

November 18, 2002

The mystery of the loop

Francis John March 1995

Authors copyright © 1995

I woke in a dark garden. There was no moon, just the vague glimmer of the stars, it was a clear night. In front of me I could see the vague outlines of some large fir trees. A slight breeze moved the branches of what appeared to be rose bushes. I had no idea how I came to be there or even where it was. It was cold and I was naked. As a teenager I would go climbing about the local park at night with no clothes on. There was a similar feeling of vulnerability but none of the sexual *frisson* that I remembered.

I was standing on grass. As my night perception sharpened I began to make out a white shape away to my right. I decided to move closer to it and was rewarded with the impression of marble steps and a balustrade. There were fluted columns with a level line of flat marble across the top. I imagined that it would be about waist height after I had walked up the steps. I thought it odd that these arrangements are usually so that the owner of a large house can look out at the gardens without getting their shoes soiled and there was no house rising behind it.

I could make nothing else out and decided to walk up in order to warm up a bit. As I walked up the cold stone, my feet hurting with the marble chill against them, I began to smell blood. At times one thinks nothing of this. If you have a bad cold you may smell blood if you have damaged the membrane by blowing and sneezing. It may linger in your head for many days. This smell had no inside and no outside.

It was about this time that I noticed that the whole balance of my body was different. I was using the eyes of a body that was not my own, not even my gender. The shock of this made me feel dizzy but the part of the body that does most of the mechanical stuff to do with walking lives at the bottom of the spine and it just kept on working with the inner ear as this strange body moved to the top of the steps.

There was indeed a paved area and I stopped and stood there while I gathered myself together. I wanted to touch this odd body in the obvious places and see what it felt like but this seemed so invasive of whoever it belonged to I could not do it. My feet were wet with something on the stones. The breeze still struggled fitfully through the redoubt of the trees and brushed my skin. It was odd to find myself in a position that most people would like to try at least once on a temporary basis. I knew this was no dream. This experience was not formed from things that I could know not even at their most distorted, although I do believe the differences between human genders are no where near as vast as some people would like to make out.

The body started to shiver and goose bump. I began to feel the desire to urinate and was somehow too embarrassed to do anything about it. I looked up and could see nothing but stars. At one time I used to know something of the constellations and I can recognise some of the ones in the northern hemisphere. I could not see Cassiopeia or the Plough. As I looked some more I realised that there was no milky way either. Eventually the cold and discomfort made me look down again.

The paving was also white marble. To one side I could make an irregular shape in the gloom. It was not moving. I stepped towards it and the soles of my feet moved from a vague wetness to slipperiness to stickiness. The presence of blood became stronger but I could see the marble underfoot. I have often wondered why in horror films the victim walks toward certain doom instead of running the other way. I am still

unsure, except that in this case it seemed the right thing to do. Anyway, where would I have run to?

The shape, as far as I could tell was articulated like the human form but the head was lizard like. The intestines gleamed wetly in the faint light. I concluded that I was indeed stepping through blood but that somehow it was transparent in that light. I was not afraid. I knelt down and touched its head. The lizard thing blinked.

I felt a dislocation and I could see a dark haired person looking at me. The pain was excruciating. I wanted to lay my head back and scream but there was no breath in my body. The body would not respond in any way. It was not breathing but there was no problem with that. I could not feel the desperate need that I would normally have felt but the pain, the pain was terrible.

We blinked again and I was looking down at the lizard. I wanted to help it in its pain because such pain should not be experienced by any one or thing. My body knew what to do at some level and it *pushed*, which is the only way to describe it. I watched with some amazement as the mortal injuries on the lizard healed themselves and it sat up. This all happened in a moment. Like a man would it placed its head in its hands and shook it from side to side.

Another blink found that the pain was gone. I stood up and took the human's hand. This lizard body could see in the dark with some detail, possibly in the infra red, but there was not much to see. There was no house behind the paved area, just more steps leading down. We began walking, switching from body to body as we did. A few paces down there was a blanket strewn across our path and the human body wrapped it round its shoulders. I was still unafraid, the situation was simply too odd.

