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AMAZING WAGES

by

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B.A., University of California at Santa Cruz, 1974

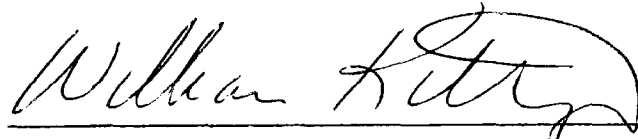
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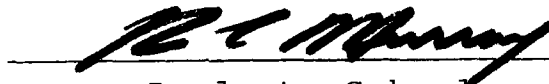
Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1978



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ONE.

THE SWELL WAS STILL HITTING, but the land wind died in the night. Then swung around and started to blow toward shore. The air grew thick with salt damp where it had been dry with desert heat. First light showed the cove at Mogador to be a choppy cata-strophe.

Donning khaki pants and sandals and a ragged shirt, Regret trudged out of camp, through the cool dawn sand, toward the Agadir road. Under one arm, he carried what looked from a distance like a six-foot broadleaf, sample from some mammoth infidel elm: in reality a surfboard in a filthy wax-stained canvas bag; while deep in one khaki pocket rode his tattered equalizer: a military money belt, leaking visas and several kinds of currency through its ruptured zipper.

Less than halfway across the Mogador dunes, Regret was joined by a drooling camel he hated, upon whose back swayed a wide load of fresh mint leaves. This camel had incurred his infidel wrath by taking a large bite of his surfboard some weeks before, creating a hole which had been hell to patch.

Now the camel's owner pointed as they approached, having clearly drawn a bead on him across the dunes, to the genuine woven Berber muzzle which the beast this morning wore, causing it to slobber.

Regret nodded solemnly. Feeling rumpled and regressed, though, Regret greeted the man, who he knew from experience understood no English whatsoever, with a salutation learned at the video knee of one Sheriff John, peerless showman since deceased.

"G-o-o-o-d Morning, Ass Breath," said Regret, improving on the suave Sheriff's "boys and girls."

The Arab muttered a taciturn obscurity as he fell into step.

The insult was not anomalous. Rastiness of a regressive type had been a discernible trend in Regret over the months he had been camped out at Mogador, especially evident in the forms of address. For reasons he had grown too rasty to even consider, the entire abuse vocabulary of the young surf snot now returned at regular intervals to rearrange the world into passive ranks of goons, geeks, cretins and kooks. It was the most orderly arrangement Regret could recall.

With the humans judiciously separating the hostile parties of board and camel, the little group strolled a

while in silence, the wind at their backs, blowing sand lightly tickling their ankles. Then, as the sun readied to rise from behind the high brown headboard of the Atlas Mountains before them, the lean local in his dark jellaba launched into a vehement speech in pidgin German.

Regret gathered this gist: it was unwise to sleep all alone out on that sandy point with the sea on three sides and bad men abroad in the land. Regret had received the same advice from this same counselor before.

"You're absolutely right," he said. "Just don't point that thing at me, Mo-hammed."

For the old camel-straddler apparently found the thought of defenseless Regret out there sleeping on his lonesome quite an image to conjure with. He was vigorously fingering himself beneath his jellaba. Regret, wondering at the salt-caked bloom of youth still ruddy it seemed on his own thin-whiskered cheek — for juvenility was invariably the great erotic requirement of these guys — avoided the Arab's eyes, the hot wolfish yellow-toothed bloodshot leer from beneath the dirty hood of his robes.

It was daylight and his comrade was growing hoarse by the time they reached the blacktop road. A flatbed truck immediately rattled to a stop beside them. Several families already rode on the wide wooden bed. Regret hopped

aboard, squeezing in among the women in veils and their broods of big-eyed children.

Meanwhile, the camel man was frantic, thrashing and kicking his nonplussed pet to get it to board the truck. But no one made room for the animal, and the truck suddenly roared off without warning, leaving the camel man in the road, his bitter eyes averted toward the mountains, his big companion sucking at a great silver streamer of spit.

"Adios, Abdul," said Regret. "You too, ass bite."

The women smiled shyly beneath their veils at the tourist. Regret took generous nostril helpings of the heavy perfume they wore. But the wind soon thinned the scent. And the women all dropped their black eyes into their great black skirts.

At the great white fort walls of Essaouira, the wind was obliged to detour, either that or bash itself bleakly on the sun-bleached bastions. In any case, remain outside. Regret, on the other hand, entered the city unopposed, and made straight for further shelter.

The Hotel Boukamen was located deep in the medina, down curving cobbled alleys, through dark unlikely archways, on a narrow nameless avenue where children played and herds of burros were tethered on certain afternoons. No sign marked the hotel's sky-blue door. The Bouk was, however, well-known throughout even distant Europe. It was the cheapest legal room in Essaouira. All the hard-core "boys and girls" stayed there.

Safely arrived in his second floor room, Regret sat on the edge of a crater-shaped bed with his money belt in his hands (with the canvas-wrapped fin of his surfboard protruding from beneath the foot of the depressed bunk like the feet of a poorly stashed corpse) and studied the brilliant gardenias in the ruined tile fountain in the courtyard below his door, studied them dully while listening leadenly to a badly mixed track of torporous noise from next door. These obtuse interludes were a regular feature of Regret's sojourns at the Bouk. He resisted them only listlessly, as befitted a man who felt himself essentially on ice, only out of the big game for a breather.

Maybe it was the effect of having surrendered his passport to the hotel owner. His money belt felt absurdly empty.

"Ant-honey," the owner laboriously pronounced, copying the name onto a long white form, "Zhay," his high red fez bouncing from document to document for the transfer of each letter, "Reg-ret."

It was ten dirham, two dollars, for three nights in advance. When he paid, Regret leaned over for a last look at his passport, morbidly whispering the name he read there: "Anthony Joaquin Regret." Florid but true, it was him. There was a surfer in South Africa, an elder stylist named Ant. But in North Africa, whenever he was called, he was called Walking. Honey.

Or maybe it was the money, a few more dirhams dribbling away when his savings were already dwindling well below the level of the lowest fare back across the Atlantic.

Mostly though, he knew, these doldrums were just abreaction to leaving Mogador. The system got used to the routine rigors of all-out early-morning sessions, the straightforward shock of cold walls of powerful soup, and then one day was switched out into the subtler treacheries of town and went into a sulk. Perfectly friendly pederasts were coldly spurned; all the intricate fascination of foreign culture was ignored in favor of the sullen and primitive privacy of cheap lodgings.

In this coarseness, however, Regret was as nothing in comparison to his next door neighbors at the Bouk. The racket from that quarter consisted mainly of low giggling, growns, and croaked boasts in French. Regret knew the boys in question without having to meet them individually. When they tripped downstairs to the bog, they all looked like English rock stars. But virtually every other minute of the day, whether waking, sleeping, or otherwise, they spent flat on their backs on their bunks in their big dim, blue-smoky room: dozing or laughing thickly, fiddling with chillums and spilling tobacco and hash on themselves; or else solemnly smoking, adding to the sweet thick haze; or maybe sending the owner's boy out for pastries and Cokes, arguing over what they would get. So that eventually they would come to look more than anything like frightened children in bed, kept home on account of sickness. After that, they would disappear.

Regret attempted to ponder the relative corruptions of Europe and of Islam. As usual, the mental effort defeated him immediately. That was what was so satisfactory about Morocco. The gardenias might be brilliant in the ruined Moorish fountain, the landscape cruel and moving, the cities picturesque, the air absolutely pellucid, yet none of it ever seemed to yield a single thought

beyond itself. What you saw was what you got. Once bundled, any corpse could be stashed, no matter how poorly. This state of things made life out at Mogador, that deliberately minimized, exhausting, frontier existence, particularly appropriate.

Thrilled now with clean living, with shameless self-sufficient North American low-lead zest, Regret rose and pocketed his money belt and room key and strode out the open door — desperate for conversation, dissipation, sex, anything.

Passing through the courtyard, he was startled by the flimsy green door to the bog flying open, and the emergence of his one sure thing in the way of the last-named diversion: the young Berber chambermaid at the Boukamen. She had a bucket of brown water in one hand, a red basket piled high with scraps of newspaper in the other. Their gazes met for an instant above the basket of crumpled paper, where some of the shit stripes were still fresh across the columns of Arabic. Several scraps fluttered up against her forearm. Her expression was of distinct disgust.

She swept by muttering. Regret, recognizing that she was out of patience with the quirks of tourists at the moment, forebore any overt gestures toward his room.

These filthy foreigners anyway, wiping with paper. Why couldn't they just use their left hand and smear it on the wall like civilized people? He watched her disappear up the stairs, her loose black robes rustling. It was the first time he had ever seen her with her veil down. The ring of small blue tattoos around her mouth had made her look greedy and cruel. She might even have been a different maid altogether from the one he had been in the habit of plugging whenever he came to town.

Outside, Essaouira was ripening in the windless heat. A fetid stench had begun to fill the city. Regret set his sandals on a windward course for the harbor district.

At the first corner leaving the Bouk, two teenagers fell in beside him.

"Hey friend what you looking for? You tell me, I get you it."

This was Regret's favorite straight line. "Chili dog and a cherry coke," he said. "Crime-free streets, pest-free fruits, kook-free waves and a playground for the kids. A liquid jungle gym."

"Hash, you like hash? Best black, best kind. You like to really see the medina, you need a guide. Really man, what you want?"

"One Teen Angel, Mr. Sandman, if you can. A sweet little waitress in white pumps and ponytail. A beach queen in bikini. I Need Ruby Immediately."

"No man, what you want, where you going?"

Regret sighed. He glanced at his interrogator, a thin boy with yellow eyes in a tight turquoise T-shirt and tighter pink hiphuggers. The hustler caught his eye and nodded with fierce sincerity. Regret kept going. The other boy had come up close on his other side; but they were losing interest. Seeing that he was not new to their game, they were about to abandon it. This was where Regret knew he had to watch himself. Flip as he might get, he took these fellows seriously enough to back off when they did. Parting salvos had been known to be physical.

"I'm for the harbor, men," he said in a hearty nervous tourist's voice, "to see somebody about this wind. I know the way. Have a nice day."

The boys slowed. Yellow eyes spat at Regret's heel and missed. The boys stopped and turned back toward the Bouk. From a distance Regret heard the second boy speak

for the first time, tossing over his shoulder in growled half-English, "You fuck."

"Not like I used to," the American muttered.

The only hotels in Essaouira with any Michelin stars at all were out by the harbor. It was the only part of the city where a car could be driven. The wind kept the reek of the medina more or less at bay and the area attracted only your higher class of hustler. Regret bought an International Herald Tribune in the lobby of the most luxurious of the hotels and settled at a table over a tasse of French coffee and a plate of stale rolls in the cordoned area where hustling was more or less discouraged in front of one of the large cafes on the cobbled main thoroughfare of the harbor district. Where he discovered his newspaper to be three days old. No matter, it was all more or less news to him. Mostly less.

The International Herald Tribune seemed to regard vague statements by interested parties as the definitive descriptions of conditions in various obscure states of Africa where the natives were restless. The Australian girl at the table behind Regret seemed to feel the same way. Her voice grew hard to ignore.

"We want a true friend, only a true friend."

"Yes yes, I already tell you, we just have fun."

The bearded young local in silver rings and sunglasses kept glancing nervously over his shoulder toward the interior of the cafe, crossing and re-crossing his legs. The girl's boyfriend, a big blond dull-looking fellow, was gazing unhappily up the street. The girl was small, with dark hair pulled tightly back into a bun, a freckled aggressive face, and her voice had a most irritating whine to go with its marble-mouthed accent.

"Because see here, we've had guides before, in Fez and Marrakech and all over, and after the fun, the meals and the music and all, it's always Now you pay, you owe us this much, for our time, the food, the dope, bloody everything, and —"

It was a common tale of North African woe. Regret's own favorites among such stories were the terrifying accounts of foreigners adventuring in the mountain hashish districts who found themselves compelled to purchase large quantities of contraband to smuggle where they might by local growers and dealers whose supremely aggressive sales techniques had been known to include kidnapping, auto confiscation, and torture.

Regret rose to leave. Along the cobbled promenade, as if summoned by his lust for company, a familiar figure

approached. The hood was up on the stroller's striped jellaba but the shrewd eyes swivelling in Regret's direction from beneath black curls gave him away. It was Regret's best Moroccan friend, Amen. Regret dropped a couple of dirham on a saucer, gave his Tribune to the male Austroid, and intercepted Amen with a deft full nelson that failed, however, to account for the many ways arms might be carried inside a jellaba. Amen slipped laughing out of his grasp and they headed for the harbor itself.

"You're a lizard, Amen. What's at the harbor?"

"Wind."

TWO.

Indeed, they were emerging from between the buildings onto the point itself and the onshore breeze was strong and chilly. Whitecaps streamed past the end of the jetty into the bay. Mogador was barely visible through the mist that the wind kicked up on the water. They doubled back into a small park for tourists and sat on a low wall out of the wind.

Amen produced a stick of kif and began to smoke.

"Walking, how long you been in Essaouira? One year eh?"

"No. Maybe three four months. Well, let's see, I came through here before then, on my way south, but then I came back. Shit, since around Christmas, if you know when that was."

Amen offered the kif, Regret declined it. He chose his spots very carefully when it came to kif. It was too strong and speedy for casual use. As fuel for some crazed exertion, fine. But without a mountain to climb, Regret had a tendency to create one with kif, and its faces were invariable sheer.

"You ever going back to United States?"

"Sure, someday," said Regret, ceasing to think.

Inevitably, Moroccans assumed that Regret was the heir to wealth. How else could he be travelling, vacationing endlessly like this? Soon, certainly, he would return to his home to assume great responsibilities. Regret had given up trying to correct the impression. How could he explain that he financed his international movements, had bought and sold houses and land, had supported half a dozen people, as well as a costly drug habit of his own, all on the wages earned at a job which he had once watched barefoot boys perform in Marrakech, ragged nimble children dodging between the old French colonial mahogany coaches in the primitive switching yard, guiding couplers to joints and dropping the treacherous pin in the link with bare hands with perfect aim, probably earning five dirham a day — until, of course, that day when they were not quick enough and, if not killed outright, were maimed and transferred permanently to the beggar legions lining the city streets — how explain that for infinitely less risk a man might be paid a hundred times as much? Amen would not have listened had he tried.

"You say you got nobody to give you money there,

no father."

"You got it."

"Then you must to look out for yourself."

Regret laughed. "What's on your mind, Amen?"

Amen set the last of the reefer down on the wall between them. "Walking, how you like to do a deal? Make big money?"

"Ah-ha. I always knew you were into that, Amen. You're too slick for little ol Essaouira. You mean take kilos back to the States."

"Yeah."

"I'll think about it."

"OK."

"But it won't be soon, if I decide to do it."

"OK man we got a deal."

"No, 'man,' we don't got a deal."

Amen looked pained, then laughed softly. "OK, Walking. No deal. You thinking."

"Slowly. Slower all the time."

They gazed steadily into one another's eyes. It was a common practice in these parts, long silent stares like this, and Regret had slowly grown comfortable with it over the months. With Amen, it was particularly easy, as he had a shrewd, amiable, sympathetic face. Amen was

probably the single Moroccan Regret trusted most, and that mostly because Amen had once told him never to trust a Moroccan. They had had some rowdy nights together drinking wine Regret bought and smoking Amen's kif and dropping in on various people around the medina who Amen thought might be a gas and who usually were. Once they had walked out to the end of the harbor jetty in a howling wind and had a very serious, very sad conversation about love before they passed out among the rocks and crabs. Without breaking their gaze, Regret began to grin.

"Wine," he said. "Wine oh. Let's get us a jug."

Amen needed no urging. It was against the law for Moroccans to buy liquor in most parts of Morocco, while foreigners were free to buy it when they could find it. Regret cut around the corner into the hotel where he had bought the paper, and returned five minutes later with two bottles of cheap white burgundy wrapped in old Tribunes.

"These oughta get us over the road, eh? Now just don't go disgracing me and getting us arrested."

But if anyone hit the first liter bottle recklessly hard while they walked along the sea wall on the lee

side of Essaouira, it was the infidel. They traded it steadily back and forth, but Regret's gulps were markedly hungrier.

"I hope you don't mind, Amen. But I've got terrible troubles to drown. I'm drinking doubles while she's acting single."

This was nonsense and referred to nothing except a song Regret remembered nothing but the title from. Why he was really seeking vino oblivion had more to do with cross-chop than with wives. But random memory shrapnel was a major hazard on every peace mission one pursued in Maroc. Amen politely ignored his host's involutions and stuck to the subject.

"This wind blowing bad out at Mogador, eh Walking?"

"Disastrous. Cata-fucking-strophic. There's etymological trickery in my use of that word, refers to the wind changing its tune, but what do you care about Latinate games. But yeah, bad bad. In fact, I think the bastard's performing a Venturi over these walls at this very moment, adding insult to injury. You feel it?"

Amen put an index finger in his mouth, withdrew it, and held it up. Regret noted that it was his right index. He said "Look" and did the same with his left.

Amen's face registered shock in spite of itself. Regret crowed crudely.

"Stupid I know," he said. "I'm sorry. The boor makes these periodic appearances. It's my USMC origins. An old fisherman up in Asilah almost broke my wrist the first time I tried to reach into some Ta Gine with my left. But that's neat, you guys use the same trick to tell the wind. What's it doing?"

Amen wasn't sure.

"Venturi then," said Regret. "Course you know what that is. Fuckin Amen, you never miss a trick."

Amen took the wine with a small sly smile and finished off the first bottle with a long deep drink. Regret was watching seagulls ride the upwelling wind above them. Amen followed his gaze to the buffeted birds.

"I wonder if they're looking for food or what," said Regret.

"Fish in the harbor, not here," said Amen.

"I know. That's what I mean. What are they doing? Just checking things out, playing around, practicing flying? You kind of hope they aren't just always looking for something to eat."

Amen snickered quietly. "Yes," he said, "they are."

Always. So are we."

"I knew you'd say that. A poor ole idle rich can't let his guard down around you guys. But think of it this way: it's their job."

Amen shrugged. Regret continued to watch the gulls rise and drop, twist and sweep suddenly away to one side, without ever flapping their wings. He started to laugh.

"It's their job! You probably don't relate to that, Amen. You're not into visible means of support. But having a job, a real job job, can take care of just about everything. You can flush forty years down the toilet just like that with one, no fuss no muss. Americans even give their dogs jobs. Did you know that kitty cats are required to work in the States, either that or they go to jail?"

"Kitty cats?"

"Yeah."

They were nearing the spot where the sea wall dwindled into sand and the high white city walls bore away from the coast. Regret suddenly stopped short, squealing in surprise. Where the little dirt road ended at a narrow gate to the city, a gray British mini-van

was parked. Four surfboards were strapped to the roof. Regret dodged awkwardly behind a sea wall boulder, where he squatted and cursed, astounding Amen.

"I don't believe it," he sputtered. "I don't believe it. What are they doing now, getting out?"

"Leaving. They drive away now."

Regret stood and watched the van disappear into the dunes around a curve. He sat down on the boulder in the sun and tore the top off the second bottle of wine.

"You know what those guys were doing?"

"Looking for surfing."

They each took big glugs of the warm wine.

"Right. And you know where they'll try next?"

"No."

"Mogador, that's where."

"No auto road to Mogador."

"They'll walk it, if they've got any brains at all. This isn't the point here, not the real one. It's deep water here, it's got a jetty, it's not worth shit. But you can just see the swells pouring by. Even these little lefts in here have got juice. You'd have to be a total cretin not to figure out that Mogador's the place."

Amen shrugged inside his jellaba and sipped delicately. He plainly failed to see the reason for Regret's dramatic distress. Regret, boldly risking ridiculousness, waved the wine bottle by the neck and tried to explain.

"Mogador is not just a place, man, Mogador is the place. I am sitting on a fucking Mecca out there, a spot that a minimum of a million people would give just about anything to know about. I could make my fortune just by handling the franchising right. You've been out there, you've seen it good. Well, Amen, no place else gets that good. Why do you think I've been staying out there all these months, risking my fucking life in that madness with nobody to rescue me when I finally do get drilled headfirst into the rocks? You think I like eating sand three meals a day, nobody but old camel fuckers to talk to?"

"No."

"Goddam right I don't."

"So why?"

"Why what? Why don't I want these English geeks to find the place? Because they'll tell every surf goon in the world about it, that's why, they'll start calling it the Moroccan Malibu, chartering special jets from

Huntington Beach right to Ifni, I shit you not. Man I am the thumb in the dyke. One word from me, one picture with map to a magazine, and this whole coast would be knee-deep with kooks. That doesn't sound too bad to you? You think you'd like that? Well then, I give up. I've tried fifty times if I've tried twice to explain to you guys this weird idea, that it's actually nice sometimes to be alone. Nobody understands, I know, they see you and they still make a bee-line from two miles away straight to where you are, no matter if you're sitting up on a mountain or out in the middle of nowhere in the god damn desert. They come right up, sit right down, climb in your lap, they don't give a shit. They'd climb fuckin Simon's pole if they found it, and bring their camels up too!"

