

Interregnum: Twenty-first Week's Summary

And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Isaiah, 11:1

Dr. Guerney's dramatic courtroom demonstration notwithstanding, Judge Helm (citing the State's regularity in executing the mentally retarded) ruled that my brainlessness was not a sufficient deterrent to legal culpability, and thus found me guilty of certain misdemeanor charges. I forget which ones exactly, perhaps assaulting a known Republican. Thus, Dick Flamm, through no fault or virtue of his own, had his remarkable courtroom losing streak extended, a circumstance which seemed to disturb him not one wit. The sentence was no sooner pronounced, when he turned his back on me for the last time and walked out of my life forever, without so much as a handshake or a faretheewell. He seemed, as always, preoccupied. Nevertheless, Mr. Flamm did, perhaps inadvertently, gift me something precious, in so far as he left a tattered paperback behind, which, as it turns out, I find at least metaphorically, if not materially, liberating. Metaphors, I guess, will have to suffice for me now, since my conviction seems to assure that any material liberation must be, at best, postponed. I was saved, however, from time-served in the county chokey, oddly enough, by my own appeal and some fancy shoe leather. I told the Judge that 30 days served could spell doom to Diva and John Wayne.

"John Wayne?" he asked, his large hairy ears perking up at the mentioned of the icon's name.

"Yes, Your Honor, the dog whose torment prompted my behavior."

The Judge deepened the furrows of this liver-spotted forehead and gazed over the tops of his half-frame bifocals, suspecting, I suspect, another indecency from me. "Says, here in the report, Son, that the critter fled the scene of the crime."

"Yes, Your Honor," I assented, "but he returned 40 days later, and I took him in."

"Forty, huh?"

"Yes, Your Honor, forty. John Wayne is a most agreeable companion. A Rotty, Your Honor, a hundred and sixty pounds, and all of it heart. I may deserve my punishment, but John Wayne certainly does not."

The Right (far Right) Honorable Helm softened a bit at this report — a dog lover — who would have thunk it? "Got a Rotty my own sef, Son," he said, and them critters is finer than frog's hair. Well now, here's watumunna do. I b'leve justice can be served in this particular case by a couple hundurt hours of community service." He imparted this good news with a brief lecture regarding the virtues of meat eating, his exhortations garnished with a peppering of neoconservitive political/religious ideology. "You need to beef up

there, boy, and take some responsibility for your wishy-washy lib'ral tendencies. Stand up straight and eat a good All-American hamburger now and agin. I foresee that a few weeks removin' trash from the county highways will do both you and the motorists of this fair Republic a passel a good."

"Yes, your Honor, and thank you for your consideration of John Wayne."

My thanks were sincere, and I guess my demeanor and tone of voice showed it. I was genuinely obliged to be spared the horrors of incarceration, and very, very relieved to know that I would still be able to care for my companions — or should I say "my saviors". The Judge responded to my gratitude with a rough concern couched in an odd compliment and a predictable exhortation. "Well, Son, you wear purty shoes, anywho. Court Reporter, don't this boy wear purty shoes?"

"Yessum, Your Honor," the Court Reporter beamed, I thought, obsequiously.

"And Son, spend some time with the Bible. Court Reporter, don't you think the defendant should be spending some good time with the Good Book."

"Yessum, Your Honor."

The Court Reporter blinked up at the dais in a way that I thought might presage ascent. Were these two openly flirting? 'Too many witnesses here,' I was thinking, 'get a room.' But my shoes, which apparently had served better than my lawyer or my doctor in procuring for me the Court's sympathy, seemed to whisper, somewhat sentimentally: "*Amore è cieco.*"

"Did you say something, Son?" The judge tore his eyes away from those of the fawning Court Reporter.

"Only that 'I am grateful,' Your Honor."

"As well, you should be, son." I actually think Judge Helm's eyes were a little misty — and I know the Court Reporter's were — when he wrapped his gavel and dismissed me from the presence. A murmur of approbation ruffled through the Courtroom, but there was no overt cheering. Yay.

And thus began my new passively acquired career as a civil servant. I suppose, given my general reclusiveness, that Uni (remember her?) had no other recourse but to resort to judicial fiat, if she were resolved to hatch me from the cocoon of my self-imposed house arrest, and once more launch me — fluttering, unfinished and unfledged — into her inhospitable world.