We had passed underground and the steps opened out into a large room. There was more light but there did not seem to be a source as such, just a diffuse glow from the surroundings. The room was vaguely what I would imagine a waiting hall in a country house might have been. There were recesses in the wall at eye level that held small statuary and *objets d'art* but it was like no statuary I had seen before. They were mainly executed in what appeared to be a milky blue stone. We stepped closer to one and I had a good look at it. It showed somehow a spiral of creatures, each reaching upward towards a light. I could see lizard men riding some peculiar quadruped animals upward, men and women with wings and webbed feet, sealions, marmosets, giraffes, elves, pixies and several kinds of non-anthropomorphic insect creatures. I recognised them but I did not know where from. There was a sense of movement in the scene and I could hear voices and other communications, the words made no sense. The figures began to move and I felt myself begin to become part of the scene. I took an alarmed step back and it became still again, the detail lessening.

When I turned I saw the human had found a door and was attempting to open it. This was encouraging, it meant that whatever mind had been in the lizard was not dead and was capable of doing things itself. I tried to speak, to ask what it thought was going on. I could make no sound and heard nothing of my own voice. Why would it have understood me, I had never seen one before. I went to the door and had a good look at it. It had no handle as such just a flat plate with four indentations on it, like a hand with three fingers. I pushed the door but it was unmoving.

Moved more by curiosity than anything else I looked into another alcove. This one had a bracelet and a ring on display. They were laid on velvet and appeared to be made of a luminous metal. The next alcove had a formless three dimensional shape in it that was mostly blue and kept shifting as you looked at it. It was very restful and I found that I felt calm just looking at it. The human appeared to be getting worried about something and it was then that I became aware of the silence that surrounded us. I had been peripherally aware of the breeze in the garden above but it had stilled. There was somehow a sense of *immanence*, of something trying to arrive.

I heard a scraping noise on the stairs and turned to look back the way we had come. There was a chitinous foot, the first of probably several coming in to view. The human started to pull at my arm. I noticed that it was now wearing the jewelry on its right arm. I took a step in the direction I was pulled, towards the door when I saw the most extraordinary thing that was somehow a cross between a cockroach and a spider. I suppose because of its size it must have breathed with lungs like the rest of us but it still had spiracles on its thorax. I knew, somehow, that being this close to one of these creatures as extremely dangerous. It threw webbing of some kind from somewhere near its tail and I felt it stick to me.

The human clapped its hands and an intense light filled the room. When I could see again the insect was burning at the foot of the stairs, its legs twitching spasmodically. I could hear more movement above along with noises I took for anger or distress. The human pulled me by the arm again and pressed my hand against the plate on the door. I saw that the lizard creature had hands and fingers that fitted the shapes and felt a little obtuse at this. The door suddenly wasn't there and a warm wind started to blow through the hole where it had been. We ran through and I heard something pop shut behind us.

I looked over at the lizard. It was dressed in a kilt made of a shining green material. In the bright sunshine I could see that its colour was a dusty grey. Its eyes were covered over with a nictating membrane and I could see that the pupils were slit vertically like a cat. The human body was now clothed in an orange overall. I looked down and could see an insignia of some kind on the breast pocket. It was a blue spiral on a white background.. My feet were shod in sturdy boots of some sort.

I looked about me. We were standing in the sunshine on a hill. Behind us there was the beginnings of a wooded area but we could look down a half a kilometer or so. In the distance was what might have been habitation. I could here the noise of the wind in the trees, a steady sussurus in the background. Now I was hot where I had been cold but the call of physicality, unfelt when I had been in the lizard body began to feel almost too strong to resist. I walked some way into the forest. The lizard watched me but stayed extremely still, blinking occasionally. I hid behind a tree and did the necessary.

