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Gilbert Neiman

DEATH IN THE SOUTH*

I : MORNING

THIS NEW ORLEANS' summer heat kept you wrapped up in a sticky blanket. It gave a continuity to life which life did not usually have. Though you were always on the lookout for any distraction that came along, the heat constantly enabled you to concentrate. Not only enabled you to, it tied and bound you, harnessed you to whatever it was that you were obsessed with. Surrounded by artists in the French Quarter here, though he had spent only a few months in this strange, easy land among these strange, easy Southerners, his main obsession had at last consolidated itself. The limp, root-like thoughts that had been sprouting through his cranium for the past several years, which he had grappled with the more fiercely the faster they slipped away from him, without his ever coming to the point of being able to name them, were painfully mentionable now.

They were: Was he a genius? Had he ever been, could he ever be, a genius? Was life worth living, if one were a genius? But most of all, after all, to be precise about the whole ticklish mess—what, exactly, *was* a genius, anyhow?

So as the summer had approached, as the heat had descended, or ascended, or grabbed him by the throat and tried to throttle him, this imperious question had become quite firmly established in his head and, try as he would, he could not shake it off. The heat had actually forced him to concentrate upon it. The heat had a humming sound, he fancied; the idea had a humming sound to it, too; the two sounds had grown inseparably linked. They seemed to drone on all the time, whether he was asleep or

* This is the opening section of Mr. Neiman's new, and at the time of this printing unpublished, novel *Art's the Thing!*—Ed.

awake. He wished he could say to himself, "*A genius is a drone,*" and have done with the matter there. But he felt his life was inseparably linked up with this momentous question, and that was too clever a way of solving your life. He said to himself: "I am still too young to take life lightly."

As he stepped off the curb at the end of the block, to reach the saloon with swinging doors on the opposite corner, a negro whipped out of the entrance-way to a patio a few doors up the next block, on the other side of the street, and made a beeline for the saloon. He kept on walking across the street but, as he was about to step up on the other curb, the negro swerved around the corner of the saloon and streaked by in front of him, causing him to stop. Then the negro stopped, too. He gave three crazy lurches, and fell into the side of a shiny red Packard, parked at the curb. He ricocheted face-down on the sidewalk, his lanky arms flung out ahead of him, his fingers clutching at the air as if in search of a rope with which to tug himself forward. The fingers made five or six clutching motions, and were still. Stanley gaped down at the limp body, breathing in through his mouth and feeling his lower jaw sagging foolishly open. His eyes, more adept at reflexes than his body, shot back to where a shadow appeared at the edge of them. The shadow was another plunging figure which had also dashed out of the entrance-way and was now nearly across the street. This shadow did not move with the lithe grace which the negro had displayed on rounding the corner, but lunged and lumbered across the street like an epileptic in a hurdle-race. It was clothed in blue. It wore shiny buttons and a shiny medal. It was a cop.

In an outstretched hand, this lumbering body carried a shiny piece of metal which gave off blue glints and thin streamers of smoke. The face was florid and beefy, with blond hair which, as the bulges of fat on the nape of the neck passed before his eyes, reminded the young man standing in the gutter of a pig's sharp bristles. A heavy black shoe with a thick leather sole kicked twice

very hard at the rump of the negro sprawled out on the sidewalk. The flesh, through worn patches of the much-mended pants, could be seen to shake like two cups of jelly. The bulky blue shadow, whose arms and legs resembled dangling hams, stooped over and snatched up one of the lanky arms which were flung forward beyond the head. The policeman felt the negro's pulse. A smile of satisfaction, sensually triumphant and mingled with a flush of pride, washed over the beet-red face. The officer let the arm flop back on the concrete.

"Shoot 'em like quail!" the policeman puffed, for the benefit of his audience, which had sprung up out of the pavement, out of the windows, out of the doorways, all around him.

Stanley, standing stock-still in the gutter, leaned his empty glass pitcher against a fender of the bright red Packard, and gasped suddenly, seeing a bullet had perforated the metal top, leaving a neat round hole in it, which could just as easily have been left in his head. Sure enough, his own skull, had he arrived two steps sooner, could have been punctured by this round, black period. The big black period, which punctuated all of his poems at the end, had he marched down the street any faster that morning, could just now have put an end to all the poems. In awe of his own demise, like John Donne stroking his death-mask, he touched a tentative finger to the tiny hole, and felt death draw near—a palpable reality. Compounded of two things, metal and space.

With almost equal awe, as if he were looking upon a monster escaped from a circus, he gazed at the blue-coated agent of Death, who was starting to warm up to the admiring audience that had gathered around him.

Back in Stanley's apartment—or rather, in the apartment which they had subleased for the summer—his wife, Babette, was puttering about, somewhat pretentiously tidying up things for the benefit of Venard, who had generously leased the place to them. Venard taught painting in a local college, and was guest instructor for

the summer term at a junior college some two hundred miles inland.

He was back for the week-end, a month had elapsed, and had dropped in to see how things were going. He had also asked, politely, to see what Babette had been painting since he had been gone. Babette was a painter too, at least a Woman's Art League had considered her one in Iowa, and she was an effusive conversationalist on the subject. She had done only one water-color since Venard had been gone, however, and wished to conceal this fact, as it had been her ecstatic ravings about what a "divine Cézanne light" his apartment had and how it would plunge her into work every day, that had made him decide to sublet his place to her and her husband, instead of to closer friends.

Venard slyly liked her looks. She had been born in the South which, beyond the fact that both of them painted, was a bond between them. She had high, stubborn cheekbones which reminded him of his favorite aunt, the childish one, who still looked pretty at fifty, though grown distinctly dowdy, as he imagined Babette would too. He had instantly recognized that this couple, Babette and Stanley, were far too juvenile for their years (they were close to thirty) and utterly naïve politically, which made them ripe for the Party, if they were handled not too dogmatically, but with intellectual kid gloves.

"It's been just wonderful, knowing Sidney!" Babette exclaimed, ignoring Venard's question about her painting. "But what a curious girl is that one he lives with!" She picked up a rectangular copper-glazed bowl from the shelf above the fireplace and dusted it off meticulously with the clean white dish-towel which she had chosen expressly for that purpose. She'd learned that Venard had been painting less and less the last year and had been going in more for pottery, which he wanted to give classes in. This was the piece that had won him second prize in an exhibition in the East last year. She held it up like a sacred object. "She's rather attractive in her way, but—oh, so preposterously

skinny! You'd think she never got enough to eat. Of course, it's not nice to say that, I know, but I just couldn't help wondering—"

There goes my Aunt Flora, thought Venard; now her only way of getting compliments is by being catty. "She eats enough for three horses," he said dryly. "Three horses feeding three times a day." Like Aunt Flora, too, she called everybody familiarly by their first name, even when she scarcely knew them. Back in the patio was an upstairs and downstairs apartment in which his most respected friend, Sidney Goldtree, lived. Though Stanley and Babette had not learned it yet, Sid was the Secretary of the Party for the city, having earned his stripes for this important post by weathering some of the toughest of the garment-workers' strikes in New York. Which was another reason why he had chosen this couple to sublet his apartment to. Most of his friends, if not over the edge, were near the brink and ready to push. But these two, if once converted, might be invaluable when they went back North. Babette, for her looks and her flair for giving parties; Stanley, for his name in the little magazines—with a political backbone, he might turn into a literary force of significance.

