last slept with a woman—and I had to pay for it. I do get some recognition within the division for my ability to collect on loans, but no real respect. I don't have a single person who likes me, either at work or in my private life. I don't know how to talk to people, and I'm bad with strangers, so I never make friends. I have no athletic ability, I'm tone-deaf, short, phimotic, nearsighted—and astigmatic.

I live a horrible life. All I do is eat, s1eep and shit. I don't know why I'm even living. Why should a person like me have to be the one to save Tokyo?"

"Because, Mr.. Katagiri, Tokyo can only be saved by a person like you. And it's for people like you that I am tying to save Tokyo."

Katagiri sighed again, more deeply this time. "All right, then, what do you want me to do?"

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Frog told Katagiri his plan. They would go underground on the night of February 17 (one day before the earthquake was scheduled to happen). Their way in would be through the basement boiler room of the Shinjuku branch of the Tokyo Security Trust Bank. They would meet there late at night (Katagiri would stay in the building on the pretext of working overtime). Behind a section of wall was a vertical shaft, and they would find Worm at the bottom by climbing down a 150-foot rope ladder.

"Do you have a battle plan in mind?" Katagiri asked.

"Of course I do. We would have no hope of defeating an enemy like Worm without a battle plan. He is a slimy creature: You can't tell his mouth from his anus. And he is as big as a commuter train."

"What is your battle plan?"

After a thoughtful pause Frog answered, "Hmm, what is it they say—Silence is golden?"

"You mean I shouldn't ask?"

"That's one way of putting it."

"What if I get scared at the last minute and run away? Whet would you do then, Mr. Frog?" "'Frog."

"Frog. What would you do then?"

Frog thought about this awhile and answered, "I would fight on alone. My chances of beating him by myself are perhaps just slightly better than Anna Karenina's chances of beating that speeding locomotive. Have you read Anna Karenina, Mr.. Katagiri?"

When he heard that Katagiri had not read the novel, Frog gave him a look as if to say "What a shame." Apparently, Frog was very fond of Anna Karenina.

"Still, Mr. Katagiri, I do not believe that you will leave me to fight alone. I can tell. It's a question of balls—which, unfortunately, I do not happen to possess. Ha ha ha ha." Frog laughed with his mouth wide open. Balls were not all that Frog lacked. He had no teeth either.

Unexpected things do happen, however.

* * * * * *

Katagiri was shot on the evening of February 17. He had finished his rounds for the day and was walking down the street in Shinjuku on his way back to the Trust Bank when a young man in a leather jacket leaped in front of him. The man's face was a blank, and be gripped a small black gun in one hand. The gun was so small and so black that it hardly looked real. Katagiri stared at the object in the man's hand, not registering the fact that it was aimed at him and that the man was pulling the trigger. It all happened too quickly: It didn't make sense to him. But the gun, in fact, went off.

Katagiri saw the barrel jerk in the air and, at the same moment, felt an impact as though someone had struck his right shoulder with a sledgehammer. He felt no pain, but the blow sent him sprawling on the sidewalk. The leather briefcase in his right hand went flying in the other direction. The man aimed the gun at him again. A second shot rang out. A small eatery's sidewalk signboard exploded before his eyes. He heard people screaming. His glasses had flown off, and everything was a blur. He was vaguely aware that the man was approaching with the pistol pointed at him. I'm going to die, he thought. Frog had said that true terror is the kind men feel toward their imagination.

Katagiri cut the switch of his imagination and sank into a weightless silence.

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When he woke up, he was in bed. He opened one eye, took a moment to survey his surroundings and then opened the other eye. The first thing that entered his field of vision was a metal stand by the head of the bed and an intravenous feeding tube that stretched from the stand to where he lay. Next he saw a nurse dressed in white. He realized he was lying on his back on a hard bed and wearing some strange piece of clothing under which he seemed to be naked.

Oh yeah, he thought, I was walking along the sidewalk when some guy shot me. Probably in the shoulder. The right one. He relived the scene in his mind. When he remembered the small black gun in the young man's hand, his heart made a disturbing thump. The sons of bitches

were trying to kill me! he thought. But it looks as if I made it through OK. My memory is fine. I don't have any pain. And not just pain: I don't have any feeling at all. I can't lift my arm.....

The hospital room had no windows. He could not tell whether it was day or night. He had been shot just before five in the evening. How much time had passed since then? Had the hour of his nighttime rendezvous with Frog gone by? Katagiri searched the room for a clock, but without his glasses he could see nothing at a distance.

"Excuse me," he called to the nurse.

"Oh, good. You're finally awake," the nurse said.

"What time is it?"

She glanced at her watch. "Nine-fifteen."

"P.M.?"

"Don't be silly; it's morning!"

"Nine-fifteen A.M.?" Katagiri groaned, barely managing to lift his head from the pillow. The ragged noise that emerged from his throat sounded like someone else's voice.

"Nine-fifteen A.M. on February 18?"

"Right," the nurse said, lifting her arm once more to check the date on her digital watch. "Today is February 18, 1995."

"Wasn't there a big earthquake in Tokyo this morning?"

"In Tokyo?"

"In Tokyo."

The nurse shook her head. "Not as far as I know."

He breathed a sigh of relief. Whatever had happened, the earthquake at least had been averted. "How's my wound doing?"

"Your wound?" she asked. "What wound?"

"Where I was shot."

"Shot?"

"Yeah, near the entrance to the Trust Bank. Some young guy shot me. In the right shoulder, I think."

The nurse flashed a nervous smile in his direction. "I'm sorry, Mr. Katagiri, but you haven't been shot."

"I haven't? Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that there was no earthquake this morning." Katagiri was stunned. "Then what the hell am I doing in a hospital?"

"Somebody found you lying in the street, unconscious. In the Kabukicho neighborhood of Shinjuku. You didn't have any external wounds. You were just out cold. And we still haven't figured out why. The doctor's going to be here soon. You'd better talk to him."

Lying in the street unconscious? Katagiri was sure he had seen the pistol go off, aimed at him. He took a deep breath and tried to get his head straight. He would start by putting all the facts in order.

"What you're telling me is, I've been lying in this hospital bed, unconscious, since early evening yesterday, is that right?"

"Right," the nurse said. "And you had a really bad night, Mr. Katagiri. You must have had some awful nightmares. I heard you yelling, 'Frog! Hey, Frog!' You did it a lot. You have a friend nicknamed Frog?"

Katagiri closed his eyes and listened to the slow, rhythmic beating of his heart as it ticked off the minutes of his life. How much of what he remembered had actually happened and how much was hallucination? Did Frog really exist, and had Frog fought with Worm to put a stop to the earthquake? Or had that just been part of a long dream? Katagiri had no idea what was true anymore.

* * * * * *

Frog came to his hospital room that night. Katagiri awoke to find him in the dim light, sitting on a steel folding chair, his back against the wall. Frog's big, bulging eyelids were closed in straight slits.

"Frog," Katagiri called out to him.

Frog slowly opened his eyes. His big white stomach swelled and shrank with his breathing. "I meant to meet you in the boiler room at night the way I promised," Katagiri said, "but I had an accident in the evening--something totally unexpected--and they brought me here."

Frog gave his head a slight shake. "I know. It's OK. Don't worry. You were a great help to me in my fight, Mr. Katagiri."

"I was?"

"Yes, you were. You did a great job in your dreams. That's what made it possible for me to fight Worm to the finish. I have you to thank for my victory."

"I don't get it," Katagiri said. "I was unconscious the whole time. They were feeding me intravenously. I don't remember doing anything in my dream."

"That's fine, Mr. Katagiri. It's better that you don't remember. The whole terrible fight occurred in the area of imagination. That is the precise location of our battlefield. It is there that we experience our victories and our defeats. Each and every one of us is a being of limited

duration: All of us eventually go down to defeat. But as Ernest Hemingway saw so clearly, the ultimate value of our lives is decided not by how we win but by how we lose. You and I together, Mr. Katagiri, were able to prevent the annihilation of Tokyo. We saved 150,000 people from the jaws of death. No one realizes it, but that is what we accomplished."

"How did we manage to defeat Worm? And what did I do?"

"We gave everything we had in a fight to the bitter end. We--" Frog snapped his mouth shut and took one great breath. "We used every weapon we could get our hands on, Mr. Katagiri. We used all the courage we could muster. Darkness was our enemy's ally. You brought in a foot-powered generator and used every ounce of your strength to fill the place with light. Worm tried to frighten you away with phantoms of the darkness, but you stood your ground. Darkness vied with light in a horrific battle, and in the light I grappled with the monstrous Worm. He coiled himself around me and bathed me in his horrid slime. I tore him to shreds, but still he refused to die. All he did was divide into smaller pieces. And then..."

Frog fell silent, but soon, as if dredging up his last ounce of strength, he began to speak again. "Fyodor Dostoevsky, with unparalleled tenderness, depicted those who have been forsaken by God. He discovered the precious quality of human existence in the ghastly paradox whereby men who have invented God were forsaken by that very God. Fighting with Worm in the darkness, I found myself thinking of Dotoevsky's 'White Knights.' I..." Frog's words seemed to founder. "Mr. Katagiri, do you mind if I take a brief nap? I am utterly exhausted."

"Please," Katagiri said. "Take a good, deep sleep."

"I was finally unable to defeat Worm," Frog said, closing his eyes. "I did manage to stop the earthquake, but I was only able to carry our battle to a draw. I inflicted injury on him, and he on me. But to tell you the truth, Mr. Katagiri..."

"What is it, Frog?"

"I am, indeed, pure Frog, but at the same time I am a thing that stands for a world of un-Frog."

"Hmm, I don't get that at all."

"Neither do I," Frog said, his eyes still closed. "It's just a feeling I have. What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real. My enemy is, among other things, the me inside me. Inside me is the un-me. My brain is growing murky.

The locomotive is coming. But I really want you to understand what I am saying, Mr. Katagiri."

"You're tired, Frog. Go to sleep. You'll get better."

"I am slowly returning to the murk, Mr. Katagiri. And yet...I..."

Frog lost his grasp on words and slipped into a coma. His arms hung down almost to the floor, and his big, wide mouth drooped open. Straining to focus his eyes, Katagiri was able to make out deep cuts covering Frog's entire body. Discolored streaks ran through his skin, and there was a sunken spot on his head where the flesh had been torn away.

Katagiri stared long and hard at Frog, who sat there now wrapped in the thick cloak of sleep. As soon as I get out of this hospital, he thought, I'll buy Anna Karenina and "White Nights" and read them both. Then I'll have a nice, long literary discussion about them with Frog.

Before long, Frog began to twitch all over. Katagiri assumed at first that these were just normal involuntary movements in sleep, but he soon realized his mistake. There was something unnatural about the way Frog's body went on jerking, like a big doll being shaken by someone from behind. Katagiri held his breath and watched. He wanted to run over to Frog, but his own body remained paralyzed.

After a while, a big lump formed over Frog's right eye. The same kind of huge, ugly boil broke out on Frog's shoulder and side and then over his whole body. Katagiri could not imagine what was happening to Frog. He stared at the spectacle, barely breathing.

Then, all of a sudden, one of the boils burst with a loud pop. The skin flew off, and a sticky liquid oozed out, sending a horrible smell across the room. The rest of the boils started popping, one after another, twenty or thirty in all, flinging skin and fluid onto the walls. The sickening, unbearable smell filled the hospital room. Big black holes were left on Frog's body where the boils had burst, and wriggling, maggot-like worms of all shapes and sizes came crawling out. Puffy white maggots. After them emerged some kind of small, centipede-like creatures, whose hundreds of legs made a creepy rustling sound. An endless stream of these things came crawling out of the holes. Frog's body--or the thing that had once been Frog's body--was totally covered by these creatures of the night. His two big eyeballs fell from their sockets onto the floor, where they were devoured by black bugs with strong jaws.

Crowds of slimy worms raced each other up the walls to the ceiling, where they covered the fluorescent lights and burrowed into the smoke alarm.

The floor, too, was covered with worms and bugs. They climbed up the lamp and blocked the light, and, of course, they crept onto Katagiri's bed. Hundreds of them came burrowing under the covers. They crawled up his legs, under his bed gown, between his thighs. The smallest worms and maggots crawled inside his anus and ears and nostrils. Centipedes pried open his mouth and crawled inside, one after another. Filled with an intense despair, Katagiri screamed.

Someone snapped a switch and light filled the room.

"Mr. Katagiri!" called the nurse. Katagiri opened his eyes to the light. His body was soaked in sweat. The bugs were gone. All they had left behind in him was a horrible, slimy sensation.

"Another bad dream, eh? Poor dear." With quick, efficient movements, the nurse readied an injection and stabbed the needle into his arm.

He took a long, deep breath and let it out. His heart was expanding and contracting violently. "What were you dreaming about?"

Katagiri was having trouble differentiating dream from reality. "What you see with your eyes is not necessarily real," he told himself aloud.