The next few days found me inside the body of the city, scrounging along the veins and arteries of its circulatory system, the highways which pumped the monster's essential nutrients from its manufacturing to its consuming nodes, the removal of the great

tuberosity's detritus being my assigned community service. And what was this plaque conglomerating along the metropol's concrete and asphalt surfaces, and who were these fellow phagocytes condemned to terms of scavenging? I have to answer those two questions through the haze of fever and sickness, for although the Houston March weather was generally fine — breezy, humid mid-sixties — I had caught a cold, and was forced to conduct my duties as a trash picker while swimming through the mucousy stupor of an upper respiratory catarrh. The discharge of by debt to society was taken rather literally by my assaulted immune system, for while I scrounged the roadways for society's discards, I dripped and snotted and spit some considerable portion of my own effluent along the weedy shoulders of the roads. This most revolting development, was, however, redeemed by my meetings, to filch a Gurdjieffian phrase, with remarkable men. Meetings? Well, perhaps reunions would be a better word.

Envelopes (window and security), sex magazines, telephone books, bills, advertisements, playing and trading cards (even Tarot), lots of those little wrappers for individual cigars, napkins (food and sanitary), condoms (used, new, ribbed, lubricated), KY tubes, diapers, newspapers — some from out of state, fast food Styrofoam containers confining maggoty burgers, jellified chicken flesh, pizza — crusts hairy with green mold — coffee cups, donuts, potato and corn chips (bagged and un), loose cheetos, aluminum cans, (beer and soda), plastic bags (make nice hats for screaming babies), hypodermics, juice boxes, soda straws, brushes and combs, make-up paraphernalia (lipstick cylinders, mascara sticks, blush brushes, compacts with cracked mirrors) shell casings (all calibers), knives, butts (cigar, cigarette, cigarillos), clothing (panties, bras, t-shirts, thongs, lots of single shoes), pop tops, bottles (plastic and glass), oodles of those little shotsized individual servings of Scotch, vodka or gin, appliances (large and small), bleeding paint cans, splintered pulverized freeway furniture, mattresses (stuffing, springs, frames), garden and carpentry tools, car parts, tires, pitiful dead animals, entire wigs of human hair. “All y'all 'foos' don't get it YO i am a 18 yearol girl. k? my boyfren call me boo bitch what chu lookin' at white dick hll merk yo ass y'hehmewhatimsayinmothafucka y'all peeps don't get this man forget all the peeps who be thinkin'this is nothin cause it style and its jiggy.” I stared slack jawed at these pronouncements as uncomprehending as a stone. “Yo think i be doin' ganstas for bling bling mofukr yo.” I thought nothing of the sort. Here was wisdom, perhaps, but as usual it was revealed to me in a language that I could not decipher. I stumbled around in my orange dayglow apron, teenage truants sliming me with incomprehensible scorn, doing my staggering best to scarf up all this human waste. Green and silver secretions threaded from my mostly occluded head holes, drifting away like bovine spittle on the humid petro-fumed winds. A sloppy-fat (not Phat, y'allhehmewhatlmsayin?) racist, overseer — too slovenly and undisciplined to qualify as a genuine fascist, hocked hunks of green venom in the spittoon of my open wounds. “Yo'get your skinny damned ass in gear, boy, this ain't no vacation cakewalk.” God it was awful. Should I have opted for jail?

But on the third day, there appeared on the blurred horizon of my servitude, a most unusual personage — one, as it turned out — that I recognized, his appearance bringing my mouth into a perfect O of astonishment. The oroborus, long dangling in discontinuity, curled round and closed the ring of head and tail. I was laboring up the