The jewelry was still there on the wrist and ring finger and as I walked back I took a good look at it. On the bracelet the detail was beautiful, like an interweaving Celtic pattern but extremely fine, almost like it had been woven out of hair and transformed into metal. The ring was a spiral design around the finger. I half smiled to myself as I thought that it may represent both an upward climb and the pandemonium of a helter skelter.

The lizard had moved a little but was still practicing being very still. I tried to speak to it and discovered that the human body could not speak either. Maybe these people used telepathy or some way of at least indicating emotion to one another. If that were the case I was effectively a deaf mute although I did seem to know things when I needed to. I sat on the grass and thought how like a park it all looked, without the intervention of some one or thing the grass would have been much taller, or maybe the forest would cover the area.

Down the hill I could see a figure toiling up towards us. There was a path of sorts where the grass was thinner, possibly made so by feet of various descriptions. For want of anything better to do I began to walk toward it. The lizard followed with a smooth gait which surprised me. I had expected it to walk with the jerkiness of a conventional reptile but I was wrong. It was probably also warm blooded, even though it didn't seem to need to breathe. Maybe I had brought it back from death when I *pushed* but how would I know.

After I crossed a small rise in the flanks of the hill the path became dusty and fairly broad. It had been made by beings of some sort because it had stone in it to keep erosion at bay. It would probably have served wheeled vehicles at a push but I could see no tracks. It was hot in the sun and now I began to feel thirst as I moved down towards who or whatever it was that was coming up the hill.

I tried to distract myself from this by looking about me. The grass looked like it was regularly mown or eaten by something but I could not see what. There were occasional clumps of a coarser weed that had thick leaves and stood a out of the ground. On closer inspection the sky was a far darker blue than I remembered it should be. This may have been because the body I was in had different colour vision from the one I normally use but I have no way of telling. The air smelled dusty, almost like chalk with an odd addition of some spice that caught the back of my throat. Somehow this was an *alien* smell but I could not place it. You spend your life with the most basic of senses constantly informing you of various things about what is going on around you and yet do not notice. The brain seems to see *differences* rather than constancies. I knew that this smell was nagging at me but I did not know why.

I was nearer now to the person or thing that was coming up the hill. I thought that it was probably coming to see the lizard and I. After more walking we came to the crest of a small rise in the folds of the hill. There was a figure dressed in green about thirty meters away on another crest. It made a gesture, opening its arms and bending down towards us from the waist. We continued to walk towards it while it waited. It was, or appeared to be, a minotaur about shoulder high on me but it did not have a particularly bovine face. The forehead and jaws were almost like those of *homo sapiens*. It had a small beard on its chin and what I could see of the skin was mottled like some bizarre freizan walking like a person. The horns were small, almost an affectation, but I would not like to fight one all the same because such a thing could have an eye out very easily.

The creature shook my hand and I felt a momentary blurring of consciousness but did not switch into its body. It looked a little startled and dropped my hand. It took a pack from its shoulder and reached into it, passing me a drink in a small stoppered

bottle. I removed the stopper and drank. The beverage was almost like a citrus fruit of some kind but again had a strange overtone that I could not place. I look back at this instant and wonder why I trusted this strange being to give me a drink that wouldn't poison me but it seemed right.

My vision became sharper and I found that I could no longer smell the dust of the place. I realised that I was now looking up the hill at a bedraggled figure in an orange boiler suit. Perhaps the drink had effected some change so that the transfer could happen anyway. I felt angry and sick at this. The calm with which I began this adventure had evaporated. The only advantage I could see was that I was no longer thirsty. I turned on my heel and began walking down the hill towards the village or whatever it was.

It was another kilometer or so before we reached a stockade. I could hear dogs barking and the quiet noises that people make when they are going about their business. The wall of the stockade was a raised earthwork that was topped with a dry stone wall. To gain entry one walked up a ramp and through a gated hole in the defenses. This gate was unguarded. The other two transferees were still following me at a distance of a few meters. On my right was a cattle yard of some kind but I didn't recognise any of the breeds. The animals became silent at my arrival and stared over a low wooden fence at me. To the left I could see a large building which I took to be an armoury of some kind, or perhaps a place for meeting and trading with others. The path lay straight ahead and began to take on a metalled smoothness that suggested a concrete highway, although it was only a couple of meters wide.