"That's so true," the nurse said with a smile. "Especially where those dreams are concerned." "Frog," he murmured.

"Did something happen to Frog?" she asked.

"He saved Tokyo from being destroyed by an earthquake. All by himself."

"That's nice," the nurse said, replacing his near-empty intravenous-feeding bottle with a new one. "We don't need any more awful things happening in Tokyo. We have plenty already."

"But it cost him his life. He's gone. I think he went back to the murk. He'll never come here again."

Smiling, the nurse toweled the sweat from his forehead. "You were very fond of Frog, weren't you, Katagiri?"

"Locomotive," Katagiri mumbled. "More than anybody." Then he closed his eyes and sank into a restful, dreamless sleep.

The End

Philip K. Dick

HOW TO BUILD A UNIVERSE

THAT DOESN'T FALL APART TWO DAYS LATER

...

can also be found in the collections

I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon

published _ 1985

The Shifting Realities of Philip K. Dick

published _ 1995

originally published _ 1978

first, before i begin to bore you with the usual sort of things science fiction writers say in speeches, let me bring you official greetings from Disneyland.

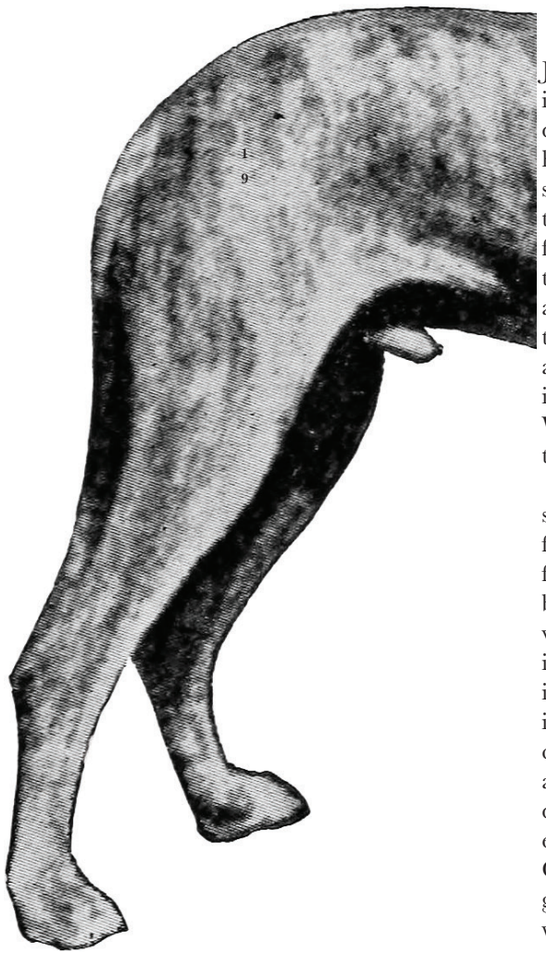
I consider myself a spokesperson for Disneyland because I live just a few miles from it and, as if that were not enough, I once had the honor of being interviewed there by Paris TV. For several weeks after the interview, I was really ill and confined to bed. I think it was the whirling teacups that did it. Elizabeth Antebi, who was the producer of the film, wanted to have me whirling around in one of the giant teacups while discussing the rise of fascism with Norman Spinrad... an old friend of mine who writes excellent science fiction. We also discussed Watergate, but we did that on the deck of Captain Hook's pirate ship. Little children wearing Mickey Mouse hats those black hats with the ears kept running up and bumping against us as the cameras whirred away, and Elizabeth asked unexpected questions. Norman and I, being preoccupied with tossing little children about, said some extraordinarly stupid things that day. Today, however, I will have to accept full blame for what I tell you, since none of you are wearing Mickey Mouse hats and trying to climb up on me under the impression that I am part of the rigging of a pirate ship.

Science fiction writers, I am sorry to say, really do not know anything. We can't talk about science, because our knowledge of it is limited and unofficial, and usually our fiction is dreadful. A few years ago, no college or university would ever have considered inviting one of us to speak. We were mercifully confined to lurid pulp magazines, impress-

ing no one. In those days, friends would say me, "But are you writing anything serious?" meaning "Are you writing anything other than science fiction?"

We longed to be accepted. We yearned to be noticed. Then, suddenly, the academic world noticed us, we were invited to give speeches and appear on panels and immediately we made idiots of ourselves. The problem is simply this: What does a science fiction writer know about? On what topic is he an authority? It reminds me of a headline that appeared in a California newspaper just before I flew here.

SCIENTISTS SAY THAT MICE CANNOT BE MADE TO LOOK LIKE HUMAN BEINGS.



It was a federally funded research program, I suppose. Just think: Someone in this world is an authority on the topic of whether mice can or cannot put on two-tone shoes, derby hats, pinstriped shirts, and Dacron pants, and pass as humans. Well, I will tell you what interests me, what I consider important. I can't claim to be an authority on anything, but I can honestly say that certain matters absolutely fascinate me, and that I write about them all the time. The two basic topics which fascinate me are "What is reality?" and "What constitutes the authentic human being?" Over the twenty-seven years in which I have published novels and stories I have investigated these two interrelated topics over and over again. I consider them important topics. What are we? What is it which surrounds us, that we call the not-me, or the empirical or phenomenal world?

In 1951, when I sold my first story, I had no idea that such fundamental issues could be pursued in the science fiction field. I began to pursue them unconsciously. My first story had to do with a dog who imagined that the garbagemen who came every Friday morning were stealing valuable food which the family had carefully stored away in a safe metal container. Every day, members of the family carried out paper sacks of nice ripe food, stuffed them into the metal container, shut the lid tightly and when the container was full, these dreadful-looking creatures came and stole everything but the can. Finally, in the story, the dog begins to imagine that someday the garbagemen will eat the people in the house, as well as stealing their food. Of course, the dog is wrong about this. We all know that garbagemen do not eat people. But the dog's extrapolation was in a sense logical given the facts at his disposal.

04

photo 04_ Miller, Conrad Jenness, 1903

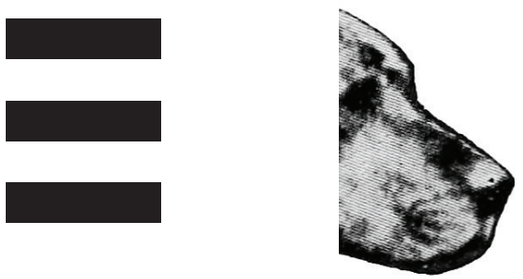
The story was about a real dog, and I used to watch him and try to get inside his head and imagine how he saw the world. Certainly, I decided, that dog sees the world quite differently than I do, or any humans do. And then I began to think, Maybe each human being lives in a unique world, a private world, a world different from those inhabited and experienced by all other humans. And that led me wonder, If reality differs from person to person, can we speak of reality singular, or shouldn't we really be talking about plural realities? And if there are plural realities, are some more true (more real) than others? What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe, it's as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, His reality is so different from ours that he can't explain his to us, and we can't explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too diffrently, there occurs a breakdown of communication... and there is the real illness.

I once wrote a story about a man who was injured and taken to a hospital. When they began surgery on him, they discovered that he was an android, not a human, but that he did not know it. They had to break the news to him. Almost at once, Mr. Garson Poole discovered that his reality consisted of punched tape passing from reel to reel in his chest. Fascinated, he began to fill in some of the punched holes and add new ones. Immediately, his world changed. A flock of ducks flew through the room when he punched one new hole in the tape. Finally he cut the tape entirely, whereupon the world disappeared. However, it also disappeared for the other characters in the story... which makes no sense, if you think about it. Unless the other characters were figments of his punched-tape fantasy. Which I guess is what they were. It was always my hope, in writing novels and stories which asked the question "What is reality?", to someday get an answer. This was the hope of most of my readers, too.

Years passed. I wrote over thirty novels and over a hundred stories, and stillI could not figure out what was real. One day a girl college student in Canada asked me to define reality for her, for a paper she was writing for her philosophy class. She wanted a one-sentence answer. I thought about it and finally said, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." That's all I could come up with. That was back in 1972. Since then I haven't been able to define reality any more lucidly. But the problem is a real one, not a mere intellectual game.

Because today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups and the electronic hardware exists by which to deliver these pseudo-worlds right into the heads of the reader, the viewer, the listener. Sometimes when I watch my eleven-year-old daughter watch TV, I wonder what she is being taught. The problem of miscuing; consider that. A TV program produced for adults is viewed by a small child. Half of what is said and done in the TV drama is probably misunderstood by the child. Maybe it's all misunderstood. And the thing is, Just how authentic is the information anyhow, even if the child correctly understood it? What is the relationship between the average TV situation comedy to reality? What about the cop shows? Cars are continually swerving out of control, crashing, and catching fire. The police are always good and they always win. Do not ignore that point: The police always win. What a lesson that is. You should not fight authority, and even if you do, you will lose. The message here is, Be passive. And cooperate. If Officer Baretta asks you for information, give it to him, because Officer Beratta is a good man and to be trusted. He loves you, and you should love him.

So I ask, in my writing, What is real? Because unceasingly we are bombarded with pseudo-realities manufactured by very sophisticated people using very sophisticated electronic mechanisms. I do not distrust their motives; I distrust their power. They have a lot of it. And it is an astonishing power: that of creating whole universes, universes of the mind. I ought to know. I do the same thing. It is my job to create universes, as the basis of one novel after another. And I have to build them in such a way that they do not fall apart two days later. Or at least that is what my editors hope. However, I will reveal a secret to you: I like to build universes which do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem. I have a secret love of chaos. There should be more of it. Do not believe — and I am dead serious when I say this — do not assume that order and stability are always good, in a society or in a universe. The old, the ossified, must always give way to new life and the birth of new things. Before the new things can be born the old must perish. This is a dangerous realization, because it tells us that we must eventually part with much of what is familiar to us. And that hurts. But that is part of the script of life. Unless we can psychologically accommo-



“As soon as you begin to ask what is ultimately real, you right away begin talk to nonsense.”

date change, we ourselves begin to die, inwardly. What I am saying is that objects, customs, habits, and ways of life must perish so that the authentic human being can live. And it is the authentic human being who matters most, the viable, elastic organism which can bounce back, absorb, and deal with the new.

Of course, I would say this, because I live near Disneyland, and they are always adding new rides and destroying old ones. Disneyland is an evolving organism. For years they had the Lincoln Simulacrum, like Lincoln himself, was only a temporary form which matter and energy take and then lose. The same is true of each of us, like it or not.

The pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Parmenides taught that the only things that are real are things which never change... and the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Heraclitus taught that everything changes. If you superimpose their two views, you get this result: Nothing is real. There is a fascinating next step to this line of thinking: Parmenides could never have existed because he grew old and died and disappeared, so, according to his own philosophy, he did not exist. And Heraclitus may have been right — let's not forget that; so if Heraclitus was right, then Parmenides did exist, and therefore, according to Heraclitus' philosophy, perhaps Parmenides was right, since Parmenides fulfilled the conditions, the criteria, by which Heraclitus judged things real.

I offer this merely to show that as soon as you begin to ask what is ultimately real, you right away begin talk nonsense. Zeno proved that motion was impossible (actually he only imagined that he had proved this; what he lacked was what technically is called the "theory of limits"). David Hume, the greatest skeptic of them all, once remarked that after a gathering of skeptics met to proclaim the veracity of skepticism as a philosophy, all of the members of the gathering nonetheless left by the door rather than the window. I see Hume's point. It was all just talk. The solemn philosophers weren't taking what they said seriously.

But I consider that the matter of defining what is real — that is a serious topic, even a vital topic. And in there somewhere is the other topic, the definition of the authentic human. Because the bombardment of pseudo- realities begins to produce inauthentic humans very quickly, spurious humans — as fake as the data pressing at them from all sides. My two topics are really one topic; they unite at this point. Fake realities will create fake humans. Or, fake humans will generate fake realities and then sell them to

other humans, turning them, eventually, into forgeries of themselves. So we wind up with fake humans inventing fake realities and then peddling them to other fake humans. It is just a very large version of Disneyland. You can have the Pirate Ride or the Lincoln Simulacrum or Mr. Toad's Wild Ride — you can have all of them, but none is true.

In my writing I got so interested in fakes that I finally came up with the concept of fake fakes. For example, in Disneyland there are fake birds worked by electric motors which emit caws and shrieks as you pass by them. Suppose some night all of us sneaked into the park with real birds and substituted them for the artificial ones. Imagine the horror the Disneyland officials would feet when they discovered the cruel hoax. Real birds! And perhaps someday even real hippos and lions. Consternation. The park being cunningly transmuted from the unreal to the real, by sinister forces. For instance, suppose the Matterhom turned into a genuine snow-covered mountain? What if the entire place, by a miracle of God's power and wisdom, was changed, in a moment, in the blink of an eye, into something incorruptible? They would have to close down.