Amen had risen and might have been thought to be resenting these racial slurs on the part of the raving tourist. But he only said, "That's right," and reached for the wine.

Regret, badly winded from his tirade, handed it over and rose also. In a different voice he sighed, "And god damn lucky for me."

They started away from the beach, following the base of the city walls on a trail that was now in afternoon shadow. As they passed the spot where the van had stopped, Regret inspected the site with an eye that was almost wistful.

"Actually, Amen," he said, following Amen's path through a windblown field of dried garbage and broken glass, "I don't want to cause you any undue anxiety. I don't need any lifeguard out there. I been surfing fifteen years and I never been rescued yet."

"What does that mean, 'rescue'?"

Amen led them through a small gap in the old fort walls, made a sharp turn down a dark passageway, then ushered Regret up a dank flight of stairs into sunlight again. There he produced a sweltering graveyard full of cactus and old men in turbans, a rundown Moslem cemetery and local doper hangout ringed by mud walls.

They finished the wine while sitting in the shade of a spire-shaped stone. Amen's head fell slowly forward onto his chest, the striped hood again hiding his face. All in all, Regret reflected, Amen had not borne out this afternoon the popular conviction that Moroccans were madmen when under the influence of liquor. Regret himself had hardly behaved better. In fact, a combina-

tion of heat, no nutriment, and the sweetish burgundy were beginning, at this moment, to undermine his own condition to a degree that was nothing short of alarming. All this morning's vague misgivings were returning in warped new forms.

Some time later, Regret found himself staring into the green glass of the empty bottle, rotating it dully in a futile attempt to find a less distorted reflection of his face. He looked haggard and swollen at the same time, with the sides of his head folded greenly back in an inverted cylinder. Turned sideways, the bottle squashed his visage beneath a beetle brow and stuffed an unshaven chin in his mouth. Regret brought the bottle down hard by the neck on a rock.

If Amen reacted to the sudden sound of breaking glass, Regret did not notice. He was absorbed in the long lateral slice across all four fingers which a crack in the bottle neck had opened. Tightening his fist around the neck closed the crack. A thin bite of fresh bloomed inside the glass. Regret held the broken bottle out over one knee and felt the blood begin to run down the inside of his wrist. It tickled as the heavy leading edge coursed slowly over dry skin. The pain in his fingers was vague and tedious.

THREE.

"Hey Amen," Regret called thickly. The hood beside him did not rise. "Hey, you still give me a thousand dollars for my passport?"

"Three hundred," Amen's voice intoned.

"Three hundred! What happened to a thousand?"

"Get a new visa, I get you thousand, Walking."

Regret stared at the striped jellaba, which still did not move. Now how in the wondering fuck did Amen know that his six-month visa only had a week to go? How much of the rest of his money belt's meager contents was Amen privy to? Between pondering this disturbing bit of news, and fighting off passing twinges of panic at the prospect of running entirely out of funds in Essaouira, Regret forgot about his ace, that publishing coup he so loved to plan in full elegant, staggering detail: those classic photos of himself locked at inconceivable speeds into the long grinding grey-green offshore walls of Mogador, a score of stunning shots accompanied by spare, understated, flawless text by the featured surfer himself, whose fortune this article neatly made.

But maybe, after all, "fortune" overstated the case. Perhaps even Mogador was not quite all he had represented it as to the grossly agreeable Amen, or to the traders and assorted desertic layabouts who frequented his camp. None of these thoughts occurred to Regret, not specifically. But they did serve to darken somewhat that general cloud of mental pestilence which had rolled lately into the area.

Amen abruptly produced a stick of lighted kif from beneath his jellaba.

"Jesus Christ!" cried Regret.

Amen only showed several gold-capped teeth in a sleepy smile. Regret accepted the kif, with his uninjured hand, shaking his head. He drew deeply on the dope and spoke with his breath held. "If I'd known you were lighting matches and throwing whole parties in there, I'd have felt a lot different."

They smoked while the spire shadow lengthened away from them; and Regret found the kif to be exactly what he needed. It cut the wine fog like a knife. He began to sit up and take note of his surrounds. Small groups of bearded men still lay around the compound, most of them smoking kif in the scanty shade of clumps of

cactus, talking and laughing quietly. When the thin stick they shared was gone, Regret leapt nimbly to his feet and watched Amen rise mystically from the ground like some kind of striped tombstone.

It was a different city than the one Regret had negotiated in the morning. No hustlers approached them and not only, Regret was convinced, because he was now successfully radiating the inaccessibility he desired to project. He was "dancing them down" before they even appeared. It was Regret's belief that Moroccans, whose drug, more common than beer in the States, was the enlivening and sensitizing kif, were extraordinarily attuned to levels of personal readiness and power. Not always did he feel up to entering the energy-level he sensed always present in the streets himself, but when he did, usually with the help of kif, the streets came alive in his crackling senses.

And now he stalked their twisting density in perfect tune. Willingly breathed the strong strange smells that assaulted from every side. Deeply dug the structures he moved among, the heavy old white plaster walls, the sky-blue wooden shutters and doors, the

complete ancient uniformity of architecture and design. This was why he rarely felt in any physical danger in Morocco, this way in which everything was still tied tightly into a center. Only the unready, the unreal, the Westerners who held all this at a distance, who stopped their nostrils, need fear the unknown in this land. It could all be danced down. Beggars remained at their cripple-posts in the shade without approaching or calling out. No wonder liquor was outlawed; it destroyed the exact agility it took to survive in this scene. The blood on Regret's hand had dried; the sting turned into an ache and then vanished.

The cemetery had been out in the less densely built district on the inland side of Essaouira, where the markets for country folk were held. They threaded now through open squares full of camels and burros and dirty jellabas. In the last of those before they would re-enter the central medina, Amen dodged into a dark stall, leaving Regret outside.

Regret stood quietly and ran his senses indiscriminately over the flashing field of the market, the fruiterers, artisans, acrobats, magicians, storytellers, poets, dancers and musicians, confectioners

and cooks, snake-charmers and spice-sellers, who were all furiously performing and dispensing, demonstrating and extolling to the milling crowds. The amazing nasal oboe and low rapid hollow, rhythmical drumming of Moroccan music twisted and floated above the scene. It all brought on the strangest nostalgia. For Regret had once made a practice of setting up shop somewhere right around here himself: equipped with some fruit, a couple of pipeloads, a pot of mint tea, maybe a pound of candied peanuts, and stationed just downwind of the spice man, with his fifty little glass bowls of fragrance. Where he would proceed to watch until his eyes fell out. Would he ever do that again? Amen caught his arm and guided a dried apricot into his mouth with his right hand.

In the medina they came to a dim cafe. Where music hit them from every side. The place was packed with men and most of them were singing, clapping, chanting, drumming, or playing some kind of instrument. The rest were shouting and laughing. Amen found them two seats at a table. Regret recognized half a dozen different people, who each greeted him with quick gestures of the eyes as they went on singing or clapping. Kif pipes were passing from table to table,

emptied and reloaded in a few swift expert moves. The proprietor shuffled and danced among the chairs, a fat old man in a gray fez and baggy gray shirt, bringing Regret and Amen hot glasses of mint tea and singing. Pipes came round, they smoked. Regret drank the hot sweet tea, the mass of uncut gree leaves sliding up to tickle his lips. He rocked in his chair, tapped on the table, closed his eyes as the noise, the smoke, the drug surged through his system.

When he opened them, Amen was gone and his fingers hurt again.

And two men at the next table were the focus of the whole cafe. One, and extremely thin old fellow in a white turtleneck, grey sport coat, and high red fez, played at blinding speed on a violin which had been spraypainted blue and tuned beyond all recognition. The other, a dark squat blind man with only one tooth, wearing huge cheap women's bubble sunglasses, sang the main voice part, wailing and whispering through an immeasurable range with a mouth that puckered like an infant's.

Once, this exotic atonal cacophony might have seemed like chaos, formless and pointless. But Regret

knew now that these were songs that everyone knew, with prescribed parts, refrains, stanzas, conventions. Their formal patterns eluded him, but all the cues given and taken were hard to miss. He bolted from the cafe with a polite nod to the old violinist, who smiled back from beneath a thin moustache.

Stumbling through the medina streets, it was difficult to feel himself any longer the cougar-like wilderness athlete spryly sampling the pleasures of the town. Regret suspected that he might not be able to "dance down" an irritable quadriplegic if one presented. Ravenous hunger was not helping. Before he made any move, he would require food. Around the Boukamen were a number of cheap restaurants that served Ta Gine, a greasy pile of spicy fried vegetables. Regret turned into the first one he saw.

A brawny young man in a tight purple shirt greeted him with unnecessary ardor. Regret took a seat on a rug on the dirt floor without ceremony, leaning against the wall. Near the back wall, their eyes darting at him through the dimness, he saw several others also sitting on the floor, including a young Englishman in a lush new jellaba who did not stop talking as he checked out Regret, and a blonde

girl in blue jeans who did not stop laughing. Her laugh sounded American. She was definitely not laughing at what the Englishman said. The Englishman was whining.

"I mean those bastards were really trying to rip us off. Ten quid and those rugs would have unravelled before Tangier!"

Coming from the hood of the jellaba, the voice sounded like a recording played behind a foreign curtain. The girl laughed on. Purple shirt now crouched beside her, nodding as though he agreed. Yes, it was all very funny, this "Morocco." Purple shirt regarded the girl's quaking body with a fry cook's eye.

Regret turned forty-five degrees, so as to look out the door, relieved once again that he had never gone native in dress. Also that he had sold his last pair of blue jeans for many times their original price six months ago, and worn only baggy khaki castoffs since.

The street outside was now in blue shadow. A tourist couple passed, in full regalia of shorts and cameras and shoulder bags, unusual in this part of the medina. The Englishman shrieked.

"Did you see that! Bloody straight tourists looked like Yanks, like bloody George Meany or somebody from Ohio! They're just what I came down here to get away from, they're all over London."

The jellaba apparently assumed laughing girl would appreciate this devastating perception of her cruder countrymen. Unaddressed Regret, however, turned to the Britisher.

"Those were my parents, you twit," he said. "How would you like to wake up tomorrow?"

That really cracked up the laughing lass. Purple shirt responded by hopping up and fetching Regret his bowl of Ta Gine, which had been ready, or as ready as it was going to get, all along. The Englishman blinked a great deal but said nothing, regarding Regret coldly from beneath his hood.

That a boy, Regret applauded himself. Show these weenies who's boss. You're such an old hand at these rasty Berber bluff games that you've got at least a half a chance of leaving this country with your skin still on. Important papers, remaining savings, your few possessions, those you can forget about if you don't make some smart moves soon. But these Europa

punks better watch their step around you, huh Tiger? Live out on the edge, Limey, or watch your big ass on the flat.

As if to emphasize the point, a dashing young local dude came stroking at that moment through the door all smiles and purple shirt promptly leapt into his path to stop him with equal smiles and a back-breaking hug.

The two buddies went around in circles several times, slapping each other on the back and laughing, the slim newcomer struggling to break free, burly purple shirt wrestling him steadily back toward the door. When they finally broke apart, their voices each assumed an uglier edge but still their abrupt embraces walked the thin line between blows and hugs. And somehow the knives remained sheathed as the strange ballet went on: shoves and slaps, advances, retreats, shouts, loud laughs. The new arrival apparently felt he had some business with laughing girl. Purple shirt felt he had none. Laughing girl's laugh wound down alarmingly into a strange undulant noise like someone convincing themselves they're still alive between gut-wrenching retches. Perhaps she was realizing that she

would no longer own her blue jeans before the night was through. Perhaps not. Regret, meanwhile, awaited a break in the rowdy, delicate, dangerous Dance. Finally, purple shirt stood alone in the doorway, calling throaty adieus to his pal.

Through the blue streets Anthony Joaquin wandered. A lit glass storefront drew him to its verge. It was a barbershop, closed at this hour, though five men sat on the other side of the window: the barber and a late customer and an audience of three. They were all in great spirits, the watchers noisily advising the barber and the barbee. Regret's gaze drifted around the shop. Photographs of black American college basketball players cut from Sports Illustrated were pasted on the wall. A framed retouched photo of Hassan II, King of Morocco, in his youth, and a big glossy picture of Muhammad Ali. Overhead were shelves of huge jars of pickled olives. A lamp in a sheepskin shade lit the whole scene warmly. Regret was limp with longing to be in there laughing too, indistinguishable.

FOUR.

Some hours later, Regret sat in his room at the Bouk in the dark. His surfboard stood in a corner next to the low wooden chair he occupied; but the money belt on the table still contained no passport. Faint silver light hung in one high window. Then a skeleton key slipped with a soft click into the lock and it was like a hot grainy sourceless light had been fired through the hole to fill the room.

She entered, a featureless shadow in a keyhole shape but with hands framed in infrared as she drew up before him where he sat on the chair, and produced a little wooden box, the lid turned up in one hand like a blackjack ace turned over. Regret brushed the box away and tried to catch her arm, but she brought it back, shrugging him off. Regret dropped thirty bitter dirham in the box. She clapped the lid back on like a magician with no stage presence and disappeared. Regret sat alone in his room in the dark once again.

She was successfully inaccessible. From the first time he had managed to communicate his wishes, blocking her exit from a room and nodding grimly toward a scatter of change on a scarred wooden table, she had reckoned perfectly and agreed instantly to the terms of their contract, meeting them to the letter ever since. Yet never had she registered the least consideration of any of Regret's gestures which were not included in their pact. This coarse-faced little Berber maid, whose touch was as hard as the coins she hoarded, treated Regret, who could have pursued and had any number of tourist girls if he wanted women, treated Regret more candidly than any woman he could recall.

As she re-entered the room, he followed her with his eyes. Her outline seemed to burn its silhouette through the space before him as she crossed to the bed, knelt upon it, her head toward the wall, and drew the black bundle of her robes up around her waist. He could hear the sound of her spitting in her hand as she wet herself.

Was this really how they did it in the desert she came from? It seemed so hard to believe. She

wouldn't handle him or mouth him. She ferociously refused to allow him to go down on her. She kicked him sharply with her heel if his left hand went anywhere near her crotch. And she never seemed to give a damn which of the two proffered orifices he employed. She grew impatient if he was the least hesitant about commencing but, once mounted, took every thrust, caress, pause, dawdle, second and third wind and sprinting climax without protest or the slightest peep of pleasure or pain or adjustment of her stolid, well-planted posture.

Regret had concluded that she was a lesbian, that this whole country was homo, though the men he asked laughed in derision, demanding to know what the women could possibly do without the indispensable male instrument. Regret did not enlighten them on that score. Their uneasy sense of disenfranchisement in the face of this massive national conspiracy of bored, busy-elsewhere women, was undoubtedly bad enough as it was.

But gazing from his chair into the depths of that great black symmetrical vagary across the room, Regret could hear his consort beginning to mutter. It was no

time for anthropology. He rose, dropped his drawers on the floor, and crossed to the bed. He laid his hands on the warm upper haunches of his Sahara honey, just where her body disappeared into her dress, and let the heat from her loins go to work.

It was daylight before Regret got on the road. He had had to roust the Boukamen owner out of bed to get his passport back. Riding in the crowded aisle of a country bus bound for Agadir, his surfboard balanced on its pintail beside him, he decided to get out at Ifni village, to try to cover his tracks.

The onshores were still blowing as he approached the village on foot. Ifni, the only habitation on the Mogador side of the bay, was built of bricks so exactly the color of the little hillside it occupied that from this distance it was impossible to tell where the dirt ended and the houses began. When the road he was walking dropped off into space, Regret took a trail down the bank. He then picked his way through the boulders of the wide dry river bed at Ifni's foot.

An ancient Fanta sign was all the advertisement Ifni's tiny market bore. Regret left his board leaning on the wall outside and went in. Behind the counter, a handsome boy sat. Anwar. Regret had never seen him anywhere else.

"Walking," said Anwar.

"How you doin, Anwar. I'm just in for some water and a couple loaves of pita."

Anwar nodded and began to lift plastic liter bottles of water from a low shelf behind him onto the counter. He nodded toward Essaouira.

"You saw the truck?"

Regret shook his head.

"Government engineers. They will rebuild the bridge."

"You're kidding."

Anwar shrugged. It struck Regret as strange that Anwar should be so restrained about the biggest news Ifni could have received. According to Anwar, the bridge had been washed out in a flash flood and the hamlet had been like a ghost town ever since.

"More high times in Ifni then, eh?" he asked.

"The King," Anwar shrugged. "No."

Regret clicked his tongue sympathetically. Of course. There was nothing strange about Anwar after all.

The King's hostelry ban, again according to Anwar, had fallen on Ifni after a stormy period several years back when the village had been flooded with young foreigners in search of a safer hash heaven than Essaouira. Having no hotels, the local residents had been prevailed upon to provide lodging for the newcomers, which they gladly did, as the rents they received far exceeded the meager incomes they had gathered previously from the sea and the sandy earth. But the partying had gotten out of hand.

"People came crazy," Anwar had told him. "They burnt down roofs. One girl died from drugs. Bad boys from Essaouira stealing things. People they began to fleep out. They take Ass-eed you know, go off in the desert at night, take off all clothes. Many were taken away. Some to the hospital in Essaouira. Many Americans, they flew back home in ambulance planes. Finally the King said no, no more foreigners in Ifni. The people moved back to their houses. Then the bridge fell down and nothing. Nobody since, nothing. Till you."

Anwar was now digging the loaves of bread out of a box beneath the counter.

"Trucks?" said Regret. "Already this morning?"

"Yesterday."

"Oh. Yesterday. Anybody come out from town yet this morning?"

Regret did not have to be told that he would make a piss-poor shamus. Anwar didn't even deign to answer his question. He asked his own. "Where's your rucksack?"

"Believe it or not, I forgot it. You got a bag or something I could carry the stuff in?"

While Anwar looked around, Regret wondered how far he needed to go with this routine, whether he was really going to carry this stuff the two miles out to Mogador if Anwar came up with something like a cardboard box. It was easier walking of course, than the short mile straight over from the highway to camp, since from Ifni he walked the hard shore sand. But the real question was whether any of this ruse was necessary. Bread and water hardly looked like supplies for another contented week out at Mogador.

Anwar came up with a sturdy string bag. And a question that kicked Regret's idle suspicions into overspeed.

"How many kilos holds your rucksack?" he wanted to know.

"Oh," Regret waved his hands like an Italian. "I don't know. Maybe fifteen. It's not bad. At low tide. Down on the hard sand."

Regret was stuffing plastic bottles and pita bread rapidly into the string bag while he talked; but this persiflage did not seem to speak exactly to Anwar's point.

"You know Amen," said Anwar. "In Essaouira."

Regret's voice rose. "Yeah, sure. You know Amen?"

This question was almost amusing: all Moroccans knew all Moroccans.

"Yeah, sure," mocked Anwar. "He has done many things for you."

"Well I think we're about even, to tell you the truth."

"Do you know that I am not supposed to sell you even water, banned by the King?"

"I do now. Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you telling me this now?"

Anwar's mouth, the image of the flat deadly tone he had been assuming, suddenly broke into a dazzling grin. "Have a good walk. The wind will change in the night."

"Much obliged," muttered the camper, striding from the market and nearly forgetting his surfboard as he started down the trail to the beach.

Once on the hard sand, he briefly considered foregoing Mogador altogether, just turning around and heading back toward Essaouira and the road to Marrakech, sacrificing his campsite. But the thought that his apprehensions were perhaps entirely groundless and a certain sense too that the net he felt falling around him had its strange propriety which it would be impolite to avoid, turned his steps instead toward the southern cusp of the bay. He proceeded along the coast with his fingers throbbing around the rail of his board and his eyes tightly closed.

It was a technique of his for assembling mental strength. There were no trees to walk into or cliffs to stroll off, but the effort of keeping the softer warmer sand on one side and the grumble of surf on the

other required a concentration which calmed him. Also, yesterday's excesses had left a residue of dullness in his muscles which the self-overcoming of striding blind dispersed. Before he knew it, he was in the windy point region which he called Mogador. He cut through the dunes to his camp, which had not been touched.

But his empty rucksack lay half-buried by fine sand. And the two rocks from his fire ring which he had rolled onto his sleeping bag to keep it from blowing away had already settled out of sight. Finally, a cardboard box full of twigs and brush had built a long low elliptical dune on its lee side that ran all the way across the center of the site. In the Sahara they said the routes of even the main roads changed daily, according to the winds. Such that there was no use attempting to travel them without a local guide. Regret now fell on his camp with the actuarial eye of the caravanser.