I kept walking purposely straight ahead and the cattle began to call, possibly the figure I was now in had a close affinity with them. I ignored them and kept walking, not wanting to swap bodies with a cow. There were shops and what I took to be dwellings on either side. After a while there was a cross roads and I took a left for want of anything better to do. I could hear the bang of hammer on metal and realised that this must be a manufacturing area of some kind. The people, by the way, were all normal-looking human beings but none looked at all surprised at me and my entourage.

There was a field ahead where it appeared there was some kind of competition going on. I stopped to watch, the game involved a large balloon that was set just to float above the ground. It took about for people to push it in any one direction. The objective, as far as I could make out, was like volley ball except that the ball was this peculiar thing and the pitch sized for football. I watched this while a small group cheered and complained with the progress of the game, trying to divine the rules.

There was a buzzing noise overhead and I saw a microlight of some kind. It went round the field a few times and then came to land some distance away. I began walking in that direction in order to see what it was made of. Indeed I was curious about what powered it because I had seen no evidence of the scourge of the earth, the internal combustion engine.

The pilot looked across at us as we approached. The microlight was of what I imagine is fairly conventional design but I know very little of them except that they are basically powered hanggliders. The engine had no pistons and I could discern no

fuel tank. There was a control wire going to a grip that probably controlled the thing but I was confronted by my ignorance. The pilot took one end and gestured to me. I walked over and started to help pull the thing off the field towards some low buildings. When I looked round I saw that my two companions had gone out of sight. The craft ended up in a prefabricated garage with a pull down door. I was interested enough to notice that there was no lock.

The pilot was about two meters tall and broad shouldered. He was wearing a heavy quilted jacket and trousers, which I thought must have been to keep the wind off and perhaps provide some protection should he come to a forced landing. He was clean shaven and had hair of moderate length. During our labours he had undone the jacket and I could see that he was wearing a round neck shirt with the ubiquitous spiral design on it. Upon reflection I know that I estimated his size by comparing it with my own but I was in a strange body, for all I know we could have all been dwarves. He smiled and took my arm, leading me back the way we had come earlier.

This time we went across the cross roads, where I would have gone if I had turned right earlier. We sat at a table under an awning and a man-like machine came and placed drinks on the table. I began to realise that the sophistication of the people around me was far greater than my own. I noticed with some surprise that the face reflected in the burnished surface of the machine was my own, even down to the glasses I have to wear but when I looked at my hands they were still the piebald hands of the minotaur. After all of the strange things that I had had to put up with over the last few hours this was oddly reassuring. It would appear that I was still me somewhere in all this mess.

I slaked my thirst with another lemony brew and when I attempted speech again nothing happened. The pilot sat in silence. I found suddenly that my perception shifted again and this time I was above the town. I was piloting the microlight, watching the game of ball below me. I knew how to fly the thing somehow and circled the playing field. I looked down at where I had been looking up and there the three figures were but all looked like I normally look. They were wearing the clothes I remembered but *they were all me*.

I blinked and I was back under the awning. I began to see that this was how these people communicated, by sending experiences and memories directly into each others' heads. The consequences of this are quite profound. It would be difficult to murder someone if they could make you feel their pain as they died unless you were quite perverse and went out for such an experience. I speculated about how the family of a cancer victim would cope and shuddered.

I concentrated on my memory of the room outside this world, with the door that opened at the top of the hill and then *pushed* as before. The pilot grunted and acknowledgment. Maybe cancer victims didn't push. I blinked and I was far far away above the planet. I knew, somehow, that I was geostationary above the town I had been sitting in. There were clouds and coastlines. A blue green globe spread out before me. I felt a linkage between my very self and the whole planet. A thin web of forces moved out from me, each connecting with someone or thing. I could not feel individuals, although I knew they were there but I could feel *aggregation*,

communities. I knew the weather and the rocks. I knew the other side of the planet. It was a *gestalt*, I was everywhere at once.