In Plato's Timaeus, God does not create the universe, as does the Christian God; He simply finds it one day. It is in a state of total chaos. God sets to work to transform the chaos into order. That idea appeals to me, and I have adapted it to fit my own intellectual needs: What if our universe started out as not quite real, a sort of illusion, as the Hindu religion teaches, and God, out of love and kindness for us, is slowly transmuting it, slowly and secretly, into something real?

We would not be aware of this transformation, since we were not aware that our world was an illusion in the first place. This technically is a Gnostic idea. Gnosticism is a religion which embraced Jews, Christians, and pagans for several centuries. I have been accused of holding Gnostic ideas. I guess I do. At one time I would have been burned. But some of their ideas intrigue me. One time, when I was researching Gnosticism in the Britannica, I came across mention of a Gnostic codex called The Unreal God and the Aspects of His Nonexistent Universe, an idea which reduced me, to helpless laughter. What kind of person would write about something that he knows doesn't exist, and how can something that doesn't exist have aspects? But then I realized that I'd been writing about these matters for over twenty-five years. I guess there is a lot of

latitude in what you can say when writing about a topic that does not exist. A friend of mine once published a book called Snakes of Hawaii. A number of libraries wrote him ordering copies. Well, there are no snakes in Hawaii. All the pages of his book were blank.

Of course, in science fiction no pretense is made that the worlds described are real. This is why we call it fiction. The reader is warned in advance not to believe what he is about to read. Equally true, the visitors to Disneyland understand that Mr. Toad does not really exist and that the pirates are animated by motors and servo-assist mechanisms, relays and electronic circuits. So no deception is taking place.

And yet the strange thing is, in some way, some real way, much of what appears under the title "science fiction" is true. It may not be literally true, I suppose. We have not really been invaded by creatures from another star system, as depicted in Close Encounters of the Third Kind. The producers of that film never intended for us to believe it. Or did they?

And, more important, if they did intend to state this, is it actually true? That is the issue: not, Does the author or producer believe it, but — Is it true? Because, quite by accident, in the pursuit of a good yarn, a science fiction author or producer or scriptwriter might stumble onto the truth... and only later on realize it.

The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words. George Orwell made this clear in his novel 1984. But another way to control the minds of people is to control their perceptions. If you can get them to see the world as you do, they will think as you do. Comprehension follows perception. How do you get them to see the reality you see? After all, it is only one reality out of many. Images are a basic constituent: pictures. This is why the power of TV to influence young minds is so staggeringly vast. Words and pictures are synchronized. The possibility of total control of the viewer exists, especially the young viewer. TV viewing is a kind of sleep- learning. An EEG of a person watching TV shows that after about half an hour the brain decides that nothing is happening, and it goes into a hypnoidal twilight state, emitting alpha waves. This is because there is such little eye motion. In addition, much of the information is graphic and therefore passes into the right hemisphere of the brain, rather than being processed

by the left, where the conscious personality is located. Recent experiments indicate that much of what we see on the TV screen is received on a subliminal basis. We only imagine that we consciously see what is there. The bulk of the messages elude our attention; literally, after a few hours of TV watching, we do not know what we have seen. Our memories are spurious, like our memories of dreams; the blanks are filled in retrospectively. And falsified. We have participated unknowingly in the creation of a spurious reality, and then we have obligingly fed it to ourselves. We have colluded in our own doom.

And — and I say this as a professional fiction writer — the producers, scriptwriters, and directors who create these video/audio worlds do not know how much of their content is true. In other words, they are victims of their own product, along with us. Speaking for myself, I do not know how much of my writing is true, or which parts (if any) are true. This is a potentially lethal situation. We have fiction mimicking truth, and truth mimicking fiction. We have a dangerous overlap, a dangerous blur. And in all probability it is not deliberate. In fact, that is part of the problem. You cannot legislate an author into correctly labeling his product, like a can of pudding whose ingredients are listed on the label... you cannot compel him to declare what part is true and what isn't if he himself does not know.

It is an eerie experience to write something into a novel, believing it is pure fiction, and to learn later on — perhaps years later — that it is true. I would like to give you an example. It is something that I do not understand. Perhaps you can come up with a theory. I can't.

In 1970 I wrote a novel called Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said. One of the characters is a nineteen-year-old girl named Kathy. Her husband's name is Jack. Kathy appears to work for the criminal underground, but later, as we read deeper into the novel, we discover that actually she is working for the police. She has a relationship going on with a police inspector. The character is pure fiction. Or at least I thought it was.

Anyhow, on Christmas Day of 1970, I met a girl named Kathy - this was after I had finished the novel, you understand. She was nineteen years old. Her boyfriend was named Jack. I soon learned that Kathy was a drug dealer. I spent months trying to get her to give up dealing drugs; I kept warning her again and again that she would get caught. Then, one evening as we were entering a restaurant together, Kathy stopped short and said, "I

can't go in." Seated in the restaurant was a police inspector whom I knew. "I have to tell you the truth," Kathy said. "I have a relationship with him."

Certainly, these are odd coincidences. Perhaps I have precognition. But the mystery becomes even more perplexing; the next stage totally baffles me. It has for four years.

In 1974 the novel was published by Doubleday. One afternoon I was talking to my priest - I am an Episcopalian — and I happened to mention to him an important scene near the end of the novel in which the character Felix Buckman meets a black stranger at an all-night gas station, and they begin to talk. As I described the scene in more and more detail, my priest became progressively more agitated. At last he said, 'That is a scene from the Book of Acts, from the Bible! In Acts, the person who meets the black man on the road is named Philip - - your name." Father Rasch was so upset by the resemblance that he could not even locate the scene in his Bible. "Read Acts," he instructed me. "And you'll agree. It's the same down to specific details."

I went home and read the scene in Acts. Yes, Father Rasch was right; the scene in my novel was an obvious retelling of the scene in Acts... and I had never read Acts, I must admit. But again the puzzle became deeper. In Acts, the high Roman official who arrests and interrogates Saint Paul is named Felix — the same name as my character. And my character Felix Buckman is a high-ranking police general; in fact, in my novel he holds the same office as Felix in the Book of Acts: the final authority. There is a conversation in my novel which very closely resembles a conversation between Felix and Paul.

Well, I decided to try for any further resemblances. The main character in my novel is named Jason. I got an index to the Bible and looked to see if anyone named Jason appears anywhere in the Bible. I couldn't remember any. Well, a man named Jason appears once and only once in the Bible. It is in the Book of Acts. And, as if to plague me further with coincidences, in my novel Jason is fleeing from the authorities and takes refuge in a person's house, and in Acts the man named Jason shelters a fugitive from the law in his house - an exact inversion of the situation in my novel, as if the mysterious Spirit responsible for all this was having a sort of laugh about the whole thing.

Felix, Jason, and the meeting on the road with the black man who is a complete stranger. In Acts, the disciple Philip baptizes the black man, who then goes away rejoicing. In my novel, Felix Buckman reaches out to the black stranger for emotional support, because Felix Buckman's sister has just died and he is falling apart psychologically. The black man stirs up Buckman's spirits and although Buckman does not go away rejoicing, at least his tears have stopped falling. He had been flying home, weeping over the death of his sister, and had to reach out to someone, anyone, even a total stranger. It is an encounter between two strangers on the road which changes the life of one of them — both in my novel and in Acts. And one final quirk by the mysterious Spirit at work: the name Felix is the Latin word for "happy." Which I did not know when I wrote the novel.

A careful study of my novel shows that for reasons which I cannot even begin to explain I had managed to retell several of the basic incidents from a particular book of the Bible, and even had the right names. What could explain this? That was four years ago that I discovered all this. For four years I have tried to come up with a theory and I have not. I doubt if I ever will.

But the mystery had not ended there, as I had imagined. Two months ago I was walking up to the mailbox late at night to mail off a letter, and also to enjoy the sight of Saint Joseph's Church, which sits opposite my apartment building. I noticed a man loitering suspiciously by a parked car. It looked as if he was attempting to steal the car, or maybe something from it; as I returned from the mailbox, the man hid behind a tree. On impulse I walked up to him and asked, "Is anything the matter?"

"I'm out of gas," the man said. "And I have no money."

Incredibly, because I have never done this before, I got out my wallet, took all the money from it, and handed the money to him. He then shook hands with me and asked where I lived, so that he could later pay the money back. I returned to my apartment, and then I realized that the money would do him no good, since there was no gas station within walking distance. So I returned, in my car. The man had a metal gas can in the trunk of his car, and, together, we drove in my car to an all-night gas station. Soon we were standing there, two strangers, as the pump jockey filled the metal gas can. Suddenly I realized that this was the scene in my novel — the novel written eight years before. The all-night gas station was exactly as I had envisioned it in my inner eye when I wrote the scene — the glaring white light, the pump jockey — and now I saw something which I had not seen before. The stranger

who I was helping was black. We drove back to his stalled car with the gas, shook hands, and then I returned to my apartment building. I never saw him again. He could not pay me back because I had not told him which of the many apartments was mine or what my name was. I was terribly shaken up by this experience. I had literally lived out a scene completely as it had appeared in my novel. Which is to say, I had lived out a sort of replica of the scene in Acts where Philip encounters the black man on the road.

What could explain all this?

The answer I have come up with may not be correct, but it is the only answer I have. It has to do with time. My theory is this: In some certain important sense, time is not real. Or perhaps it is real, but not as we experience it to be or imagine it to be. I had the acute, overwhelming certitude (and still have) that despite all the change we see, a specific permanent landscape underlies the world of change: and that this invisible underlying landscape is that of the Bible; it, specifically, is the period immediately following the death and resurrection of Christ; it is, in other words, the time period of the Book of Acts.

Parmenides would be proud of me. I have gazed at a constantly changing world and declared that underneath it lies the eternal, the unchanging, the absolutely real. But how has this come about? If the real time is circa AD 50, then why do we see AD 1978? And if we are really living in the Roman Empire, somewhere in Syria, why do we see the United States?

During the Middle Ages, a curious theory arose, which I will now present to you for what it is worth. It is the theory that the Evil One — Satan — is the "Ape of God." That he creates spurious imitations of creation, of God's authentic creation, and then interpolates them for that authentic creation. Does this odd theory help explain my experience? Are we to believe that we are occluded, that we are deceived, that it is not 1978 but AD 50... and Satan has spun a counterfeit reality to wither our faith in the return of Christ?

I can just picture myself being examined by a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist says, "What year is it?" And I reply, "AD 50." The psychiatrist blinks and then asks, "And where are you?" I reply, "In Judaea." "Where the heck is that?" the psychiatrist asks. "It's part of the Roman Empire," I would have to answer. "Do you know who is President?" the psychiatrist would ask, and I would answer, "The Procurator Felix." "You're pretty sure about this?" the psychiatrist would ask, meanwhile giving a covert signal to two very large psych techs. "Yep," I'd replay. "Unless Felix has stepped down and had been replaced by the Procurator Festus. You see, Saint Paul was held by Felix for —" "Who told you all this?" the psychiatrist would break in, irritably, and I would reply, 'The Holy Spirit." And after that I'd be in the rubber room, inside gazing out, and knowing exactly how come I was there. Everything in that conversation would be true, in a sense, although palpably not true in another. I know perfectly well that the date is 1978 and that Jimmy Carter is President and that I live in Santa Ana, California, in the United States. I even know how to get from my apartment to Disneyland, a fact I can't seem to forget. And surely no Disneyland existed back at the time of Saint Paul.

So, if I force myself to be very rational and reasonable, and all those other good things, I must admit that the existence of Disneyland (which I know is real) proves that we are not living in Judaea in AD 50. The idea of Saint Paul whirling around in the giant teacups wile composing First Corinthians, as Paris TV films him with a telephoto lens — that just can't be. Saint Paul would never go near Disneyland. Only children, tourists, and visiting Soviet high officials ever go to Disneyland. Saints do not.

But somehow that biblical material snared my unconscious and crept into my novel, and equally true, for some reason in 1978 I relived a scene which I described back in 1970. What I am saying is this: There is internal evidence in at least one of my novels that another reality, an unchanging one, exactly as Parmenides and Plato suspected, underlies the visible phenomenal world of change, and somehow, in some way, perhaps to our surprise, we can cut through to it. Or rather, a mysterious Spirit can put us in touch with it, if it wishes us to see this permanent other landscape. Time passes, thousands of years pass, but at the same instant that we see this contemporary world, the ancient world, the world of the Bible, is concealed beneath it, still. there and still real. Eternally so.

Shall I go for broke and tell you the rest of this peculiar story? I'll do so, having gone this far already. My novel Flow My Tears, the Policeman Said was released by Doubleday in February of 1974. The week after it was released, I had two impacted wisdom teeth removed, under sodium pentathol. Later that day I found myself in intense pain. My wife phoned the oral surgeon and he phoned a pharmacy. Half an hour later there was a knock at my

door: the delivery person from the pharmacy with the pain medication. Although I was bleeding and sick and weak, I felt the need to answer the knock on the door myself. When I opened the door, I found myself facing a young woman — who wore a shining gold necklace in the center of which was a gleaming gold fish. For some reason I was hypnotized by the gleaming golden fish; I forgot my pain, forgot the medication, forgot why the girl was there. I just kept staring at the fish sign.