steep bank of a freeway overpass (the only hills extant in Houston), and there discovered a pasteboard box, containing something wrapped in the front page of the *New York Times* from, curiously enough, that very day's date: March 18, 2001. When I unfolded — for what reason I cannot say — the paper, I was shoved suddenly gaze to gaze with the still supple remains of a black cat. As the poor thing looked so much like my wonderful Diva, I was instantly shocked out of my snot-torpor, lost my footing in the gravelly weeds, and rolled down ass over hardhat toward the ruthlessly traveled portion of the highway. I might have wound up as another piece of roadkill, had not my progress been halted by the frail pillar of a person who was not part of the clean-up crew, but who seemed to be out collecting trash too, for reasons, as I was soon to discover, very different from those of us P-farm reprobates. When I looked up, I blinked as if trying to awaken from a paralyzing dream. Above me stood a small, flaggy-bearded man of indeterminate age. He was looking down at me out of the waning backlight of the whitish brown Houston skies, his hands the color of potato skins, open in an entreating manner, scarred on the palms, as if awaiting the answer to a question that he had posed months before. I could not speak. My mind, and maybe my body too, went racing down the wormhole of the crumbling days, and I was back in August of the previous year, standing among the potted fruit trees of that commercial nursery, my head swimming in feverish humid heat. Here I was, stuffed back into my old fabiform body, in a suit stiff with dried snot and vomit. And here HE was returned, as if he had arisen suddenly from the bowels of the earth, to arrest my progress into the deadly onslaught of traffic. The mysterious figure who seemed to have started me on my mad odyssey of rock gazing had reappeared, and this time, as I was to learn, not to so furtively disappear again. His gaze seemed to reach into the bottom of some part of my psyche — should I say soul? — as if excavating for some valuable commodity, which I had foolishly discounted and discarded. “Excuse me, Sir,” he said, as if it were I who could do him a favor, “do you have . . .”

“Time!” Cried the phat (ponderous hips and thighs) phascist road boss. “Five o’clock. Let’s pack it in!”

The teenaged truants dropped their trash in their tracks and scrambled for the flatbed as if they had been shot out of a cannon, and would miss their bus to paradise if they dallied for an instant. But I did not move. I lay on my back and rolled my eyes up, up, up towards the one who had saved me. He was inching sideways now up the steep embankment to retrieve the box with the cat, the discovery of which had triggered my descent. The flatbed, spitting gravel and dirt, roared off in a cloud of dust and diesel, and I closed my eyes as quietly and as peacefully as if I were in some Tibetan Monastery, enveloped in mountain peace, far, far from the haunts of men, and not lying inches from the roaring tires of a rush hour Houston freeway. I don’t know how long I lay there, but eventually the traffic slowed to a crawl and then to a stop, as rush hour — in which all of those condemned to “rush” were abruptly and excruciatingly halted — the bi-quotidian general paralysis of the insane squatting sweatily upon the harried city. I had blacked out, and when I awakened, the black cat from the box, apparently not dead after all, was perched on my chest and staring remorselessly into my stupefied eyes. She stretched and yawned, as if to say, “My work is done here,” and ambled off, tail aloft, in the direction

that I and my potato-skinned savior would soon enough be following. He offered his hand to help me to my feet, and while doing so, said, in an intelligent and not cheerless voice, “Jesse’s the name, and trash is my game. And today, as everyday, we have had a find.” “A find?” I sputtered. But Jesse, the root, if not the shoot, did not answer. Instead, he carefully placed a folded section of newspaper under the wing of my left arm, and patted it as if it were a baby. “Yes,” he said, admiring both me and the paper, “we indeed have had a find.”

Jesse followed the cat and I followed Jesse and we descended under the beetle brow of the overpass to where a boxy delivery truck was parked. ‘Looks like one of those old bread or milk trucks,’ I thought. Yet this one was not white, but thickly brush-painted — bumpers, trim, wiperblades, wheelwells and all — a kind of shitcolored chocolate brown. The vehicle was old, but solid. One might even say, ‘reassuring’, and not, I marvelled, unattractive in its own way. Jesse opened the passenger side door with a large, antique-looking latchkey, and ushered me into his home. The cab had a cavernous, worn driver’s seat, the biggest gearbox I think I had ever seen, and no passenger seat, but instead an unpainted plywood container with a hasp and padlock, ‘perhaps’ — I thought with a shudder — ‘harboring the relics of martyred highway workers.’ There were no other adornments in the cab, except that of a rather frayed postcard clipped to the passengerside visor. I stared at this postcard with wonder, in so far as it was the very same photograph of the man who was on the cover of the dogeared paperback, which had been bequeathed to me by the escaping Dick Flamm. Jesse saw that I was looking at this, and smiled. But before I could question him about it, he took my hand and ushered me through the heavy earthgreen curtain that separated the cab from the box. It would not be too melodramatic to say that as we entered the rear of the truck, the veil, or at least, *a* veil, was, for me, in that instant, rent.