Babette was wearing bright yellow shorts with green suspenders over a dazzling red and blue plaid rayon shirt. The second button of her shirt was undone; one could see she was going around with no brassière on. Her skin was creamy, quite flawless; she looked much younger than her years. She was vain about her fresh, youthful appearance, and never lost an opportunity of reminding the onlooker of it by exhibiting her figure. This attempt to hang onto youth might become pitiful in another ten years, if she continued the act, Venard thought to himself, but it had a fetching charm to it now.

"Curly's a remarkable girl, a very good sport," Venard went on, with an edge of personal appreciation in his voice to see if he could stir up more feminine antagonism in Babette. "You could learn a lot if you would talk to her alone sometimes. She's had thirty-three years of hard knocks. Some people learn from hard

knocks, some don't; she's one of the few who did. She started out life as an orphan, you know."

"So she told me," Babette tossed over her shoulder, now standing on tiptoe and arching out her bright yellow behind. She had dismissed pottery as a subject, Curly was more interesting, and had chosen this moment for dusting off a row of books on the top shelf of the built-in bookcases, a pose that displayed her more advantageously. "I well understand just what you mean. An orphan is bound to learn more than a child born with parents. For the most of us, growing up is a process of disentangling ourselves from our parents." She let out a giggle of emphasis, which she could not help doing when she was pleased with her prowess at language. She still retained some of the linguistic powers of her old colored mammy, who had watched over her till the age of seven. She frequently committed astonishing blunders in English, especially with long words, usually making up non-existent ones, so she was always delighted when she could think up a sentence in which she could fit a multisyllabic word correctly.

"It was that way with me, anyhow," she stuck to the subject vaguely. "I just had to outgrow my mother. Grow beyond her, that is. She was always a child. I was lucky; I outgrew mine at a very early age."

Like Aunt Flora, she thought she created brains by talking about them; by assuring all and sundry that she, herself, had more than a sufficient supply. But secretly, thought Venard, they must know the insides of their heads would fit in a thimble. They have other insides more interesting, was his observation.

"But I'll cultivate Curly more from now on, since you say so. Since you think it wise. Because—" and here Babette stopped dusting, swung around, and leaned solemnly back against the bookcase. With a pensive finger wrapped in the dish-towel, she touched her chin and arched her eyebrows seductively. "—because you've recommended her. Because I think you're so wise!"

Venard sucked his breath in through his teeth at this warm,

sudden shower of coquetry. He dropped his eyes from her eyes modestly, dazzled by their spray of intimate sparks, but he found that his eyes were following the lines of her firm bare legs—immodestly.

Back in the patio, in his room upstairs, Sidney Goldtree was rummaging through the turmoil of papers on his dusty roll-top desk, frantically searching for a piece of paper which he had tossed there a week ago. He had just received some fresh instructions from New York, signalling this piece of paper as one that would have to be destroyed. He could expect a raid any day now: the tip-off had come. In a way, he was rather looking forward to it. He always felt much more heroic when he went to jail than he cared to admit. He had been through plenty of jails, and had watched enough other people going through the same ropes, to know what saps the martyr types made of themselves; but the adolescent romance of the thing had not burned itself entirely out of his blood yet. Then too, there were the flashbulbs, the reporters, the interviews, the exaggerated distortions in the newspapers, and always around them was the waving fringe of wide-eyed girls, of devoted feminine flesh of all shapes and sizes, willing to give its all for him. Their enthusiasms, their convictions, got under his skin, into his bloodstream, and renewed his purpose. The fine part was this: the more he was moved by their demonstrations, the more solid and austere his mask became: the more purely ideological his thoughts became. At these crucial moments, his mind turned into a perfectly functioning machine, grinding out bullets for some, ploughshares and hacksaws for others, and distributing to each according to his need.

He rubbed his fingers through black, snarled hair. They came off greasy. He looked at the tips of his fingers with pleasure. He liked to go for weeks without a bath. He felt, somehow, closer to the masses when he was dirty—closer to the black heart of human-kind. Only with grimy hands could he ever hope to clutch it. Only with greasy, smudged fingers could he pick the white lice,

the virulent white corpuscles off the chugging, tortured black heart of humankind. It was right after taking a bath that he felt the most unclean. Early in life, as a kid in the ghetto, he had learned this scorn for the aristocracy of cleanliness. The poorest fighters, the intellectual cowards, the tattletales, the welchers, had all been the boys who washed. He had grown out of the ghetto with precocious alacrity, but the memory of it stayed with him like a big black rose, a protective amulet almost, though he hated the thought of mysticism. There had been something secretly beautiful about his childhood there, though the word *beautiful* was anathema to him. Much as he detested poets, there was a streak of poetry in him that he would eventually have to purge away. A flaw in his thinking appeared whenever he let his mind drift over the early enthusiasms of his street fights in the ghetto. The same flaw appeared when he was locked safe inside the jails, a hint of heroism he couldn't suppress. Ideologically, it didn't fit into his character anywhere. His brain had no cubby holes for it; there were no drawers in his desk to file it away in. With an angry swirl of his hand, he punched at the sea of papers before him, at the whole clutter on the dusty desk. Such debris represented the actor-poet part of him, an exhibit reserved for only his closest friends. Actually, every important piece of paper, except the one he was looking for now, was safely tucked away in the safety-deposit vault of a bank. Secure and immune were the secret papers, right under the watchdog eyes of the guardian of the holy of holies. A blue-coated man with a medal pinned on him marched to and fro in front of the vaults, ogling each teller and each bank executive who trespassed into the cellar. As for himself, his own name there was an alias, the name of another man who happened to be dead. And he rarely dared show his own face in that bank himself. But he had to chuckle to himself, for perhaps the fortieth time, as he visualized the scene of all of those papers, folded and filed, safely locked up in a steel box in the midst of the stocks and bonds and jewels, the amulets and heir-

looms of those wealthy bastards he was out to destroy—who were always protecting themselves, but now had this bomb in the midst of their boxes.

Right under Sidney's heavy-soled shoes, in a large room giving onto the patio, in the party-making room, full of divans, hassocks, antimacassars, objets d'art from China, India, and Palestine, with a few cheap tapestries from Syrian peddlers thrown in, and one burnished samovar reigning in a corner like an incense Buddha, Curly was panting like a cat exhausted from the heat. She was attempting to squeeze out of one of her long lank legs the pus that had gathered from a mosquito bite the previous night. She had grown rather fond of her serpentine body, especially when it had become so emaciated from her withering disease that at times she had to hate it. It was too close to her now, a constant object of attraction and repulsion. At moments, she would watch it glide like a snake through a marsh of lilies; at other times, it wound away from her like a delicate ribbon of highway vanishing over a hill in a fading sunset.

She had once been a nurse, so she was trying to be scientific about her body now. One, two, three, she pressed her fingernails into the skin around the bite, as though blocking off venom from a rattlesnake's fangs. She tried to feel the sympathy of a nurse towards a fairly good-natured person whose days, and even mornings, were distinctly numbered. Her body had been pinkish and filled-out once, but now it was as white as the sheet which it would eventually be laid out on—when the wind had died away in the valley between her breasts.

She gazed at a bone, the end of her rib-box. It rose up, a thin white bone in an Arizona desert, more bleached than the plains. It was a landmark, the final milestone not too far off down there, beyond the hills of her breasts. Her breasts had lately become *desiccated*; that was the word for them. Just the sound of the word seemed to suck her breasts down and away, made them droop upon the bones like melting pieces of clay. Yet nipples still could

rise, at a moment's notice, ruby and roseate, like striated needles of the Grand Canyon at twilight or dawn—with a few strokes from a man's hand. Not any man's hand. Though she did once have a capacity for loving many men. That, she was pleased to admit. Still, she was not a cheap whore, not a chippy in any sense of the word: but even if she knew that, she suffered just as much as the lost ones who were.