"What does that mean?" I asked her.

The girl touched the glimmering golden fish with her hand and said, "This is a sign worn by the early Christians." She then gave me the package of medication.

In that instant, as I stared at the gleaming fish sign and heard her words, I suddenly experienced what I later learned is called anamnesis — a Greek word meaning, literally, "loss of forgetfulness." I remembered who I was and where I was. In an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, it all came back to me. And not only could I remember it but I could see it. The girl was a secret Christian and so was I. We lived in fear of detection by the Romans. We had to communicate with cryptic signs. She had just told me all this, and it was true.

For a short time, as hard as this is to believe or explain, I saw fading into view the black prison like contours of hateful Rome. But, of much more importance, I remembered Jesus, who had just recently been with us, and had gone temporarily away, and would very soon return. My emotion was one of joy. We were secretly preparing to welcome Him back. It would not be long. And the Romans did not know. They thought He was dead, forever dead. That was our great secret, our joyous knowledge. Despite all appearances, Christ was going to return, and our delight and anticipation was boundless.

Isn't it odd that this strange event, this recovery of lost memory, occurred only a week after Flow My Tears was released? And it is Flow My Tears which contains the replication of people and events from the Book of Acts, which is set at the precise moment in time — just after Jesus' death and resurrection — that I remembered, by means of the golden fish sign, as having just taken place?

If you were me, and had this happen to you, I'm sure you wouldn't be able to leave it alone. You would seek a theory that would account for it. For over four years now, I have been trying one theory after another: circular time, frozen time, timeless time, what is called "sacred" as contrasted to "mundane" time... I can't count the theories I've tried out. One constant has prevailed, though, throughout all theories. There must indeed be a mysterious Holy Spirit which has an exact and intimate relation to Christ, which can indwell in human minds, guide and inform them, and even express itself through those humans, even without their awareness.

In the writing of Flow My Tears, back in 1970, there was one unusual event which I realized at the time was not ordinary, was not a part of the regular writing process. I had a dream one night, an especially vivid dream. And when I awoke I found myself under the compulsion — the absolute necessity — of getting the dream into the text of the novel precisely as I had dreamed it. In getting the dream exactly right, I had to do eleven drafts of the final part of the manuscript, until I was satisfied.

I will now quote from the novel, as it appeared in the final, published form. See if this dream reminds you of anything.

> *The countryside, brown and dry, in summer, where he had lived as a child. He rode a horse, and approaching him on his left a squad of horses nearing slowly. On the horses rode men in shining robes, each a different contour; each wore a pointed helmet that sparkled in the sunlight. The slow, solemn knights passed him and as they traveled by he made out the face of one: an ancient marble face, a terribly old man with rippling cascades of white beard. What a strong nose he had. What noble features. So tired, so serious, so far beyond ordinary men. Evidently he was a king. Felix Buckman let them pass; he did not speak to them and they said nothing to him. Together, they all moved toward the house from which he had come. A man had sealed himself up inside the house, a man alone, Jason Taverner, in the silence and darkness, without windows, by himself from now on into eternity. Sitting, merely existing, inert. Felix Buckman continued on, out into the open countryside. And then he heard from behind him one dreadful single shriek. They had killed Taverner, and seeing them enter, sensing them in the shadows around him, knowing what they intended to do with him, Taverner had shrieked. Within himself Felix Buckman felt absolute and utter desolate grief. But in the dream he did not go back nor look back. There was nothing that could be done. No one could have stopped the posse of varicolored men in robes; they could not have been said no to. Anyhow, it was over. Taverner was dead.*

This passage probably does not suggest any particular

thing to you, except a law posse exacting judgement on someone either guilty or considered guilty. It is not clear whether Taverner has in fact committed some crime or is merely believed to have committed some crime. I had the impression that he was guilty, but that it was a tragedy that he had to be killed, a terribly sad tragedy. In the novel, this dream causes Felix Buckman to begin to cry, and therefore he seeks out the black man at the all-night gas station.

Months after the novel was published, I found the section in the Bible to which this dream refers. It is Daniel, 7:9:

> *Thrones were set in place and one ancient in years took his seat. His robe was white as snow and the hair of his head like cleanest wool. Flames of fire were his throne and its wheels blazing fire; a flowing river of fire streamed out before him. Thousands upon thousands served him and myriads upon myriads attended his presence. The court sat, and the book was opened.*

The white-haired old man appears again in Revelation, 1:13:

> *I saw... one like a son of man, robed down to his feet, with a golden girdle round his breast. The hair of his head was white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; his feet gleamed like burnished brass refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.*

And then 1:17:

> *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, and I am the living one, for I was dead and now I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of Death and Death's domain. Write down therefore what you have seen, what is now, and what will be hereafter."*

And, like John of Patmos, I faithfully wrote down what I saw and put in my novel. And it was true, although at the time I did not know who was meant by this description:

> *... he made out the face of one: an ancient marble face, a terribly old man with rippling cascades of white beard. What a strong nose he had. What noble features. So tired, so serious, so far beyond ordinary men. Evidently he was a king.*

Indeed he was a king. He is Christ Himself returned, to pass judgement. And this is what he does in my novel: He passes judgement on the man sealed up in darkness. The man sealed up in darkness must be the Prince of Evil, the Force of Darkness. Call it whatever you wish, its time had come. It was judged and condemned. Felix Buckman could weep at the sadness of it, but he knew that the verdict could not be disputed. And so he rode on, without turning or looking back, hearing only the shriek of fear and defeat: the cry of evil destroyed.

So my novel contained material from other parts of the Bible, as well as the sections from Acts. Deciphered, my novel tells a quite different story from the surface story (which we need not go into here). The real story is simply this: the return of Christ, now king rather than suffering servant. Judge rather than victim of unfair judgement. Everything is reversed. The core message of my novel, without my knowing it, was a warning to the powerful: You will shortly be judged and condemned. Who, specifically, did it refer to? Well, I can't really say; or rather would prefer not to say. I have no certain knowledge, only an intuition. And that is not enough to go on, so I will keep my thoughts to myself. But you might ask yourselves what political events took place in this country between February 1974 and August 1974. Ask yourself who was judged and condemned, and fell like a flaming star into ruin and disgrace. The most powerful man in the world. And I feel as sorry for him now as I did when I dreamed that dream. "That poor poor man," I said once to my wife, with tears in my eyes. "Shut up in the darkness, playing the piano in the night to himself, alone and afraid, knowing what's to come." For God's sake, let us forgive him, finally. But what was done to him and all his men — "all the President's men," as it's put — had to be done. But it is over, and he should be let out into the sunlight again; no creature, no person, should be shut up in darkness forever, in fear. It is not humane.

Just about the time that Supreme Court was ruling that the Nixon tapes had to be turned over to the special prosecutor, I was eating at a Chinese restaurant in Yorba Linda, the town in California where Nixon went to school — where he grew up, worked at a grocery store, where there is a park named after him, and of course the Nixon house, simple clapboard and all that. In my fortune cookie, I got the following fortune:

DEEDS DONE IN SECRET HAVE A WAY OF BECOMING FOUND OUT

I mailed the slip of paper to the White House, mentioning that the Chinese restaurant was located within a mile of Nixon's original house, and I said, "I think a mistake has been made; by accident I got Mr. Nixon's fortune. Does he have mine?" The White House did not answer.

Well, as I said earlier, an author of a work supposed fiction might write the truth and not know it. To quote Xenophanes another pre-Socratic: "Even if a man should chance to speak the most complete truth, yet he himself does not know it; all things are wrapped in appearances" (Fragment 34). And Heraclitus added to this: "The nature of things is in the habit of concealing itself" (Fragment 54). W. S. Gilbert, of Gilbert and Sullivan, put it: "Things are seldom what they seem; skim milk masquerades as cream." The point of all that is that we cannot trust our senses and probably not even our a priori reasoning. As to our senses, I understand that people who have been blind from birth and are suddenly given sight are amazed to discover that objects appear to get smaller and smaller as they get farther away. Logically, there is no reason for this. We, of course, have come to accept this, because we're used to it. We see objects get smaller, but we know that in actuality they remain the same size. So even the common everyday pragmatic person utilises a certain amount of sophisticated discounting of what his eyes and ears tell him.

Little of what Heraclitus wrote has survived, and what we do have is obscure, but Fragment 54 is lucid and important: "latent structure is master of obvious structure." This means that Heraclitus believed that a veil lay over the true landscape. He also may have suspected that time was somehow not what it seemed, because in Fragment 52 he said: "Time is a child at play, playing draughts; a child's is the kingdom." This is indeed cryptic. But he also said, in Fragment 18: "If one does not expect it, one will not find out the unexpected; it is not to be tracked down and no path leads us to it." Edward Hussey, in his scholarly book The Pre-Socratics, says:

> *If Heraclitus is to be so insistent on the lack of understanding shown by most men, it would seem only reasonable that he should offer further instructions for penetrating to the truth. The talk of riddle-guessing suggests that some kind of revelation, beyond human control, is necessary... The true wisdom, as has been seen, is closely associated with God, which suggests further that in advancing wisdom a man becomes like, or a part of, God.*

This quote is not from a religious book or a book on theology; it is an analysis of the earliest philosophers by a Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy at the University of Oxford. Hussey makes it clear that to these early philosophers there was no distinction between philosophy and religion. The first great quantum leap in Greek theology was by Xenophanes of Colophon, born in the mid-sixth century BC Xenophanes, without resorting to any authority expect that of his own mind, says:

> *One god there is, in no way like mortal creatures either in bodily form or in the thought of his mind. The whole of him sees, the whole of him thinks, the whole of him hears. He stays always motionless in the same place; it is not fitting that he should move about now this way, now that.*

This is a subtle and advanced concept of God, evidently without precedent among the Greek thinkers. "The arguments of Parmenides seemed to show that all reality must indeed be a mind," Hussey writes, "or an object of thought in a mind." Regarding Heraclitus specifically, he says, "In Heraclitus it is difficult to tell how far the designs in God's mind are distinguished from the execution in the world, or indeed how far God's mind is distinguished from the world." The further leap by Anaxagoras has always fascinated me. "Anaxagoras had been driven to a theory of the microstructure of matter which made it, to some extent, mysterious to human reason." Anaxagoras believed that everything was determined by Mind. These were not childish thinkers, nor primitives. They debated serious issues and studied one another's views with deft insight. It was not until the time of Aristotle that their views got reduced to what we can neatly — but wrongly — classify as crude. The summation of much pre-Socratic theology and philosophy can be stated as follows: The kosmos is not as it appears to be, and what it probably is, at its deepest level, is exactly that which the human being is at his deepest level — call it mind or soul, it is something unitary which lives and thinks, and only appears to be plural and material. Much of this view reaches us through the Logos doctrine regarding Christ. The Logos was both that which thought, and the thing which it thought: thinker and thought together. The universe, then, is thinker and thought, and

If any of you have read my novel Ubik, you know that the mysterious entity or mind or force called Ubik starts out as a series of cheap and vulgar commercials and winds up saying:

> *I am Ubik. Before the universe was I am. I made the suns. I made the worlds. I created the lives and the places they inhabit; I move them here, I put them there. They go as I say, they do as I tell them. I am the word and my name is never spoken, the name which no one knows. I am called Ubik but that is not my name. I am. I shall always be.*

It is obvious from this who and what Ubik is; it specifically says that it is the word, which is to say, the Logos. In the German translation, there is one of the most wonderful lapses of correct understanding that I have ever come across; God help us if the man who translated my novel Ubik into German were to do a translation from the koine Greek into German of the New Testament. He did all right until he got to the sentence "I am the word." That puzzled him. What can the author mean by that? he must have asked himself, obviously never having come across the Logos doctrine. So he did as good a job of translation as possible. In the German edition, the Absolute Entity which made the suns, made the worlds, created the lives and the places they inhabit, says of itself:

> *I am the brand name.*

Had he translated the Gospel according to Saint John, I suppose it would have come out as:

> *When all things began, the brand name already was. The brand name dwelt with God, and what God was, the brand name was.*

It would seem that I not only bring you greetings from Disneyland but from Mortimer Snerd. Such is the fate of an author who hoped to include theological themes in his writing. "The brand name, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him." So it goes with noble ambitions. Let's hope God has a sense of humour.

Or should I say, Let's hope the brand name has a sense of humour.

As I said to you earlier, my two preoccupations in my writing are "What is reality?" and "What is the authentic human?" I'm sure you can see by now that I have not been able to answer the first question. I have an abiding intuition that somehow the world of the Bible is a literally real but veiled landscape, never changing, hidden from our sight, but available to us by revelation. That is all I can come up with — a mixture of mystical experience, reasoning, and faith. I would like to say something about the traits of the authentic human, though; in this quest I have had more plausible answers.