Outside of me there was hostile darkness. This was not the nothingness of space but and unpleasant *otherness* that I did not like. I knew then that it was the insectoid beings that I could feel. Like this whole planet they too were joined together in some kind of linkage. I could not conceive of what they would want though. When you have something that is so wonderful why spoil it? I could sense that any attempt to wrest this lovely globe from the people who lived there would damage it terribly. The weather would go out of control, some species would disappear before their time. It was unthinkable.

I discovered that I could withdraw from the visions if I wanted to simply because I did. Why was my friend showing me this? What could I do? This was a more subtle and frustrating way of communicating than mere words. Words are supposed to be direct and in fact they can be if you are writing or talking about the technical and are halfway competent. This exchanging was far quicker at the big picture and the small one but it was about being not so much explaining.

The pilot rose and out of simple courtesy I followed him. We moved past more awnings with street side cafes. The smell of various foods and spices hit my nose but I could not place anything. People looked incuriously at us as we walked. After a while we reached a geodesic dome that was about a hundred meters across. It was situated in a dell such that you could not see it until you crested the rise down into it. We went through a large door which opened and closed automatically for us.

On entering the temperature dropped considerably and I felt far more comfortable than I had been, although I had not noticed my discomfort. There was a featureless corridor that led across the dome where I could just make out another door. It was about twice the height of a person. We stepped off the corridor and up some wooden stairs. After a few turns my companion and I were standing at the threshold of a wooden door. He took my hand and placed it on a plate by the side of the door and it opened.

There was a simple room with a bed and a couple of chairs. There were no windows. He nodded gravely at me and left. It would appear that I was to wait here for some indeterminate period of time. At the head of the bed there was a headset but somehow I felt unwilling to put it on. There was a screen with picture of what I took to be food. I touched a picture curiously and it lit up. A panel slid away and there was the food I had touched. Beyond surprise I took the tray and sat in one of the chairs.

The food tasted odd but stilled the beginnings of hunger. I decided to lie on the bed. I was in an untroubled sleep for a few hours and woke to an insistent knocking on the door. When I opened it I saw the human body I had been in earlier waiting there. It walked over to the headset by the bed and mimed wearing the thing. I shook my head, sick to the bone of all of this body swapping and loath to find out what might happen if I put it on. I *pushed* an image of the dentist as seen when I was a child at it and it reeled back from me. I risked body swapping by pushing it with my hands back out of the door.

It was interesting to note that in this well-ordered society the kind of fear I remembered as a child was an unusual experience. I could probably use it to defend myself, assuming I could catch people unaware. I stored this fact away and went back to sleep. It was nothing, really, and I knew that eventually I would have to put the helmet on because what else could I do? I was in limbo in a place where I did not belong and I needed answers which were obviously being offered to me in an abstruse fashion. Although I can be very stubborn and will not give in lightly in this case I was arguing with myself.

I woke up refreshed after an indeterminate length of time and left the room. I had no personal possessions to worry about so I did not bother to close the door, but it shut of its own accord anyway.

This was a strange environment. When I went downstairs the configuration had completely changed. There was no long corridor but an open space. Where I guessed the doors might have been was a blank wall with no hint of a door. I started to wander because as usual there was little else to do. Where the door had been there was now a curved corridor leading to the left and right. I mentally tossed a coin and started to walk left.

There were doors on my left that all had a slight curve matching that of the corridor. I pushed one and it opened. The room appeared to be empty but I stepped in and let the door close. The walls lit up with images of space. I felt like I was standing above the blue planet. We were moving away from it quickly enough to be noticeable. Like Earth there was a moon but this didn't surprise me because otherwise the atmosphere would be too dense to breathe, like Venus in our own solar system.