Wetsuit, flashlight, butane camp stove: the most indispensable items would bring little. His sleeping bag, a dirty old relic from the days of cheap goose down, might be washed and peddled profitably to the right chilled camper. Blackened mess kit, box of

rain-ruined paperbacks with key pages sacrificed to the starting of forgotten cookfires, emergency plastic tube tent with holes burnt by clever hopping kif seeds: there was history here, but little to make up the difference in dirhams between what he had and what he needed. Regret stuffed it all in his rucksack anyway, all but the books. In the process, he stubbed a toe on a lump in the sand and discovered a shiny, super-lightweight Swiss thermos he had once purchased while under the spell of a brash girl in a "mountain store" in a faraway land. It might bring a tenth of its original cost in Marrakech.

So the south swell was still hitting at Mogador. And the surf was still a mess. Big cross-chops marred the thick faces and the wind toppled ragged sections all along the line. Half a mile out to sea, directly off the point, the historical Mogador: a dark hunk of island surmounted by huge skewed broken walls of stone, with narrow Moorish turrets cut in the tops of the walls: was alive with spray. Near the crest of the long wave of land which soared out nearly to touch the old ghost-castle, former port of Arab pirates, a rumpled surf bucaneer prepared to vacate.

Yet as the laden figure, a canvas-draped ellipse under one arm pointing the way, began to bisect the long wave-shape of sand where the dunes were now throwing long teat-shaped blue shadows to the west, three other figures moved out of Ifni, also bound for the Agadir road. One wore a striped jellaba, one a purple shirt, one led the way. It was a hundred miles across the hills to the nearest railway, at Marrakech.

FIVE.

"Slack Action"

Regret rolled his rucksack across the boxcar floor. It came to rest against the graceful white ghost of his surfboard, which he had already slid through the door. Regret himself stayed outside, standing on the toepath, one hand on the iron track of the high steel door. He was waiting for the slack to run out.

The Doppler accordion thunder began somewhere off to the west, roared crescendoing through this part of the train, the boxcar under his hand lurching with a sound like a metal kick to a metal stomach, then cracked away in diminishing snaps into the warm night toward Philadelphia. Regret took two steps and rolled easily into the groaning, now rolling car. He dragged his bag and board into a dark corner and curled up with them on a pile of soggy cardboard.

So: railhead to railhead: he had successfully entered the country.

But what a country. The magnitude, the plenitude, the wealth and sheer overextension of all he had seen this first day back followed him now into his little tramp nest like water into a hole. Since scurrying through Customs at dawn, and collecting a package for his friend T. Smoot at the P.O. downtown — passing between outrageously tall stone pillars as he fled, senses swimming with visions of prim vicious police dogs and grim ranks of agents waiting for him to set foot outside the building, rucksack of valuable drug slung casually over one shoulder — since daring to enter his baroque little name in the tremendous roll-book of his homeland, Regret had felt as dwarfed and despised as the child who arrives at school every night in his dreams stark naked. Roads, autos, lights, buildings, people, billboards, restaurants — even the railroad cars he ultimately trudged among in search of a westbound block, modest archaic conveyances so familiar to him that he could have catalogued fifty different features of each and still not begun to suggest his intimacy with their buffalo-colored brawn, seemed to the recent exile now unnecessarily huge, monumental, grotesque.

Weary infidel arms wrapped around his grubby cargo of contraband, Regret strove then to drown these still-born matters in sleep as the westbound freight began to pick up steam and the slack stretched out to stay.

He woke in a half light and crawled to the door to urinate. The train was speeding through an American town. Down a dim street of elms, Regret, clutching the jagged sill with his free hand as the boxcar clattered through a crossing and rippled the last of his silver stream out into an undulant sprinkler ribbon — Regret, clutching, whizzing, saw a boy who broke his heart. He was walking on a sidewalk in front of a small market with lighted windows. Though no more than ten years old, the lad was in full tackle football dress: great bulbous helmet with snarling faceguard silhouetted, tremendous ridiculous shoulders, too hefty hips over thin boy legs. Very simply, it was Regret himself, twenty years ago in some other town in the heartless heartland. Little Tony R. crawled back into his cave stricken with a senseless dread of his life.

Did he want to disembark at the next sweet throw-back burg, get a room at the Y and have everybody call him Tony as he applied for positions, or joined the Armed Forces, yet was being prevented by the great hump

of hash lashed to his back, was that why so sad? No. Then did he pity the child prematurely trapped in the technicolor trappings of terrible pigskin battle? Yes, but no. Then what? The sight had reminded him that he was returning, after eons of motion through interzones, to Square One. And that there was in fact no Square One, not for this child. That was what.

For Regret, when leaving his native land in another, chillier season, had left his life behind like an old suit of clothes in hock. And returning to reclaim those same sad duds was simply out of the question. Yet now that the exile's anonymity was deserting him each new aspect of old North American life, as it reappeared, was seeming more alien than the last. None of the old clothes would ever fit again, yet he felt he had no new measurements to offer. Finally, like every Dust Bowl orphan and goof in the Western world, he was bound for California. No hopeless hobo's prospects could be worse. In his money belt he carried a telegram naming a certain craft moored in Moss Landing Harbor, Monterey Bay, California — and that yellow scrap of misspelling was the one and only pawn ticket he was bound to cash. After that, an awful emptiness yawned.

It rained all that afternoon across Ohio and Regret tried to rouse himself by thinking about all the fine bosoms into which he had managed to get himself adopted. The Kalakukuis in Honolulu, the Kialoa and the Cloud inter-island, the Wheelers in Santa Cruz, SP. Families, ships, paternal corporations. And half a dozen lady loves. Each had kept him out of more rain than he cared to consider.

But then, dabbling at adulthood, Regret had acquired Elkhorn. As if to reverse the trend, to start providing shelter rather than be always taking it. And his suspicion as to his own essential orphanancy had never felt more confirmed than when he finally abandoned the old ranch to its new owners. Regret might be pushing thirty, but the claims of the perennial hatchling were still strong upon him. This thought made him slightly wild as he stared out the windy panel of his boxcar at the tractors and dull glass in which so much self shimmered: the smuggler as eternal suckling.

Moreover, these Americans all looked so occupied. Both invaded, conquered by a strange race of large and arrogant products, and busy, ostentatiously employed. No one crouched to no purpose in the graveyards, no one **crossed** the wide plains on foot alone. Regret himself,

his job now was carrying leaf, like a camel he had once despised.

In Topeka, the boxcar he rode was switched out at last. In a drug store in that town, while purchasing ointment for the nasty purple sores on his legs and feet, those lingering souvenirs of Mogador's merciless shore-break, Regret discovered, to his astonishment, a copy of Surfer Magazine. He took it with him into the grain hopper which he hopped that evening. And he wallowed in the wind-whipped pages and frames, the turquoise imminencies imaged thereupon, until darkness fell. Then he dreamt through two crew changes into Colorado, his mind still buried in California juice ... before he was switched out onto a siding at dawn and quickly buried by a bulk load of itchy winter wheat sprayed by mirthful workers from above.

So it was an all but Chaplinesque Regret who finally arrived at Moss Landing Harbor, Monterey Bay, California. Tattered clothes, battered knapsack, wheat stems still shooting like war feathers from his hair — he approached with a game lanky stagger that particular trimaran named in the telegram, which turned out to be dry dock. Asking no one's leave, he boarded her, and

drew the tall ladder up behind him. A bright sun beat on the empty deck. Before he went below, he unburdened himself of the treasure so long strapped to his back. So long, treasure. He tipped an invisible bowler to the dope and waved a similar cane at the Pacific which shone beyond the harbor jetty.

Leaving the foil package spread open in the gangway behind him, he crawled away into the sailboat's cabin. Through a dim chaos of equipment he inched, groping past spiky grinders and cold arch-welders, past sea anchors and chemical toilets to a soft final lair of toppled stacks of old girlie magazines and thick books in German. And there his late aimless odyssey, a loop of some ten months and twenty thousand miles, came quietly to a quiet close, with its crafty hero folded in a fetal ellipse in a high and dry hull beside the water.

Regret woke in a confusion of craft. Four days of submissive hibernation in the noisy crannies of trains came back in a rush to suggest that he was only

delayed in one more desert twilight siding. Then the slow recognition of the nautical quality of his cave brought with it a thousand other wakings below other decks than these.

:::::Rolling automatically out of his aft hammock on Flying Cloud at the sound of the boom swinging over the cockpit and jib sail flapping, assuming that someone had allowed her to jibe accidentally. Vaulting through the hatch to find George, the skipper, at the helm, and Barkley, the mate, hauling silently on the jib sheet. Five miles off Lahaina and they were changing course, falling off their close reach to town and heading out to sea, east south east, between Lanai and Maui. Bound for Big Island?

"Kahoolawe," hissed George, his blue eyes bloody in the red binnacle light before the wheel.

Barkley tittered as he winched the last slack out of the sheet and cleated it. "OK with you, Aka?"

Regret said nothing. He climbed through the cockpit and went forward, absently checking the anchor beneath the bowsprit before taking a seat on the deck, his back against the mast. He was naked and shivering slightly beneath the Hawaiian stars. Off the starboard bow, tremendous crimson streamers and intermittent

yellow firework pops marked the Navy's nightly bombing of Kahoolawe.

Of course it was OK with Regret. He had no more business in Lahaina than George or Barkley did. He and Barkley were fugitives, each currently passing under assumed names and best advised to stay out of towns anyway; while George would re-supply his ship at sea if he could, anything to avoid hated civilization. Barkley had only asked Regret's permission out of nervousness, because Regret, though only nineteen, was a notch above him on the Cloud's unspoken totem pole of command ... just a notch below George. Yet the Cloud was George's boat absolutely, and she sailed where he said. It was the other passengers on this crossing, particularly two Canadian girls who had been miserable since the minute they left Honolulu yesterday morning, who might mind this detour to the uninhabited desert island eight miles off Maui's Makena coast.

Yet only Regret had woken at the sound of the schooner's changing course. And Regret went where the boat went. It was a tractability long and devoutly cultivated. Learned and perfected on Kialoa, where destinations had been like antic menus with no relation

to what they actually ate, his skills of existential plasticity had really been put to the test on Flying Cloud under the autocratic whimsy of George. And they passed, and passed, and passed. Yet tonight, regarding Orion, the bow splash growing louder as they rode the trades on their new broad reach, something rankled, something new.

To be borne to a barren bombing target by the arrogant heir to an East Coast coal fortune:::::

Regret clambered out of the trimaran's shadowy cabin into the last light of a day that had begun somewhere east of Tehachapi. Venus was already burning above Moss Landing Harbor. Dew was already gilding the deck. He sucked hungrily at the damp cool harbor air. He watched murky figures move inside the windows of The Harbor Light, Moss Landing's only bar. No, Moss Landing wasn't much. Just a grubby little harbor for commercial fishers, a few charters, and the odd destitute yacht that couldn't afford Santa Cruz or Monterey. Also a short row of shops for tourists, and maybe forty or fifty cheap houses scattered on a hill south of the harbor, virtually every one occupied by workers at the PG&E Power Plant across the highway. So Moss Landing

was just about Regret's speed, as far as that went. Yet he found himself fiercely wondering nonetheless whether he was in fact free to simply leave the foil package there on the galley counter and continue on his way. The awful prospect was obliterated, the awful question answered, by the brawling conviction with which an old pickup jounced across an empty lot at that moment and abruptly parked beside the boat yard fence.

The man who emerged from the truck was like a truck himself. Regret could hear low whispers of laughter rippling through his big frame like oil slowly splashing side to side in a drum. He circled the pickup and began hoisting equipment from the back. When both arms were full and a huge industrial hose was coiled over his shoulder bandolier-style, the beast turned toward the boat, stomped both boots in the dirt, and growled out loud before starting to stagger under his load toward the trimaran. Watching him approach, Regret flashed a row of Arabs, lean and sidling inside their tricky jellabas, being scattered like tenpins by the seven league boots of the approacher. And when the overloaded arriver reached the bottom of the

ladder and looked up to see Regret looking down at him
... the trespasser knew that his own time of idle ter-
giversation was at least temporarily over.

- "TAMARACK YOU LONG LEGGED HORSE PUD IT'S ABOUT GOD
DAMN BULL FUCKING TIME!"

SIX.

"If that's all hash, we're millionaires."

Regret, sprawled limply in the cockpit after his recent release from the ecstatic jailhouse of a T.J. Wheeler embrace, did not reply. The broad back of Wheeler was blocking the glow from the gangway lamp as he stood now staring down into the cabin, swinging his big beard back and forth like someone was yanking it. A strange mix of growls and laughter was rippling up from the hatch.

"Tamarack, Tamarack," Wheeler was muttering, his head swinging over the hash. "The second we turn some of this shit, I'm gonna shove that Moe's dry dock fee so far up his ass he won't find it till Halloween." T.J. whirled, letting out the light, then blocking it again as he faced Regret. "He was gonna try to impound my ship! My ship! Guess what the plan was."

"Drive a truck through his office."

Wheeler giggled a fast high piccolo gust. "No. I was gonna steal it back! Just launch her myself

tommorow night and hope to hell she floated. Then beat like a bastard all night for Monterey or Santa Cruz."

"With no forestay?" Regret pointed toward the bow. "You'd have had the mast in your lap."

T.J. shrugged, round shoulders rising in the gangway glow. He threw his wooly head back to look up the mast. "Well all right," he said. "Tamarack old salt. Just what I been needin, a details man. But where, my lad, in the donkey fucking world is Rabat Maroc? That telegram chased me down here clear from Cordova. The old lady brought it over. I thought some kinda A-rabs had a hold of you! God-damit, Tamarack, stick your face down in this light."

Wheeler backed down into the cabin and Regret crawled into the gangway. After several seconds of glittery-eyed gazing, T.J. pronounced, "You look like shit."

Regret humphed. "Danke. You want to know what you look like?"

"No."

"You look like you belong on a Bulgarian freighter. On a concrete boat with steel bulkheads ten feet thick.

I don't know where you got this thing, but the first time the wind doesn't blow, you're gonna get mad and put those fuckin lumberjack boots right through the hull of this three-winged potato chip."

Wheeler chuckled menacingly, then put his hands prayer-fashion to his chest, bowed his head slowly, turned, and silently assumed, as well as the narrow confines of the cabin would allow, a perfect judo ready position. The transformation of presence was impressive. When Regret nodded, he abandoned the posture and pounded one palm against the galley bulkhead.

"I'll tell you one thing, Tamarack: I ain't no fisherman. Not after that fuckin winter on those sardine boats. I sold my gill-net rig, my permit, everything. Got my ass back down here just as fast as that ice would let me go. Bought this beauty with the proceeds. What do you think, really?"

Wheeler was not asking what Regret thought of his abandonment of a profitable occupation — in the ten years Regret had known him, Wheeler had been: a motorcycle hoodlum, a mechanic, a welder, gun-smith, cowboy, logger, homesteader, card dealer, drug dealer,

bar owner, bar tender, teamster, judo champion, and, most lately, gill netter in the Copper River mouth of Alaska; so dramatic shifts of scene and livelihood were for him an annual event at the least — but rather what he thought of the sailboat in whose bowels they presently parleyed.

The question was terribly serious. Regret chose to postpone it.

"Feed me," he demanded. "Since I just saved your ass."

Wheeler chortled as he remembered the dope. He patted the package tenderly with one large hairy paw. "Ho-ho," he crowed, "Son, that six hundred was my last. Do we split the take right up the crack or do I have to drown you like a kitten in a sack right now?"

Regret meowed. "You can have it all."

"Bullshit," said Wheeler. "We split it."

Over a two can dinner of chili and peas swiftly heated on a little gimbal stove and consumed off used paper plates, T.J. tactlessly pried into A.J.'s personal life.

"You still got that professor on the string, or she get smart and grab onto some more learned dick?"

"I couldn't tell you. I haven't heard a word from these parts since I split."

"My Ma says you were calling the house every week or two for a while but then you quit. That old Southern Pack still got their hooks in you or not?"

"Beats the shit out of me."

"I'm glad to hear it. If they ain't fired you already, here's how you oughta quit: go right up to Company headquarters tomorrow morning and squeeze that old President's nuts and tell him every nigger in the System needs a raise and a bonus by noon or he's gonna be singin' soprano for his lunch. That's what I'd do."

Regret guffawed through his peas and beans. Wheeler probably would do that. Over the years T.J. had bombed badly at several, insufficiently mythic occupations, like pharmacist, football player, and college student. But he always managed to turn the failures into extravaganzas. Downtown Drugstore Missing Shipment of Dangerous Drugs, Assistant Suspected; Blowhard Coach Thrown Nude In Snow By Own Benched Tackle; Bleeding Heart Dormitory Outraged At Commercial Gunsmith Operating In Midst; etc.

"Well I haven't got the least idea what the railroad's up to," said Regret. "I started making those calls from this Post Office in a big town called Essaouira, and I wasn't getting any sympathy, so I quit."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, in these little desert towns where I was doing it first, making these collect calls to California every couple weeks, the whole place would turn out to watch, the whole village. And then when Clara would refuse the charges, like I wanted her to, letting me know that they hadn't called me back to work yet, all the villagers would be so shocked that they'd take me home, feed me, put me up, make this whole big fuss over me because they felt so bad that I had such a bad family back home. It was great."

T.J.'s laugh was like the booming of an empty boxcar at speed.

"In Essaouira," shrugged Regret, "nobody gave a shit."

T.J. boomed through several crossings, rode out the last rocking billows of his mirth, then drove a huge fist into his palm. "Well you're nuts if you

ever lift a finger for that fuckin Company again," he declared. "Working for any other man than yourself warps your mind, that's why."

Regret crumpled his paper plate and cracked a beer. He had heard it before. Abusive candor was nothing new between he and T.J. When it hit home, he would hit back. Meanwhile, he experienced no need to note Wheeler's own obsession with occupations: how T.J. never went a week without, if not paid employment, or at least apprenticeship to some skilled trade, than a consuming independent project like homesteading or dealing dope.

Or skippering a sailboat? Regret watched Wheeler carefully cut a chunk from the topmost brick of hash and tried to imagine T.J. on a small sailboat at sea. He recalled some of the stillness, the agility, that strange submission that the situation finally required of anyone who would survive it. Judoka poise notwithstanding, he couldn't see it.

"Now we find out," Wheeler was saying, rigging a pipe from the cardboard core of a toilet paper roll and some tin foil. "Now we find out whether Tamarack has done made our fortune or sold us down the river.

Reichsmarshal Moe will be most interested."

Intent on his madeshift construction, T.J.'s undulant undercurrent of chuckles was meandering through assorted tone-shifts. Regret noted each change closely. Strangers were confused and unnerved by the big man's constant quiet laughter, But Regret at one time could have compiled a complete typology, *The Humours of Wheeler*, cataloguing a thousand different laughs and what each meant. T.J. had one for every notch in a whole range of occasions and sentiment, with only some of them signifying actual mirth. But Regret was out of practice now, and the noise was only restless intimate energy splashing gently around the cabin.

T.J. presented the homemade pipe to Regret. As he crumbled hash into the shallow bowl, he asked, "You out of that Elkhorn place yet?"

"Financially, yeah. My stuff's still there though."

"Glad to hear it. It was a god damn beautiful place, but that shit that was going on when I came through last spring, man it had no future. No future. Everybody fuckin everybody else. That joint was turning into a holding tank for hard-ons."

This remark hit too close. Regret countered accordingly.

"Just what you could have used up there in Ruby, right? Little more of that and we might not a left two acres of excellent homegrown in the ground. While we scooted into town and let it all freeze and rot. I Need Ruby Immediately."

Wheeler glowered. A.J. laughed. His joining T.J. on the Yukon homestead site had been Wheeler's idea from the start, and their ultimate abandonment of their only cash crop after two months in the wilderness, two months in which they did not see a single woman, Regret was always pleased to lay entirely to Wheeler's account.

"Fuck you Tamarack," grumbled the big man, lighting a match. "Smoke."

After they had each had a hit, Wheeler was nodding his approval and starting to spread a dead serious grin down inside his beard. He held the match for Regret's second hit.

"Hey, you find any surf over there, in Africa?"

Through smoke-full lungs, Regret wheezed, "Sure did."

"Goddam goddam," said Wheeler, sucking on his second hit. He held it a minute, then blew it out and

announced, "THIS IS GOOD SHIT! WE ARE RICH!"

They toked and fulsomely giggled for a few more turns, then laid the pipe down.

T.J. threw out his arms and shouted, "OK OK, we'll hit Africa then! Surf the Sahara! But first it's the South Seas! Nuku goddam Hiva!"

Wheeler vaulted past Regret, up the gangway and into the night. Then he stood there in the cockpit, straddling the hatch, and howled and shook the trimaran's sheet lines like some deranged breed of ape or wolf. The craft rocked beneath him.

"Look lively Queequeg! Because here comes the Terribe T and his flat-headed first mate Tamarack!"

Behind Wheeler hunkered the huge Moss Landing Power Plant, three white cylinders soaring up into a foggy sky like the teeth of a whale who could eat a city. Regret bent his flat head. The sight was too much, the two behemoths belching ragged high-burn power into the void like that.