The authentic human being is one of us who instinctively knows what he should not do, and, in addition, he will balk at doing it. He will refuse to do it, even if this brings down dread consequences to him and to those whom he loves. This, to me, is the ultimately heroic trait of ordinary people; they say no to the tyrant and they calmly take the consequences of this resistance. Their deeds may be small, and almost always unnoticed, unmarked by history. Their names are not remembered, nor did these authentic humans expect their names to be remembered. I see their authenticity in an odd way: not in their willingness to perform great heroic deeds but in their quiet refusals. In essence, they cannot be compelled to be what they are not.

The power of spurious realities battering at us today — these deliberately manufactured fakes never penetrate to the heart of true human beings. I watch the children watching TV and at first I am afraid of what they are being taught, and then I realise, They can't be corrupted or destroyed. They watch, they listen, they understand, and, then, where and when it is necessary, they reject. There is something enormously powerful in a child's ability to withstand the fraudulent. A child has the clearest eye, the steadiest hand. The hucksters, the promoters, are appealing for the allegiance of these small people in vain. True, the cereal companies may be able to market huge quantities of junk breakfasts; the hamburger and hot dog chains may sell endless numbers of unreal fast-food items to the children, but the deep heart beats firmly, unreached and unreasoned with. A child of today can detect a lie quicker than the wisest adult of two decades ago. When I want to know what is true, I ask my children. They do not ask me; I turn to them.

One day while my son Christopher, who is four, was playing in front of me and his mother, we two adults began discussing the figure of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels. Christopher turned toward us for an instant and said, "I

am a fisherman. I fish for fish." He was playing with a metal lantern which someone had given me, which I had never used... and suddenly I realised that the lantern was shaped like a fish. I wonder what thoughts were being placed in my little boy's soul at that moment — and not placed there by cereal merchants or candy peddlers. "I am a fisherman. I fish for fish." Christopher, at four, had found the sign I did not find until I was forty-five years old. Time is speeding up. And to what end? Maybe we were told that two thousand years ago. Or maybe it wasn't really that long ago; maybe it is a delusion that so much time has passed. Maybe it was a week ago, or even earlier today. Perhaps time is not only speeding up; perhaps, in addition, it is going to end.

And if it does, the rides at Disneyland are never going to be the same again. Because when time ends, the birds and hippos and lions and deer at Disneyland will no longer be simulations, and, for the first time, a real bird will sing.

* * * * * *

Ian M. Connell

HelLA TIMES

...
not sci-fi but what the heck

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Four O'clock shadow
and I smell like piss;
Kind of figures when
you live like this,
Down by Cobain in
Koreatown,
I get cheap cocaine
when I get really down.
Crooked teeth and a
busted nose,
I write naked and sleep
in my clothes.
I don't care if you
like who I am.
That's the difference
between us and them.
I'm gonna fast 'til I'm
a hundred pounds
Saving every last dollar
for one last round
Started smokin' weed
when I lost my job
Now I steel what I need
'cause I will not rob
Forty dollars and
twenty-five cents
Isn't nearly enough
to pay my rent
So I spent it all out
in Beverly Hills
Getting drunk and
trashed on shitty pills
I see her getting ready
at a half past six,
I can't sleep when
I know she's turning
tricks. I could leave;
it'd probably be smart,
But I won't because
it'd break my heart!
Fuck your gods;
I'll die when I please,
I'm easy to bruise but
I'll never bleed.
That's how it goes when
you're living in Hell.
She won't help but
she'll wish me well!

05

photo 05_ Pierce, C.C. (Charles C.), circa 1910

Samuel R. Delany

THE ART OF FICTION

NO. 210

...

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interviewer_ Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah

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Delany was born on April 1, 1942, in Harlem, by then the cultural epicenter of black America. His father, who had come to New York from Raleigh, North Carolina, ran Levy and Delany, a funeral home to which Langston Hughes refers in his stories about the neighborhood. Delany grew up above his father's business. During the day he attended Dalton, an elite and primarily white prep school on the Upper East Side; at home, his mother, a senior clerk at the New York Public Library's Countee Cullen branch, on 125th Street, nurtured his exceptional intelligence and kaleidoscopic interests. He sang in the choir at St. Philip's, Harlem's black Episcopalian church, composed atonal music, played multiple instruments, and choreographed dances at the General Grant Community Center. In 1956, he earned a spot at the Bronx High School of Science, where he would meet his future wife, the poet Marilyn Hacker.

In the early sixties, the newly married couple settled in the East Village. There, Delany wrote his first novel, The Jewels of Aptor. He was nineteen. Over the next six years, he published eight more science-fiction novels, among them the Nebula Award winners Babel-17 (1966) and The Einstein Intersection (1967). Even then, his exploration of issues of sexuality, ethnicity, and gender—like the polyamorous love between three spacecraft navigators in Babel-17, or alien colonization and the relationship between the marginalized and history in The Einstein Intersection—distinguished him from other authors working in the genre. Even when set in fantastic worlds, like the Star-Pit, a city that squats at the galaxy's edge, or Nevèrÿon, an ancient, dragon-filled land whose inhabitants are just learning to write, Delany's work mirrors the generational shifts and concerns of his times.

In 1971, he completed a draft of a book he had been reworking for years. Dhalgren, his story of the Kid, a schizoid, amnesiac wanderer, takes place in Bellona, a shell of a city in the American Midwest isolated from the rest of the world and populated by warring gangs and holographic beasts. When Delany, Hacker, and their one-year-old daughter flew back to the States just before Christmas Eve in 1974, they saw copies of Dhalgren filling book racks at Kennedy Airport even before they reached customs. Over the next decade, the novel sold more than a million copies and was called a masterpiece by some critics. William Gibson famously described it as "a riddle that was never meant to be solved."

When we talk, Delany still seems humbled by that novel's success, yet he mentions more than once that it did not change his life in any real way: he still struggled to publish his more controversial works. One of these was "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals," from the Return to Nevèrÿon series, four volumes comprising eleven interlocking pieces. Written in 1984, it was the first work of fiction about aids published by a major publisher, Bantam. During the mid-eighties, Dalton Books, then the largest bookseller in America, refused to stock his books or those of other science-fiction and fantasy authors who dealt with gay content, since novels in those genres are often read by high-school students. As a result, Bantam backed out of publishing the fourth book in the series, and much of his older work wasn't reprinted. Delany, however, turned to small presses and academic publishers, and to date he has nearly forty books in print.

Over the course of almost a year, I met with Delany eight times. We never returned to the diner; as we finished that first interview, the waitress informed us they would be closing forever that afternoon. We conducted one of our longest interviews in a café-bar in Philadelphia called Woody's, where the walls are painted bordello red. Young men milled about in leather vests, and someone kindly picked up our bill. I had been reading Octavia Butler's essay "Positive Obsession," in which she mentions that when she started out as a writer of science fiction, Samuel Delany was perhaps the only black author writing in the genre. "What good is science fiction to black people?" Butler asks. "What good is its tendency to warn or to consider alternative ways of thinking and doing?"

I pose these questions to Delany, and he responds excitedly: "Science fiction isn't just thinking about the world out there. It's also thinking about how that world might be—a particularly important exercise for those who are oppressed, because if they're going to change the world we live in, they—and all of us—have to be able to think about a world that works differently."

—Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah

(Additional questions posed by Jenny Davidson.)

By Samuel Delany's request, this interview is dedicated to Joanna Russ, 1937–2011.

INTERVIEWER

Between the time you were nineteen and your twenty-second birthday, you wrote and sold five novels, and another four by the time you were twenty-six, plus a volume of short stories. Fifty years later, considerably more than half that work is still in print. Was being a prodigy important to you?

DELANY

As a child I'd run into Wilde's witticism "The only true talent is precociousness." I took my writing seriously, and it seemed to pay off. And I discovered Rimbaud. The notion of somebody just a year or two older than I was, who wrote poetry people were reading a hundred, a hundred fifty years later and who had written the greatest poem in the French language, or at least the most famous one, "Le Bateau Ivre," when he was just sixteen—that was enough to set my imagination soaring. At eighteen I translated it.

In the same years, I found the Signet paperback of Radiguet's Devil in the Flesh and, a few months after that, the much superior Le Bal du Comte d'Orgel, translated as Count d'Orgel in the first trade paperback from Grove Press, with Cocteau's deliciously suggestive "introduction" about its tragic young author, salted with such dicta as "Which family doesn't have its own child prodigy? They have invented the word. Of course, child prodigies exist, just as there are extraordinary men. But they are rarely the same. Age means nothing. What astounds me is Rimbaud's work, not the age at which he wrote it. All great poets have written by seventeen. The greatest are the ones who manage to make us forget it."

Now that was something to think about—and clearly it had been said about someone who had not expected to die at twenty of typhoid from eating bad oysters.

INTERVIEWER

What was your daily routine like in those days?

DELANY

At six-thirty or seven I'd get up, scramble Marilyn some eggs—she was eighteen, I was nineteen; we'd been married that August—make toast and coffee. She'd go out to work, and I'd start writing. I'd work all day, with a couple of breaks for extracurricular sex in the local men's rooms and a stop at the supermarket for dinner makings. Right before five, I'd start cooking again. In general, I believe I work a lot harder today than I did then. Today I'm a five-o'clock-in-the-morning riser. Although I do stare at the wall a lot.

INTERVIEWER

Stare at the wall?

DELANY

I think of myself as a very lazy writer, though other people see it differently. My daughter, who recently graduated from medical school, once told me, "Dad, I've never known anyone who works as hard as you. You're up at four, five o'clock in the morning, you work all day, then you collapse. At nine o'clock, you're in bed, then you're up the next morning at four to start all over again."

Gide says somewhere that art and crime both require leisure time to flourish. I spend a lot of time thinking, if not daydreaming. People think of me as a genre writer, and a genre writer is supposed to be prolific. Since that's how people perceive me, they have to say I'm prolific. But I don't find that either complimentary or accurate.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think of yourself as a genre writer?

DELANY

I think of myself as someone who thinks largely through writing. Thus I write more than most people, and I write in many different forms. I think of myself as the kind of person who writes, rather than as one kind of writer or another. That's about the closest I come to categorizing myself as one or another kind of artist.

INTERVIEWER

When did you decide that sex was important to your work?

DELANY

For my work? Hell, for my life! Although I didn't start taking advantage of the public sex available to gay men till I was eighteen, with a moderately successful trip to the New Amsterdam movie palace on Forty-second Street. No lightning flashed. No bells clanged. But it was useful to learn that it was available and could make me feel better about small stretches of my life.

Not a full decade on, when I was twenty-seven, Stonewall happened. Many of the political conclusions that became generalized with Stonewall—such as coming out of the closet to end the nightmare of gay blackmail—I'd arrived at in theory at eighteen or nineteen. But I didn't start acting on them until I moved to San Francisco on New Year's Eve 1968.

INTERVIEWER

You describe learning, as a young teenager, that a sexual fantasy you hadn't yet written down could be eked out for a number of days or even weeks, whereas putting it on the page—using what you call "the whole narrative excess we think of as realism"—would make it briefly far more exciting, but then leach it of all subsequent erotic charge. Do you still feel that tug between the urge to put something into language and the urge to fend off writing?

DELANY

I still feel that style is important for reading pleasure, and sex is important for pleasure in life. Each appeases a different type of desire. And while I find nothing shameful in taking direct erotic pleasure from reading or writing, I don't think they entail a necessary relation. The processes you have me describing are contingent psychological processes. Neither marks one end nor the other of any necessary or even philosophical relationship. Do I still feel the tug between the urge to put something into writing and the urge to fend it off? Less so as I get older. I shall always be able to come up with new fantasies. As long as there are people walking around in the street, as long as I have books to read and windows to look out of, I'm not going to use them up. I assume the universe will go on providing me with many more. The man I've lived quite happily with for twenty-two years provides me with much of my sexual satisfaction, physical and psychological. But, no, not all—thank Deus sive Natura, to borrow a phrase from Spinoza. Nor do I provide all his. What an unachievable responsibility!

INTERVIEWER

In your writing, you seem fascinated with cities and the contact they provide. Where does that come from?

DELANY

Doubtless from living in them. I was born in Manhattan. I grew up in Harlem, a block away from what was then the most crowded block in New York City, according to the 1950 census. Something like ten thousand people lived in one city block. Probably that means it was more crowded than Calcutta or Singapore or Yangon—places we think of as inhumanly crowded today. The city gets you used to crowds, used to people relating to one another in a certain way, like strong and weak interactions between elementary particles. The strong interactions only come into play when the particles are extremely close, less than the distance of a single atomic nucleus. Those are the interactions readers want to see in novels. At the same time, paradoxically, cities can be dreadfully isolating places. The Italian poet Leopardi wrote in a letter to his sister, Paulina, about Rome, that its spaces didn't enclose people, they fell between people and kept them apart.