The light in the back of the truck was strange, and I had a hard time adjusting my eyes to it. It was not harsh, but in some way that I could not explain, it seemed exceedingly bright, sourceless, or rather pulsing from so many sources at once that I could not get my bearings. I was floating in the nacreous sheen of a *ganzfeld* and although reason told me that I was in a small space in the back of an old truck, the quality of light, or else some other kind of trickery — my headcold, my fall, my sudden meeting again with this remarkable personage — had conspired to spirit me away into some realm that was far more dream-like in its nature than anything in waking reality. But I was most assuredly awake, and when Jesse touched my arm and removed the paper that he had pressed under its wing, I came to with a start and noticed that I was standing before a frame, exactly like the one I had at home, which was sized precisely to hold the front page of a newspaper. Jesse quickly placed the paper that I had found in the frame and returned it to the sparkling wall. “A find,” he said. “Yes indeed, a find.” He tapped the paper in the frame, pointing to one of the articles, then he turned to me and said, “Fresh Kills is closing four years ahead of schedule. Don’t you find that remarkable?” To which I answered, stammering, “What are fresh kills?” My answer amused him greatly, for he threw back his head and laughed with the easy freedom of a child. I laughed too, but I didn’t for the life of me know why. I noticed then that my head was clear, and that my cold symptoms had vanished. I also noticed a sweet perfume pervading the atmosphere, far

fresher in the back of this old truck than in the close, fumey air outside near the clogged freeway. “Fresh Kills,” he began, “the Staten Island MVS planned by Moses, Bob Moses that is, was born 14 June, 1948, but it will live forever!” He looked at me pointedly as if I were supposed to make some sort of connection here, but I was dumbfoundedly silent, and he pressed on. “Yes! Yes! I would say that Moses’s letter to Mayor Impelliteri was certainly worthy of a prophet. Listen to these words,” he said, cupping his hand round the shell of his ear and cocking his head sideways attentively. ““The Fresh Kills landfill project cannot fail to affect constructively a wide area around it. It is at once practical and idealistic.”” He stopped and looked at me again, as if he expected me to say something. But I was as silent and I am sure as bug-eyed as one who has just been gonged on the back of the head by an iron frying pan. “Don’t you see, that the prophesy has come to pass.” I did not, of course, see at all, and I was wondering what an MVS could be, when my host continued, rushing headlong into his fervid explication. “Every civilization builds its Monstrous Visual Symbols: pyramids, tombs, cathedrals, skyscrapers, defensive walls, their statements in material reality that they existed, had form, aspired to grandeur — *and achieved it!*” I was getting more and more lost in the maze of his exposition, but he continued, breathless, piling puzzles atop obfuscations. “Fresh Kills covers three-thousand acres. Its 100 million tons of waste has an estimated volume of 2.9 billion cubic feet, and had its life been extended to the originally proposed close date in 2005, it would have reached a height of 505 feet, making it the highest geographic feature on the Atlantic Seaboard from Florida to Maine. A great achievement!” He enthused. “A worthy MVS! It is twenty-five times the size of the Great Pyramid of Khufu, forty-five times the size of the Temple of the Sun at Teotihuacan, and its volume rivals that of the stones in the Great Wall of China.” His voice was rising in tone, singing almost, in a sweet honey of tenor caresses. “A monument to the ages for modern man! Its archeological riches exceeding those of a thousand Pompeiis, a million Tikals, a hundred Valleys of the Kings! A mighty legacy of the era to the curious minds of the unborn! The unopened Tomb of millions Tutankhamuns! A trove brimming with almost unimaginable splendors of great finds!” He was waving his hands over his head as he finished this dissertation, his face radiant with ecstasy.

“But it’s garbage!” I cried, already sick to death of the stuff after my first three days on the road gang.

