

Our House

ALLYN WOOD

I have left my wife in the village to arrange for the rental of a rowboat, and to find shelter for our car which no longer is of use, while I go ahead to open the house. It is strange to be out under sky again; to think that as a biologist, working on the elements of life, I am so long absent from life that others know unquestioningly. The experiment is behind, and summer ahead, to rest and arrange my notes without interruption in the house we have leased atop the cliff by the sea. Perhaps we should have examined it first. They say it is an old house made of stone and wood, and they do not remember the former occupants who reached it from high ground behind. Later—that, too, was long ago—their approach was transected by the Eo River cutoff which no one has troubled to bridge. We shall get our things across by boat later. Meanwhile there is a steep natural stair on the seaward side. I am tired and excited: is it easier, perhaps, to be excited when one is tired?

And the day is strange, oppressive yet fresh; sky still, in grey and yellow strata; the sea—as I climbed the backbone of the beach, finding it suddenly, as if after years—shallow, grey, opalescent, aloof. Nothing is quite what it seems: it tells me by existing, it tantalizes by revelation. From a distance the beach appeared motionless. Now I feel it moving under me, circling and shifting cryptically as the upper sand in an hourglass. Sea worms are tunneling mazes. Buried clams throb. Everywhere is the sedimentary world, invisible, dominant; whose exhalation I inhale, sustaining only expectation; over which I pass

incongruous and vulnerable, a creature stripped of shell.

The cliff is a great moodless thing uniting beach and sky, stratified, eroded by sudden crumbings into terraces. At the foot of the stair, bodies of seaweed with outflung filaments lie where they have died, joined by my shadow reaching to climb. How easily might I die with such a little little change! If I were isolated on this first ledge, and never could go to the village for supplies, nor down to the shore for loathsome raw clams. From here the sea looks too young to be briny—almost Devonian. I have disturbed lizards on the ledge. But they do not run from me; they brush the sand on long toes, pursuing insects. They are unperfected, a plasmic pause, life in a dry case kept moist and workable. Out of their simple shape, special forms, cumbrous, unadaptable—why am I thinking of now as Mesozoic? Their eyes fleetingly object to me. Their eyes enter my mind like sand into a sealed instrument. They are capable of destroying order—my order, by substituting theirs. What is their order but mine retraced? Why does their simplicity overpower?

How beautiful, our cliff! Higher and higher, it begins to float, our world by itself. The sky that was like stone is breaking into gold-grey fragments; this evening Elise and I will see the mackerel sky swimming inland. I soar between ledges. A thrumming, cooing sound, palpitant and wild—warm and round, the incubating eggs of speech—rolls over the edge intricate with twigs.

I am afraid.

Why? My mind says, After the age

of reptiles, the age of birds. It says this over and over, a simple basic thing confirmed by evidence, a fact of pre-history, starting-point of investigations. So my mind has been trained to say without thinking, After the age of reptiles, the age of birds. Yet something in my mind, or out of it, is out of control, for I am climbing through time. I even am beginning to look at my hands, which are of a weathered color and merge into the stones they grasp, to ask of them—or rather of my eyes which I trust, yet which are so filled with the sea that they are nothing—whether I am yet. What has Elsie said about knowledge of all time being held suspended in certain places? Am I that knowledge incarnate (or disincarnate) looking back, looking forward—to the age of man? I did not recognize the Cambrian beach. I glanced at the Devonian sea. Now they are acknowledged: I say they all are here at once, even as I say they cannot be; and as I cling to this shelf—if I do cling—among these preening, sleeping, soaring terns, I see the roof of our house toward which I am coming. It is far and grey, above the last and widest terrace.