INTERVIEWER

When you write about Harlem, you give it the allure and glamour of the Jazz Age but also describe how rarefied and suffocating its bourgeoisie could be.

DELANY

Wonderful as it could be, that world was proscribed in some very strict ways. I was a kid who liked art and theater and dance and music, but if you lived in Harlem, high

culture was somewhere else, and it wasn't black. When I was a child, the Metropolitan Opera had no black singers. I was twelve, when, at the start of 1955, Marian Anderson first sang the part of the sorceress Ulrica in Verdi's Un Ballo in Maschera—the first black singer to be featured in an opera at the Met, when it was down on Forty-sixth Street and Broadway.

In Harlem, though, there was jazz culture. We lived right down Seventh Avenue from Small's Paradise, which I never went to, because I was a kid, but I knew it was there. Or the Red Rooster. They were places my parents and their friends went. I knew the Lafayette Theatre had once been right across the street from where I lived, but it wasn't now. Orson Welles had directed plays at the old Lafayette. My mother told me how she'd gone there to see the black actor Canada Lee in Welles's all-black production of Macbeth, when she was a young woman. Harlemites called it Blackbeth, so that's what I grew up thinking was its actual title, till I saw some posters for it on display at the Museum of the City of New York.

My childhood was massively and miserably contradictory. I'd been singled out as a smart child almost from infancy. Back in 1947, when I was five, I'd spent six weeks with my mother at the Vassar Summer Institute for the Gifted. The institute was very near our summer home in Hopewell Junction, New York, and my father would drive out to visit us on the Vassar campus on odd weekends. My mother had a sense that I was a really bright kid, and I thrived on the institute's music, drama, and science programs.

Yet from ages eight to sixteen, I had to go twice a week to special tutors and psychologists who tried to help me with my appalling spelling and often incomprehensible writing. The psychotherapy continued till I was twenty-three. There was this bewildering contradiction between my clear intelligence and my extreme dyslexia. And nobody understood why. The fact that I was a black kid from Harlem in a private school full of white kids added its own tangle to the general confusion. In Jill Lauren's book on dyslexia and learning disabilities, Succeeding with Learning Disabilities, I'm used as a case study, along with my daughter, who's inherited it.

INTERVIEWER

You were an adult and a published writer when you first came upon the word dyslexia and realized it described some of the difficulties you experienced with writing. Did having or not having a word for it make a great difference?

DELANY

To answer that in any detail, we would have to reanimate the whole discussion over the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the notion that the lack of the word in the language means it's all but impossible to entertain the concept, while a detailed vocabulary, such as the Inuits' fifty-plus words for fifty-plus different types of snow—powdered, crusty, hard, soft, blown-into-ridges, et cetera—enables you to perform intellectual feats of winter negotiations unthinkable to temperate-climate folks like you and me.

What's wrong with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is that it fails to take into account the whole economy of discourse, which is a linguistic level that accomplishes lots of the soft-edge conceptual contouring around ideas, whether we have available a one- or two-word name for it or only a set of informal many-word descriptions that are not completely fixed. Aphra Behn clearly describes the "numb fish" and its calamitous effects on other fish, animals, and human beings, so that we all recognize it as what we call the "electric eel" today. But she did it in the mid-seventeenth century, well before anyone had thought of electricity or Franklin had sent his kite up into the lightning storm. Thus falls the Sapir-Whorf.

Discourse is a pretty forceful process, perhaps the most forceful of the superstructural processes available. It's what generates the values and suggestions around a concept, even if the concept has no name, or hasn't the name it will eventually have. It determines the way a concept is used and the ways that are considered mistaken. The following may be a bit too glib, but I think it's reasonable to say that if language is what allows us to think things, then discourse is what controls the way we think about things. And the second—discourse—has primacy.

For a couple of years in my early twenties, I was a die-hard believer in the Sapir-Whorf, though I had never encountered the term, or even read a description of it, which begins to hint at what's wrong with it as a theory. I even wrote a novel that hinged on the concept—Babel-17.

"What the language calls up in your mind can also make you think in a rich and vivid manner. How it makes you think about what it evokes, including its place in the world—that's particularly important.
And how it makes you think about it must be supported by certain discourses.
If those discursive models are rich enough, they inculcate the sophisticated idea of discourse itself that I'm striving for.
For forty years, that has been and remains my project."

Perhaps the largest problem the lack of a single term imposes is that it becomes difficult to individuate the idea. Where does it begin and where does it end in terms of what it refers to out in the real world? The more complex verbal support there is for a concept, the easier it is to critique.

If I'd had the term Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, it might have been easier for me to realize that it was just incorrect—in the same way that when, at twenty-one, I first encountered the word dyslexia, I was able to realize I wasn't the only one with these problems, that it was a condition rather than an individual and personal failure on my part, and the stories I'd read about writers such as Yeats, who didn't learn to read until he was sixteen, or Flaubert, who was so backward in his reading and writing that he was known as l'idiot de la famille, now made much more sense. The realization of the flaws in the Sapir-Whorf, in that they caused me to begin considering the more complex linguistic mechanisms of discourse, you might say gave me my lifetime project.

INTERVIEWER

How did your dyslexia manifest itself?

DELANY

I had, and have, no visual ability to remember how words are put together. I can recognize them when I see them. But unless they're in front of me, I can't recall the vowels they contain. I have no command over whether they contain single or double letters. The closest metaphor I can come up with is that it's like being able to recognize hundreds of different faces but being incapable of producing any sort of likeness of any of them with a pencil and paper. I know all the rules—"i before e, except after c, or when sounded as ay as in neighbor or weigh"—and still cannot put down the words correctly. At the same time, I read omnivorously.

When I was thirteen, I read War and Peace—the first two hundred pages over two or three days, then I stayed up for thirty-six hours straight to read the rest, with my father coming in every few hours during the night to tell me to put the light out and go to sleep. Interruptions aside, it was a wonderful experience—though I slept all Sunday. That's the point I decided novels were where it was at.

I read whatever books were lying around—Freddy the Pig and William Faulkner, Raintree County and Mandingo and Frank Yerby and Studs Lonigan and God's Little Acre and the Alexandria Quartet. I tackled Dylan Thomas and The Waste Land before I left the eighth grade and probably every popular-science book George Gamow published. My downstairs neighbor, who was a writer of young-adult novels, in a moment of who-knows-what excitement, enthused to me one afternoon about Colette's Chéri and The Last of Chéri and Chester Himes, whom he had known personally. By then, I had a library card, so I read them.

The novels that made me want to write them were Huckleberry Finn—my father read it to me one winter, a couple of chapters a night, after I was in bed, one of few truly pleasant memories I have of the man—and A High Wind in Jamaica and Great Expectations. And Pale Fire, a novel that reinspired me to want to make more such books in the world. The Song of the Lark, My Ántonia, and My Mortal Enemy, along with all of Cather's stories and nonfiction writing. La Princesse de Clèves, Madame de La Fayette's wonderful seventeenth-century psychological study on which Radiguet modeled his Count d'Orgel, or Sentimental Education, or Lost Illusions, or Mrs. Dalloway or The Waves or The Years. They are all books that have made me—and, oh yes, others—want to write still other books.

The dyslexia didn't much hamper my reading. What it affected was my writing. I couldn't spell anything! In an early short story I wrote, a woman who works in a five-and-ten at one point exclaims, "Customers! Customers! Customers!" All three were spelled differently—and all three wrong. I could not spell the word paper three times right in a row!

INTERVIEWER

But you were already serious about writing?

DELANY

I don't think I was ever any more serious about writing than I was when I was twelve and thirteen. Of course I wanted to do lots of other things besides. I wanted to be a musician—that is, I wanted to be a composer. I played the violin back then. I wrote a violin concerto, from unrequited love for a young violinist, a prodigy my age who was playing solo concerts, whom I had met at a kids' party up in Croton-on-Hudson. I choreographed dances, wrote stories, directed plays. It was all terribly serious. At seventeen, for a winter, I took ballet lessons. But, one after another, probably because I had a sense of the seriousness of each, I realized you can't do it all. Finally, writing more or less drifted to the top.

I had already tried to write a novel, something called Lost Stars. It was about a very lonely young man named Erik Torrent who wandered around the city, looking at things. I started it when I was thirteen and finished it when I was fourteen. It had about everything wrong with it such a narrative could have. People were very nice about not telling me that. I suspect they were just impressed I'd filled out that many pages with words.

INTERVIEWER

In my opinion, Asimov's Foundation trilogy seems to have had a much wider and more transformative influence than has generally been acknowledged. That's something else you read when you were thirteen. How did it affect you?

DELANY

Well, certainly that's an opinion we share. The first volume—with malice aforethought on Ike's part, I'm sure: the SF club he belonged to when he was seventeen, the Futurians, was a hotbed of hyperintelligent teenage Trotskyites—taught me what historical materialism was. By the end of the third volume, I had a pretty dramatic picture of what's wrong with historical determinism, so that when I encountered Popper's The Poverty of Historicism, say, I'd seen the whole thing on the big screen, as it were, in full color and with stereophonic sound. Why do you think nobody's ever made a film out of it? It would make Marxists—or, at any rate small-m marxists—of every bright thirteen-year-old in the country. Personally, I think that's preferable to the demagoguery of Ayn Rand.

INTERVIEWER

When you write about high school at Bronx Science, it almost comes wrapped in gold. The image you give of Dalton is very different from this cornucopia of creativity in the West Bronx.

DELANY

Whatever its problems—and certainly it had them—Dalton was an excellent school, as was the Bronx High School of Science. But one was a small, private institution of no more than 350 students, while the other was a sprawling city public school, spread out between two buildings and catering to several thousand. I remember thinking, You haven't really learned one thing at Science that you didn't already learn back at Dalton. Science was an excellent school, but, with few exceptions, what they were doing in effect was going over all the stuff I'd already been exposed to.

One exception was music. Science had a wonderful music-appreciation course, in which I learned all about the Second Viennese School. It changed my life. We listened to a part of Berg's opera Wozzeck and, after we listened to Webern's Passacaglia, heard the story of his death, how Webern had been shot by an American soldier when he went out on his front steps for a cigarette after curfew. Webern and Berg have been among my favorite composers ever since. A lot of the students, when our music teacher played the last three scenes of Wozzeck, began to snicker and asked, "What is that? That's just noise! What kind of music is that?" But I was knocked out by its expressivity. All I could think was, Wow! Our music teacher explained the twelve-tone system to us, and I went home and started composing a twelve-tone piece that afternoon.

INTERVIEWER

Did college not excite you in the same way? Why did you drop out?

DELANY

I wasn't smart enough. By that I mean I lacked a particular kind of organizational discipline or intelligence. I had the reading under my belt. I had the analytical chops. I was a magpie for picking up facts and dates. But to do well at college—there's no way around it—you have to be able to organize your time, which I could not do to save myself. I'd get started on one thing, and twenty minutes later I'd be off on another, in the midst of which I'd pick up some book on calculus or archaeology or Galois theory and read the odd hundred pages about that. I was intellectually all over the place. I was writing music, directing plays, acting in them, singing in folk groups, choreographing dances, and if I had a paper due next week, there was at most a

one-out-of-five chance I would finish it—some of which, yes, was the bad side of Dalton, because they'd been fairly accepting of that sort of thing and had often been willing to cut me some slack. But I didn't have the discipline. Still, not once did I ever think, Hey, I'm superior to all of this! I never thought, I know more than these people. When I flunked out, I flunked out miserably, spectacularly, and I was mortified. I thought, The truth is out, I'm an idiot. Now everyone knows.

It took me a while to realize that if a teacher had taken me aside and said, "Come on, Chip, sit down, let's talk, this is how you have to do this," probably I would have learned how to negotiate it. But nobody did.

INTERVIEWER

What would they have said?

DELANY

Well, when I started as a comparative-literature professor at the University of Massachusetts, I wrote an essay explaining how you do it—"How to Do Well in This Class"—and I still give it out to students who are having problems of that sort. Basically it's about what's gained by living your life in end-stopped time units, both for work and for play. Some of the students I've given it to have found it helpful. I wish I'd had it when I entered college.

INTERVIEWER

You have suggested that the writers who influence us "are not usually the ones we read thoroughly and confront with our complete attention, but rather the ill- and partially read writers we start on, often in troubled awe, only to close the book after pages or chapters, when our own imagination works up beyond the point where we can continue to submit our fancies to theirs." What were some of your "ill-read" books?

DELANY

Proust—until I finally got around to reading most of it in my midtwenties. The Recognitions for the first thirty-some years of my life—I had my first copy at fifteen—until, in '75, I got snowed in at a Buffalo motel and, over a couple days, lay on the bed and read the whole thing. Early stabs at getting through Nightwood. Moby-Dick, once I realized it was, intentionally on Melville's part, a gay novel and that at the end of Father Mapple's sermon Melville swears to the reader to tell us the absolute truth about the relation between male sailors—and does. Sons and Lovers, The Rainbow, and Women in Love—until I sat down and read them through in preparation for a class I taught on them at the University of Massachusetts—along with Lawrence's great story "Odour of Chrysanthemums."