Satisfied that she had blocked off the bite scientifically, she walked across the room to the medicine-cabinet, which had the only mirror in either the upstairs or downstairs room, and took from a white metal shelf one of the bottles labelled with skull and crossbones. Still playing the nurse, she read: "ANTIDOTE: Give starch, egg-whites or flour mixed with water. Give strong coffee, tea, stimulants of diluted alcohol, whiskey or aromatic spirits of ammonia, one teaspoonful in water. DIRECTIONS: Cleanse the injured part thoroughly with soap—"

She left off reading, slammed the door of the cabinet shut, and inspected her pale features in the mirror. What good would iodine do her, unless she drank the whole bottle down? And what good would that do her, since all she had to do was wait and she would get the same result anyhow? She was conscious of holding the bottle of colorless iodine in her hand as if it were a prop she was posing with on a stage. All life is a stage, especially to an orphan. She had lived down the orphan part of it, but the stage aspect still clung to her. That was why she so pitied the actors in the left-wing little theaters she was always being dragged to, those who acted in "plays with a purpose," not wanting money for their talents, but glory. She had played a part in many a drama more purposeful than any they acted out on the stage. She had played for higher stakes off-stage. How many lives, how many minds, had been saved or lost on account of her, she did not dare surmise.

Staring into the mirror, she saw nothing. Flesh that looked like powder, watery lips that drained away, flaxen wisps of a mummified towhead flying up like straws in the wind from the bones of

her face—a face that looked like a modern drawing, too abstract. Men staring into a mirror were hirsute beasts shaving themselves. She, herself, was nothing there. She was already shaved, shaved down to the bone. Why go on with the scientific process? Why place the iodine, though stainless, on the bloody marks on her leg? What was there to save? Just because she was born with a surgical and a mathematical mind, because at nursing and at taking dictation she was a whiz, did she have to carry out scientific procedure forever to the last *s* of statistics? How she hated the sound of those words: *statistics, dessication!*

She carried her nude body across the room, though it seemed to sag with the burden of her shame of it. Her arms and legs moved like animated toothpicks. Opening wide the screen door, she flung the bottle high over the wall that rimmed the patio, into a neighbor's back yard. "May the planes have a fly at you too, neighbors!" she said to herself, then grew abashed at her words. She should actually love her neighbors, as Sid upstairs supposedly loved his, abstractly and dispassionately, until their deeds proved them enemies. That was not so easy to do all the time, if you did not have Sid's animal health.

It was strange, her never having been able to have children in all of these thirty-three years, and her body fading away at last, forever into thin air. The body that had delighted so many men, though some it had offended. Some of them had become disgusted with the way her body kept on disappearing into the air. Especially after sex. Sometimes she was just not there when the male had consummated his feast. Even in her own mind she could not quite equate the way she would vanish afterwards into a magician's hood of she didn't know where, with her definite enjoyment, during the act, of men in the bed. Enjoyment of men of many kinds—stumbling ones, mumbling and bungling ones, silent ones, invincibly stupid ones, but few who had been completely bums!

Even the effete ones, emancipated as they thought they were. Take Venard, for example. Only good for one-night stands. It

was part of his considered policy never to fall even slightly in love. Not only had this been her own experience, but it had been the fate of other girls too, several of whom had told her. To fall in love, he had explained, would have seriously interfered with his politics, which were those of an outsider striving desperately to become an insider. Among artists, it was rarely that way. Few artists had the stamina to do more than to start to think. Not just think for themselves—no, they were all adept enough at that—but to think in terms of the mother colossus that was strangling them. In terms of Society, the octopus that had them all by the throat, each one laying claim to a different tentacle. The poor, sad artists! A hopeless lot. She couldn't feel too well-disposed towards them. Though she did summon up more sympathy for them than Sid upstairs could manage. To him, they were ornaments for the mantelpiece, decorations to give tone to the atmosphere. Of course, Sid had seen them mainly at parties. He hadn't had to live and sleep with them, which she had not been able to avoid. As for their brains, he suggested they were all descendents of a tribe of pygmies bred by prehistoric head-hunters who specialized in shriveling skulls on living bodies. He made an elaborate joke of this at parties, and most artists inwardly shivered when they caught the point. Venard had been the artist who registered a hurt look the most perceptibly. How nice his head would look on the shelf by the samovar, thought Curly, primly shriveled to its rightful size!

"I'm not really so wise," said Venard to the legs before him, not lifting up his eyes. "It's just my academic air that impresses you. If one teaches very long that air settles over you like crêpe de Chine and, try as you will, you will find that you can't crawl out from under. I'm really a man of action, but none of my students would ever suspect it."

"Oh, you're much too modest," Babette said pertly. She let her dish-towel fall to the floor quite brazenly, as though she were

shedding her domestic chores and wanted no obstacle to come between them.

Curly strolled back to her divan and flung her body down on it just as defiantly as she had hurled the iodine bottle over the wall. Venard was a constant attempt to be a washout. The man upstairs could never be anything resembling that. Sid had a constant purpose; Venard was constantly forgetting his. Among artists, Venard wished to appear a Goliath of consistency, but his thoughts, when you came down to them, were nothing but sentiments. When the slightest deviation of propaganda came out of New York, he adjusted to it laboriously. Nor did he ever seem to suspect when a new deviation was on its way. He seemed devoid of predictive ability. Of course, one had to admit, he did not proclaim aloud his doubts, but he let them sprout in his face like weeds in a garden. Not that he did not sometimes attract capable people to the Party; he had a flair for proselytizing, but he never seemed able to do as thorough a job on himself as he could on his converts. His consistency was emotional, one of fervid faith with no intellectual calm to back it up: that type you could never rely on.

Sid's heavy footsteps creaked overhead. He was pacing about the room again. He did this only when he was upset. Usually he made no unnecessary moves, above all when making a speech. At parties he used the minimum of gestures necessary to show that he was being convivial. In lovemaking, too. That was where he made the fewest gestures of all. In bed, you became quickly convinced of his purpose. There was no doubt about it there.

Asleep or awake, he exuded purpose. Emotionally in a sweat or ideologically chill, his mind and his body were as securely steady as a trapeze acrobat's. He never let you down. He kept you steadily conscious of the fact that only he could swing you safely through space. She giggled, and dug her fingernails into her thigh. It was true, in the dark at times she would have this vision

of him: above a circus of performing animals, he was safer and more immune, more serene and solid than the leopards and lions and panthers and trainers below, all of whom had their feet on the ground. Venard was more like one of the barkers down there. One of the better barkers, perhaps; at least, one of the more elegantly costumed. She saw him in striped silk trousers, a coat with tails, a fedora, and a gold-handled cane. But no matter how dandified his dress, he was only good for getting the crowd inside the tent. When the crowd was gone, he would be at a loss among the other performers of the ring. The wild beasts would tear him to shreds, if their keepers were not about. While Sid soared safely through the air, Venard was in peril down below. He was like a dandy among the hurly-burly men, a defrocked missionary among blood-thirsty natives and animals. His kisses tasted like bites of a stale lemon meringue pie.

Stanley was carried along by the surge of the crowd to the bar inside the saloon. The crowd rolled through the swinging doors like waves to hear the policeman get on the telephone. A fragment of the waves remained outside and sloshed around the negro's dead body on the sidewalk.

"Shoot 'em like quail!" little rivulets echoed behind Stanley's back, their approbation swelling the tide.