"WELL TELL ME TAMARACK! CAN SHE DO IT? IS THIS THE BOAT?"

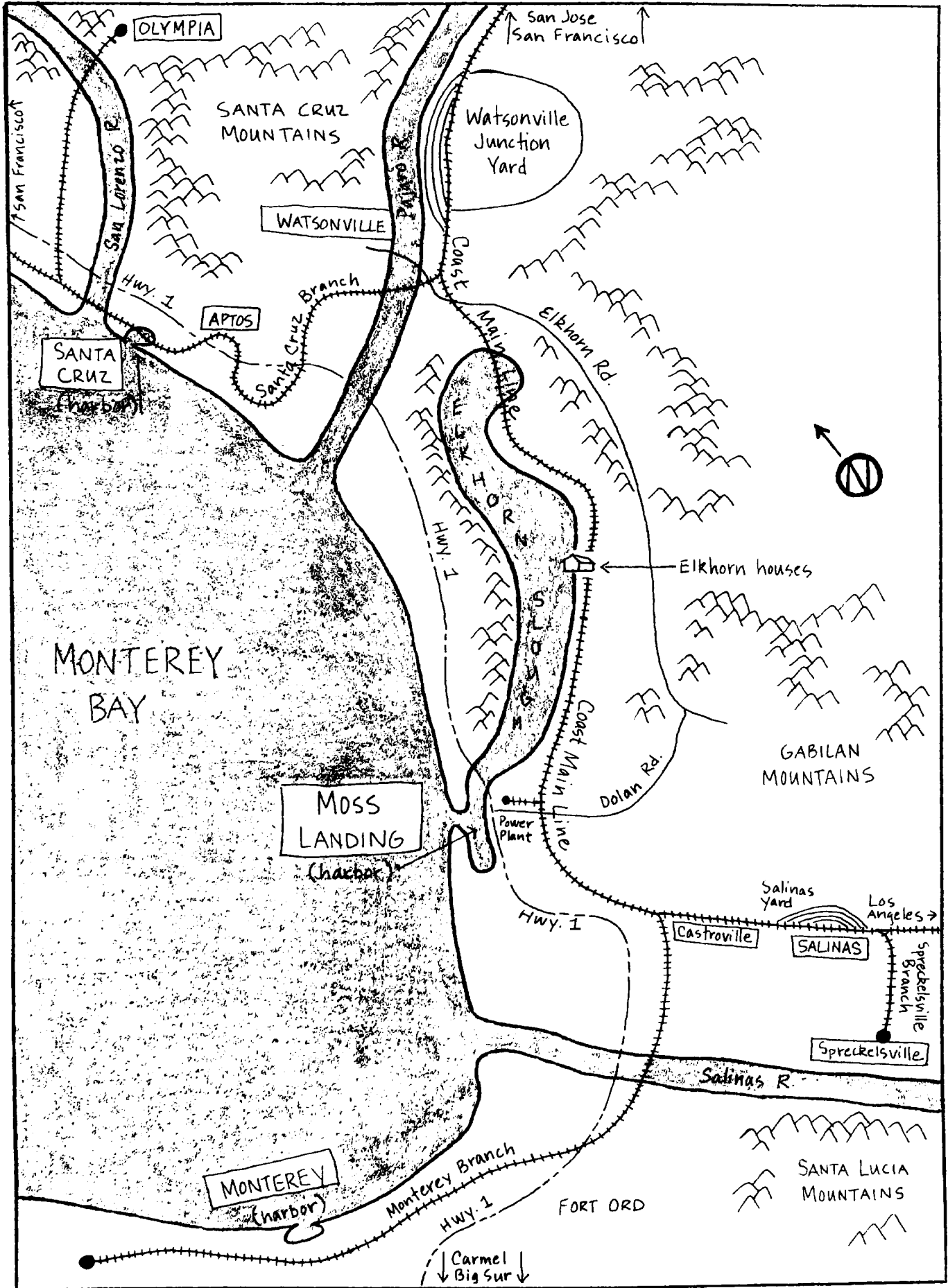
Regret lifted heavy eyes and looked slowly around the tri.

He didn't know much about trimarans. This one was a Phillipine design he had seen once or twice before, thirty-six feet long and probably twelve feet wide at the centerline sheer. The outside hulls were eight feet shorter than the main hull. They were hollow but only used for stowage. The deep main cabin extended in wide shallow bunks up over both wings. Two more bunks were in the bow. The galley was in the gangway. An aft cabin formed the transom, the outside hulls ending at its forward wall. A large diesel in-board was underneath the cockpit in a severely dismantled state. (Her previous owner had apparently decamped with a goodly amount of rigging and essential accessories.) The construction was wood under fiberglass. T.J. had nearly finished with all the hull repair that required hauling out. Altogether, it appeared to be a sturdy and comfortable craft, though the shallow draft in the three-hulled design made the boat feel to Regret unsound, like a lovely illusion. The decks were turquoise, the hulls white. She was sloop-rigged. First impression was that T.J. had been

reasonably treated for \$6200, though it would cost at least that much more again before this ship could hope to travel offshore.

But Regret was less interested in his immediate lodgings than in the strange scallop of California coast that his little capsule had come crashing down among. It was strange because so intricately familiar. Standing on the trimaran's stern in the damp harbor night, he could more or less survey the whole of Monterey Bay and adjacent districts — by the greenish smears in the watery sky in some directions, and the unrelieved darkness in others — and the associations that this gauzy horizon, only torn by the Power Plant's massive extrusion immediately inland, the associations that the view afforded the flat head came so thick and fast that he suddenly felt himself floundering in more foreign mental waters than in all his months abroad. And it struck him now as "strange" indeed that such different towns as he knew to lie in the various directions, from wealthy artsy fashionable Monterey and Santa Cruz to rundown Mexican farm centers Watsonville and Salinas, should each exude the exact same municipal hue. Did local genius count for nothing in these United States?

But most alien and frightful of all was the thought that a creature with his face and name was considered to be known in many of these same auras and shadows and their interstices around the Monterey Bay. The man in question retreated into the trimaran's cabin to crash, T.J. slept on deck.



SEVEN.

"Neck Deep at Noon"

Seagulls were making a loud pond of wings and heaving bird shoulders in the half-open mouth of a half-dumped dumpster behind the rambling produce stand beside which Regret was hitchhiking north. It was midmorning, sunny and cool. Regret had woken on the trimaran's deck to find T.J. already gone with the truck. At intervals a bird would burst through the screaming surface of his fellows and soar from the dumpster, a strand of rotten vegetable trailing from his beak.

Regret was bound for Watsonville Junction Yard, a spot that had actually run a distant second on his shrivelled list of places to visit while in California. But if his first choice had gotten him shanghaied to Micronesia within a matter of hours, then he felt he owed it to somebody to see what would come of this. California was so protean. Also, daylight had climbed

in his sleeping bag with him like some suffocating leech making free with his bound and gagging mental faculties. And now tourists passed him, accelerating from the wide vegetable pullout onto Highway 1 in Montegos, Capris, and baby blue Gremlins with Kansas plates. Bushels of bargain artichokes smirked at him through shrinking back windows. Finally a soldier from Fort Ord stopped in a souped-up Valiant.

"My old man was a Major," lied Regret en route. His father had been a Master Sergeant when he met eternity.

"You know where to find sympathy in the dictionary," said the young soldier.

Bitter, bitter, Regret said to himself. Right between baby and bull dung.

He got out at Pajaro bridge and caught a ride into Watsonville town on a farm truck. The last mile out to the Junction, a ragtag neighborhood of canneries, warehouses, and churches, he walked, stopping once at a tiny market to buy a cube of grainy, cinammon-laced Mexican chocolate with some change he had found laying loose on the cabin floor. The extreme sweetness of the candy suited his mood; he could feel his

teeth rotting in his head in a Yucatan jungle as he trudged past an asphalt playground where Mexican children played softball umped by nuns. Then he crossed the Santa Cruz Branch Line and veered left across the wide east end of Junction Yard — noting the recent collapse of more portions of the old brick roundhouse as he passed, crossing forty sets of silent tracks, and coming slowly into the shadow of rumbling locomotives as he made for the crew door of the depot.

No one was in the crew room. In a groove of habit so deep he could not have missed had he tried, Regret crossed the room and went straight to his own name tag, which, along with hundreds of others, still rode one of the dozens of tracks which lined the far side of the large window that formed the inner wall of the crew room. It was turned up on end though, so that his initials were buried in the track. His Seniority, he saw, must have been working for months already. But the rest of the whole great intricate arrangement of multi-colored tags and columns — a sprawling rebus that would describe the men on trains and engines for a hundred miles around, and for days to come, to one who knew how to read it — went out

of focus as Regret peered through "The Board" to the office beyond it and saw there a great dull slab of a face regarding him hotly.

"You wanna mark up, Regret?" shouted the fat clerk through the glass.

"Yeah," Regret shouted back. It was always best to be definite hereabouts.

"You've gotta see the Trainmaster first, and he won't be back till Monday!"

Regret turned to go.

"I'll put you on the Emergency Board though," bellowed the young clerk, as though that were some kind of threat, seizing Regret's tag and revealing the "A.J." before the "Regret." "What's your number?"

"Moe Marine, Moss Landing."

"No phone?"

"No."

"Then we can't call you."

"Yes you can."

"It's outside the call limits!"

"No it's not."

Regret departed the depot without waiting for the bellicose reply he faintly heard through the Board.

He walked on the gravel toepath beside the Westbound Main Line, eyes down, for a half mile — past the old passenger depot, out to the Spring Switch where the Eastbound Main swerved into the West to form single track. There he paused a minute, listening to the power switch mutter inside its silver control box — before he continued walking east, under the Elkhorn overpass, and out into the marshy memorial silence of Elkhorn Slough.

It was like treading through time instead of through space. It always had been. As Elkhorn Road swung away through the hills, and the dirt road alongside the tracks veered sharply at the edge of the Slough and died abruptly among half a dozen old clapboard cottages, the landscape seemed to visibly settle and mellow, to age a hundred years before your eyes. The rough-cut line of poles by the tracks could just as well have been telegraph. The Mexican woman and her daughter gathering laundry behind one of the cottages and glancing your way, framed by neat corn plot and tethered goat, might as well have been working outside some ancien hacienda. And when the track went from gravel bed to low heavy redwood trestle over a

shallow still finger of Slough, of reedy blue water which briefly crossed beneath it, and then curved away toward the main body of the Slough, leaving the last Mex shack behind, the solitude and sense of timelessness grew enormously, and Regret started to wonder if coming this way was not after all a mistake.

The stumps of pilings ran in three jagged rows here out into the water, like the poison stakes at the bottom of a Bengal man trap, capped white with bird lime. Now (then?) he was directly across from the old Kelly place, a cluster of buildings so weathered and ramshackle that even in the bright noon time they were difficult to distinguish from the grassy hill they stood on, maybe a third of a mile across the water. The long broad porch on the house undulated and finally fell away across the eye exactly like the crest of the hill above it did across the horizon; and the great eucalyptus grove which half enclosed the place had somehow lent its exact hue to the huge barn it was already partly shadowing. No sign of modern machinery, not even the husk of a truck or tractor rotting in the weeds, gave the lie to the sense that this homestead belonged in another century. On the

roof of the barn, just barely legible, ten-foot letters still spelled out: "Mail Pouch Tobacco." Once upon a time, Regret had explained that that message was meant for a viewer in exactly the spot he was now, to a listener who then tried to picture that other time. ::::Her grey eyes flickering away from the old ranch houses toward the dark low line of the tracks across the water. "There must have been more passenger trains then," she said.

Regret set his drop line down on the stern seat of the little rowboat, turned, and laid his head down in her lap. "Six or eight a day," he said. "Not counting the troop trains out to Ord." He rolled his face into her belly and spoke into the material there. "There was The Lark," he said. "The Daylight, The Del Monte, The Zipper. Some passenger would be reading their Collier's, set down their bourbon, look out the window, notice the sign. Mail Pouch. Maybe one of the Kelly girls standing barefoot down here by the water checking the fowl traps, she'd be watching the train go by."

Regret raised a hand and lifted the ragged blue tanktop to expose one heavy-nippled breast.

"Just checking for mud hens," he said.

A faint breeze over the water began to bunch and darken the nipple. She lifted her arm to tug her shirt down but, with a hand in the middle of her back, he brought her forward and guided the breast down into his mouth. She grunted softly and stroked his hair, continuing to watch the wide silent Slough around them while he nursed.

"How long was the Board this morning?" she asked softly.

"Mmpf," he said.

"Will you have to work tonight?"

"Mmpf."

She laughed and took his head in her arms. Later, she lay in the bottom of the boat, her bare heels braced on the gunwales, while he rose and fell in the sun above her:::::

This was bullshit. It had never been. If they had once balled in the rowboat, it had been on a foggy day at low tide with the boat pulled clear up onto the bunch grass, fifty yards from the water. Gayle had been afraid of the Slough, afraid of the mud and the water that was knee-deep in the morning and neck-deep

at noon. Regret had always fished this end of the Slough alone, except perhaps when T.J. was down.

But the memory had served its purpose. Rounding the last little left curve before the tremendous looping right-hand Elkhorn Curve — the only curve on the Coast where an 8,000-foot train could be viewed without obstruction from both caboose and engine — Regret was now treading the edge of a swamp of ghosts, tiptoeing on ties that sucked at his every footfall, slogg-ing through a massive estuary of emotions whose essential message was simply: loss. A time, a place, a horrific amount of attachment and investment: all lost. It was the irrevocability that was so leveling. No matter if he and Gayle had dared the treacherous waters together or they hadn't. No matter if her timidity had been instrumental in their failure; or whether there really had been the full-blown philosophical impasse between she and Jennifer, between Callie and Tell, between everyone and everyone, with Regret ultimately quartered on some circular Procrustean bed of group marriage, as it had seemed. All that mattered was this certainty that nothing would ever be as complete, that a descent from a certain

summit of wholeness had been occurring ever since. As the Elkhorn houses themselves loomed in the distance, dwarfed by their own little grove of eucalyptus, it seemed to Regret that he would trade fifty picture perfect Mogadors for one damp tumbledown overcrowded Casa Oso Boho, without a second's hesitation.

Around the houses new satellite structures and curios clustered. Old-fashioned cookstoves, half-built camper shells, water heaters and auto engines and row boats, a complete blacksmith's bellows with anvil and forge. In back, ancient overstuffed couches and sofas were scattered among new rabbit hutches. Half a bright blue barrel spun easily on a pole. A North Vietnamese flag sagged onto mossy slate shingles from the crown of the far house roof. Regret saw these things all through the dark glass of despair. Yet he saw more, saw other times: a misty pale hemisphere back in the woods, ribbed by branches, glowing and leaking frosty smoke through its peak; a door cut in the highest skirts under the near house and a pile of dirt growing slowly beside it; a treehouse, then another, then a whole colony of solid forms floating up there among eucalyptus; and the pasture across the

tracks full of cars, sweet music out over the water, and a hundred munchkins, large and small, running loose around the peninsula, the half-acre mound that the tracks made into an island.

Though he had been until recently a significant landowner in the area — if only for the symbolic claim that his location, on the only piece of land on the Slough side of the tracks for three miles, gave him to a good part of the Slough itself, which was in fact public land — Regret now approached his old holding as if he had no business whatsoever in the region. The closer he got to the old red houses, the more suspiciously he acted, the more he lurked and lingered and almost seemed to try to disappear into the low toepath weeds he trudged. Someone watching him approach from the houses might have imagined him some kind of upright rabid dog and gone for the shotgun, or recognizing him, they might have laughed. Which is what Callie Fleming did. Laughed.

"Hey Regret, you sneaking dog, what are you doing, you're supposed to be riding those trains, not sniffing them!"

Regret "remembered himself" and strode manfully onto the property, reaching up through the old porch railing to shake hands with his successor. With some bitterness (baby, bull dung) he noted that Callie was looking very much the rustic lesbian matriarch in her loose-fitting faded coveralls with no shirt underneath. He tried not to gape at the glimpses of her breasts he got as she went inside to get him a beer. Then he noticed a hefty young woman up behind the hutches with tits swinging free in the sun as she hoed rabbit shit into rows. Gay women, he told himself firmly, put little stock in mammary glands. Still, he had trouble keeping his eyes on Callie's face when she returned, handing him his beer and regarding him steadily, with great kind limpid eyes, as he sipped and, with each sip, let his gaze slip down over her large body which, once upon a long-lost time, he had enjoyed to the limit of his natural powers.

"How's Gayle?" asked Callie.

"I couldn't tell you. How's the muff-diving business?"

"Better than ever."

Music started up in the other house, the old Rancho Rauncho, which stood like a perfect reproduction

beside the Oso Boho, barely ten yards of crabgrass separating the two. Certain structural idiosyncrasies had once caused Regret to conclude that the Rauncho was the first built, though others swore the Boho came before, and old Carl, who owned the broad cow pasture and oak grove between the houses and Elkhorn Road, said that they had been constructed simultaneously by a crazy Mormon homesteader with two wives who each wanted her own house.

"Got a lotta ladies living out here these days?" asked Regret.

"Oh, between five and ten, depending on what's happening. Wanna look around, see what we've done?"

"Not really." Regret had already noticed, through the Boho's front windows, extensive changes. The wall of bookshelves he had built for Gayle was gone, with harshly colored posters tacked up in their place. He could also see from the porch where they stood that a shitty job of re-roofing had been recently done on the Rauncho. "I just came by to pick up a couple things I need for work."

They went inside and climbed a ladder into the attic, where he found his things neatly stored in boxes

and stacks and Callie quickly found him his lantern, switch keys, Timetable, Rule Book, and an old pair of work gloves.

"The least I could do," she said, when he muttered amazement at how his belongings had been organized and stored in his absence. "After those terms you gave me."

They stood on the porch again. Callie had her hand on his sleeve. Regret was transfixed by her alabaster bicep. She squeezed his forearm fraternally.

"You take care of yourself," she was saying. "Put on some weight. And don't let that maniac T.J. lead you astray. And anytime you need a hot meal, you just come out here. It's not a long walk from the Landing."

"How bout a hot mama," mumbled he, "You can keep the meal."

Callie laughed, releasing his forearm, and slapped him hard across the shoulder.

"Well you go see Gayle about that," she said, her tone changing. "This place is out of the maternity business."

Regret went down the steps, through the old iron gate between blackberry hedges, emerging into the sun. And continued his trek down the tracks, passing between

the high canyon of eucalyptus and Carl's half dozen redwood — the trees the old rancher had planted forty years ago to frame the ancient black railroad water tower, in the days when Elkhorn still had a siding — and out into the wide brightness of the south end of the Slough. Here the hills to the west, which hid nearly all the Slough from Highway 1 and the coast, sloped sharply down into low dunes, revealing the three great stacks of the Moss Landing Power Plant. Here the Slough started its long curve west toward the sea, and the railroad tracks swung away to the east to start the hundred-mile climb up the Salinas Valley. Yet Regret kept his eyes fixed on the Moss Landing siding branching off ahead, and the Dolan Road overpass just beyond that, where he would leave the tracks to cut down through the power plant to the harbor.

No, he no longer tempted memory with glances out across the dark, elaborately eroded mud and shallow riffled water of the Slough. Nor did he study the familiar equipment he now carried: the soft creased grimy colorless cowskin gloves, worn last fall or summer or the season before into a shiny diesel-fragrant tatter; the silver brakeman's lantern, its

body dented and bashed with scars of paint, green and orange and black and yellow and red, from collisions with a thousand ladders and brakes and sides of boxcars — the orange from Salinas reefers; nor the yellow Timetable in its bright plastic sheath, the leather-bound Rule Book, or the heavy brass keys on retractable chain. For these were only baggage tacked onto the man who set his mind rabidly now on his immediate destination. In America, yes, even the dogs had jobs.

EIGHT.

"Compensated Labor"

"There it is."

A row of backpacks and a listless pack of loiterers marked the entrance to the establishment they had sought for half the morning. T.J. parked the truck impatiently in the bus stop immediately in front of Santa Crus Switchboard's new location.

"How much you want to bet this beer's gone or empty when we get back," he said, setting the can on the seat and climbing out of the truck.

Regret stared at the can. "Two dirham," he said.

Shouldering his knapsack, Regret followed T.J. through the small sidewalk crowd. T.J. nodded and muttered and aggressively raised his brows in slightly jive fashion at whichever of the strangers seemed inclined to greet them. Inside, a male volunteer asked them their business.

"Big George Devine, we would like please to see, if he's around," said Wheeler.

"Yeah I'm here," boomed a voice from behind a notice-bedecked partition.

T.J. swept around the partition and caught the source of the voice in a blindside bearhug, growling, "I got you now you commonistic mother, so kiss your Girl Scout ass goodbye."

Devine, though as large as T.J., sat calmly back down on the bench he had been in the process of rising from. Regret hung back. When T.J. freed Devine, their mutual roar of greeting rose up and broke over Regret like remarkable shorebreak.