One key is in my pocket. The back door, they said, has no key and will not open. If I enter the house and find . . . Something . . . how shall I escape? What should I find? How amazingly fearless the birds are of a man clambering among them. Treetops are waving inland along the Eo cutoff. That way Elise and I will approach when we have the boat. Why do these thoughts ache in my brow's bone? I cannot press my brow to the stone, for it is crumbling here, rotting to little caves, and there are earth, leaves, debris, including small picked bones and shells. Something furry that scuttled into a cave is glaring at me. It comes out. It is a rat. Multitudes of eyes glisten in the holes;

angry, and not afraid. They are coming out—

But one moment to breathe! The remainder slopes toward the house. I understand. No, no, I deny that I understand! Yet must not the Cenozoic—began on the terrace of rats—culminate there? I shall go in to air the rooms for Elise. Perhaps there will be nothing . . . yet if I had a heavy branch, with knots, such as they used . . .

It is a queer key shaped like a shovel, that turns as if it were digging, and opens the door. Now to go through the twilit rooms, the dry, hot, square, empty, still, impending rooms; with the sea's ripple projected on the wall; and the cliff's life, breathing, inconspicuous, subdued to inferior place, because of the master who is somewhere here—I shall not think of the stair yet nor of the dark rooms above. I shall go slowly, putting off time, accustoming my eyes, opening the windows. Some are bay windows looking to sea. Where one is broken a tern has made its nest. Rodents have their holes in the baseboard, and the empty shells, which probably they bring, are scattered on the floor: why is this heap of them beside the ashy hearth? Mind, think of something else. Think that, if this be all within me, it is not less real, nor less dangerous, yet perhaps a little comforting. Explain that you have been too orderly. Show that until now reason has controlled, but that the merest quiver of emphasis put order in control of reason. He whom I climb now to meet, though not unkind, is horrible for latency of mind; should no one be here, I am horrible—

What cry!

His?

Dawn and our arboreal home! Cry of animal, of man. The house rings about me, the stair-rail vibrates under my hand,

He has found me and I am not afraid.

My name?

It cried my name?—Elise calls from below! She is cowering on the terrace of rats, clinging to an overhanging branch.

She has started a little landslide on the path; rocks are clattering down to the beach; terns are flying out to sea in fear; the cliff is deserted; the house is deserted; nothing's upstairs. The merest quiver of emphasis! Elise I am coming it's over . . .



The Cat And The Cricket

BARBARA PARK

HE ordered another bourbon and water, and watched the cat play with the cricket. How odd to see a cat playing with a cricket in the corner of a cocktail lounge! But then, it wasn't a very respectable cocktail lounge. John wouldn't approve of it, nor would he approve of her being there alone at four o'clock in the afternoon. John didn't approve of a good many things she did. But, good heavens, why think about John? That was past—c'est fini!

The drink came, and after she had paid for it, she turned again to watch the cat and the cricket. He pawed it carefully again and again until he paused, crouched low, his slit eyes watching it writhe and twist and scurry about in frantic circles, his tail swinging behind him like an irregular pendulum. He pounced upon it, tossing it playfully into the air and down again. She lit a cigarette, blew the smoke out slowly, and gazed into nothingness for a moment. She laughed shortly at her thoughts. They're like me, the cat and

the cricket, very much like me. She laughed again. How strange to compare oneself to a cat—and stranger still to compare the cricket with the hearts and souls of men! But it was true, wasn't it? She was a cat, a sleek and beautiful cat, playfully toying with love, tantalizing men until they squirmed and writhed and became docile. And men *were* like crickets really—stupid fools, who chirp and make a loud noise and pretend they're something they aren't. How small and insignificant and helpless they really are!

The cat batted the cricket again, but it wriggled once, and then lay very still. The cat sniffed at it, touched it experimentally, and, perceiving no movement, walked over to the corner and curled up contentedly. The cricket wasn't fun anymore. The life had gone out of it. The cat washed itself for a short moment, then lay back and surveyed the room in a self-satisfied manner.

She sank down into the dull leather cushions and smiled. It's a rather delicious feeling, isn't it, Cat? Feel pleased with yourself, don't you? Oh, she knew the