The policeman, puffing and panting his own approval of himself, had delivered a few more heroic pronouncements to his audience, emphasizing the danger which he had just come through. Stanley could not recall them. One thought absorbed his mind so completely that his ears had been stuffed up since the first exclamation. The thought spread through his mind like a seeping stain: he almost got me, the copper just missed. I could have been shot as easily as the top of the car, or the negro, for that matter. He wasn't aiming; he was just shooting for the hell of it, unloading his pistol in the general direction of the negro. That was all there was to it. Had anybody else been hit, the papers would have said: "In the line of duty Officer So-and-so unintentionally killed

a pedestrian while a colored thief took off down the street." Then they would have added details about who he, Stanley, was, and have said that his nearest kin had been promptly informed, and were rushing down from the North for the burial rites, which were to be held on such-and-such a day next week in the following cemetery. The officer would then be quoted, and would have shed manly tears over the accidental shooting. He would have vowed to track down the culprit whom he had intended the bullet for; though temporarily relieved of his badge, as a private citizen he would "make amends" to the bereaved wife and the deceased's relatives by "pursuing the dirty snake who committed this dastardly deed" until he was "put in his place."

The policeman had gone to the open booth of the telephone set on a shelf at the front end of the bar, and Stanley had somehow been pushed to the edge of the bar beside him. The blue-shirt was rattling the hook for headquarters.

"Send an ambulance over," it roared. "I got myself a goon. A colored one, with feathers. It's curtains for him. On second thought, skip the ambulance, we need a hearse."

Stanley heard another roar at the other end of the line, mirthful and hilarious; it made him sick. The voice from headquarters was booming out laughs of appreciation and congratulation. It cracked a joke that brought a vainglorious smile to the policeman's face, something about "this ought to break up the heat-wave." After the approbation of the audience around him, this official approval was too much. Stanley's stomach began to revolve.

Bracing himself with an elbow on the bar, he squinted down the row of faces. They all shone with self-satisfaction, beamed with joy, sweated with a glow of triumph, as if a white man had won back the heavyweight championship, or the home-town football team had captured the cup. The bartender passed out mug after mug of beer on the house, bestowing genial smiles on the outstretched paws. Ten minutes ago the heat had been smothering, and there had been not more than a handful of men in the

place. The heat was a prison of boredom—the same daily drinking bouts had been recommencing, the usual stale jokes and remarks on yesterday's scandals and last night's brawls were the rosary chains each person was starting to tell. Then came the explosion, the liberation, the cutting-off of the shackles. The release from the prison's tedium into the bright air of bonhomie. The dazzling radiance of Death had appeared. They were united in a celebration of their brotherhood. A negro had been shot down; their manhood had been reaffirmed. The guilt of their lifelong sloth, which weighed on their shoulders as heavy as the heat, had been momentarily lifted. They clapped one another upon the back, as if they had all participated in the miraculous deed.

The hubbub died down when the Captain of the Team, the Heavyweight Champ, clamped back the receiver on the telephone and turned to the bar. He shoved his cap back on his forehead and mopped his brow. He had finished a hard day's work. A huge mug of beer, an old-fashioned stein, appeared instantly before him. He drained half of it, taking his time, as if in response to a victory toast. The crowd became hushed, as the bartender drew no more beers. He stood in an attitude of respectful homage before the officer, looking very much like a toastmaster who had just delivered a toast. Stanley noted the raised little finger of the hand that held the stein. The policeman could have been drinking tea. This showed him to be a man of delicate sensibility, not unacquainted with the Finer Things of Life. When he placed his mug back on the counter and ran his calculating eyes over the throng of hushed, happy faces, as if in accordance with long-established ritual, the bartender asked, "Tell us, what was he up to, Maloney?"

With a princely gesture, the policeman horizontally held out two fingers. Quick as a flash, the bartender swept both hands under his apron, and they came out with a pack of cigarettes in one and a lighter in the other. In a second a cigarette was in the policeman's fingers; in another second, it was lit. This formed part

of the ritual too. With a strenuous sigh and a thin wave of smoke blown up towards the ceiling, the officer smacked his lips while his forehead grew clouded with a frown.

"He was jazzin away like a rattler, that's what the snake was up to."

The shock of these words settled over the crowd like a spray of sand sifting down from the ceiling. Again Stanley peered at their faces. Smiles had withered, the eyes were squinted, breath was suspended, and their lips were prudishly pursed together. This was more than their hopes had bargained for. To the trumpet blare of death was added the tom-tom of sex. *What kind of crime could that be?* their hearts asked lasciviously, while they hesitated to breathe. They thought of the blood drying out on the sidewalk which had been a purple swirling cloud a few minutes back, pumping away inside a chest for dear life with a frenzied rhythm in the shade of some cool, dark room across the street. Their eyes swung back and forth, like marbles of the pinball machine, between the policeman, who had assumed the towering proportions of a Judge enthroned, and the bartender, who had dwindled to the anonymous size of a Public Defender. Collaboration between the two was taken for granted, but the bartender made a dramatic pause before popping his next query.

"And he was wanted for something in particular?"

"Sure, to Gawd, he was, the lint-head! He was wanted for disturbing the peace."

The policeman's eyes drew a bead on the heads of the crowd craned over the bar. He saw he had them eating out of his hand. Another pause, and the bartender asked, "And how was he disturbing the peace?"

"Why, he'd come in rip-roaring drunk at three in the morning and start beating his old woman up. Got a call down at headquarters about it. They said it'd been going on for over a month, his coming in blind and beating her up."

"Did his wife complain too?"

"No, she never complaint none. But it woke the neighbors up something awful. A working man's got to be getting his sleep. Things couldn't be going on like that forever. Time somebody put a stop to it."

The crowd was not even interested in the right or the wrong of it, Stanley could see, but they were determined to devour each gory crumb of detail they could get. And the policeman was doling it out the way they liked it. He was the guardian of the law, *their* guardian, and they wanted a hero strutting about on a stage. He reenacted his rôle like a veteran thespian. That was what the crowd begged for: to get a glimpse of the inside show of just *how* they were being protected. The bartender was the interlocutor of the minstrels. He kept his hands underneath his apron obsequiously, popped each question with proper timing. Cross-questioning for the sake of justice was the ostensible purpose, but the real object was to build up the maximum dramatic effect.

"If you was called at three in the morning, how did you happen to show up so late?"

"Wasn't enough guys on dooty. Don't you ever read your papers? We're understaffed, we are. Your own police force is understaffed. This fine, magnificent city, not supporting enough officers of the law to keep it going. A disgrace to the State, it is! I don't come on dooty till eight."

"Well, when you got there, how—I mean—did you have trouble finding them?"

The crowd swallowed, took a communal gulp. This was the climax they had paid for. Their hearts pounded in unison. From the similarity of the expressions on their faces, you would have thought each one held a pistol.

"A neighbor pointed the room out to me. It was clear way back, way deep in the patio. I wasn't taking no chances. Lint-heads carry long knives. I give the door a kick hard enough to bust the lock, if there had been one on it. And there they was, the shameless critters, him a-loving her up like mad. Never seen how they

done it before. She was nekkid all over. But him—he had his shirt and pants half on! So that is the way they do it, now all of you know. The male, so durn lazy he just unbuttons his pants! A naushating sight, if I ever seen one. They was squiggling about like two snakes, one with his skin half shed."

The crowd was harvested now. He had bundled them up together in a compact sheaf, and tied them with a wire that carried the voltage of an electric shock. Disgust was stamped on every countenance present. A communism of revulsion, Stanley thought. Their souls ascended on a level, like a congregation reaching Heaven. Far below them two tadpoles wriggled in a puddle of slime. Two primeval vermin which their august dignity glared down upon. It was not a question of justice, or of taking a life, but a mechanical matter for a flit-gun. This guardian of the law had certainly wielded his weapon well. He had vindicated his office and proved his right to a badge. He had saved them from contagion; the consequences were a mere report for the record.