"Goddam goddam goddam," cried Devine. He stood and turned. He was balder than Regret remembered, and his big red beard was bigger. But his great patriarchal beak, bright watery eyes, and loud eager East Coast voice had not changed.

"Two goofs I never expected to see again! Is it really Aka Regret or just another backpacker?" Regret and he were shaking hands Indian-style. "Man it's good to see you guys! Tell me you're moving back to the Cruz and came in here to find a place to live."

"Only if you got a carnivorous commune into poaching and Republicans," growled the ex-gill-netter,

through Alaskan whiskers.

"Or two Scorpio co-eds into growing," offered Regret.

"Well hey," Devine said, lapsing into his professional manner, "Even if you guys are just passing through or whatever, you ought to come to a benefit thing we're doing tonight for the Duck Island folks."

"George, I don't believe you," T.J. said. "Still keeping up this space station, still scamming and organizing every ounce of energy in this burnt-out town, and still working your ass off for free."

"Hey, I'm slowed way down," Devine said modestly.

"Well, we'll try to drop by, but it's hard to say. Right now we're on important business. I don't suppose your little brother still operates out of this area?"

"Yeah." Devine made a face like someone falling asleep. "I mighta known."

Back in the truck, T.J. said, "What did I tell you," holding up the beer can, which was indeed now empty. "These goons would stay alive about one day up in Cordova."

But Regret was busy wondering how he was going to survive himself in this strange snake pit of inference

— Devine might have known, T.J. would have bet. Blindsight embraces that would have sent Regret into instant windmill frenzy. Had he really lived in this same town for eight years?

They drove to the address George Devine had given them for his brother Jeff. It was a pretty little clapboard cottage behind a big restored Victorian in a ravishingly beautiful yard of fruit trees and flower beds and redwoods. Curtains were tightly drawn over all the windows. Jeff took his time about answering. Finally the door swung abruptly open to reveal a shirtless longhair with narrow shoulders.

"Yeah hey what's happening."

He said it as all one word. Unlike his acculturated brother, Jeff had remained undiluted New York. He was smaller, paler, darker haired. "You guys. T.J., Aka, welcome. Come on in. Don't mind the jailbait."

It was dark and smelled like musk inside the tiny house. The sea green face of an instrument panel swam at waist level on the far wall, between low storms of tasteful noise from two huge sponge-faced speakers. Regret and Wheeler took seats on cushions around a low wooden table where Devine was already busy inside an elegant ebon box beneath a small soft lamp.

In the back room, where more daylight seeped through pale blue curtains, Regret watched the brown satin sheets at the foot of wood-framed water-bed shift, and thought he heard a sigh.

"A little kick to get us in the race," Devine was saying, spooning small caked mounds of cocaine out of a plastic bag onto a mirror. "I know you can always dig it, Aka. Then you gentlemen can tell me what's on your minds." He glanced up at Wheeler. "You're a real flash from the past, T.J."

T.J. was gazing with unmasked greed at the coke. "Yeah, it's been awhile," he tittered. "It's been awhile."

Devine began powdering the white into lines with a long-handled single-edge razor. "What's in the bag?"

Unable to think of a better way to introduce the subject, Regret drew a large plastic garbage bag out of the knapsack, unrolled it and withdrew one dictionary-sized package wrapped neatly in aluminum foil. He set it on the table and peeled back an edge of foil to reveal its contents. "Eleven pounds of fresh black hashish," he said simply. "Broken into kilos, of which this is one. We'd like to sell it bulk."

Devine blinked several times and his razor moved ineffectually in mid-air for some moments. Those were the only deviations he registered from his scrupulous dealer's cool. As he went back to preparing the coke, he was quietly chuckling. "Well I never thought you guys would want to get back into this fuckin business."

"We don't."

"What are you gonna tell me, you found this on one of your freight trains?"

"Nope. Can you middle it for us?"

"Nope. Here. Snort."

Even T.J.'s fixation on the coke to come was broken by Devine's reply. "Whaddaya mean, Nope?"

"I mean Nope. Now snort you goof, before it's gone. The way you guys are doing business, lugging that shit around into people's houses, you'll be on ice by tonight anyway."

T.J. took the crisp, rolled, hundred-dollar bill and loudly filled one great hairy nostril, then the other, with two thick lines of powder.

The mirror came around to Regret. Devine was nodding at him knowingly. T.J. let go a long sigh of pleasure and drummed on his chest with his fists.

Regret regarded the coke for a long second. It lay on its own reflection noncommittally.

"I ain't seen you in quite a while, Aka," wheedled Devine.

Regret snorted. The granules flew instantly into ecstatic old cavities up behind his eyes, where they began to set cool familiar fires.

While Devine availed himself of the last two lines on the glass, he explained. "No men, I'm sorry I can't touch this stuff of yours but I just don't have any contacts for it. I'm out of that business. You are in the presence of one whose occupation is strictly that of humble coke dealer."

"What the fuck for?"

"Times have changed, T.J. Prices on this stuff, like you know, have gone sky-high. While profit margin on everything else went all to hell. And there's too many uncool people buying herb. I had to start choosing clientele more carefully, you dig. I'd a thought you knew that, Aka. You ain't bought nothing else but snow off me for years. And you, shit you've watched the price double, maybe triple over that time. You were snorting this stuff back when a working man could

afford it. Now — what can I say?"

But Regret's attention had strayed away to the back room, where he had just seen a young girl sleepily cross the pale blue wedge of his vision — her dark hair tangled and full on her shoulders, the swell of her small breast white beneath one arm, her ass like a perfect dusty little statue's. Devine laughed at Regret's expression. A stream of liquid was splashing vigorously into a basin in the direction that the girl had gone.

"Man this guy is really hungry!"

"Well how bout it," Wheeler insisted, "You must know somebody else we can look up."

Devine frowned. He sighed. "Yeah OK," he finally said. "Lemme see what I can do." He made a phone call which lasted less than a minute, setting up a date for a jumbo North African lunch at the Whole Earth Restaurant.

"Yeah OK," he said when he hung up. "Here's a guy you can go see. He'll meet you up on the UC campus. He's a creep but he's OK, but these kids he sells to, man, they're like strictly from Barry Manilow, so I don't know what to tell you."

"Who's Barry Manilow?"

"Don't ask me. I'm just warning you. These people smoke hash like toads but they're weird. They're about as far from the old Santa Cruz Psychedelic Conspiracy as Sheriff Moe ever was. They're liable to pay you in fuckin RCA stocks and bonds."

Jeff Devine still shared with his brother George some few scraps of the idealistic undergroundism with which they had arrived together in Santa Cruz some ten years ago — around the same time, in fact, that Regret had. A toilet flushed throatily in the rear of the house and Jeff shouted over one shoulder, "Only flush when you shit!"

He shrugged his pale shoulders at his guests and grinned. "These boozshy runaways," he said, "What are you gonna do. Save water, men. And take care."

Everybody carried knapsacks just like Regret's around the Whole Earth Restaurant — including their connection, who, except for the conspicuous pounds of turquoise jewelry that weighted his left hand, which

they were to know him by, and a slightly sharper cut to his Oriental reed sandals, faded coveralls, and perfect mane of dark blond curls, blended perfectly with the great herds of students who milled around the area. He introduced himself as James and led them to a nearby dormitory. He had a strange mincing speech.

"I'll have to make a quality test of course," he said, once they were inside the room and had brought out a brick of hash.

"Sure, go ahead. You got a pipe?"

"Naturally."

While James went about his business, Regret and Wheeler took seats on the edge of the room's narrow bed. Regret was beginning to enjoy himself. Once upon a time, he and T.J. had made their living this way, and an old unspoken synch from the days of that partnership was now re-surfacing. When it went smoothly, dealing could have an amazing, oblivious momentum of its own, with a most pleasant mixture of paranoid tension and total outlaw relaxation.

James shaved half a gram off the brick with a penknife. T.J. and Regret exchanged a look that meant: This fop will be so fucked-up in five minutes he won't

know hash from corned beef. But James produced a spoon instead of a pipe, and then a lighter, with which he began to heat the hash in the spoon.

"Hey, that's not smack, it's hash," objected T.J.

James let his lighter go out and stared theatrically at Wheeler a second, then seemed to discard whatever cutting retort he had been preparing, in deference to the brawn of the bearded one. "I know that," he said, and resumed.

Regret and Wheeler exchanged another look, this one of scorn and confusion. They avoided watching the rest of James's operation. T.J. preferring the view out the window of the mass of students moving in and out of towering redwoods behind the Whole Earth, Regret letting his gaze wander around the room.

It was a standard dormitory cubicle. A poster showing a grand piano on a snowy ridge in the mountains was on the back of the door. The two regulation wall shelves were aesthetically stocked with books whose titles did nothing for Regret. Your Erroneous Zones, Looking Out For #1. Regret's experience of this sort of room had been largely confined to waking up warily among its institutional grimace after a more or less

successful pursuit, originated someplace downtown, of one or more sophomores on the midnight preceding. Featureless pop music was issuing from an ornate stereo set-up and Regret was about to ask if the artist were Barry Manilow when the door flew open.

"James have you got my Supertramp?"

It was a thin boy in red overalls with a sun-bleached natural. He hardly glanced at Regret or T.J., who had both grabbed for their knapsack and were visibly prepared to defend it with their lives. James, who was carefully dipping what looked like a large red needle into the heated hash, did not bother to look up.

"No, I don't."

"Oh, hash," said the boy, noticing the foil package on the desk. "That's nice. That reminds me, James. We really liked that Columbo. Sally and Evan both say they want another pound."

"OK. Tell them it's gone up to 500 a pound."

"OK, James, I will. Hey, I bet that hash would be bonus for solar bonging." Nobody agreed, nobody argued. "Well, if you see my Supertramp around —"

"Right."

Regret and T.J. were now looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes. Gee Arch, let's round up

Jug and Betty and the rest of the gang and all go solar bonging. The red boy left. James set down his spoon and needle.

"All right," he said. "This is within my quality range. What's the price?"

"Thousand a pound, twenty-one a ki, ten thousand for the whole eleven pounds," said Regret.

"Sold. Will you take a check?"

"No."

"Then let's take a ride downtown to my bank."

Coasting down the magnificent campus entrance road behind James's careful Opel Kadett — with the sweet little green and white city of Santa Cruz laid out below them like a map, and beyond it the whole deep blue sweep of the Monterey Bay, with the Peninsula itself rising dim and purple straight out to sea like some superb old island, and Moss Landing over there somewhere beneath that single high white plume of pollution — staggered by this vista, the international smuggling team of Regret and Wheeler howled and hooted like fools.

"I think we're getting fucked to death by this weenie!" screamed Wheeler.

"He'd have gone for twice the price!"

"He'll sell this shit for two hundred an ounce!"

"Stooged by a playpen candyman!"

"Well all right!"

James handed Regret the registered money order in a downtown municipal parking lot, while T.J. slung the knapsack from the truck to the Kadett.

Cashing the order and opening bank accounts raised the question of how to split the cash, which neither A.J. nor T.J. cared to address quite yet. So instead they opened a mutual account, astonishing the teller with reciprocal vows of grisly vengeance should either ever attempt to abscond with the funds. That settled, they both immediately withdrew a thousand for pocket money and left the bank feeling full of steam. Against both of their better judgments, especially Regret's, they trimmed their truck's sails for Jeff Devine's dim lair.

NINE.

T.J. was staggering through the soft sand of Castle Beach toward the edge of the water, laughing like local storm surf and shouting that this had been the easiest deal of his life, as well as the most profitable. Regret was thinking the same thing, at less decibels. He was also thinking that cocaine would surely prove his undoing one day. Breaking suddenly into a sprint, he cut the big man down with a driving tackle to the back of the knees.

Wheeler lay like a redwood where he hit, still chuckling. Regret straddled his chest, pinning his arms with his knees, his right fist full of Wheeler beard.

"We gotta figure out a way to take about a pound of this stuff out to sea with us," T.J. was saying.

"Bullshit," said Regret.

T.J. stared wide-eyed up at Regret. "Can you feel my heart?" he said. "It's going like a power tamper."

Regret pressed his right thigh in closer. He nodded.

"What'd you do for snort in North Africa?"

Regret shook his head deliberately. "Ate shit. When I got to those Canary Islands and realized there probably wasn't a gram of coke in a thousand miles, I just about flew back."

"Means that much to you, eh Tamarack?"

"No. It's bullshit. It's Need out of nothing. If it was cheap, nobody would care about cocaine."

"I would."

Regret slowly pulled Wheeler's beard up so that his chin rose with it and his face was finally looking back up the beach toward the bluffs. "No you wouldn't," Regret said. "And if you started snorting at sea, you'd just start tearing up your boat and chewing on the sails that much sooner."

Wheeler was silent, the heavy cords in his neck working as he swallowed.

When he finally spoke, his face still tilted up like a saint's, his voice might have been a child's. "I wanna be a sailor," he said.

Regret though he felt Wheeler's heart slow perceptibly once these words were spoken. Regret leaned forward on his knees and said, into T.J.'s upturned nostrils, where pale drug dust lingered, "You wanna grow up to be Aka Hemmings III. But you're too big and too noisy and too smart. And you know too much about Nazis. And Aka Hemmings III, when he wants to learn something, doesn't just storm into Japan stone broke and force the little bastards to teach him judo or else. He pads around politely, he relies on his girlish good looks."

T.J. brought his face back down to regard Regret, dragging Regret's fist with it. His eyes were as quiet as they came. "You mean I gotta have fucked-up blonde hair, and a ponytail?" He was grinning very faintly down inside his beard. "And a flat head, and worried eyes, and hardly no whiskers?" Regret felt like T.J.'s fingers were gently walking over his face, though he still had his arms pinned. "Do I gotta be skinny, and stupid when it comes to chicks?"

Regret sat back abruptly onto T.J.'s stomach, causing him to grunt. "Yeah," he said.

"Well you watch me."

Wheeler tried to raise his forearms, his forehead coloring with the effort. Regret put all his weight on his knees and Wheeler still lifted him several inches straight off the ground before he dropped him, puffing.

Between hard breaths, he said, "What do you wanna be, Tamarack? You wanna grow up to be Shorty Wheeler? Number one man on the Seniority list? I thought you'd wanna grow up to be Aka Hemmings too. You got a good head start on me. You look like him already. Except them worried eyes. That's from railroading."

"Bullshit."

"Then it's from shackin up with chicks smarter than you. Takin fuckins when you shoulda been givin em."

Regret glared and slowly shook Wheeler's head from side to side by the beard, saying, "If a gang of polar bears had butt-fucked you steady for about a month up there, I might certify you for offshore."

As Wheeler's left cheek rolled onto the sand under his captor's twisting, he said, "Jesus. Look at this scene."

It was late afternoon and Castle Beach, Santa Cruz, was undergoing its daily patron turnover. The

tourists and sunbathers who crowded its wide sand in the heat of the day were nearly all gone, stuffed into their station wagons and headed back over the mountains to San Jose, while the local shore stalkers were just beginning to come out. From where they lay, T.J. and his tormentor could see: a skinny young man practicing some Oriental martial art in gawky elaborate extreme slow-motion; three prancing afghans leading a woman in a huge white gaucho hat; further down the beach, a heavysset teenager wading silently into the freezing water in only a pair of panties; scattered groups huddled over pipes and bongos; a dozen crosslegged icons transcending in the sinking sun; and assorted individual gypsies and latter-day druids of every description.

T.J. groaned, overthrew Regret with ease, and rose to his feet.

"Whaddaya want me to do," he said, arms outstretched, "Go mackrobiotic again?"

They started walking down the beach, Regret now laughing to himself. Before T.J. had gone to Japan, when they both still lived in Santa Cruz, T.J. had briefly become a macrobiotic vegetarian. Years later,

when Regret found occasion to relate that chapter of Wheeler's history to an old trapper in Alaska, T.J. had felt called upon to eat half a pound of raw beaver meat before their eyes. The sight had worked to shut them up.

"But look at this zoo," Wheeler now wailed. "The right Reichsmarshal could make a killing in this town. He could get a cadre just off this beach. I may a been mackrobiotic in my time, Tamarack, but was I ever stumblin around like fuckin Toby Tyler ready to join anybody's circus? Look at that chick in the water!"

Regret turned to watch the heavy girl get knocked down by a short stiff shorebreak. When she struggled to her feet, her panties were down around her knees. She pulled them up abstractly. Her nipples were maroon with cold. Sand breaded her chest.

"I don't know," Regret said wearily. "A little more solar bonging and you might have done about anything. You were pretty nuts."

"We were all pretty nuts. But it was different."

"It was different," repeated Regret. What were they talking about?

"Remember the time," said T.J., "We were up in that meadow there where the harbor goes now with all those people, Tell and Ben and Verna and all those

folks, smokin opium and drinkin wine, and you just stumbled off in the dark finally and started howlin, 'Poss-ibilities! Poss-ibilities!?' That's all you said for about an hour. We all just sat there and listened, and kinda wondered if you were ever gonna come back. But it didn't matter if you didn't, because you were right."

So that was what they were talking about. The California of the mind. Regret ground his teeth as they approached the south end of Castle Beach. And now T.J. wanted him to grow up to be what he was before he ever grew up. Who says you can't have a bad time on cocaine. Regret reeled along the hard shore sand.

They had come to the harbor jetty at the end of the beach. T.J. had climbed the low bank of boulders and was standing with his hands on his hips, starting to laugh/growl in his usual way. Regret stayed down on the sand, watching T.J. move in the deepening sky.

"Look at this place," T.J. was saying, his back turned. "Not a fishing rig in sight."

Regret did not need to look. As small harbors went, Santa Cruz was the absolute opposite of Moss Landing. Clean, picturesque, stuffed to the gills

with modern floating docks. An expensive restaurant behind the fuel dock. T.J. laughed his loud hard contempt laugh.

"And a quarter of a million dollars every god damn year to dredge that fuckin mouth so these San Jose assholes can get their fiberglass bathtubs in and out!" T.J. was turning, looking down at Regret, his broad figure filling the sky. Then he spoke so softly that Regret could hardly hear. "Why can't they just surf over the bar," he murmured. "Like old Tamarack did the first time he ever tried."

T.J.'s heavy brows rose dramatically, his eyes were bitter with poetic question. Regret and he were locked into something as old as them, a ritual Regret had no will to resist. Now Wheeler turned a shaggy profile as he looked out toward the jack-legged end of the short north jetty. The breeze had died but his voice rose and fell like he was calling into a wind.

"Middle a winter, big north swell, first year this jetty was built. Maybe six foot a channel left, even that's closing out on the sets. Nothing but Whalers been getting in or out for a month. I look out and see this sloop, beating in off the open sea, every sail

flyin. So weathered she looks like she just sailed in from Jap-an.

"So I watch her pull up into the wind, and start pointing straight off this jetty, where I'm sittin smokin dope. It's plain as day she don't know shit about the sandbar. I start yellin and wavin. She keeps comin. Next thing you know, she's right in by me, and it's way too late. She's riding groundswells. And behind her here comes this huge old bastard of a set.

"So what does she do? Drops straight off the wind, that's what, down the face. And she takes off and surfs, this thirty foot sloop, right across the first wave, right in the god damn hook. Comes screamin over the corner of the bar, the wave tubing over her stern, and then just cuts back into deep water. The fanciest piece of sailing this place will see if it sits here a thousand years."

Regret was trying to recall this scene from his own experience, from the little sloop sighting the Santa Cruz Mountains that morning, after six weeks at sea, after a series of North Pacific storms that had left his companions, a couple from Sausalito, ready to sell

their new sloop the day that they reached land, which they virtually did. First Lighthouse Point, then the towering Boardwalk rollercoaster, then the gleaming white buildings of the new University on the hill above town, and slowly the little town itself — Regret knew it all had risen slowly from the east all that day like some fabulous unknown civilization. But the actual elation and horror of sailing through the unnavigable harbor mouth was an irretrievable memory. He had heard T.J. tell it so many times that he only saw it from here, from the jetty. Regret did not resent the loss. On the contrary, he wished all the costs of love were as negligible.

But he did recall quite clearly the burly hometown boy storming down onto the guest dock to greet the sloop, shaking his fishing pole like an African spear. And remembered too suspiciously answering, when the over-wrought native demanded to know who that flat-headed little skipper was, that he was "Aka Hemmings III."

"And here I'd lived in this town my whole life," T.J. was saying, "And maybe been on a boat three times. Nobody I knew but fishermen's kids ever fucked around

in the ocean. First time you got me out on a board, first set came, I didn't know to shit or go blind."

Regret was starting to shiver now in the flimsy old aloha shirt he wore. The sun had sunk into Lighthouse Point. T.J. was standing, hands plunged into the pockets of his jeans, waiting. Regret had made his objections, T.J. his plea.

"OK," said Regret. "How much will it take?"

"How much will what take?"

"To get your tri in the water, rigged and stocked for offshore."

T.J. shrugged and looked down at his feet, his face now dusk invisible.