He dropped his hands and the brass light in his face wavered back from its bright ecstasy to what I can only describe as the color of a greased penny, a tone somehow indicative of fathomless compassion. A long moment passed in which the walls pulsed iridescence, and the perfume deepened its subtle, spiritualizing aroma. His scraggy hair and beard seemed suddenly to radiate rainbow scintilla, as if alive with millions of infinitesimal blinking fireflies. I felt a slight pressure against my legs, and looked down to see that the black cat was rubbing up against me. There was an instant in which the nacreous walls rushed towards me, and I suddenly realized that they were mosaiced from the tiniest bits of cellophane, little prismatic pieces of discarded packaging that were cunningly cut and placed like those crystals in old lighthouses which can magnify a small light with thousands of times its candlepower. The cat yeowed and my mouth rounded voicelessly in response to that animal cry. Above me rose a mighty tsunami of refuse, and I felt

Jesse take hold of my hand as my knees buckled. But it was too late. The wave curled and crashed, and I fell beneath its weight, down, down into the methane gases and the sweltering gruel of eternity.

*Interregnum: Twenty-second Week's Summary*

My meeting with Jesse the trash picker brought me to a curious revelation. The thing that my mother named and that I had been calling my Self was nothing more than a midden heap of the past's debris, the discards of evolutionary and cultural history, something that walked and talked, hoped and feared, slept and dreamt, but had no real volition. Some great metaphysical earthmover's shovel bulldozed this hovel about in response to those large scale events that I read about each day in the newspaper, and, of course, garbage was constantly being added to the pile. But it was always more of the same kind of stuff that was already there, and these latest iterations of refuse only served to crush to gray-brown gruel those layers of biography which fermented at depths too foul and depressed to ever consider reshuffling towards the surface. My world was a world of trash, and not my world only, but the world beyond my skin as well, both fills permeable to one another's toxins, both Monstrous Visual Symbols of spent appetites, of worthless prophylactics against terror, of discarded love potion bottles, of cancelled checks and of empty window envelopes. What were these thoughts in my head, then, or in anybody's head, but the buzzing of multitudes of flies and the munching of innumerable scatophagi. My new work and my new friend had led me to the realization that my excerebosean skull, that extravaganza of a medical and legal anomaly, was nothing more than a festering dump. But this revelation, curious, as I said, to be sure, was not, as Jesse had shown me, depressing at all. I had been inside the truck, in the box where light was refracted from millions of surfaces, and not refracted only, because this realm was more than a reflector of light: it was light's progenitur. It was a self-illuminated terrestrial body. In short, an earthly star. No matter that it had to be tucked daily under another nondescript freeway overpass, tended by an outcast, and fabricated from what society had thrown aside. It nevertheless generated its own pulsating energy, megajoules of irresistible and nourishing potency whose solar flares erupted out into the city and changed things in unseen but powerful ways. Under that shitbrown chocolate box of motorized metal, that antique International Harvester, there existed something indefinable. Call it an inner light, a luminous power gleaned from all that effort of mining, harvesting, manufacturing, advertising, distributing, consuming which now seemed to throb with its own internally generated glory. I felt a bit giddy whenever I went inside that truck, which was waiting for me everyday now as soon as I finished my court-appointed harrowing of the city's cement and asphalt arteries. Like a mobile Chartres Cathedral, the thing followed me around. I cannot explain it, but it is as if I myself were being recycled, put to some new and dazzlingly aesthetic use by my daily disappearance inside that vehicle, where I delivered, like a small boy showing his mother or father some marvelous treasure, the finds I had discovered that day on my rounds. Jesse was always filled with delight, and even his rags seemed to glow, as if — like the close, nearly phosphorescent coat of his marvelous black cat, Meera — they too had become a kind of transcendently beautiful fur, a feral and gorgeous part of the man himself, and not mere secondhand coverings. How, I wondered would Judge Helm react,

if he knew the astonishing outcome of his prophetic sentence: “I foresee that a few weeks removin’ trash from the county highways will do both you and the motorists of this fair Republic a passel a good.” Oh yes, my dear sweet Accuser, a passel of good, indeed.