"So I raps him on the bean with the butt of my gun, and tells him to pull his pants on. And so he does. Then he takes off acrost the patio, not choosing to come along in peace, like I give him a chance to. That's all there was to it. Nothing else to do, but let him have it. And so I did."

When the policeman said, "*And so I did,*" Stanley winced sharply, as though from somewhere above him a judge had whacked his gavel down on a desk. But, unaccountably, the mallet descended on the hard wood of the bar by Stanley. Then there came a rapid third blow. It was as if the gavel had been whacked down three times from the judge's bench: once on his desk, once on the bar, and the third time on Stanley's head. The three sounds smacked out rapidly, rat-a-tat-tat. On the last *tat*, it was as if someone had filled Stanley's empty pitcher with beer and dumped it over his head. The liquid spilled down from the crown of his skull, smoothing out in all directions. It cooled his hair,

drenched his ears, and trickled down the sides of his neck, becoming particularly cold at the nape. Before the liquid could blot out his vision, Stanley rolled a baleful eye up at the authoritative cap perched on top of a bloated forehead. The cap seemed to float like a kite up into the ceiling of the courtroom, while the forehead beneath it bulged towards him like a swiftly expanding balloon. A balloon inflating so fast that he expected it to go *pop!* And let out such a gust of hot air that the explosion would instantly dry his drenched hair.

Curly was staring dreamily at her long, lank legs again. Shanks and a hank of hair, that was truly her body—what she was reduced to. The way that she stared at her body had become a kind of perversion, she felt; a case of the snake hypnotizing the fakir. Her skin might seem sallow to others, but to her it had the lovely gleam of much-handled ivory. Once an evanescent garment of beauty, now turning dully into the opacity of oblivion. If this was a perversion, her gazing upon it as she did—it felt strangely more proper and fitting than looking at Sid's brawny body, which seemed to her a thing that butchers should keep behind closed doors, or averting her eyes from Venard's pasty nakedness, which was that of a nubile boy evading a dowager's clutches. She heard Sid's rumbling steps above, and Venard's flute-like diction from the kitchen across the patio. She could not make out his mincing words, nor did she care to.

This body had been quite an instrument for the Party. When it became of use to no one but her, they would toss it aside. But it had been, they had to admit, pretty damned useful in its time. All sizes and shapes of bodies, all sizes and shapes of brains, had it sucked along with it into the swim. What a shoal of fish she had spawned in the Party's sea! And this floating island, this body, was slipping away from under her now. *And from under them, too!* Her last laugh would take on the sinister tone of a death-rattle. Not that they would mind at all. They would still have their Thing to hold onto. What a cynic she had become! But

since she had served their purpose, they shouldn't begrudge her a lingering look at what they had used. What had once been the instrument of the life of the Cause, was now becoming the instrument of the death of her. She was falling in love with her body right behind their backs, for the very first time. Where had she heard it—*you only love a thing when it's gone?*

Well, they all had their Thing: they could hold *that* without her assistance. And they would. Had her body not been around, there would have been somebody else's. And even if nobody's body had been around, they would still have had the Thing to clasp in their sleep.

How she wished she could keep her mind from whirling so! She was tired, so tired, of her thoughts. The faster her mind spun around, the faster it seemed to unwind the flesh from her bones. Thoughts came so fast they faded like snowflakes. They were all of a whiteness, her thoughts, her bones, and the sheet. The others had the Thing; she had her bones and her sheet. Such an idea might be perverse while you lived, while you had a chance to help others to live, but when the time came to die, they at least ought to let you *think* about it. Well, whether they let you or not, she was thinking the idea right now.

NOW! Incredibly large, the word loomed in her mind. She supposed that that was another kind of betrayal. To think in the terms of NOW. With them, it had always to be in the terms of THEN that one had to think. *Then* one would wave the banner, *then* sing the songs, *then* drink the drinks, *then* love the loves. Until THEN, everything became premature—abortive, a gap, a lull. And, of course, to die—one never, never died NOW. That was a dialectical slip, a material impossibility, an error of thought, a crime against faith, to imagine that you could die now! Your death was only a step towards the THEN, a moment's illusion of sacrifice. Actually, it was an inevitable movement ahead. The THEN swallowed all!

As if her thoughts had aroused an angry ghost, she heard

boards creaking at the side of the room. Ponderous steps came down the stairs from the balcony overhead. Sid had not slept with her for over a week ~~now~~. Only when he had some big scheme on his mind did he sleep in his office or away like this. After her merry-go-round ride of rebellious thoughts, she felt gayly relieved. She was pruning out some of the hypocrisies in her thinking. And she had to admit it right now, she didn't care a tinker's damn what crisis of the moment was bothering Sid. What Big Project he was pregnant with. Any more than he seemed curious about the cause of her staying in bed. He took her illness as a matter of course. She had made a pact with herself, as a parting gift to the Cause, not to tell a soul what the doctor yesterday had emphatically stated: that she had less than four months to live.

With snarled hair, cheeks aflame, and sweating like a bull, big Sid kicked open the screen door from the patio.

"God, what a heat!" he exclaimed inside, pausing to accustom his eyes to the shade of the room. "You've got it cool down here. Up under that roof, the heat curls up your hair and fries off your eyeballs."

He had on some faded denim pants and an old red-striped rayon T-shirt, which he always knocked about the house in when he had to put in a public appearance later. This outfit reminded her of the way an actor might dress while rehearsing his lines. He looked like an American's idea of a roustabout from one of the wharves of Marseille. She gazed at the bulge of his biceps, at the ropes of muscle on his forearms. Once, she had admired them rather lavishly; now they inspired only disgust. Was it that when you had hope of life you worshipped health, blooming bushelsful of it? But when you were sick, sick, sick, with only death as your next adventure, something within you drew back from the vitality of health, as if it were more cruel than disease itself—?

"And me with a speech to make this afternoon, and our party coming up tonight. I suppose you've forgotten it?"

"You haven't been around to remind me."

"So you *did*?"

"Easy now. I'm not in the proper mood to be barked at. We're almost strangers, anyhow. A week is long enough for an ocean voyage."

"That week—it was for you to recuperate in."

"You wanted to be sure I would be in shape for the party, you mean?"

"Stop getting so sensitive! You know the party's the most important one we've thrown for months. These N. M. U. boys are sailing for San Pedro tomorrow; they're going to have trouble there. Also, their pals from Australia and New Zealand, yes even a couple from France, will be coming here—and you pull a Camille on me!"

"There, there. Don't tell me that things are starting to get too much for you. Don't tell me that you have blood pressure, too! Where's my old Iron Man?"

She spoke in the wheedling voice one uses when teasing a child. It was the kind of baby talk she often put on when she was pretending to buck him up. It was a game both of them played at, the closest they ever came to love talk. But if she had ever met anyone who never needed any bucking up, he was the one.

"A piece of paper," he said, smacking his fist in a palm, as if he were going into action, "a little tiny piece of paper, not much bigger than a bill."

"What kind of paper? Fly-paper? They have that at the corner grocery," she said mockingly, not caring what he was talking about. She had prepared for the party methodically, punctiliously, as she always did. When had she ever let him down on the slightest detail? It was part of the pomposity of the brute in him to assume she had.