Regret answered for him. "Most all of what we got today. Eight or nine grand spent right will send that thing around the world."

T.J. was silent, so still against the sky that he did not seem to breathe.

"You can count my cut in," said Regret.

T.J. sank silently down onto the jetty. His silhouette merged with the rocks around him. A set began to pound the jetty further out. In the intervals between waves, Regret could hear quiet sobs flowing

from the one boulder which was Wheeler.

Regret found he craved that contraband back in the truck so bad he could taste it.

TEN.

"The Perishable and The Dead"

That night, Regret went to work. T.J. had gone to triumphantly repay his parents the loan that had kept the trimaran in his possession for the past two weeks. Regret, declining to encounter the Wheelers just yet, had hitchiked from Santa Cruz to Moss Landing alone. Standing outside the locked gate of Moe Marine, eight hundred dollars and two grams of cocaine in his pocket, he had just begun to wonder whether he could possibly navigate the evening ahead without disaster when a Company Carry All came round the bottom of Moss Landing Harbor and bore mercilessly down upon him. It screeched to a halt in the dirt lot outside the gate.

"Regret!"

"Yeah!"

"Called for the Classifier! Nine P.M. On Duty!"

Regret bent to peer into the cab of the Carry All. The driver was the same clerk who had put him on the

Emergency Board the day before. When he noticed Regret studying him, the clerk grabbed the column shift and jammed it into Drive.

"Hold it!" yelled Regret. "Let me get my stuff. I need a ride."

The clerk revved the Carry All engine viciously while Regret clambered over the boat yard gate, climbed up into the trimaran, and reappeared shortly with coat, lantern, Timetable, Rule Book and work gloves in a bundle in his arms — his dance card for the evening blessedly filled.

From that moment on, the night was enchanted. Regret's Conductor on the Classifier was a loud little man named Billy "Jewboy" Goldman. He said he wanted to "get that Perishable back," as it was Saturday night, by 2 A.M. Since the other brakeman was a new man, this meant that Regret would be expected to run the work as rapidly as possible. "Leave the god damn Dead in Salinas if it's not blocked. Let Night Boston block it and the West Beets bring it." Regret nodded soberly, though secretly thrilled to let "Night Boston" and "the West Beets" handle "the Dead." Stripped of the fat of habit, this railroad was more exotic, pound for pound,

he thought, than any old Morocco.

Armed with his lists, Regret sallied out into Junction Yard alone with his lantern to "lace up the train" and "knock off the brakes." Those tasks accomplished, he unlocked the caboose and prowled its grimy, familiar interior until "Porky," the engineer, came over the radio and together they "tested the air." When the caboose lurched a few minutes later, Regret called into the radio, "Got 'em all!" And when he felt the slight whip action of the caboose rolling over the spring switch onto single track, he simply reached up from his work at the conductor's desk and pressed twice on the sending button of the phone which he had hung on a make-shift coathanger cradle beside him, to which Porky sang out, from sixty cars away, "Spring switch! Highball!" Regret had not had so much fun in ages.

His business at the conductor's desk was, of course, chopping up more lines. He used his dirty old pocket knife and snorted through one of the hundreds. His Conductor had been a good guy and caught the head end out of the Junction. "Rear man" Regret now threw down the bill and reeled out the caboose back door. Loosely braced on the rear platform, he stood in a sixty knot

wind and watched the placid blackness of Elkhorn Slough stream past. His heart raced, his mind felt fierce and light. The Elkhorn houses flashed by, with only the dim gold glow of kerosene lamps in the windows. A fuse probably blew, and none of the ladies knew how to fix it. Regret realized that he had forgotten to inspect the train on Elkhorn Curve. He smiled benignly. This train did carry midnight ramblers, greenback gamblers who don't give a damn. The caboose lurched heavily into Moss Landing Curve and hurtled down the hill toward Salinas.

In Salinas Yard, though, the Classifier turned from a train crew into a switch crew. The rear man became "the field," and the Conductor became "the tag." And suddenly there was nowhere to hide. Because fielding kicked cars at Salinas was not sending casual clicks on the radio. The high black "reefers" came fast and silent down six different rails at once. Predicting the tag man's strategy from the long tattered illegible lists that fluttered in his lantern beam while he clambered between cars, jumped on fast-moving ladders to tie brakes before knuckles butted or broke, and dismounting at speed to swiftly lace air hoses under wheels in the

few moments that a cut was sure not to be struck within the complex active diagram of the free-rolling yard in his mind ... took Regret right out to that edge where habit would no longer protect him — out to it, and well over it. When the first batch of Perishable was finally blocked, and his crew headed into the yard shanty, Regret just stayed where he was, deep in 7 rail, his forearm resting on a greasy grabiron, his forehead resting on his arm ... and slowly caught his breath by sobbing. Before he entered the yard shanty, he spooned two fingernails' worth from out of the little vials, inhaling hard enough to hurt himself.

Inside the shack, Regret settled quickly into a soft old chair in the corner. "Night Chicago" was the only other crew in the shack, and they were deeply engaged in a pinochle game which Porky and Goldman joined. Regret picked up a well-pawed Playboy and promptly trudged, through the soft sand of airbrush abdomens, straight out of grubby Salinas. Buried alive in cocaine flesh relish, he did not notice "Night Boston" come through the door, nor the abrupt reaction his presence provoked in that crew — until one pair of brakeman's gloves knocked the magazine out of his

hands and another pair bounced off his head.

"Look who's back!"

"Where you been, dude?"

Regret was confronted by two laughing Extra Board brakemen, Stevie Gurney and George Vierra. They took seats on the arms of his chair. Gurney retrieved his gloves from the flustered flat head's lap.

"You been hidin out someplace, livin on that good Unemployment?"

Regret shrugged shyly, letting this be believed. The others were shaking their heads.

"I thought you musta quit or transferred or something," Vierra said. "I was gettin worried. There ain't that many of us left!"

"You haveta talk to Flukey?"

Regret said, "No, not yet. I'm just working this Emergency actually."

"Aw, fuck that," said Vierra. "You're back. When you tie up tonight, they'll mark you up on the Extra Board same as ever. Won't let you lay off if you can walk. And you'll probably catch this fucker tomorrow night. It's a seven day job now, and it's a bitch. I deadhead in tomorrow. Stevie's got two more to go."

"If my old lady don't kill me before it's up," said Gurney.

Both Night Boston brakemen laughed and Vierra, who wore a small painter's cap over a riot of brown hair only slightly less kinky than his thick brown beard, lowered his voice out of earshot of the rest of the shack and said, "Hey, Aka, you got time to toke one? I got some nice nice."

"I don't know," said Regret. "Jewboy's kinda——"

At that point Goldman stood up from the pinochle game, crossed to Regret and handed him several fresh lists that a clerk had just brought over from the depot.

"So much for that," said Vierra.

"That's our shit there on 3 rail," said Gurney, pointing to one of the lists. "Nothing to it. You'll be outta here in half an hour."

"While we're gettin dicked till ten in the fuckin morning," said Vierra.

Regret got up and gathered his things while Stevie and George wrestled over the easy chair he was leaving. Then he followed Porky, Goldman, and the nervous new head brakeman out the shanty door just as Gurney bulled

into the pinochle table with Vierra riding his back, struggling to maintain a full nelson. Outside, Night Chicago's oaths resounded, while Vierra's high giggle of triumph pealed oblivious ... and Regret wondered whether disaster would find him tonight after all, somewhere in this iron reefer wilderness.

The Classifier "tied up" at 2:10 A.M. at Watsonville Junction Yard, all hands intact. The brakemen had each earned 53.17 for the five hours ten minutes work. Regret told the midnight crew clerk that his name tag belonged not in the column titled Working Board but in the column titled Lay Off, though he did not stay to see whether his instructions were followed..

One hour later, Regret was four miles west of Junction Yard, on Highway 1, walking past the darkened Happy Burro Supermarket west of Watsonville town. Traffic had thinned to the point that his prospects of a ride before dawn were statistically extinct. Then, again, a soldier stopped.

One hour later, smashed on Early Times and Gatorade, Regret disembarked from the soldier's Honda Civic in downtown Santa Cruz. The corporal had never tried cocaine before. Half a gram had not convinced him it was worth all the hullabaloo. Regret strode then through silent streets, taking a last few careless fingernail snorts without bothering to even break pace.

She lived in a little cabin now, on a dead-end street with trees. Regret stood in the mud of a flower bed and scratched on a window screen. A small cry of sleepy fear came from inside, followed by the sound of steps approaching. Then the white oval of her face hung dim in the window above him. And remained there motionless for minutes, her eyes thin terrible lines under high thin brows. While Regret sank steadily into the mud in T.J.'s old work boots. When the face finally disappeared, Regret's neck was stiff from meeting it's gaze. He thought about taking a piss. Then the door beside the flower bed opened.

"What."

"Is somebody else in there?"

"No."

"Can I come in?"

She sighed and he heard her walking away from the door, which she left open. He followed her. A lamp came on. She was at a small stove heating water. She wore a loose blue robe. She crossed to a desk chair and sat, drawing her feet up underneath her. Regret sat on the edge of the bed.

"What are you doing, Aka," she said to the floor, "Showing up like this?"

"I wanted to see you."

"I don't mind that you're drunk and wanted to see me." She looked up, her face relaxing. "But if you're horny, I swear I'll kill you. That would be too tawdry."

"I'd fuck a friendly bear, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I mean. You keep your distance, mister."

"Whatever you say, Gayle."

She made coffee and they each had a cup. When she handed him his, their fingers touched. She retired to her chair and studied him while he sipped, but he could not keep his eyes from her haunches so he looked around the room.

Gayle's cabin was even smaller than it looked from outside. The kitchenette was in the main room, only

the bathroom was separate. With a plain board desk and unadorned walls and books stacked and shelved in every available space, it looked like a studious monk's cell. Regret felt like a Visigoth in his muddy boots.

"How's the dissertation going?" he asked lamely.

"Fucked. Where's your wetsuit?"

She was almost smiling. The reference was to a courtship practice of his of some years past. He had appeared at her windows at dusk wet and eager in black rubber. She had swooned.

"Some Moroccans got it."

"That's where you were, Morocco? Mrs. Wheeler said the Canary Islands."

"Yeah, I was. That was before. Too many surfers already there."

She sipped her coffee, her eyes sleep-heavy over the rim of the cup. "Well, you don't look too bad," she said. "Got a tan like an African anyway."

"Thanks," said Regret. "I'm real proud of that. You got a sunlamp by any chance? I'd like to keep it up."

"I use the oven."

Regret winced. Old jokes grew jagged around the edges. "Another sweet winter in Santa Cruz, eh?"

"It was a fucker," Gayle said quietly.

Regret did not, did not, did not want to hear about it. To forestall any possible recitation of woes, he fumbled in his shirt pocket and brought out his last vial. Exaggerating his inebriation, he slurred as he said, "How bout a toot, toots?"

Gayle cocked her head to one side and visibly strove not to smile. She shook her head slowly from side to side, looking away. Finally, she pulled a round hand mirror out from under a pile of books on the desk, set it under the small lamp, and placed a razor blade on the glass, still without looking in his direction. Regret crossed to the desk and stood unsteadily beside her to tap out the coke. They snorted and Gayle turned the radio on low.

The coke only faintly leavened Regret's sodden state. He returned to the edge of the bed and watched Gayle warily. She was looking with a bemused expression at an old Russian print lying on her desk, a half-smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Then her face seemed to cloud and crowd in on itself, her brows lifted, and she raised her face.

"Well, have you seen Jennifer?" she asked with chrome-plated cheer.

"I thought she was still in Mendocino."

"As far as I know, she is."

"Then why are you asking me? I haven't heard from anybody in nine months."

Gayle sighed. "I'm sorry."

They each sighed. Who says you can't have a bad time, thought Regret.

"How about Tell?" she asked more gently.

"I thought he was in L.A. selling rugs."

"He is, I guess."

"Gayle, why are you asking me about people when —"

"Because I don't know what else to talk to you about!"

The exclamation started as a scream, dropped to a shout, ended as a plea. Regret the forgiver crossed to Gayle and knelt before her, placing his head against her knees. She put a hand to his forehead.

"You smell like trains," she said softly. "Are you working again?"

Regret was trying now to climb into her lap, but her hand felt more like she was knighting him or checking his temperature than inviting more intimacy. She wanted to know where he was staying. When he told her, she pulled his head up with both hands.

"T.J.'s back?!"

T.J. was one of Gayle's heroes. She had only met him personally a few times, but on the strength of Regret's descriptions, had come to regard him as some kind of fabulous character from myth. Regret, on the other hand, she knew very well. Far too well to let him weasel any further into her favors tonight, though he now gnawed slavishly at her knee. Ultimately, he passed out with his cheek against her shins.

ELEVEN.

Some time before dawn she covered him with blankets. When her alarm went off, he pulled them over his head. She began to bustle back and forth above him. Was it not Sunday? Where was she going? She kicked him in the thigh by way of saying goodbye. The cabin door slammed.

Thumbing back to Moss Landing proved absurdly difficult. Sprawled in the roadside dirt at the back of a long line of hitchhikers at the entrance to Highway 1 South, Regret had to shut his aching eyes against the cruel brightness of the sun. Meanwhile, inside his head, he could not find the shutoff for an enervating tape first made one drunken night out at Elkhorn: Gayle on the subject of T.J.:

"If there were dragons in that Slough, I swear T.J. would be Beowulf. He ought to be sitting every night at a big table of thanes drinking mead and bragging so loud that the pine trees shake outside. He's a fucking bulwark of the culture, a great bank vault of all the traditional values. Men are men, women are women, and

Grendels get thee behind me, goddam you!"

This had not been spoken to Regret, but to some one who wondered why everyone at Elkhorn should be so incensed at this recent visitor Wheeler. Yet Regret had been nearby somewhere, and Gayle, defending his friend, whom Callie among others had finally condemned unconditionally as "a fascist," made certain to throw her well-lubricated voice in the flat head's direction. Now that voice returned to Regret in pompous, painful self-parody.

"But the monsters are all gone. T.J.'s just out there roaring in the void. So he's really more like Faust. And of course he knows it. He learns bloody German just to read Goethe! That Nazi stuff of his, that pissed everybody off so much around here, is just incidental I think. It's just his own ruthless conclusion about social organization. I respect it. He's almost satanic in the way he studies it, like Faust's Theology. But T.J.'s true soul is early Romantic, somewhere between Beethoven and Bruckner. Sturm und Drang. It's the grandest mode, the only one suited to somebody who lives on the scale he does. Aka says he carries a copy of Faust with him everywhere he

goes, even out into the goddam tundra. God, especially out into the tundra!"

Had Regret told her that? Now Gayle, it must have been some other time, seemed to be railing at him, Regret, oblivious in her vehemence to his reservations.

"The real question though, the crucial question about T.J. is whether he actually believes in that whole masculine cult he incarnates, or whether he does it, whether he apotheosizes it, ironically. Because that would be heavy indeed. T.J. is macho beyond macho, but maybe he really is 'beyond macho'. Maybe he just acts it out like some kind of ritual. T.J. is growling for your sins. It's obvious that he can do anything he wants to, that he can master any trade worth mastering. Why not Teutonic samurai savior?"

"I doubt it though, don't you? Beyond all that bluster, I sense a soul so delicate that he's got no choice left but to build these huge walls of armor around it. Bombs can't budge him, but the right feather might just flatten him. And that is exactly what's so incredibly beautiful about that kind of male: how finally fragile he is."

Yes, that would be heavy indeed. Herr Delicate now kneaded his aching brow with two filthy palms to

no avail. What was this? Wasn't this shit all just some twisted manufacture of his own from some ancient chance comments of hers? What an asshole he had been anyway, to go there last night like that. He was just getting his due, in the cruel coin of true souls, foreign literature, and ironical incarnations. AND, Regret now realized, he had left the last of the coke back in her cabin. Three grams, two hundred bucks' worth, all gone already. It certainly had been a long twenty-four hours since he and T.J. first drove up here to sell the hash.

Suddenly Regret remembered the roll of bills still in his pocket. He stood up, staggered glumly past the glum line of hitchhikers, and somehow found a phone booth in the blinding plain of a gas station. The twenty-mile cab ride to Moss Landing cost him twenty dollars.

A diesel crane was running at Moe Marine, shredding the air with hateful noise. Regret stood at the boatyard gate and wondered where he might hide. Some

of the short row of Moss Landing shops looked like they might be open. Could he possibly kill this June afternoon shopping for seashells? Two cowries, a nautilus and a polyp, gift-wrapped please. Regret was about to set a course instead for The Harbor Light, where a neon cocktail shone faintly over the door, when a voice stopped him where he stood.

"TAMARACK!"

Regret gingerly entered the auidial shredder of the crane's immediate neighborhood. He found T.J. standing on the ground beside the trimaran, which hovered inches above its three high scaffolds. The long-awaited launching was in progress.

"HOW'S SHE LOOK?"

Regret gave a wan sign for A-OK. T.J. made a fierce gesture toward the control cabin of the crane, where Peter Moe sat pouting. The crane revved viciously and the tri slowly rose further off its supports. Regret covered his ears and looked away. And noticed then the Wheelers, Shorty and Clara, standing off to the side of the trimaran's path to the water. They were both shyly watching him, Regret.

"EASY, MOE! DROP THAT THING AND I'LL SKIN YOU ALIVE!"

The trimaran swung easily through the air and out over the green harbor water. The crane screamed hideously as it began to lower the boat. T.J. signalled for a halt with the bow hull at eye level.

"THAT'LL DO, MOE!"

T.J. turned ceremoniously to his audience of three, his face beaded with sweat, his eyes hot and shiny. Regret had followed the boat across the yard to stand beside the Wheelers.

"Well," said T.J., raising the bottle of beer he was drinking, "You guys have got your Eastbound and your Westbound, so I think we should call her Southbound, how's that sound?"

"Sounds like a winner, son," shouted Shorty.

"Then Southbound it is," said T.J. He turned to the dangling craft. "You're a downwind boat, I don't want to ever see you go any other way." He cracked the beer bottle across the bowsprit. "Now get your ass out on the high seas."

The crane went through its last agonistes as Southbound settled delicately onto the water. Its screams abruptly died as the sling wires went slack and she floated. T.J. belted out a huge Hallelujah.

Regret, his head ringing, hugged Clara, whose gray hair smelled like fresh sheets, whose broad back warmed his hands. And he shook Shorty's crabbed little hand while the old railroader grinned crazily up at him through thick glasses that magnified still further his wide blue eyes.

"Ridin in taxi cabs now, huh Aka?"

"Little as possible, Shorty."

"That's my boy."

Regret helped T.J. disconnect the sling rig and walk the trimaran down the wharf to the docking T.J. had arranged to continue the work of outfitting. The Wheelers followed and, when she was solidly moored, stepped aboard, ginger as cats. Shorty's work boots boomed on the deck. They carefully sat in the cluttered cockpit in the sun. Regret sat with them, his lips glued to the beer T.J. had provided. T.J. laughed at his parents' deathgrips on the deck rails.

"Well, Aka," Clara began. "How was Morocco?"

"It was just fucking awful," whimpered Regret into the soft cavity of her shoulder.

"It doesn't matter," Gayle said, stroking the back of his neck. His face would simply not fit between her side and the sheet. Her breast had fallen sideways, off of her chest and onto his mouth, muffling his voice.

"Yeff it doth!" He rolled away onto his back, and spoke toward the ceiling in deliberate phrases. "They're sitting there, so happy to see me, and I can't even act, like a human being."

"Couldn't you just tell travel stories? You must have a million."

"I don't have one."

Regret clapped a pillow over his face and shouted something into it.

Gayle rolled over on top of him, pulled a corner of the pillow up from his mouth, and asked, "What?"

"I said," his mouth said quietly, "'This culture shock is no joke.'"

"I say you've got faint little freckles in your lips, right underneath the skin, which I never saw before."

"I say you ought to be tattooed in blue all around your mouth," said Regret's mouth.

"Oh yeah?"

"And wear a veil."

"Why, is that the foxy combination in Maroc?"

"Yeah."

She pulled the pillow off his face. "Did you have any Moroccan women?"

"Yeah. One. I paid her."

"How was it?"

"Fantastic."

Gayle placed her elbows on his chest. "Did she have blue tattoos around her mouth?"

"Yeah."

Gayle pushed off his chest unpleasantly, causing him to gasp and flinch and roll her quickly off him. They lay apart.

After a while he said, "Except she didn't have a cunt."

"Oh no? What did she have?"

"I don't know. Some kind of contraption. Looked like summer squash. No hair on it, just these green bulbs. The Arabs call it 'poosaba'."

Gayle shook her head sharply on her pillow. She gathered piles of her own brown curls in each of her hands and clapped them over her ears. "You make me crazy," she sang, her voice swinging up on the last word wildly to prove her point. After a minute, however, she began to giggle. Then she rolled over and started sucking softly at Regret's brown tits. She had always said they ought to be more sensitive than Regret reported them to be.