I was so happy gleaning treasure from the metropole’s roadways that I lost myself in these splendors and felt every morning as I donned my dayglow orange vest that I was strapping on a buckler of light, and was now in the company of seraphim who had been blessed with the divine duty — no, not duty — playful privilege — of descending into the depths of the culture and retrieving cask after cask of precious gems. No matter that the same outward forms clustered about me, the truants with their incomprehensible ebonics, the roadboss with his cracker bluster, the fumes of the freeways, the uncertain weathers, I had found Jesse and Meera and they had led me into the crystal mansion whose glee glitter fluttered through everything and everyone, bling bling washing over me now and transforming all of my nasty judgements into gold. But one afternoon while I was showing Jesse a particularly marvelous plastic comb, its teeth broken in a pattern which seemed to betoken some secret message, he looked at me seriously for a moment, and his habitual delight darkened, as he said: “That’s Latearea’s comb. Her mother says that she’s not right in the head, and locks her in a closet day and night. She broke those teeth out in the dark, one at a time, and pushed them into the flesh of her thighs.” My heart sank. Who was this Latearea, and what dynamic had been set in motion that had confined her to a misery so black that she would mutilate herself in order brighten it? As this question augered down through my mind, I saw in Jesse’s eyes, floating beneath that sparkle of joyousness, something else, something fathomlessly dark and grieving, a viscous substance under fantastic loads of terrestrial pressure, the pressure of multitudes of geologic layers, the pressure of time, the lightless pressure of eons of accumulated death. In that instant, the fumes of the freeway, which had been swimming around us all this time, and which had been obscured by the fresh perfume of Jesse’s marvelous collections, exploded like a heavy caliber revolver and struck me dead on at the base of the skull. The epiphany nearly took my head off. I sunk, face down into that compassionate gaze, down into the deposits of a crudity and stench which seemed irredeemably lost.

Jesse placed his two hands on my shoulders, squared me round to face him, and said, speaking right into the deep pool of my grief: “It is coming to an end. Production has peaked all over the world, and the decline will be as precipitous as it will be abrupt.” What “it” was and what “production” had peaked and was declining, I did not have the wherewithal to either understand or question. I was thinking about the missing black teeth in my find, and of that girl somewhere locked in a closet who had sent this message out into the world where someone might find it and read it, and come, like a knight errant, to her rescue.

“All this noise we hear outside, this constant freeway hum that now reaches far out into space itself, will fall silent. And the red electric glow that radiates as far as the moon, will flare out into primordial blackness. The blue pearl will once again show her virgin face, washed clean of man’s pollution, to the other entities of the solar system.”

Jesse had said something, and all I could answer, as I saw that girl in my mind's eye, her imagined suffering disturbing what little store I had of serenity, was "What?"

"The party is over," he said.

"What party?"

"Oh, yes, I know, there are some questions in the geologic community regarding the exact timing, but the King is essentially right.

"Right about what?"

Jesse lifted his hands from my shoulders, touched my ears and said: "Listen," then he began reciting, his eyes turned up, as if reading from an invisible script which floated on tablets somewhere above him in the dazzling light of his truckbox.

The world's present industrial civilization is handicapped by the coexistence of two universal, overlapping, and incompatible intellectual systems: the accumulated knowledge of the last four centuries of the properties and interrelationships of matter and energy; and the associated monetary culture which has evolved from folkways of prehistoric origin.

The first of these two systems has been responsible for the spectacular rise, principally during the last two centuries, of the present industrial system and is essential for its continuance. The second, an inheritance from the prescientific past, operates by rules of its own having little in common with those of the matter-energy system. Nevertheless, the monetary system, by means of a loose coupling, exercises a general control over the matter-energy system upon which it is superimposed.

Despite their inherent incompatibilities, these two systems during the last two centuries have had one fundamental characteristic in common, namely exponential growth, which has made a reasonably stable coexistence possible. But, for various reasons, it is impossible for the matter-energy system to sustain exponential growth for more than a few tens of doublings, and this phase is by now almost over. The monetary system has no such constraints, and, according to one of its most fundamental rules, it must continue to grow by compound interest.

These words were drilling into me, tapping those deep layers of deposits that I had discovered in myself when Jesse had mentioned the name "Latearea," but I had no idea what they could mean, or how Latearea could possibly be connected to this rigamarole about the loose couplings of matter-energy and monetary systems. All I could think to say was "What king?"