"Fly-paper, sure, fresh from New York, with the stickiest glue you ever saw. A glue that would catch even rats; especially the rats they grow in this Quarter."

"Dear me, could it be that serious?"

She suddenly tired of the old pretense. It had been funny, once upon a time, but now it was just another hypocrisy. She searched for a quick way out, but the familiar pattern had become too ingrained. She would give thought to the matter later. She had to be rid of the last hypocrisy before she died. He was in a state of crisis now. After this one was over, and before the next one appeared, she would have it out with him somehow. She could not seem awkward around him now. She would have to think it out alone, by herself, at first.

"Uff, woman!" he growled, continuing the show. "What could be serious in this Quarter? Packed with bohemians the size of rats, and rats the size of bohemians. Everything you look at long enough in this lousy Quarter turns to grey! Take our Ochoa now, remember? He had skin the color of an alligator's belly, and we thought it was just as tough. And what did it turn into, here in the Quarter, in less than a month? A soft, rubbery rat-grey! It must be the weather that does it. These bohemians haven't the guts to change under their own steam, like that. Sometimes I think New York sends us a bunch of pansies down here, the whole rotten lot of them! Ochoa, the rat, remember?"

"Your elocution is showing," she warned him, still using the cheerful tone she despised. "You'd better get in better form than that this afternoon."

Sidney walked to the sink and spat in it. Then he turned both faucets on, holding a hand under each. He could never remember which one was hot, and which one cold; neither faucet was marked, and the cold always came out tepid.

Curly remembered only too well: Ochoa had been touted as something of a windfall, a boy wonder in New Mexico. There he had served the Party most brilliantly for five or six years. He could not only compose inflammatory pamphlets in lyrical Spanish, he could print and distribute them as well. As a propagandist among the Spanish-Americans, he was rumored as having no equal. Well—he might have been all he was cracked up to be,

back in New Mexico, but he had certainly run hog-wild here. The girls had gone to his head. Drinks had been cheaper, to start with; the whores younger, more beautiful. In three weeks, he was shooting his mouth off in every brothel. Every brothel he could get up the steam to cross the threshold of, that was. And he could get up plenty of steam. You would think that he had never seen so much fresh white skin in all of his life. What he had saved up that cash from, nobody knew. The payoff came when he started writing odes to some of the belles whom he had slept with. A few of the more pornographic paeons he set up in type, and ran them off. These he distributed, instead of pamphlets, to some of the more reputable fancy houses. The trouble had been—not all of the poems were written in Spanish.

"Skip Ochoa," Curly advised, "he's well tucked away now."

Sidney thought up a whole string of language about the fellow, in good, solid, chunky Bronx patois, and spat once again in the sink, before starting to lather his hands.

"Can't be so sure," he replied. "Manny checked at the jail last night. They're not sending him up, like we thought. I'm telling you, he'd be safer on the inside. If they'd only give him a two-year jolt, just for being a Mex, like they do in most towns, he'd be a lot better off. I'm telling you."

Half closing her eyes, Curly squinted at Ochoa on the ceiling. She saw a lithe, spindly fellow with hair dripping over his collar in back, and the long, sad face of a starving horse. She felt an observer's twinge of pity. His lonely stare could remind her only of herself. He had the lost, furtive air of an underfed orphan. She had studied some of the poems he had distributed. She had found nothing disgusting about them. The pornography had always been witty, and rather Byronic. As pornography went, they had been in good taste. But the madams had not found them so. And some of the girls, allegedly, had not found them in good taste, either. Perhaps their southern sensibilities had been injured by the fact that pornography could be both humorous and intellec-

tual. The police had not found them in good taste, either, after a few madams had called them up. Ochoa had been clapped instantly into jail for "purveying smutty, lewd, and lascivious writing."

"You mean you would do something to him if he got out?" Sidney was holding a washcloth to his face, softening his beard. The sounds he made came out muffled. All she could catch was: "Auf gump it matter to you? I've had flugerbs in my hands before. All I need dugged up is a chance at a thumb-hold on him!"

Whatever a "thumb-hold" might be, Curly could not imagine. She knew Sidney was a past-master at jiu-jitsu and judo, though, and had laid many a strike-breaker low at his own muscle-game. Sidney was lathering his face now, slapping the whipped cream on it with the vengeance of a pastry-cook. He orated through the foam.

"That's why I say we should all steer clear of poets. Preached it from Maine to Minnesota. Plato was a smart old geezer, banning the poets from his Republic. They've got a fire burning in their guts that we could use, but you never can tell when they'll go limp on you. They're doing it all the time. Can't trust 'em even for propaganda. They knock out reams of the right stuff, then all of a sudden one night they're burning the midnight oil, stiff or hopped up or getting a vision—probably from the D. T.'s, but they're too sold on their genius to admit it—and blooey! off they go on a rhyme that they never heard before. That does it! It tears their past meanings up in ribbons. So they sell out for a fancy word. Christ, what excuses for men they are! They sell society down the river and float away on their fancy word. The first real purge we have in this country, the poets will have to go!"

Curly started singing in a little girl's voice, "Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream." With a carmine fingernail she sketched a canoe on the starched white sheet.

"I know what you're thinking," Sid interrupted her. He knew she wanted to break up his line of thought. He couldn't stand the

plaintive lilt in her voice when she sang. There was something so individual and lonesome about it, it made him feel fuzzy inside.

"What am I thinking?" asked Curly, still humming. "Come to me, Chandu, my Lord. Wave your wand thrice over my sconce, and pronounce the magic word."

"Your sconce?" asked Sidney, leaving the mirror and walking over in back of her head. "What part of your anatomy is that?"

She turned her blue eyes up at him. A sickly sheen tinged them of late. Upside down, her eyes made him think that he was gazing at a fish. She tapped her forehead with a bony finger.

"All my anatomy's up here today."

"Well, this is the only wand I have this morning," Sidney said, tapping the spot she had touched on her forehead with his shaving-brush, leaving a minaret of white icing on it. He could not bear the sight of her thinning body. After all, he reassured himself, you have to distrust even a well-proven brain once the body begins to give way. He'd tried his damndest to fatten her up, the first few months they had been together. Insisted on her eating an eight-course French meal every night. It had been no use. She kept on getting skinnier and skinnier. He had even given up sex with her for a month, taking on a few girls after some of the meetings she had not attended—the fresh, enthusiastic ones, consolidating their recent allegiance—but that had been of no avail, either. Her body went on wasting away. He didn't talk about it any more; he knew she saw a doctor once a month. She was next to the oldest active female member of the Party down here. Certainly she had the record of having been the most effective. He could not yet bring himself to the point of dropping a hint that she was being put to pasture, at last.

"I didn't know you had an all-seeing eye. Could you really tell what I was thinking?"

"You were remembering the poetry you wrote."

How had he guessed? She had scarcely mentioned it, not spoken more than a dozen words, and this during their hectic first night

together, more than a year ago. Despite the blanket of heat that lay upon her, goose-pimples sprang up on her skin. Much as he scowled on the mystical subject of clairvoyance, he at least possessed the memory of an elephant.

"So I'm one of the first you would purge, then?"

He had gone back to the sink, and slashed his razor about loudly in the water, but used it cautiously when he scraped his chin.

"No, Sappho, you're absolved. From all the reports I had on you when I got down here, you'd purged enough poets of their poetry to make up for your own original sin. That is, of course, unless you still write verses on the sly."

This banter came up in her stomach like a wave of bile. She saw a coating of greenish pond-scum creep over her skin. She wondered if a dead body, for a time, turned green. What was it she expected of him, now she knew that her days were numbered? What was it she wanted now, which she had never wanted before? It was there, somewhere in her intestines, an indefinable something, swirling about, an amorphous desire, that had never been there before. It was this new element, an unknown quantity, that made their banter, which had previously pleased her, seem now sour and picayunish.