Any book you have to work yourself up to read. Pater's Marius the Epicurean, His Sensations and Ideas, which I've now read four or five times and taught twice, and Plato and Platonism, which I also teach. It took me two years to get into the first. I devoured the second over two evenings. When such books influence you, if that's the proper word for what I'm describing, it's what you imagine they do that they don't do that you yourself then try to effect in your own work—that, to me, is what's important. What these books actually accomplish is very important, of course! But the whole set of things they might have accomplished expands your own palette of aesthetic possibilities in the ways that, should you undertake them, will be your offering on the altar of originality.

Before I read Robert E. Howard's Conan the Conqueror books and stories, I really thought they would be the Nevèrÿon tales, or at least something like them. But I discovered that, rich and colorful as they were, they weren't. So I had to write them myself.

INTERVIEWER

You open Atlantis: Three Tales with a very rich story about your father as a young man.

DELANY

When I was seventeen or eighteen, before I'd gotten married, my dad had told me that the main reason he had come to New York from Raleigh was to see the skyscrapers. He hadn't turned eighteen yet. It was just after Thanksgiving 1923. His older brother Hubert met him at Grand Central Terminal. They didn't even come out of the station. They went immediately into the subway and got out at 125th and Eighth Avenue. My father looked around, but there were only two-story buildings. He was very disappointed, because he'd expected New York to be all skyscrapers. He said to Uncle Hubert, "Shoot, this ain't no different from Raleigh. And there, at least, we got a building six stories high what got an elevator." And Uncle Hubert, who was a twenty-three-year-old law student at NYU at the time, turned to him and said, "You are a real country nigger, ain't you?"

When my father told me this, it was just a funny story. But he was so disappointed at not seeing the skyscrapers right away, I decided, thirty-five years after his death, to include the anecdote in "Atlantis: Model 1924." Family stories provided most of the proairetic material for the tale.

Because Dad wanted to see the skyscrapers, someone told him he should walk across the Brooklyn Bridge. Back then, of course, Brooklyn was nowhere near as built-up as it is today, and as he got to the other side, he saw a big cornfield—where Borough Hall is now—an immense cornfield stretching off into the distance. His first thought was, They told me Brooklyn was supposed to be part of New York City. But coming off the bridge here is like walking right back into North Carolina!

In 1993, when Dad was dead and I started to write my story, I realized that was the same time—year and season—that Hart Crane had moved into his new home at 110 Columbia Heights, in Brooklyn. The first thing Crane did was start writing the poem "Atlantis," which became the final section of his poetic sequence The Bridge. There's a reference in it to corn and another to fields. It struck me, That's got to be the same cornfield my dad saw. It's got to be!

When Crane looked from his window, he must have seen the same corn my dad saw when he crossed the bridge. So that's what gave me the idea—and the title. Why, I thought, don't I write a story about the two of them meeting each other on the bridge?

INTERVIEWER

You wrote the novella "Atlantis: Model 1924" and your essay on Hart Crane at the same time?

DELANY

I wrote the novella first, then the essay. One led directly into the other. That's because I had all this extra information—specifically textual—that didn't go directly into the story, and I thought, I've got to do something with it, since I read all those books.

Even before the autobiographical impulse, what started "Atlantis" is the idea that the paradigmatic works of our time were The Waste Land, The Cantos, and Ulysses. A vast intellectual armamentarium is presumed to stand behind each one, an armamentarium of cultural references and literary allusions. They're drenched in intertextual references, to the point where you wonder, Could a writer do all the things that Joyce and Pound and Eliot are presumed to have done in these works? Is this really possible, or is this all critical hype? So I thought, Well, let me try it on my own.

I went and got as many books on Hart Crane as I could. I invaded the library at UMass, where I was teaching. I wrote down hundreds of phrases I wanted to work into the story. There are so many references to other texts, I can't remember them all! In my story, Crane cries, "Any dull seamy era can throw up an Atlantis." Well, "any dull seamy era" is an anagram for Samuel Ray Delany—and, yes, the other thing I had in mind was "Vivian Darkbloom," Quilty's biographer in Lolita and an anagram for Vladimir Nabokov. Nabat and Kalit and the lines just before them are the code words and phrases the terrorists use to gain admittance in Oscar Wilde's early play Vera, or the Nihilists. The tale is filled with references to all sorts of obscurities, most of them things Crane might have known. The subway signs on the subway cars, for Naugahyde and Sloan's Liniment? Well, when Crane worked for Sweet's Catalogue Service, those were among the accounts he had to write. The subway car Sam and Hubert ride uptown in is, in effect, Crane's own world … except for the Coca-Cola sign.

INTERVIEWER

Now, you've said you don't do research—

DELANY

"Atlantis: Model 1924" is the exception. There I read the weather reports for every day the story covers and reflected it in the narrative. That year saw a blizzard on my birthday, which is in the story. I got hold of astrological ephemerides for the time and read them. The references in the tale to the transit of Mercury and those other astrological occurrences are accurate. I looked at street maps. I knew the nights when the moon was full and when it was crescent. That tale contains as much research as I could get into it.

INTERVIEWER

Was it fun to write?

DELANY

No, not at all. It was a game but it was tiring. And I was aware that it wasn't reaching after any end. But at least now, when somebody asks, "I wonder if Joyce could have done all the things he's supposed to have done in Ulysses," I can answer, "Yes, he could have. I know, because I tried it myself. It's possible."

The next question is, of course, Why would he have done it? These are very conservative, backward-looking literary experiments, you see. They are experiments that start with a hypothesis, and the text is used as a way of working out a task, to see what the result is. Other than trying to weave the work, in a practically magical way, into the rest of the culture, I don't know why. The only reason I can think of is because he wanted to see if he could.

INTERVIEWER

You describe a moment of transition, around the age of twenty, between conceiving of writing as the transcription of a sort of mental movie to becoming a writer who felt the presence of blocks of language, so that you were no longer just describing images and ideas but creating a string of sentences and paragraphs with verbal particularity and rhythm and so forth. Has that transition continued?

DELANY

Arrogant and self-flattering as it is, today I really like Lessing's description of genius from his wonderfully suggestive Laocoön—the ability to put all your talent into the service of a single idea. That's usually what I'm trying for these days, rather than just describing a movie in the mind—though I still lean a good deal on diegesis, that movie in the mind.

To assume that "putting all your talent into the service of a single idea" necessarily involves something fundamentally different from concentrating on the precision, energy, and ekphrastic force of the single sentence is to commit one of those logical slips Orwell described so well in his essay "Politics and the English Language," the one he calls "operators" or "verbal false limbs," assuming there are differences and oppositions where there are really developments and continuities. It's just a way of starting to talk about the larger project, the bigger picture—and critics are always slipping into the false notion that there's a conflict between the bigger picture and the details that compose it, when there isn't. That's one of the ways they mystify the artistic process. Sometimes these are honest mistakes. More often, however, they are symptoms of lazy reading and lack of thought about what the writer is actually saying.

INTERVIEWER

You—and, indeed, several other SF writers—have called Bester's 1956 novel, Tiger! Tiger!, the greatest science-fiction novel from that period. What so excites you about Bester?

DELANY

I picked up Tiger! first when I was fourteen or fifteen, in its Galaxy serial publication, and thought it was the greatest thing I'd ever read. Tiger! Tiger! is an extraordinarily colorful and inventive novel. One whole chapter utilizes bizarre typography that sprawls all over the pages. In the climactic chapter, the hero is in the basement of a burning cathedral—St. Patrick's, in New York—that's collapsing all around him, and the man experiences this through synesthesia, where he hears smells and sees sounds and tastes what things feel like. It's Bester's version of the end of Gaddis's Recognitions. Besides the nods to Gaddis—he was Bester's Greenwich Village neighbor and published The Recognitions the year before Tiger!—and Joyce, it's also very much an homage to Rimbaud's "dérèglement de tous les sens."

Later on, when I was about twenty-four, I read Bester's book again and realized, while it was very good, it wasn't the greatest thing I'd ever read. But because of its overall color and energy, Tiger! Tiger! projects a sense that, just over the novel's horizon, someone is thinking seriously about important modernist questions. What is the relation of the ordinary working man to the privileged man at the pinnacle of culture? What causes modern warfare today? What is the relationship between economics and war? Bester was very definitely a leftist writer, with a sense that economics was behind all wars. For him, wars were the playing out of economic-cum-industrial conflicts. Still later I found out that Bester himself had been reading and rereading Ulysses for a year and discussing it weekly with two close friends. You could easily say that Tiger! Tiger! was his attempt at a book for bright fourteen- to seventeen-year-olds, with some of Ulysses's textual playfulness. I wanted to see whether I could write something that would be as interesting for a twenty-five-year-old as this had been for me at fifteen. I'll never know whether I succeeded.

INTERVIEWER

In Nova, your reimagining of Tiger! Tiger!, Prince Red and Ruby Red have an almost incestuous relationship.

DELANY

Yes, they do. You have to remember the book was written before '68, the moment when innuendo ceased to be a legally necessary literary technique.

INTERVIEWER

Did you intentionally want to make something the reader could only speculate about, rather than be certain of?

DELANY

Certainly as far as the incest goes. Suggestion is a literary strategy. But when, in 1968, works like Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer and Black Spring and Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover were legal to publish and sell in this country, the age of innuendo and the coyly placed line of white space, as the hero envelops the heroine in his arms, ended. Fifteen years later, aids rendered them permanently obsolete.

Today, I watch seminar rooms full of graduate students misread both Bester and Conrad, because they no longer have to wonder about the possibility of such illegal elements occurring in the story and the compensating possibility of suggestion as a writerly strategy for representing both sex and violence. In Tiger! Tiger! the demonic antihero, Gully Foyle, invades Robin's exploded apartment and stalks across her living room to where she cowers away from him on the couch. There is a line of white space…

At fifteen I knew perfectly well Gully went on to rape her. Many of my students, however, miss it. As readers who've learned to read with texts written largely after 1968, they're unfamiliar with that order of narrative suggestion. Writers aren't constrained by law to use it today and many young readers, under thirty-five, have forgotten how to read it.

My students reach the climax of Heart of Darkness, when the pilgrims stand at the steamer's rail, firing their rifles at the natives on the shore, fifteen or twenty feet away, "for some sport," while an appalled Marlow blows the boat's horn to frighten the Africans off. Some of the natives throw themselves on the ground, but among them stands Kurtz's black mistress, her arms raised toward the boat that carries Kurtz away. From his bed in the wheelhouse, sickly Kurtz watches through the window—which Conrad has made clear has been left open. At the boat rail, the white men go on firing, and with a line of white space, the scene ends…

Year after year, more than half my students fail to realize that the white men have just killed the black woman an Kurtz has been sleeping with for several years. Or that Kurtz, too weak to intervene, has had to lie there and watch them do it.

When you ask, later, the significance of Kurtz's final words, as he looks out through this same window, "The horror! The horror!," it never occurs to them that it might refer to the fact that he has watched his fellow Europeans murder in cold blood the woman he has lived with. Suggestion for them is not an option. Earlier generations of readers, however, did not have these interpretive problems. "If he raped her, why didn't the writer say so?" "If they shot her, why didn't Conrad show her fall dead?" my graduate students ask. It makes me wonder what other techniques for conveying the unspoken and the unspeakable we have forgotten how to read over four or five thousand years of "literacy."

Another canonical work that lists toward the incomprehensible for the modern reader under the weight of modernist criticism is Kafka's The Metamorphosis.

INTERVIEWER

How do you mean?

DELANY

I've read interpretations that see the tale as Kafka's prediction of World War I or II, and it has to stand up

beneath interpretative phrases like "that great portrait of the sickness that was Europe." I've even heard one academic give a rather involuted explanation about how the story depicts the encounter of a family with the inexplicable. Well, that's true, in the sense that a heart attack, a stroke, a crippling accident is, itself, inexplicable. But that sort of occurrence—schizophrenia or some mentally or physically crippling disease—is still the tenor of Kafka's metaphor.

Whatever you say about the story's all but infinite higher meanings, just at the level of plot, The Metamorphosis is an allegorical tale about a family, one of whose members, presumably the one who's responsible for bringing in most of the money, is suddenly stricken by a catastrophe, a debilitating disease that—overnight—renders him homebound and largely unrecognizable as the person he once was and tells what the experience might be from the point of view of the person to whom it happens.

This was a fairly common experience for families before World War II, and it still is. Kafka himself was such a person. His tuberculosis rendered him such a person in his own family, and it struck me as a chillingly accurate picture of the whole process of the transformation that occurred when my own mother was felled with a major stroke that, in an instant, rendered her wheelchair-bound, paralyzed on one side, and without language for the last eight years of her life.