TWELVE.

As a young girl, Gayle had been kidnapped by her mother and new stepfather from her grandparents' home in Minnesota and brought to California to live. Contradicted constantly in her pleas that she wanted her grandma, told that "Minnesota" was all a fabrication on her part, her first six years were steadily, successfully erased from her memory by her new parents. It was not until she was twenty, during a conversation with a psychiatrist (assigned to her case after a brief term of institutionalization due to amphetamine abuse), that Gayle began to recall the first part of her life again, and realize that her father, who she had always feared and distrusted, was in fact her stepfather. Her parents, who had collaborated on three more children in the meantime, were soon made to see that denying the truth had never been well-advised. But the experience was, for Gayle, permanently unsettling. If one sought an explanation for the unlikely endurance of the longtime alliance between she and

Regret, the shadow of uncertain origins would have to fall heavily over the proceedings. Also, perhaps, a certain shared susceptibility to certain bitter crystalline alkaloids, such as that the flat head had plied his old partner with tonight.

But lust was not conquering all, as he had hoped. He mounted and rode. She spurred. He neighed. They reared. They stumbled and rolled, their trembling flanks grew slowly still, he yet in the stable, she now in the saddle. Yet her glance out from under lush willow tresses now dubious, spooked. And pulling her face down out of his sight, launching an independent offensive of the hips, drew no answering fire from hers. It was not the first time they had been ambushed by the howling Apaches of sadness.

:::::"I can't hack it," she said. "I just can't hack it anymore."

Regret was standing in the doorway to their room in the back of the Casa Oso Boho. Gayle was kneeling on the floor beside an overturned dresser drawer, one hand gripping the open mouth of half-filled canvas bag. She did not look up as she spoke.

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

He set his brakeman's lantern down on the dresser with his gloves. He pulled the switch keys off his belt and sank onto the mattress beside her.

"Nothing happened. Don't touch me."

Regret drew his hand back slowly, letting her feel the weight of her words. He began to unlace his work boots, breathing deeply against the sensation of weight on his chest.

"Nothing happened," he said. "You're just packing your bags like you're in some soap opera because you feel like it."

"That's right," Gayle snapped, stuffing another handful of shirts into the bag. "I feel like it. And don't give me this shit that I'm throwing some tantrum out of left space at you. This has been going on for a long long time. I've been trying and trying to handle this trip, but it's just too fuckin fancy for me. So I'm splitting, OK?"

Regret kicked his work boots away and shut his eyes.

"OK," she finally said, "Here's what happened tonight. Not that it was anything special. I was at the Rauncho talking to Callie. She was telling me about

how she handles trips with Suzanne, because I don't care what else she says, she really doesn't want to share Suzanne with anybody, men or women. I was telling her how totally exhausted I feel by this whole scene. We were in her and Suzanne's room. I hear Jennifer come into Verna's room with Jan and Verna. The door's open and I can hear them talking. Verna's telling Jennifer that she ought to give up men altogether, being a little obnoxious about it, a little drunk. But Jennifer's just laughing away, you know how she does, she doesn't give a fuck. And then I hear her tell Verna that Verna really ought to ball you sometime, that you've got a stroke that might make her change her mind. Somehow that was just the last straw. I've got to get out of here, that's all there is to it."

Regret sighed. "Aw come on, Gayle," he said. "You know that's not true. You said yourself that I fuck like a tired sheep."

"I was kidding and you know it and that's hardly the point. Don't start trying to charm me, Aka. I mean it this time."

Regret rubbed his eyes with filthy fingers and considered taking her at her word. What would Elkhorn

be like without Gayle? He had bought the ranch only when she agreed to move out there with him, they had filled the two old houses with their friends — yet all their months together on the Slough appeared to him now as one long succession of crises, tearful reconcilements, and more crises. And the bickering and battling had certainly taken its toll in his devotion. Still, he could not picture Elkhorn without her.

"Look," he said. "I haven't touched Jennifer, or Rose, or anybody else since we decided I wouldn't."

"And I've been getting vibed to death for casting a fucking pall over hump heaven!"

And I haven't touched you in a week either, thought Regret. Maybe a nice long crotch massage would cool her out and let him get some sleep. He crawled around on the mattress behind Gayle and encircled her with his arms. He nuzzled the back of her head awhile. Eventually, she took the skin from the back of one of his hands between her teeth. From that point on, she was as clay beneath his kneading.

But lust gave, as later, only transient respite from care. To Regret's astonishment, Gayle broke into

wrenching sobs just as he was putting the finishing touches on his labor of pacification. With the sheen of his long and patient attentions still damp from eyebrows to chin, he hovered frozen above her while she turned her face away and suddenly started to weep. Regret immediately withdrew his imminency as delicately as he could and tried to cradle her unhappy head against his chest. But she pushed him cruelly away.

"No!" she sobbed. "No! This is nuts! I'm sick of feeling guilty about being so old-fashioned. I'm sick of making you miserable with my jealousy. If I just get out of here, everybody will be happier."

A clatter announced the entrance of several people through the front door of the Oso Boho. Voices in the kitchen immediately adjacent caused Regret to spring to the door and slam it. A peal of laughter followed a pause and taunts through the door in female voices. Gayle now held the mouth of the duffel bag in two fists again, and was wiping her eyes on her arm.

"It'll be OK," she was saying. "I'm sorry. You don't know how sorry. But we've dragged it out long enough and it's obviously not going to get any better. I'm thirty, not twenty-three. I just can't seem to change."

"Who says you have to change?"

"You do. I do. Everybody does."

"Bullshit. Verna's fifty. You don't see her changing. And Jennifer, who's the only person around here that young, idolizes you, and you know it."

Gayle grimaced bitterly. "A lot of good it does me," she said. "Can't you see, Aka, the position I'm in, being your woman out here where nobody is supposed to belong to anybody else? Can't you see all the aggression that gets focussed on me? You're the axis of this whole place. You own it, you support it, and all the main people here are here because of some connection to you. Then I come along making special claims on your time and affections. Every time I turn my back, somebody wants to fuck you! And I can't handle it!"

"OK, OK."

Gayle's rising voice had silenced the chatter in the kitchen, which Regret was hoping would soon resume.

"You know," Gayle said, turning a slightly deranged face up to Regret as she swept a last armload of clothes into the duffel and pulled the drawstring, "I don't think I even really want to evolve some more communal

consciousness than what I've got. That fucking Morgan gives me the creeps!" Morgan was the six-year-old son of Suzanne, who was very probably out in the still silent kitchen right now. Morgan had lived in the Rancho for the past year, mothered collectively by a shifting group of women and men, as he had been all his life. "He's like some kind of zombie. He's so cool he makes me sick. I think a kid ought to know exactly who his mother is. I find myself wondering if little enlightened Morgan has even got a soul."

"Gayle, shut up."

Gayle bit her lip and sniffled loudly as she pulled on a pair of jeans. Regret was ashamed to realize that the sight of her swollen nipples swaying in the light was resurrecting his wilted desire.

"I'm sorry, Aka. I'm fucked, I know. I told you. I just keep getting these huge paranoid flashes that the whole time I'm trying to change, to get looser, not so possessive and specialized, that the whole time I'm actually leaving behind everything I really value. Don't you ever get the feeling that spreading everything around, not focussing too much feeling on any one person, not caring too deeply about anything really,

ultimately just shallows you out, robs you of any possibility of really profound feeling? I don't know, but conflict and risk just seem like what it's all about to me. Maybe it's perverse of me, but I get these visions of these half-developed personalities endlessly fucking in these incredibly tedious daisy chains."

"Yeah, I know, I know," said Regret, drawing his knees up and hiding his face between them.

Gayle touched his shoulder. "I know you do," she said gently. "And you're caught in the middle, and I'm not blaming you. I know it was hard for you when I slept with Tell and with Ben. But you handled it. And I only did it because I felt like I ought to. And I wanted you to not handle it. I wanted you to hurt and freak out, don't you see? It's no good. You've just had a different life than I have. Living all those years on all those sailboats, in communal situations that really had a focus, taught you a truly fine way to love a number of different people at once."

Regret groaned. "Jesus," he said through his knees. "Where the fuck did you get that? That wasn't how it was at all. And it was not all that many years."

"OK. But it was definitely a life that discouraged any kind of heavy, long-term trips with another person. And I'm sick of trying to carry on one half of one of those while you want something else." Gayle pulled a sweater quickly over her head and stood.

"And I'm sick of being the heavy, the witch, the old woman who wants to put all you kiddies in the oven!"

Regret raised his hand and climbed to his knees to try to catch Gayle's hand. At that moment, the bedroom door opened.

"Did I hear something bout the oven? You guys hungry too?"

It was Verna, leaning in the door. She was drunk. Over her shoulder, half her age and many times as lovely, peeked Jennifer. She was curious. When Verna noticed Regret on his knees, ass in the air, she laughed loudly.

"Hey Aka, that ain't no way to win a lady!"

Jennifer tittered. Gayle abruptly turned her back on the leering women at the door.

"Well," said Verna. "If you kids do get the munchies, just let us know, we're makin hot fudge sundaes out here."

The door shut. Gayle shouldered her duffel bag and stepped into a pair of sandals.

"Gayle, no. Please. Why tonight?"

"Because I took a bunch of speed to grade papers," she hissed. "And I can't do that and I can't sleep, so I might as well go. I sure as fuck can't stay here. I'll come back tomorrow or the next day for my stuff."

She looked fiercely down at him, her red eyes slitted, lips compressed. "I see you've still got a hard-on," she said. "Second time I've seen it in a month. I'm sure you'll find somebody else to stick it in when I'm gone."

She stormed out the back door. Regret waited until her steps had ceased on the back stairs before he jumped up and followed. He caught her alongside the house, on the trail beside the Slough, knocking her down from behind and hurling her duffel bag far out into the mud. She lay in the grass and cried so hard she choked. He stood above her in the dark, still erect, and cried more quietly. Why he would not let her go, he could not say. It was true that they did not have a chance:::::

And the summer night dew grew heavy on the cabin eaves in Santa Cruz one year later, grew heavy and

dripped all night, splashing in the flower bed and on the walk pavement in a sullen duet that Regret heard to jabber, "Poss-ibilities, Poss-ibilities", while Gayle slept fitfully between bad dreams.

THIRTEEN.

"Shakedown"

Southbound's water line sank six inches in the hour it took to collect all the tools, materials, and assorted equipment on her decks and pile it on the dock. The heaviest tools, T.J.'s welding and gunsmithing set-ups, were still stored below, in the bottoms of all three hulls.

"But she oughta be OK now," said T.J. "Don't you think? Just for a little shakedown? She don't really need to float as high as that main hull chine. Does she, Tamarack? That other stuff can act as ballast."

"You don't want ballast in a multihull," said Regret.

"You mean I hauled all that shit over here from my folks' for nothing? I'm gonna haveta haul it all back before we go?"

Regret shrugged. The remaining extraneum would be a huge chore to get up from below. He decided to

let it slide. They proceeded with the preparations to sail.

"How much you think I spent since we turned that crumble?" T.J. asked.

Regret didn't know. A lot.

"Just about four grand," said T.J. I don't believe it. Twelve hundred to Moe and my folks, nine hundred for that second set of sails, which won't be ready for a month I bet, six hundred on that old Ship to Shore, four hundred on engine parts and a long way to go, four hundred for just this compass! And we ain't even got a life raft yet! But ain't this thing a beauty?"

T.J. was leaning over the new compass, polishing its face with a rag.

"A dinghy would be better than a raft," said Regret.

"Yeah, well, they're about eight hundred and a good raft's four."

"The kind of raft you need, all outfitted, is a thousand."

T.J. looked up from the cockpit to stare curiously at Regret, who stood on the dock. But Regret was watching a Company Carry All come to a fast dusty halt in the lot above the dock.

"Regret!"

It was Regret's least favorite crew clerk again.

"Regret! Trainmaster Fulkerson wants to see you!
A.S.A.P.!"

"About what?"

"About you laying off for five days when we're
short of men! A.S.A.P.!"

At the beginning of this exchange, T.J. had
climbed off Southbound and started up the dock ramp to
the lot. Now he chuckled his Watch This chuckle and
swerved toward where the Carry All idled. He leaned
his big beard into the driver's face and roared,
"OH-KAY!"

The clerk recoiled like he'd been slapped. T.J.
laughed fiercely and slapped the flank of the Carry All
as it lurched ten yards ahead. The clerk yelled over
one shoulder, "And this place ain't no two miles either,
so get a phone if you wanna work!" The Carry All
raised a long puff of dust as it streamed away from
Moss Landing.

T.J. stomped back down the ramp. "Ain't that just
like them bastards," he growled. "Can't believe any-
body'd wanna live without a god damn phone." He stepped

past Regret, set one foot over the deck rail, and stopped. "Well, Tamarack," he said quietly. "What's it gonna be?"

Regret turned thirty degrees and ran his eye over the trimaran's rigging. A new forestay sparkled in the afternoon sun. The shrouds had been tested and tightened. The blocks, tracks, and winches all gleamed faintly with cleaning and oil. Wheeler had done more work in three days than most brakemen did in a month.

"Let's go sailing," said Regret.

T.J. whooped like a sea fight Apache, grabbed Regret from behind, and dragged him aboard, banging his heels on the taffrail in the process.

They raised the mainsail, T.J. chanting the names of things, "Halyard! Clew! Sheet! Boom! Topping Lift! Snatch Block!", Regret not correcting him when he erred. The badly wrinkled sail caught the wind quickly, they cast off, and T.J. took the wheel.

Though Wheeler cut a stirring figure at the wheel in the wind in his blue knit cap, blue eyes flashing, Regret went forward to watch for lines and submerged cans as they tacked back and forth through the harbor. The wind was right in their teeth, blowing straight

down from the harbor mouth for which they were bound, and the three hulls made Aka nervous with the amount of immediate vision they blocked.

"WELL WHAT DO YOU THINK NOW, TAMARACK?" wondered Wheeler.

Regret, satisfied Moss Landing was well-dredged and clear, returned to the cockpit. "I think it's like sailing a boxcar sideways," he said. "Though that 'ballast' isn't helping. Plus your mainsail's missing two battens and the top one's broken. And we're getting nowhere against this wind."

The heat in T.J.'s eyes steamed and hissed and died. He grumbled and wrenched the wheel as the main-sail began to luff.

"Why don't you raise the jib," Regret said gently. He felt like a forty-carat turd. "Let me work on this weather helm."

Wheeler went forward and silently raised the jib sail. When necessary, Regret shouted instructions. Meanwhile, he experimented with the main sheet. And Southbound began to find the edge of the wind. Soon they were beating up between the jetties, then slicing out into open water.

And the trimaran took the first sea swells with a grace and stability that surprised Regret. The boat's width was still unnerving, but she rode the short wind chop like she was sailing long trade swells. Aka turned the wheel over T.J., who was growling again as his ship leapt over the water into the brisk north wind. They fell off on a fine beam reach for Monterey.

One hour later, Moss Landing Power Plant was a smudge beneath three popsicle sticks to the east.

"Goddam goddam goddam," T.J. was muttering. "I could do this the rest of my life."

"So you say," said Regret. "Now for the upwind part."

The sun was low, the wind was dropping, they came about and pointed for the Power Plant stacks. The tri still rode the bumpy sea as if it were smooth.

"This thing's no boxcar," said Regret. "It's a lounge car, with double-cushion passenger undercarriage."

Wheeler grinned proudly. "Hey," he said, "Fuck upwind. Let's just go downwind forever."

"Peninsula's in our way."

"I mean after we get out to sea. Let's go straight to Hawaii. That's downwind. We oughta hit fuckin Hawaii first."

"You wouldn't like it," said Regret. Too many people there now."

"Yeah, just like the North Country. Fuck it. I want my own little island where you gotta sail a month to see me and then if I don't like your face when you show up I'll just blast a cannon across your bows. Blam, go home mother, this is Eel de Wheeler."

T.J.'s chuckle ebbed and tumbled till the sun went down. Then they donned sweaters and sipped cold beers. The water to the west went pink like the color of early bougainvillea, that to the east a flat silver like a dolphin's back. Regret shivered and the wind dropped some more.

"Hey Tamarack," T.J. said. "How long did you sail around those islands anyway?"

"Couple years altogether."

"Always on other folks' boats, that right? Never your own?"

"Yep. That was the part that got old."

"Well I don't know about that. Hire me to knock around Paradise when I was sixteen, nothin to do but stare up free snatch and smoke free dope and sail some dude around, I think I'd a signed on for life."

Regret said nothing. The tri rode the light breeze nicely.

"That's what we need though," Wheeler exclaimed. "That's just what we need, a couple sweet young things to go with us."

"They're not so sweet once they start getting seasick," said Regret. "Or have to fix you dinner on the fourth day of a gale."

"They give us any shit, we tie em to the mast. Feed em to the sharks."

T.J. grumbled and growled awhile, taking time out to compliment his ship, her sails, her fine new compass.

"Well OK," he finally said, "What does she need? This main should be the spare, OK, that clew for the halyard's in a bad place on the port shroud, OK. What else?"

Regret looked around Southbound vaguely, a revery interrupted. Daylight was failing. "Have to design something different on the transom for a dinghy," he said. "Deck needs re-roughing. I don't know. A ton of diddly shit."

"But a month at most!" Wheeler crowed. "When that second set of sails comes in, we are gonna be

done! I can power all this diddly shit, and get that diesel runnin too, you wait and see. You shop for maps and provisions, get us all stocked, checked and double-checked, and I'll get the nigger work done. God damn but won't it be fine to see this fuckin California fade over the horizon once and for all!"

Regret stared across the cockpit at the giant dim shape over the wheel. Who was this fiend? Regret had been dreaming of other ships in other waters.

:::::Swimming out to the Cloud alone, breaststroking slowly in mask through blue crystal water, alternating hull views with above-water views of the schooner. In the air, she was a classic, fifty-two feet of teak and ethereal lines. In the water, her swooped keel was showroom immaculate. Regret had scraped it by hand the day they anchored, free-diving. That was the best thing about George: he ran the tightest loose ship in the islands. Still, it was a bad anchorage.

Kahoolawe had no bays. They were in the lee for the trades here, but even a kona swell could pull their anchor. Worst of all, it was sand bottom. Regret hadn't slept well since they arrived. And he didn't like to stay on land with no one aboard. When he

reached the boat, he swam underneath, routine checking the through-hull fitting, the rudder stake, the prop wheel cap, and peering down through the sun-tentacled depths to the green bottom where the anchor still lay buried — before he climbed up over the transom into the cockpit.

Alone on the boat for the first time in days, Regret suddenly felt like getting stoned, so as to enjoy it the more. But the dope wasn't in the galley drawer where it was kept. That was the worst thing about George: when it came to anything concerning the operation or maintenance of Flying Cloud, no expense was spared, and the greatest care was taken to see that all equipment was perfectly stowed, always in the same place, always available — but when it came to anything extraneous, anything inessential to sailing, even food, George treated all items as if they were his own, luxuries only provided the others at his leisure. Regret rummaged angrily through cupboards and drawers. If he recalled, he had even turned George on to the connection for this stuff in Honolulu, a home grower who would not have talked to the mainland haole without introduction. Finding nothing, Regret

climbed muttering back up on deck and tried the binnacle box. Pipe and pot were there. He settled back in the shade of the boom to smoke and cool out.

He faced the beach, where the two Canadian girls lay on the sand side by side, one face down, one face up, both naked. Across eighty yards of water, they looked like two views of the same person. They were also, Regret knew, equally miserable. But the prettier one still balled George, the other one Barkley, so it was not serious. They would go home, anyway, eventually, with the suntans of their dreams.

The less pretty one had cried the first night the Navy bombed the island. Regret hadn't enjoyed the barrage much himself. George had stood in the stern, blue eyes shining in the red tracer light. George thought it wouldn't be a bad way to go, blown to bits by the United States. "Come on, fuckers," he said. "You got us where you want us now, let's see you do it." Regret had failed to share his captain's sentiments.

And the Canadian girls still had not figured out that they could get off Kahoolawe post haste by simply holding out on Barkley and George. It was the sort of

situation Regret had seen on boats before, and often found quite funny to watch unfold, but this time, watching one girl roll over to present her sunny side up, then her partner slowly turn her round brown buns to the sun, he was strangely unamused.

Regret tapped the pipe out over the side. His throat was dry, his mouth exceedingly salty from the swim. The sun on the water in the direction of Lanai was blinding. Suddenly Regret remembered the quart jars they had filled with guava pulp on Molokai. The image bloomed in his mind. His grin was wide and shameless. There were several jars still left below. He hurried to stuff the pipe and pot back in the binnacle box. Then he noticed, in the bottom of the box, a large book wedged between spare running lights. He had seen it once before, months ago. It was well-bound in fancy red leather. He pulled it out. It was the log of Flying Cloud.