"M. King — Marion."

“Who is this Marion King?”

“Why the prophet of the age, of course.” When Jesse saw the depth of my befuddlement, he shook his head sorrowfully and muttered. . . “a prophet is without honor . . .” Then he raised his face again to the light and said. M. King Hubbert, the marvelous petroleum geologist, and the creator of the famous bell curve, with the peak that bears his name.”

“What’s Hubbert’s peak?”

Jesse looked at me sadly as if I were a fish, and had just asked: “Water? What’s that? Is it something I should know about?” Then he gently took my hand and led me back through the cab of the truck and outside. It was getting dark now and a light mist was falling, the roar of the traffic an ever-present white-noise as persistent as the unwearied action of the seas. We climbed up the embankment of the overpass, and from that imminence we could view, to the west, the stacked spirals of a vast cloverleaf of freeway interchanges. The sky was odd: and words descriptive of that oddness leapt into my mind: castory beaver-pelt browns infuscating to mud tones, ferruginous reds rusting in fuzzy corroding bars along the horizon, jaundiced yellows souring the undersides of clouds into blackish corbeau greens, hints of squalid puce, heavy, cheerless slabs of clayey griegie. The dull smeary glow of the falling sun was losing its preeminence as the evening’s major source of illumination. Now, instead of light pouring down from the heavens, it was streaming up from earth — long ribbons of creeping traffic threading their way to infinity, headlights and taillights marking the veins and arteries of a circulatory system that was consumed with coming and going, but which had no central, beating heart. The horizon near and far was penetrated by skyscrapers. Their reflecting glass surfaces had been streaked during the day with squiggles of passing lights, but they were now showing, like jack-o-lanterns, that they were the possessors of their own inner sources of illumination. Jesse turned me slowly around, and in every direction that we could see across the immense plain of this Gulf Coast swamp, the movement of luminous machines and the march of starry buildings snaked and snarled across the landscape, like a gigantic mutation of one of those creatures which exist in the deep ocean trenches, a creature that spun out of its mad tangle of tentacles the sources of its own light. Standing beside Jesse as he silently directed my attention to the enormous spread of this behemoth, I felt infinitesimally tiny, as if I were the most insignificant cell in the corpus of a burgeoning tumor, whose coils, although ostensibly constructed for my support, could at any moment convulse and crush me. I had seen this giant every day and night of my life without looking at it. But now I was beginning to grasp the dangerous significance of this immensity that was arising and constricting all around me. This city, this monstrous tuberosity, became — not alive, for I realized that this was a mechanical thing — but threatening in a way that I had never before been completely aware of. Jesse then said something that because of the traffic noise and the state of my absorption, I did not at first hear. But he repeated it, and repeated it, until it finally crossed the threshold of distraction and entered my awareness.

“Food.”

I looked at him, puzzled.

“Junk food.”

“What’s that?”

“All this is the result of Junk Food.” And then he laughed. “This is Adam Kadmon’s caca when he eats the wrong things for the wrong reasons.”

“Who is Adam Kadmon?”