I had been finessed off the planet without noticing it. Maybe my presence was causing them some distress. I wondered if I could talk to the room by pushing at it and getting it to show me more. I pushed inwards and was rewarded with pictures of the corridors and rooms of the ship, if that is what it was. I also gained an impression of the layout of the ship which reminded me of nothing more than a standard puzzle with cross pieces of the sort that can be cube, barrel or globed shaped, depending on the design.

For all I knew we could still be back on the planet and I was being fed bullshit. I moved the eye of the machine around the construct and saw myself. I also saw others sitting eating in an area with tables and chairs. There were some children playing in a free-fall gym. I was hungry too but decided to move my point of view some more.

After looking outside the ship some more I realised that I could find nothing that looked like the exhausts of an engine, but then again why should there be? The ship was rough ball shape with flattened ends. It had no decoration to speak of. There was no writing on it and it was a dull grey metal. Almost a neutral colour.

Something made me change my view again and I saw a fleet of objects in the distance. Somehow the telepathy was telling me where they were and what sort of distance. They did not look right somehow. I knew that they were not from the blue

planet we were leaving. These objects were directly in our path. I could feel that they were close to us and I was being given the impression of an unrealised hostility.

I have always known that a battle in space would be a difficult thing because of the matching of velocities and it would be easy to miss. This of course is why you would probably use nuclear weapons in any serious conflict because your ability to hit small targets like spaceships would be dramatically increased. Also the electromagnetic pulse from these devices could seriously disable an opponent. Looking about me I saw that there were other ships like the one I was in following the same course. The walls showed me their trajectory and my mind was filled with knowledge.

There was a warning flash from one of the ships ahead of us. I pushed again and knew that the ship had changed course radically. The others about us started to veer and shift. I could still see at the back of my mind the children playing and the others eating unconcerned. Maybe this was a game, some test or entertainment I had blundered into, but it felt real enough to me.

For what felt like hours we shimmied and moved, changing course every few seconds until the ship was through the cordon. I left the room exhausted and hungry. I followed the pattern in my head and found the eating area. I was greeted by smiles and gladness. It appeared that I had achieved something. I had noticed that some of the others had not been so lucky in the course of the time I had spent in the room. I would have said that we had lost about half of the flotilla.

Why was I the captain of this vehicle? I pushed the question at them and in reply saw fragments of the pictures I had sent of the dentist earlier. I took this to mean that I was more aggressive than they were. I doubted that these people had that kind of memories I did, coming from a society where the parts were not in sympathy with one another. Perhaps my aggression was higher.

I walked over to the kitchen and punched a meal from the displays. It was a fish like meat with a light sauce and some vegetables that were almost but not quite totally unfamiliar. I ate it all down hungrily and one of my hosts placed a drink in front of me. I sat brooding while I drank it as my usual entertainment is to read something after a meal.

After I had eaten I walked out of the room and went to find the zero gee gym more out of curiosity than anything else. At the door there were a pair of wings that you could put on and flap out towards the middle of the room. My inner ear was doing strange things that made me feel disoriented but I kept the food down and found myself feeling elated as I flapped past the others playing at various games on what looked like nothing more than a huge climbing frame. These seemed to be racing games where an individual would follow a particular route at speed though the frame until he or she got back to the start or flew off into the wild blue by missing a hand or foot hold. It was a great testimony to them that no-one brained themselves on the bars.

I floated there for a while watching them as they flew around the bars. A tall youth tried extremely hard to be the fastest and missed a turn. He came flying out of the end corner and kept going at some speed until he hit the corner of the room. I rested

in space and watched. The boy was angry and looked askance at me. I ignored him while his friends laughed. I don't always find pratfalls funny myself and I did not know what the social rules were for this situation, particularly because I did not even know what my own status was.

It was then that I noticed something odd. The boy's anger disappeared extremely quickly, as if it had never been. Maybe these people did not hold on to their anger the way I do, the way most people do in our society. I supposed then that this was probably because they talked to each other by exchanging emotions and ideas directly so there was an incentive not to hold on to the negative too hard because it would make people less inclined to be with you. Or maybe the negative was coerced out of you for your own good.