"It's been ten years since I've written a line," she stated soberly. She did not dare attempt a light-hearted riposte, or she was convinced she would choke. Such a tone ought to bring him down a few pegs, but in his present state of crisis—and he had at least one a month—she doubted if he would notice it.

"O. K., Sappho, you've got a clean slate, then. Ten years back. The treacheries of a virgin the Party ignores."

Oh, the absurdity of it. The ignominious abomination of her pitiless life! Her skin was peeled off by an iron-mailed fist, and the fibers and tendons, the joinings and unjoinings of her quivering muscles and nerves were laid bare. They quaked like a catch of fluttering fish, flopping themselves to death in a tightening net. The Party, the Party, the Cat ever calling, while the fish floun-

der in a hopeless trance. The Cat waits smiling, squatting on haunches, ruddy hams grimly flexed, biding her time till the moment to pounce, when the fish are dead!

Venard shoved his hands in his pockets. He had just kissed Babette, and was wondering why. Did he have her, or did she have him? The kiss had been a bit bungled. He had managed it clumsily. Or had he managed it, at all? Hadn't she been the one who had brought it about, and hadn't she wanted it to turn out a botched-up job? Dishes were being rattled furiously in the kitchen sink. He was cooling his heels in the parlor. He strode across his chartreuse linoleum, of which he was so fond, and gazed sightlessly across the street at the negroes' balcony of wrought-iron scrollwork.

They had been reaching for the dish-towel she had dropped to the floor. They had both taken hold of it together. As they came up from their stooping position, he had attempted to kiss her upon the brow. But she had tilted her chin up so abruptly that it connected with his nose, sending a sheet of light across his eyes, after which his mouth had made a dive for hers. But he had missed; or, rather, barely made it. He had caught a corner of her mouth, just an edge, and you can't kiss very effectively when you have only a fragment of a mouth to work on. She had pushed him away, as though he had been embracing her forcibly.

"Oh, Venard, you mustn't!" she exclaimed in a voice of schoolgirlish indignation.

It had all been so corny, he shuddered. He had never acted like this, even when he had been in his teens. "But, dear, I want you so badly," he said, with an exaggerated impetuosity. The words were a perfect echo for her schoolgirlish make-believe. "Well, I don't think it's nice. Stanley might come back now any minute," had been her rejoinder. Then she had snapped her head around, and flounced off into the kitchen. He thought he caught the flicker of a smile as her head spun away. A few minutes later, above the clatter of dishes and silver in the sink, her voice rang

out in a lullaby. Then the lullaby faded into a torch song, reminiscent of Helen Morgan. The giddy creature was mad! A dog chased a cat down the gutter outside. A little colored boy ran after them, laughing and throwing a handful of pebbles, one stone at a time.

Well, she had certainly given him enough of a come-on. Yet, when Stanley was around, it was her husband she seemed to adore. She was mother, sister, wife, and mistress to Stanley as soon as he stepped into the room. She became such sheer adoration it embarrassed whatever company happened to be present, and it was distinctly embarrassing to the husband. So much so, in fact, that if a female were present, he would immediately start making advances to her, as if out of self-protection. Then Babette's jealousy came to the fore. She would heap attention upon the girl, perhaps offer her a present, if something of little value were at hand, and go out of her way to become close friends with her. She would swamp her with all kinds of needless advice, take down her telephone number, her address, and invite her to a meal, or make a date to go shopping with her. She would do anything to win over her confidence, to make her into one of her friends, which implied no longer being one of Stanley's. He wondered how much of this silly game, apparent to an outside observer, Stanley caught onto.

As for his own chance of having her, that was a private doubt. What would an outside observer have said of their kiss? Although it was the dead of summer, the sunlight on the pavement outside had the autumn glow of spoiling oranges. *Did he really want her?* He had only to formulate that question, to hear the echo: *Could he?* Her Helen Morganish coloratura sobbing over the pangs of lost love, even above the clatter of the pots and pans in the kitchen sink, throbbed out an unequivocal *Yea!*

But, how to carry it off without offending her husband? Stanley, after all, was the writer—a writer of the future, to be sure, but with a drive that promised well. He was the important one to seduce into the fold, and not Babette. Of course, there was always

Sid's axiom to fall back on: "*Get the woman, she'll get the man.*" If only he were not accursed with a puritanical conscience, a blighted heritage he had not outgrown! Could he have Babette and still convert Stanley? Or could he synthesize the whole works, have Babette and convert them both?

"I say—" the voice suddenly called out to him from the kitchen. It paused with a confident kind of doubt, and sent out a suspended ray of hope.

"What is it?" he called back, in a voice that sounded to him like that of the master of the house. Even with an interrogative *What*, he could not sound impersonal enough. He must think of Sid—if he could only be Sid!—who always took ~~this~~ woman stuff in his stride. For Sid a female was relaxation, so he always had the right touch. But he, Venard, had art's scars stamped on his nerves like a seaman's tattoo. He might as well symbolize his case of jitters nobly. Bees were buzzing outside the window at the side of the room under the vines on the trellis that covered the pathway back to the patio. Their busy wings poured a deadening honey into his ears. Or was it beeswax?

"Would you come here a second, please, and try to be useful? I've got only two hands, you know."

There was the go-sign. And Stanley was coming back, but even that she didn't mind now. That southern belle babe with the bouncing black eyes—she was beckoning him on. His ears started humming a tune. An odor of jasmine drifted into the room, a level of air that had sneaked in between the layers of heat. That scent did it. Thank God, Stanley did not know that he, Venard, had pseudonymously published poetry himself! *Out, damned spot!* High-sounding syllables started buzzing behind his tongue. Yes, little did Stanley suspect that even ere female beclouded his sight, Venard's first devotion had been to the awe-inspiring catafalque of poesy. He had not revealed this to Babette, either, nor did he propose to. If Sidney ever learned this nasty item about his past, he might find himself out of the Party.

Stanley thesis, Babette antithesis, and Venard the synthesis.

With this young couple of innocents, he would have to take the Hegelian way out. Only his problem was not his own way out but how to get both of them *in*!

It was not a matter of strategy, to be mapped from the outside, but one of tactics to be intuited from the inside. Yet no matter how well he weighed the pros and cons now, and evaluated each with due precision, he knew that only one thing would inevitably take place: Stanley would be back! Then there would be no more time for hemming and hawing. The brunette belle in the kitchen would have decided he had let her down. The moment for synthesis was now! He quit comparing the orange heat of the street with the cool chartreuse of the linoleum, and made a beeline for the kitchen.

Babette gave him a welcoming smile, and thrust a large green-glazed Mexican salad bowl into his hands. It was dripping suds. She said, with the air of an Aztec empress, "See that you don't let that slip out of your hands, too!"