And then Jesse tapped me with his forefinger lightly between the eyes, and I saw. Those oddly colored clouds which had seemed so heavy and amorphous, dyeing the heavens those strange colors in the departing metallic light, began to slowly evolve a form, a human form. *Its* feet — for *it* seemed hermaphroditic, neither a he nor a she, but some bizarrely satisfying amalgamation of both — were planted on the horizon, with its body stretching miles upwards towards the zenith, its head both bearded and effeminate, mingling with the downward cascading darkness of nightfall. There was something about the light, or lack thereof, that enabled me to distinguish between various shades of black, — soap-stone, anthracite, melanic, ebony, atrous, nigrine — so that this creature, although formed of clouds, was as solid-seeming as basalt. It loomed out of the darkness as the epitome of paradox: grandeur and humiliation, nobility and pain, superhuman and subhuman, its expression pulling in opposing directions, and sending convulsions down through the gargantuan body, until — sure enough — from between the legs, there streamed a terrible diarrhea that was piling up as the form of the city below. Tears welled into my eyes, for here was pain, pain far beyond the human, but pain utterly human in its familiarity. I took a deep breath, but it felt like the vault of my ribcage was cracking. This blackness in the heavens, this heaviness and pressure, was the same heaviness and pressure that I had felt a moment before when Jesse had spoken the name “Latearea,” and I knew that this pressure was not only pressing down from the heavens, but also, vice-like, muscling up from deep in the earth. I was afraid. Now it felt that the redemption which I had experienced in retrieving the trash of the city’s freeways, and restoring it to the realm of beauty, if not of usefulness, was a sort of steel bolt inserted into my spine to strengthen me for some coming ordeal. The pain, the tears, my endless string of terrible losses: health, money, wife, even the liquification the brain in my head, had been the *prima materia* for the forging of this steel. I turned from the sky-colossus to Jesse as one would turn from the vision of a tar pit to the sunset alpinglow of a pristine mountain top. For Jesse, in all his humble diminutiveness, was yet so much larger in stature than the giant, and his largeness of spirit, so human and frail, was what, in that moment, I so desperately needed. The stench of naphthene wreaked havoc in my sinuses. I now knew what the smell of hell was like: and it was the smell of my own angst. But what smell or what mere word could possibly summon forth the depth of my terror, a terror, which was not even the terror of death or pain or injustice or violence, but something woven into the very fabric of my flesh and cementing together the armature of my bones. This entity that loomed above me in the skies, its form growing more vivid as it grew blacker, its

agony underlit by the earth-sprung tainted electrical fire that is night in such a city, seemed the very embodiment of everything that had gone wrong in my life, and not in my life only, but in all of our lives, all these lives caught in the terrible machinery of petroleum, mechanics and money. I felt bereft and inarticulate, a clutching, choking sensation arising from deep in my bowels and barreling up into my throat, there to constipate itself in an horrendous blockage of nauseating despair. Then the titanic hulk looked down upon me, its unwilling and hateful twin, and, twisting its head around as if its neck were some sort of rubbery serpent, our eyes, his black, mine wide, met. And then it howled — howled and howled, the thunder of hundreds of thousands of internal combustion engines giving voice in its massive throat to the accumulated depths of human and animal woe. The winding, crushing roar of that howling imparted to me another, truer vision of Latearea. There was something in that closet which she embodied, some form of collective suffering that had impregnated itself in her flesh, that treasure of wisdom that she had been digging for in her thighs with the broken teeth of her comb. The creature's howling was not the howl of an individual, but the collective howl that was building the bricks of history one shit-impacted corpse at a time. And somewhere at the bottom of this crazy edifice was the cornerstone, the one extolled by Jesus, a girl, of what age I did not yet know, in a dark closet, her toenails perhaps corkscrewing into some threadbare square of musty carpeting, her hair cotted and welked, her eyes, like those of cavedwellers, growing wide in the expanding pall of an inner light, her tongue, quiet as a sleeping snail, curled dormant in her mouth. But in the midst of that deformation, I knew, or at least I thought I knew, that something or someone was dreaming, dreaming a private language that peopled her physically cramped, but metaphysically infinite world with entities whose purpose, brilliance, malevolence or compassion could speak the spell that could end this spell, the words that could unfold this wad of history, and discover written there, on the calendar's graphed paper, the secret formula that would release us all from servitude. It was not I who would rescue her, but she who would rescue me. To regain any semblance of serenity, I knew I had to find this person and beg her to reveal her mysteries to me. The whole project was irrational. But maybe for that very reason — reason — an incongruous word in this, or perhaps in any context — this quest was overwhelmingly compelling. But where to start? As I looked down again on the streaming herds of traffic, it seemed to me that suffering was ubiquitous, that these lowing masses of metal, headed each one towards some mysterious private or public slaughterhouse, some boneyard or junkyard where organic and inorganic would rot or rust wasted back to despoiled earth, that there was no centrality to this beast, no beating heart from which to extract wisdom, no tongue to sing the lullaby of release. How could I find one lost being in all this rabble of lost beings. But Jesse intuited my dilemma and provided me with that clue which proved to be the first slender thread of my salvation.

“IBP,” he said.

I blinked at him, the mist and darkness of the collapsing night mingling with another more personal moistness.

“IBP. Now IBP/Tyson. Seek there, and ye shall find.”