How on earth or wherever it was did they stand me? I have since thought that it was my very isolation that was of use to them. I had all of this suppressed anger and individualism in me that made me fight when their ship was in danger, although it took a while to realise that it was not a game I was playing. I confess I was becoming tired of being in another body and being finessed constantly into doing things I did not understand. Why were there three bodies that I had used and where was the one I was born with?

After some time I became hungry again and flapped back out of the place, my inexperience causing much suppressed merriment. I retraced my steps back to the eating area and ate again, this time alone. I noticed then that there was a hand shaped mark on some of the eating surfaces so I decided what the hell and placed my hand over it. A holographic picture formed and started moving. I recognised the spiral again like a test picture or the beginning of credits or something. The picture moved and I saw again an image like that of the statue I had seen earlier where the lizard people and various human figures climbed up this spiral towards something. I know that evolution is not progress but *branching* and that there is no god, for if there were then all suffering would be a deliberate act of cruelty. I prefer the random, I can cope with it and it does not seek vengeance.

The upward spiral struck me as a very optimistic and deterministic view of the universe, if indeed it was describing some kind of view, but maybe it was more of an aspiration than anything else. Without *language* I could not ask this question. I had to infer everything like it was some kind of heroic tale that one could view on a strange TV but again there was no talk to explain anything. It was like when the sound is off during the adverts but the ad people are less subtle.

I watched a story unfold in front of me. It seemed to be about some kind of love story. The two main figures, male and female, lived in a village. The technology allowed me to feel without seeing them grow up together and all of the other things that make up the minutiae of the way one lives one's life. This machine let me feel the action and the feelings that lay between them.

The village had a problem. Occasionally raiders would come and take people into some kind of bondage in a far away place. As usual the people involved were the youngest and the most beautiful. Like wars and other catastrophes that affect human

populations these are the people that are taken. Never old granny with a weak bladder.

I began to see that it was fairly obvious that one of the protagonists would be taken by the raiders, because this is always the way this story develops. The remaining one then has to leave the idyll and have numerous adventures until, after just missing the departee several times and enduring humiliation and hardship the two are united but nobody is a virgin any more (except in more chivalric tales, I suppose). There are a number of variations on this theme to do with death, memory loss, new loves, giving birth, rape and of course long journeys through trackless forests, cities or reaches of outer space, time or universes. The ending I dislike is the one where the departee is lost forever, even though this is far closer to life.

This story was perverse. Instead neither was abducted, nor were any children, relatives or pets. What happened was that they volunteered to give themselves up in order that the rest of the village would be saved. For some reason it appeared that the raiders wanted the couple and that they had effectively been fishing for them. They went joyfully into their bondage. I supposed like some kind of Adam and Eve, except nobody has ever explained to me how god stopped inbreeding when everything started from two people.

We came to them next in a barren place that was mostly rocks and mountains. I remember noting that there was no water either, perhaps it was allegorical, who could say? Years passed somehow and you could see a teeming city full of people in all kinds of variations. There was still very little in the way of greenery or water but that has never been the strong point of teeming metropoli. I knew that our lucky pair were still there. Maybe they had cloning machines to do the work or something and give sufficient variation. Maybe this was still allegorical. Without words I could not ask.

I recognised the city, however, because I had grown up there. This did not surprise me very much. After all in their own fashion they were trying to tell me something about myself and why I came to be there. It may still have been yet another finesse using images from my own head. I knew that this allegorical Eve was not my particular mother because mine was still where I had left her as far as I knew. That Eve may have been something to do with me was unsurprising because I remembered myself as being as human as these people were.

Obviously something was wrong in the city. There was a darkness spreading over it, over the whole world in fact. I knew as usual that it came from where I was now and that that was the link back to me. *Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to save the Earth and its peoples.* Brilliant, thinks I, that old cliché? What the hell, I could be dreaming. Then again I have never been fond of insects and the thought of those insectoids doing their thing, whatever that may be, in my home town was not a pleasant one.