Under the heading, "4 A.M., Date Unknown, Alenuihaha Channel," Regret read, "The Ocean is my true Mother. I suck at her huge tits while she rocks my brothers in sleep." The handwriting was George's. Most of the handwriting was George's. Technically, it

wasn't a log at all. It was really just a ship's book, for anyone to write down anything they felt like. There had been one on Kialoa; Regret had scribbled everything from meticulous meteorological data to apocalyptic teenage surrealism in it. But the tradition had been derelict on the Cloud in the months Regret had crewed on her. He flipped through the volume randomly now.

George again: "Where are you, Amerika? Your children have run away to live in ships on the sea, which forgives like a true Mother. You are the enemy now. We live in love on the water under the sky. The winds guide us The Way."

Regret found himself coloring at these lines. He looked guiltily toward the shore. The girls had not moved. George and Barkley were off with Roger and Francois somewhere, trying to catch a goat. George must have been stoned beyond belief when he wrote this stuff. Regret started flipping pages, looking for something by Francois, who had been aboard some months and made sense most of the time when she talked. Neither Barkley or Roger, Regret was sure, could write more than their names. But the only feminine hand he

found did not sound like Francois: "When you pee /
In the sea / You feel / How truly small thou art."

Regret tried one more by George, also a poem,
titled My Creed: "Give me liberty or give me death /
Let me naturally draw my breath / On my ship I am the
master / None dares tell me to go faster." There
were two more stanzas. Regret slammed the log shut
and stuffed it back in the binnacle box.

He stood and wiped his hands vigorously up and
down on his bare hips, sudden prey to a weirdly viru-
lent sweat. Why should he care that George made an
ass of himself with a pencil? If inane philosophy
bothered him, he would have gone bananas the first
time he ever sailed inter-island, on that hillbilly
guru's little sloop. And a thousand times since. It
was definitely time for that good guava juice.

Yet Regret stayed where he was, now bouncing his
glance around the Cloud's broad cockpit as though he
had never seen it before, or never would again. The
ornate teak inlay in the binnacle suddenly seemed to
him more precious, and more ridiculous, than it ever
had before. The whole ship, rolling lightly on a
light swell, suddenly felt incredibly fragile, even

the great heavy Norfolk mast. It was a china figurine fallen into the hands of children. And True Mother would undoubtedly forgive when her young darlings dropped the toy. The Cloud was insured, after all, for a quarter of a million.

Regret began to flash that they had already pulled anchor and were drifting toward shore. He lunged for the rail. But it wasn't possible. It was still a trade wind and a trade swell. When the wind and sea changed, though, he knew that it would happen. Sooner or later. Just like Kialoa. And George would dazzle everyone with his cosmic attitude, just like Mark did when Kialoa died. And the crack young crewman, it sure wasn't his fault, would move on unscathed, on to another in the fast-shrinking fleet of full-size schooners. Where another rick kid skipper would fund another laid-back scene and record more absurd abstractions in a well-bound leather book.

Or maybe not. Maybe this was all just stoned nonsense. Something else would happen. The Cloud would not go down. Or no new ship would offer. He would go do something else. Besides sail? Besides roll and roll and roll with every gust and wave and weirdo?

Drink that guava, trim that jib, tend that sucker's ship like it was your own? Spend that rich boy's bread? From East Coast coal pits to the inter-island cruise life, from black lung to fresh trades, free drugs, and stereo headphones for the steersman, to this ever-unfolding lotus of tropical waterfall bays, of fruit-rich vallies, surf-rich reefs, firm young female flesh — where else along the twisted river of wealth would one ever want to drink?

A splash at the stern caused Regret to whirl abruptly. It was the Canadian girls, struggling up the transom. Regret could not have handled George at that moment. He gratefully helped the girls aboard, their wet bodies cool against him. They did not giggle, as they would have a week ago, or shrink in the least from full-length contact. They were beyond all that.

The less pretty one wanted to know, with a catch in her voice, if Aka thought they would bomb tonight. The sun-brown sailor sat the two of them down to reveal the one way they might get off Kahoolawe:::::

It was dead dark now on the Monterey Bay. The wind had dropped to a whisper. They were less than a

mile from Moss Landing Harbor, just barely ghosting along. Regret stood in the gangway, gulping beer, so eager to get off Southbound that he thought he might jump off and swim.

FOURTEEN.

Now Regret could smell the land, the rich loam of the long Salinas Valley. The white plume from the Power Plant's stacks rose straight up into the sky.

"Shit, I don't care if the wind dies right out," T.J. was saying. "Spend the night at sea. I had to do it a couple times up in the Copper when the inboard quit. Dodging sandbars all night with a little fuckin outboard, it was crazy. That how you guys fetched that schooner up on a reef, no motor and no wind at night?"

"Kialoa? No. It was dusk and we were power sailing with a total asshole at the wheel. I was asleep." And woke to a sound he would never forget. Then spent the night trying to force palm husks down between the coral and the schooner's hull. Then discovered at dawn that a bulkhead had buckled, and Kialoa was through. And that they were on the most inaccessible coast of Molokai, fifteen miles from a trail.

"Whaddaya think about this?" T.J. asked. "It's gettin god damn glassy."

Regret said, "Evening glass-off. Bet we missed some waves," and went below for another beer. "Hey," he called up the gangway, "You got any that coke left?"

"It's in the truck."

Regret said "Shit" and sat down in the dark cabin, beer between his knees. He was hungry, but he couldn't find food without light and he couldn't remember where the lantern or the matches for the lamps were stowed. He was sleepy, but should not crash out till they were safely in port. He could hear surf distinctly now through a starboard hatch. Regret lay his head back against the bunk and closed his eyes.

"Hey Tamarack, come on up here, check this out."

Regret rose and slowly climbed from the cabin. The first thing he saw as he emerged was the long ladder of red lights that ran up the Power Plant stacks now lying in reflection on the water, perfectly clear. So the wind had quit completely. But the high white plumes above the Plant were tending out to sea. So the wind was about to switch.

"South wind," he said. "Where are we?"

Before Wheeler answered, Regret felt Southbound yaw in a groundswell trough and heard another wave thunder on the jetty so close that he jumped and hit his head on the boom. He spun and saw the jetty beacons shining at topmast level. They were drifting sideways into the harbor, riding the rising tide and the swells that surged up and out of the mile-deep submarine canyon which ended half a mile offshore here.

"Jesus fucking Christ," said Regret. "How'd we get in here?"

"You want the wheel?" asked T.J. quietly.

"You want me?"

"Yeah."

Regret grabbed the wheel and began working the rudder rapidly back and forth, trying to gain some steerage. He ran the main boom out to the limit of its traveller, to catch any breath of breeze. But they continued to drift. The extra ton of iron in the hulls was making Southbound sluggish and balky in the calm. And now white water boiled on the jetty ends, phosphorescent, while they slowly slid between them, both grimly silent.

Then the first puff of south wind hit, right on their bows. Regret threw off all the sheet lines, to catch it from either direction. But it only backed them up, straight toward the north jetty. The ballast was holding them dead in the water. As they neared the high wall of black rocks, T.J. climbed onto the aft cabin to try to fend off. He was breathing like a steam engine. Then the first hard gust from the south came swirling across the water, caught their bows just as a groundswell surged beneath them, and swung them around up onto the jetty broadside.

The sound of the starboard hull settling onto jetty rocks was like ten thousand drunks vomiting at once. Regret scrambled out of the cockpit and onto the port hull bow to try to keep their weight on the water. But the next swell pitched them still higher and tore off the front third of the starboard hull with a terrible scream of planks and glass. Regret heard T.J. bellow once as he was swept from the stern and the boat rode up and over him.

"TEEEEEEE-JAY!"

Regret was running back over the deck toward the stern, hurdling a mess of lines and winches and sagging

shrouds. A cleat caught his toe and sent him head-first into the cockpit. An explosion in his skull silenced the world of grindings and shrieks outside. The next sound he heard was a voice. It said:

"YEAH!"

Regret rose to his knees, head ringing. He gripped the deck rail and tried to look over the transom. It was a long way down to the rocks. The trimaran sat at a wild angle now, nose down into the water. Slowly he realized that the voice had not come from under the stern, but from out in the channel. He looked that way and saw T.J., churning back toward the boat. T.J. rode a swell up onto a rock and clambered aboard. He crawled up into the cockpit. Seawater glittered in his beard in the faint light from the Power Plant. He reached out a hand and touched Regret's head.

"Holy fuck," he said. "What happened to you?"

T.J. stared at his fingers, where blood ran dark toward the palm.

"I tripped and hit the binnacle," Regret said, in a high, strange voice. "What happened to you?"

"I got dragged under the fuckin boat from stern to bow, between the hulls."

They stared at each other, then each slowly started to giggle. But laughing made Regret's head ache and spin. And T.J. ground his giggle to death with a gnashing of teeth.

"Well, what now, Tamarack?" he said. "We got a lull and we're just about high and dry, but the tide's a-rising. And half a hull's out there floating around."

At that moment they heard an engine, and turned to see the running lights of a sardine rig pounding up the harbor toward the mouth. Floodlights came on, blinding the shipwrecks. Then the first swell of another set caught Southbound under the bows and knocked them both off the port hull into the water.

The water was incredibly cold. Regret was having trouble telling air from water. He was afraid to breathe. His shoes felt like stones on his feet. T.J. helped him swim out to where the fishing boat was just pulling up to stop. A thick line hit the water. T.J. grabbed it and swam back toward the trimaran. Regret was hefted aboard by powerful arms. He sat numbly in the stern and watched the scene on the jetty.

Southbound's bows had been tossed so high by the last set that her stern now lay nearest the water. The

entire starboard hull had been ripped from its wing and lay beside the rest of the boat like a ghastly gutted whale, its belly ripped open spilling equipment into the water. T.J. went over the transom with the line. They could see him working in the cockpit, tying off on the binnacle. Then he came back over the stern and dove off into a swell. When they could see he was clear, his head bobbing off down tide in the midst of all the wreckage now floating in that direction, the tow skipper drew the line taut slowly, then gunned it as a swell rose under the tri. The line went limp at once and they shot off into the bay.

"AIN'T YOU GOT A HEAVIER LINE?" T.J. bawled from the water.

"That's it," yelled the skipper. To Regret, he said, "That boat's all done anyway. Best try to just secure her there and strip her in the morning when the tide's out. She'll sink like a stone if she gets back on the water.

But T.J. would not come aboard when they pulled around to pick him up. It wasn't the line that had broken. The entire binnacle, complete with compass,

floated in a well-tied loop. T.J. struggled to untie the line.

"What's stronger, Tamarack?" he shouted.

"Nothing stronger, T.J.," Regret said.

"Fuck that, there's gotta be!"

"Maybe the aft bulkhead. Like a line around the whole engine."

T.J. thrashed away like a dying whale. They saw him go up what was left of the starboard side and disappear into the hold. Swells were slamming the tri now with regularity. They could hear her breaking up from here. It would only take one good wave now to tear off the whole stern and sink it, with T.J. down in the dark on his belly trying to run a line around the engine mounts.

"That guy go below?" asked the skipper, incredulous.

Regret did not answer.

"Say, you better get something on that head. You're gushing like a hydrant."

Regret did not answer. Finally, Wheeler reappeared and they could hear his roar above the roar of the swells on the jetty.

"HIT IT!"

T.J. dove into the bay again. The skipper pulled the line taut again, then his ship strained and bucked and shuddered at full throttle through three successive swells before something finally gave and they lurched ahead. The remains of Southbound splashed back into the water. Half the main hull stayed on the jetty. The starboard hull was knocked off the rocks and instantly sank. The rest floated low in the smooth harbor water. As the fishing rig's overwrought engines wound down, Regret could hear Wheeler's wild whoops of thanks. They watched him climb aboard the hulk and signal them on, and they hauled Southbound back to the dock like that.

FIFTEEN.

The Trainmaster hadn't realized Regret was hurt. Nevertheless, sighing behind his desk upstairs in the old depot, he loosened his collar and began to calmly explain the terrible situation with the Perishable over in Salinas, pausing frequently to allow silent whiskey-fragrant belches to pass between his thin purple lips. Regret shut his eyes and quietly umped nuns while the Trainmaster spoke. As a result, he did not hear about how there were just not enough reefers to go around right now, some kind of holdup back East. Nor about how they were having to shuffle the empties around so much, as a result, that there just weren't enough men to do all the work. Nor, for that matter, the exact details of any of Flukey's hundred other "headaches". But he did notice when the Trainmaster started to shout and snarl. The script from this point on was a piece of unambiguous cake. His part was to appease his employer. What did Flukey want? He wanted him, Brakeman A.J. Regret, to "mark up"

immediately! Regret barked "Yes sir," rose, and backed obsequiously from the office, secretly delighted to be of service to someone.

It was low tide as he passed through Elkhorn Slough, a low tide so extreme that the entire Slough was a black mud flat except for a single serpentine, duck-choked salt stream coursing through its center. Egrets stood disgusted among the reeds. Pelicans cruised in flawless formation up from the Landing, saw what was happening, wheeled and headed back out to sea. The Slough never had looked like an elk's horn, but like a flowing fox's tail. Today it looked like the fox had diarrhea.

Verna was parking her pick-up as Regret was passing the houses. She hailed him like the bull dyke she was, with two raised fists and a Choctaw brave dance she normally only did when drunk. Regret only stopped because he knew she would attack him if he did not.

"Aka by God, where have you been?"

"I've been to see the Trainmaster."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

Verna was marching up the toepath, her broad wary half-Indian face bobbing on narrow powerful shoulders.

"But you know," she said, "We're soundin just like a poem of mine. Wanna hear it? What the hell happened to your head?"

Regret looked down at Verna's tight dirty jeans.

"OK," she said. "It's called 'Dismantle the Lendin' Man':

'Where have you been, Godsword?'
'I been down to Member, Sissy.'
'Why for you been to Member, Godsword?'
'To fetch Mama's green bowl.'
'Did you fetch it?'
'Yes, Sissy, I fetched Mama's green bowl. But I
had to dismantle the lendin' man.'"

Verna made a peeved face with her lips pursed and thrust her hands into the front pockets of her jeans.

"I don't get it," said Regret, with a fixed gaze across the pasture.

"It's about the troubles we been having keeping your old place afloat, stupid. I been captured by the po-lice twice this year, so I ain't been much help, so I wrote some poems about it. Ain't you got a motor car? Callie said you was walking out here last week too. I didn't believe you come by without a word for your old pal Verna."

"I'll be buying a car soon," said Regret. "I've been away on vacation."

"Well no shit," Verna said slowly, pulling her wide lips in belligerently over her teeth.

Regret began to move away down the tracks. He cocked his head toward the Rauncho roof. "Who put that old flag back up?" he asked.

Verna moved with him, across the fronts of the houses. "I don't know," she said.

"I'm pretty sure it's illegal," Regret said. "It says something about that on the passport."

"Oh do it?" Verna stopped as they came to the gate to the Oso Boho. "Well I'm sure some of these rednecky trainmen or these fishermen come up from Moss to see if they can see a little tittie will make sure to turn us in then. Pigs come out and see if they can capture them some preverts."

Regret nodded soberly. "Yeah," he said. "You should probably take it down."

Verna stood by the blackberry hedge, rippling her jaw and following him with her eyes as he receded, nodding and walking backward.

"Don't go to no lendin' man to finance that motor car," she called.

He nodded, stopped backpedaling, turned his back and kept walking. He heard Verna snarl something in

such thick Okie talk that he didn't catch a word. He raised his hand jauntily in acknowledgment, but did not turn his head.

If the Slough was the tail of the long proud fox of the Salinas River valley, then Moss Landing was the asshole. Regret walked the shoulder of Dolan Road down into the saddle below the Power Plant, then cut through the waste pools and toxic cattails of the Plant's backyard. He stopped alongside three luminous metal ponds at the bottom of a bank of pipes. One was turquoise, one chartreuse, and one so black it looked like liquid coal. The turquoise and chartreuse pools were preternaturally brilliant, hot chemical jewels under a dull gray sky. Regret climbed the thick pipe that fed the black pool. The first breath of its delicate suppuration made his hands tremble on the pipe. A shout came from above. Regret turned to see a middle-aged Mexican in yellow hard hat standing on the toepath (the Power Plant was served by rail) with a terrified look on his face.

"Cuidado! Cuidado!"

He was waving Regret away from the pool. Regret watched the man's passionate gestures for a long moment,

then slid slowly off the pipe and continued toward the harbor. He found T.J. standing on a dock beside a pile of dripping gunsmith's tools. Southbound was tightly moored to the dock, but she lay extremely low in the water, her port hull nearly submerged, seawater lapping in and out of the cabin through the great hole in the bow. Her starboard wing was lifted like a grisly amputation.

"Got this stuff from the main hull," mumbled T.J. "Only bout half it gone. Port hull's mostly engine tools. Starboard was welding and saws and parts. Books in the bow there all got away. So'd the magazines. Oughta be able to find that anchor by diving, maybe some the tools too."

T.J.'s jeans were soaking wet. His eyes did not seek Regret's.

"Moe saw her, said she was unsalvagable. Said just parts and materials would be six thousand. Plus months in his fuckin dry dock." T.J. flipped a clamp gently over with his bare toe, making it clank on the dock. "Don't know what the salt will do to some of this stuff," he said. "No use even lookin for the Ship to Shore, I spose, things like that. Compass got smashed.

Look at that." He pointed to the cockpit. Regret did not look. "We even pulled the mounts half out." He shook his wooly head slowly. "But look what some guy brought over after you left."

Down the dock, against an old boat locker, Regret's surfboard leaned. The canvas cover had been removed. The primitive patch on the old camel bite had fallen off.

"Looks like a shark chomped it," T.J. said. "Ain't that strange?"

Regret nodded. "Moe gonna buy what's left?" he asked.

T.J. spoke through set teeth. "I didn't ask. He did say I couldn't do the work. Said I'd need a shipwright. I told him to get fucked."

Regret nodded and looked up toward Moe Marine. "Good surf?" he wondered.

"This wind, beg swell, risin tide, it's probly perfect." T.J. was still talking through his teeth. "I been a little busy to go check it out. Moe seems to think she might go down any minute. Thought I better unload her just in case."

Regret looked back down at Southbound. "Those winches alone are worth a lot," he said.

"I ain't strippin her, Tamarack," Wheeler whispered. "I'm just helpin her float a little easier."

Regret nodded and looked at T.J.'s face for the first time since they had started to giggle during the wreck. T.J. was looking down at his ship, his mouth opening and closing silently inside his beard.

"Why, are you thinking she's salvagable, T.J.?"

Wheeler still whispered. "That's right, Tamarack. I'm thinkin she is. Only problem is I ain't ready to work for the man for the next five years to get the bread to re-build her, then work for the rest of my life to keep her up while I tour the Bay on Sundays. So it looks like my sailin days is over. But Southbound here will go to somebody who wants to sail her or she won't go at all."

Regret squatted to look under the starboard wing. Long cracks in the rabbet to the main hull had opened where the weight of the cabin was greatest. The jagged scratches and tears in the main hull toward the stern looked like the boat had been attacked. The tiller stake was smashed, the prop was mangled, the through-hull fitting ripped apart. Regret stood up and shut his eyes. He pictured Wheeler's mouth, white-lipped, opening and silently closing.

Finally Regret said, "First thing's to prop this wing. That's the worst structural. Then lighten that port hull slow, checking the props. There's two weeks at least here before you need to haul out. Do a whole hull frame while she's still in the water."

He wheeled and walked away from the boat. From one of the heaps of salvage lining the dock, he dragged out an old dive suit.

Without turning around, Regret said, "By time you're through the hash money, there'll be more. I'll go back braking till it's done. Floating, rigged, and stocked."

He took his board under his arm, went up the ramp, and disappeared over the sea wall.

Late in the afternoon, with Southbound's starboard wing securely propped, T.J. took a break and hiked across the sand spit to the south Moss Landing jetty. The surf was smaller than last night, but the south wind was brushing the faces into immaculate green-grey tubes. Every wave wore a high white plume of feathery offshore spray. The peaks lifted swiftly but threw out slowly into hypnotically spinning, impossibly hollow eyes. No one was in sight on the roadless shore.

From out of a trough Regret rose suddenly, stroking down a steep swept face. As he stood, the baggy suit he wore billowed out around him and the nose of his board looked mangled even from here. But a light-footed top turn and delicate speed tuck sent him screaming down through the now pitching peak on a trim line T.J. had once thought reserved for those seagulls who cruise the inner recesses of waves, banking up from underneath collapsing lips at the last imaginable moment. Then the wave swallowed Aka whole. And two more sections folded before he flashed from the tube in perfect trim, and went on to work the long fast vertical wall with imperceptible weight shifts for another fifty yards before slicing through the top and starting the long slow paddle back to the lineup.

Wheeler sat and watched him surf till dark. The twisting lace of his wake grew dimmer and dimmer, finer and finer, until finally T.J. could not decide which waves he was riding and which he was not. If Regret ever did come in to the beach that night, Wheeler did not know where.