The way the remaining family both recognizes and does not recognize the new and wholly dependent creature as the person he or she once was, and the way the invalid has to be treated—physically and emotionally—as a kind of insect … well, it's a hugely cruel story, even as it details how love for the person metamorphoses, under pressure of the transformative situation, into annoyance and a feeling of entrapment. The title refers to the family's transformation as much as it does to Gregor's. When the invalid finally dies—as my mother did, almost a decade on—Kafka explains how at last there is a feeling of freedom and even rebirth.

When we were coming back from the cemetery after my mother's funeral, my sister, who truly loved my mother—as, indeed, did I—said to me, "Chip, that is the end of eight awful, awful years," and a breeze blew momentarily through the trees. I had to answer, "Yes, it is." And I remembered Gregor's sister, in the last sentences of Kafka's tale. It's a portrait of the human processes which constitute that awfulness.

I'd never argue that the historical resonances that so many analysts see in the tale are not there, but I point out that what I have described as the events of the story and their general significance is how those historical suggestions manifest themselves. How we treat our invalids—our mad, our physically or mentally compromised family members—does tell you something about who we are politically, historically, culturally. But until we can respond to the story as an allegory on that level, those historical suggestions are just not anchored. The commonplace reading, under the supernatural event Kafka has given us, is what keeps the meaning-generating mechanism of the tale functioning.

INTERVIEWER

Like Birth of a Nation, Dhalgren tells the story of a black man who is believed to be a sexual predator and whose act of transgression becomes a fixture in the public conversation. Why were you interested in unpacking that particular story?

DELANY

What can I tell you? Many black writers, from Richard Wright in Native Son, to Chester Himes in his novella A Case of Rape, have tried their hand at it. The fact is, it is a many-layered process. I wanted to give the several participants, the white woman and the black man, the opportunity to speak where desire can freely articulate itself, without the judicial pressure of capture or incarceration.

INTERVIEWER

Forty years ago, when you were traveling on the West Coast, you lost a notebook with some forty-two pages of a late draft of Dhalgren. What was it like to reconstruct the novel? Did the story change as a result?

DELANY

No. I plan things out pretty meticulously. It was simply three weeks of hard, boring work, re-creating the lost pages. If the National eighty-page spiral notebook had ever turned up in the back balcony of the Empire theater on Market Street in San Francisco, where inadvertently I'd left it, many of the paragraphs would be, I suspect, all but word-for-word identical with the reconstructed version now in the book.

INTERVIEWER

What led you to write Times Square Red, Times Square Blue?

DELANY

I had written an academic essay called "Street Talk/Straight Talk," and an editor at Out Magazine asked whether I would like to pursue the topic for general readers. I wrote them a not terribly specific profile piece that described the corner of Eighth Avenue and Forty-second Street, just before they started tearing things down. But the editor, as I recounted in a preface to the book, said, "You've mentioned the theaters. Let me see what goes on in them." I asked, "Are you sure you want me to do that?" and she answered, "Yes," so I said, "All right." I tried for a representative range because I had thirty years of visits to tap. The second essay, "Times Square Red," is the theoretical underside that supports the general observations in the first half, "Times Square Blue."

INTERVIEWER

In your 2007 novel, Dark Reflections, the protagonist is haunted by embarrassment over a gay pornographic novel he once wrote.

DELANY

Yes. As was common in the 1960s, a friend of the main character, Arnold, gets a contract for a porn novel, which he actually hires Arnold to write. During the sixties, pornographic publishers often turned to young poets and writers who were not making any money to speak of and got them to write sex novels. Some of the results were quite astonishing. David Meltzer, Diane di Prima, Gregory Corso, Michael Perkins, Marco Vassi, and Alexander Trocchi are some of the ones who did. Others, like Arnold's, were done anonymously.

INTERVIEWER

A number of critics have called the work autobiographical.

DELANY

Oh, the differences between me and Arnold Hawley could fill a book! In fact, they already have filled a book—The Mad Man—and a book three times the length of Dark Reflections.

Arnold Hawley is married for not quite twenty-four hours before that relationship falls catastrophically to pieces. For the rest of his life, he lives alone. Since I was a teenager I've always been partnered with someone. Maybe four years in my life—from '75 to '79, when I was taking care of my daughter—I lived as a single man. But Dennis and I have been together for twenty-one, going on twenty-two, years. I've seen him through a serious drinking problem and his recent half-dozen years of sobriety. He's seen me through prostate cancer and a few other medical emergencies. I've always lived in open relationships and generally had lots of sex. I've been quite lucky, with some small public reputation.

Arnold is an adjunct university instructor and a poet. I've been a full professor since I started full-time university teaching in '88, and I'm a prose writer. Really, my life has been the opposite of Arnold's. Certainly when I conceived Arnold's story, I wanted to write about somebody who was as close to my opposite as possible. The only way I could have made him any more different from me was to make him white—and perhaps a woman. But I really wanted to write about another black gay male writer, a different black gay male writer from myself.

INTERVIEWER

In some of your real autobiographical writings, you've taken care not to name or identify others who appear in the text.

DELANY

Back in the mid-sixties, I lived for six months in a Lower East Side commune, called Heavenly Breakfast, named after a rock group I was part of, that lived and rehearsed there. I kept a journal at the time, and a few years later, after he'd accepted a short story of mine, Theodore Solotaroff, the editor of The New American Review, suggested I next write a nonfiction article for him about commune life. I broke out my old notebooks, and soon I had a ninety-five-page article on life in and around Heavenly Breakfast. It took about a year to assemble, but by the time I'd finished, New American Review had gone under. There was no chance of its appearing there. I didn't

show it to anyone for a couple of years after that. When I did, I had moved back to New York City. More on a lark than anything else, I showed it to my editor at Bantam Books, at that time a young woman named Karen. I was surprised when she announced that she'd fallen in love with it and wanted to publish it.

Much of Heavenly Breakfast deals with the day-to-day minutiae of minor drug sales. As much or more deals with sex, much of it polymorphous. Since much of that was illegal, as a matter of course I changed the names. Besides, as I made clear in the introduction, I had not kept characters strictly apart. There'd been a fair amount of fictive mixing and amalgamating.

I was a little surprised, then, when I ran into a woman who had been a character in the narrative and who, as we stood on the corner of Sixth Street, somewhere in Alphabet City, told me how much she'd enjoyed the book. Then, after a moment's pensive silence, she added, "I wished you'd used my real name. That way I could prove to some of the people I know now that we really did things like that."

Not long after that, I ran into Eeyore, called Grendel in the first edition. He was still selling pot off this bench or that in Tompkins Square Park. "Hey, man—that was a really cool book you wrote."

"You read it?" I asked.

"Yeah, sure. But how come you called me Grendel? Nobody believes it was me." He, too, grew pensive. "You know, I ain't done a lot to be famous for. About the only thing anybody could know about me who ain't one of my customers is being in your book. It would be nice if I could point to that and say, Hey, that's me. People who read it would see my name and know." So when I next got the chance to change it, I did.

INTERVIEWER

Do you revise every day?

DELANY

Pretty much so, except the days or the hours I devote to writing a first draft. Eighty-five to ninety-five percent of my work is rewriting and revision. Probably that started as a strategy to deal with the wages of dyslexia. Now it's habit, but it was a fortunate habit to acquire.

INTERVIEWER

Is it a difficult regimen?

DELANY

Finding time to work is the main problem. That's why I want to retire—so I can really get to work. One of my favorite quotes is from Goethe—"As soon as a man does something admirable, the entire universe conspires to see that he never does it again." This is frighteningly true. You write a decent book, and you're hired as a creative-writing teacher. The next thing you know you're director of the program, which basically means you get less time in class and more administration, which nobody likes, so that you can hardly write anything anymore.

INTERVIEWER

Your teaching gets in the way of your writing?

DELANY

It doesn't completely halt it, but it slows it way down!

INTERVIEWER

Is the teaching worth it?

DELANY

No. It's not.

INTERVIEWER

Why not?

DELANY

I'm not that good a teacher. I'm decent, maybe even better than average, but I believe I'm an even better writer. The trade-off between doing a job that you only do moderately well for one that you do very well can't be justified simply because the former pays the bills. When I was thirty-five or forty, I envisioned myself doing a kind of ideal version of the teaching that a Lacan or, yes, a Foucault did in their French seminars. That was before I had a steady position as a professor at UMass. I was going from research institute to research institute. Here, I was senior fellow at the Center for 20th Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin, then I was a senior fellow at the Society for the Humanities at Cornell's Andrew Dickson White House, then I was a guest at the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan, next, the Institute for the Humanities at the University of Michigan. The pay was usually munificent.

And I'd think, This is going to be it! They'll give me a lecture hall and some graduate students and turn me loose. I'll be able to do some real thinking and some significant teaching for them. Then I'd get there and discover that maybe three people had read any of my scholarly nonfiction, and while they had talked it up a great deal to the others on the faculty, what the school wanted me to do was take a class of freshmen and sophomores and introduce them to American science fiction—which, of course, was Asimov and Heinlein and Bradbury and maybe Pohl and Kornbluth's The Space Merchants. "You're teaching that, aren't you? We had a graduate student here nine years ago who begged us to let him teach a class in science fiction, and when we finally did, that's what he taught. So I guess that's an important book, right?"

They were sure that's what it was all about, because fifteen or twenty years ago perhaps they'd actually read some. Their views of SF basically came from some monumentally uninformed articles on the genre that would appear every ten years in Harper's or even, slightly less so, The New Yorker.

Or they'd want a creative-writing course for undergraduates. Most were surprised—and, I could tell, resentful—when I'd explain, "These are all moderately interesting, middlebrow texts. I have nothing against any of them, not to mention Philip Dick, another entirely middlebrow writer. But none is rich enough to support the kind of reading I want to do with my class." A few times I got to sit down and argue my way through to something a little more interesting. Repeatedly I got Sturgeon and Bester, Zelazny, Russ, and Disch on my reading lists—and not just single stories by them, but two and three books by each. Eventually, though, I learned that the kind of teaching I wanted to do just wasn't supported in this country. Even in France, Foucault complained repeatedly that there was never really time for post-lecture discussion.

Once I was invited to give a lecture at MIT. David Halperin invited me, and I warned him it would be a three-hour talk, with only a ten-minute break in the middle. He must have thought I was crazy. Still, he said yes. I delivered it to a jam-packed lecture hall, with students sitting up and down the aisles. It went over very well. From the student response afterward, I got a sense it was the kind of thing they were hungry for.

But I'm seventy, now, not fifty, and arthritis prevents me from standing for more than twenty minutes at a go. Were I offered that sort of lecture venue today, I'd have to turn it down. Even my public readings at universities these days have to be done seated. But that was back when I was thinking seriously about teaching.

My book The American Shore, an analysis of Thomas Disch's brilliant and exemplary short SF story "Angouleme," was an attempt to provide something I felt could stand up to the new approaches to reading that were burgeoning all around me back then. In at least three classes, Shore provided me with my own theoretical textbook, before I made the transition, in '88, to professor of comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Shore and About Writing are my two stabs at creating textbooks for my own students.

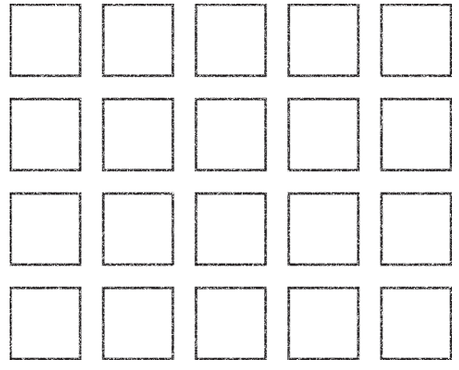
INTERVIEWER

At Temple University, where you currently teach, you place a lot of importance on the individual sentence.

DELANY

Yes. It goes back to the notion that what happens in the mind of the reader when the reader moves his or her eye from word to word on the page—that's what a story actually is. What the language calls up in your mind can also make you think in a rich and vivid manner. How it makes you think about what it evokes, including its place in the world—that's particularly important. And how it makes you think about it must be supported by certain discourses. If those discursive models are rich enough, they inculcate the sophisticated idea of discourse itself that I'm striving for. For forty years, that has been and remains my project. Frequently, those discursive models are in conflict with simpler discourses. When that happens, for some people it will be as interesting and as exciting as a good chess

game. Others will not pay that much attention to the discursive conflicts. For them it's not so interesting. But, as I did, listening to the students after my MIT lecture and reading what some of them went on to write me about the experience, I have the impression that a certain number were hungry for the kind of experience they had there and took from it something I can recognize as what I'd wanted to give. It's not a message, but an experience of seeing the world and the topics it comprises at a certain level of complexity, of potentiality, of relationship—a complexity and relationship that intricately entails, even as it empowers, the pursuit of beauty and joy.



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