It was cozy and cool down there on the floor. Hornets buzzing above made a smothering blanket out of the sky, but they would not swoop down upon you if you lay there quietly, and did not disturb anyone. That was what Stanley was intent on doing. Not to disturb a single soul. Then they would all go away and be quiet, and he could sop up this shade on the floor. He deserved a rest like this, they ought to realize that. He who had slaved his life away hammering out poems. Such labor, they ought to know, was more grueling than any day-labor. Even if the day-laborer used a machine. Of course, he, Stanley the writer, used a typing machine; he had worn out several of them. But those machines weren't steam-hoists or bull-dozers, not a way of circumventing labor, but a way of expanding energy faster. The typing machine helped you think faster on paper. But perhaps he could have done the poems better, if he had not thought quite so fast. At any rate, it was time for the hornets buzzing above him, his readers, to think it over. They had him stretched out on the floor, they ought

to lay off him for a while now. He had given up his responsibilities. It was pleasant being under their feet, inhaling a cool draught of relaxation. Sandalwood and rosewood, ineffable incense of a forest cave, were blended with a sulphuric aroma of urine and beer. He was in a state of indeterminate ecstasy. He felt he was finally the master of appearance and reality, of being and becoming. When he inhaled through his left nostril, he appeared real; when he inhaled through his right nostril he was becoming.

"I guess he couldn't stand the sight of blood," one of the hornets above him buzzed.

"Must be one of those artists around here," another hornet droned. "I seen 'em throw plenty of fits, but I never seen one of 'em faint before."

Stanley struggled to raise himself on an elbow, but soon gave up. He would either spring up like a lion and pounce upon them all, or simply lie there. After a moment, he chose to simply lie there.

At least his wife was not around. There was a negative bliss in that. He could feel things more completely when she wasn't around. Blab, blab, Babette babbled on like a shallow brook. Most of the time, he couldn't even get his feet wet in it. If he wanted a swim, he had to look elsewhere. But when he was looking elsewhere, he had to make sure that the brook wasn't chasing him around, like the devil with a pitchfork had done in his childhood dreams. Babette's pitchfork was her red tongue. He had, at one time or another, been stabbed all over with it. His body had felt like a pincushion, a spongy recipient for her barbs. Anyhow, pincushion or tadpole, whatever he had turned into now, he had found his shady bed and he was determined to lie in it. Away from the Southern summer, away from devils with prickly tongues—if only those confounded hornets would quit buzzing about his ears! Oblivion was his destination, and they kept on pulling him off the track. Oblivion, whether of childhood, of

dream, or of a deep-flowing stream—this shade on the floor was what he had thirsted for!

He was suddenly elevated. Not by gossamer wings or a magic carpet, but by Gargantuan paws, heavy hands that hoisted him high up into the air. And his thirst was being quenched, not by crystalline draughts of a mountain stream, but by some fiery fluid that those monstrous hornets were shooting down him. He choked on the scalding acid, and opened his eyes. He could not see clearly through the veils his choking had draped across his eyeballs, but a remembered taste caused him to smack his lips. The poison, though it seared his throat, was not entirely unpalatable. There was a name for it. Brandy. And who was pouring it down his throat? Of all people, the cop was the hornet!

This is a bit embarrassing, he thought, blinking his eyes several times. How bothersome to have to come back to life again. And so soon! How calm had been those briefly glimpsed shores of oblivion. To wake up and find this detested person, his own potential assassin, nursing him back to recovery. But what was he recovering from? Had something struck him? No, not a thing but a swoon. "The sight of blood," as someone had put it. Then the scornful remark about artists. And they had been right. He who waxed so heroic, especially when ensconced behind his typewriter—he who struck terror into the hearts of men with a pen—he, that noble oblivion-seeker, had been so scared by the sight of a bullet-hole that he had fainted dead away, like a blushing maiden in a historical novel!

If oblivion was what he wanted, he was staring into the face of it now. He was staring smack into the very jowls of Death itself. Death was a night-watchman late on duty. An Irishman who had forgotten his accent. Death was a blubbering beef of an orator, piercing his audience with a levelling eye. A Court Jester who, when on the prowl, assumed the airs of a Chief Magistrate. The friend of little children, a great dog-lover, a Good Samaritan to the fainting boy on the barroom floor. Woodshaded languor of

the barroom floor. That had been his own face down there, neither painted, nor Dan McGrew's.

"At's a boy, bub! Drink it off neat, like a gentleman, and toddle on home. Were you passing out, or could it of been the sight of blood that disturbed you?"

When the policeman asked this, Stanley observed closely the ring of faces around him. They were all coming near, with their snouts of animals nosing up for a nibble of meat on a prospective carcass. They bared their teeth in what appeared to be friendly smiles, but which were actually leers of fear, protective masks to conceal their motives, in case the carcass should come to life and strike out at its would-be devourers. Stanley snapped out of his pleasant dream to find reality was the nightmare.

"Thanks. No breakfast, I guess—" he stammered, searching for some bootstraps to pull himself up with, "I didn't have any coffee, I guess. It was the heat—" but it was hopeless. The words he found only served to increase their masklike grins.

"I seen 'im turn pale out there on the sidewalk," remarked one of the voices at the fringe of the circle of faces.

"Yep," another voice chipped in. "Must be one of them artist boys. A real revulooshionary, no doubt. They keel over at the sight of anything blood-red that isn't paint."

"We oughta run 'em all back to Noo Yawk," came a third anonymous squawk.

Stanley felt his own face turning blood-red. He picked up his pitcher from the floor, tugged a quarter out of his pocket, and plunked both objects down upon the counter. The bartender gave him the same mousey smile the rest of them wore.

"Fill 'er up," Stanley mumbled.

Why had he adopted their jargon? He did not dare take his eyes off the pitcher. If he looked around, he was sure he would blurt out a challenge to them all. Then he wouldn't be able to wander around in this district with any sense of freedom again. His senses were with him now. The only way out that he could see

was to pocket his humiliation and slink right on home with it. To be classified as an artist was one count against him, and his Northern accent, on top of that, would be enough for nine counts more. The policeman's hand on his shoulder lay there with the weight of a rail—a rail he might soon be tarred and feathered and ridden out of town upon.

"If it's a painter you are," the owner of the hand advised, "you'd better stick to still-lives. My wife cuts 'em out of magazines. Don't draw scenes like you seen this morning. They ain't fit for hanging on a wall. Besides, we got a 'law against it down here."

Stanley reached for the filled pitcher. The rail lifted from his shoulder and descended again.

"We treated you right, see? Brandy on the house. Brandy for still-lives. Follow me, fellow?"

Stanley nodded, and made for the door. When the flaps swung to behind him, he heard the officer gurgle with laughter.

"Bet he paints posies the rest of the year now!"

His audience exploded with merriment.

On the other side of the street, Stanley felt his body swaying sidewise, and decided to walk ahead in slow-motion. If he took long, slow steps, perhaps no one would notice the way the air-currents tugged him backwards. Those sub-human animals with their piggish eyes and their lynching glares! What a fate to be a negro amongst them—or a poet! That must be the next worst thing.

If what he had been through was a poem, he had better not talk about it. If he saw it as a story, he would never turn it into a poem. It would probably make a better story than a poem, but he never wrote stories, he detested prose. So, how should the first verse go? *Plummeted out of the dungeoned patio*—? No, there was something wrong about that. He would have to see it typed on a page first. Should he ask Venard if this was a daily occurrence down here? He had noticed the Hamletian struggle that often

took place in a Southerner: between allegiance to Party principles and the inheritance of his forebears' prejudices. The young Southerner had a way of standing up for the rights of the negro that resembled too closely the patronizing praise of plantation owners.

Babette . . . when they were alone, should he mention it to her —what a close shave he had had with Death? How would it affect her? Would she adopt the experience as if it had been her own? That would be worth finding out about her, anyhow. She had changed so strangely since they had come to the South that he felt he hardly knew her any more. Well, at least he had a poem to write now. He felt caught up in the consuming tide of youth again; it bore him onward with a purpose. All would be right with the world, as long as this familiar old, yet always strangely new, sensation of inspiration lasted. He stepped higher, lighter, and more securely up the sun-bathed street.