I went to bed. I dreamt a long dream about seeing myself in a mirror but at first I could not see my face, just faces from the city merging into one another. After some time my viewpoint changed and I *became* the mirror looking back at me there. I realised slowly that the dream was trying to tell me something about who I was, or

what I was anyway. Like all humans there are various aspects to us. Somehow I was split into the two genders and some kind of animal nature too. I was not pleased when I thought later that my animal nature was being represented by some kind of bizarre creature of mixed human and bovine descent, or that my own gender was the lizard creature. It was all rather whimsical but it did explain the picture the man from the microlight had shared with me where I had seen three different versions of myself.

What kind of world was this where the metaphysical, the psychologically analytical way of looking at some things was made real? I woke with a start, knowing that I had to get to the control room quickly. I ran down the corridor and into the room. Ahead of us was darkness and I could not think what to do. This was not the darkness of space, an absence of light, but that of an *eating* of light, the destruction of it. The shape filled my perception and I knew that we could not go back because there was something equally dreadful waiting for us there.

I started to look more carefully at what was laid out in front of me. The darkness seemed to have different types of thickness and colour, or rather absence of colour. The lighter patches were possibly places I could look at. I began to see that this darkness had a shape that I could look at in this subtlety. The only hope was that there was a way through it, areas of hollow darkness.

I skipped and dodged for a while through the darkness, waiting for the hole through it that I thought must be there but it was a nerve wracking time by any sensible measure of human feelings. I could feel the weight of the ship and the responsibility for the people I had met on my journey so far. Behind us I felt the darkness close in and before us there was the small differences that made up the hole that I had to go through. The question that came to mind was why there was a channel through this barrier anyway. It was probably a test of some kind or some nasty game that I had been forced to play by the peculiar circumstances.

When I looked behind I could see that the pursuers were having a far worse time of it than we were, in fact some of them were decidedly the worse for wear. I could see that they were being destroyed by the darkness, or to be more precise they became indistinguishable from the darkness.

We moved across the darkness for some time and I began to realise that our ship was entirely surrounded by it but I could still see the holes and shapes of it. Maybe my mind was attuned to it for some reason. I was not sure that I wanted to know the reason because I suspected it was something to do with being a lone individual and I did not like the thought particularly.

After some time the darkness began to fade and I could see stars, a whole numberless host of stars in front of me and all around me. There was a stillness out there and I felt peaceful. I closed my eyes and was asleep where I stood.

I awoke much later in the bed I had slept in previously. At least I thought that it was, but it was difficult to tell in the circumstances because one featureless room is much like another. I worked out how to use the facilities to void my body of wastes and clean it a bit. I noticed then, finally, that I had been in my own body for some time. I

surmised, but will never know, that I had worked out the puzzle that was my circumstances to some degree and this had put me back where I wanted to be. I could say that I had discovered something about myself but I would not know what.

I remember once seeing a poster about the path to self knowledge which had an individual of indeterminate gender reaching up into the light. I believe firmly that if you reach your hand out and slap it as hard as possible with the other that this is all the self knowledge there is to be had. I have studied meditation and know that you can train your mind to be still and it will be eventually. This allows you to watch behavioral things that you might not like about yourself and fix them but it is not self knowledge reaching outward into the light, it is instead reaching inward to the slapped hand.

The door would not open at first after I had dressed myself in the overalls and I had to think a little until I tried my palm on the door as usual, this worked of course. I was really beginning to get tired of this. I wandered about for a while and realised that although I was where I thought I should be the layout had changed a bit while I had been asleep. I kept noticing changes. The door to the control room was no longer there and the canteen area was painted in different colours. The mirror, however, still gave me the reassuring picture of myself so that was good.

The doors were back at the end of the corridor so I went to them. I could see that we were on land again so I opened them and walked out of the ship. We were standing on a plain. Around us was rolling tundra of some sort and the landscape seemed oddly familiar. I remember seeing a documentary about the way plants try to control their environment and how some tundra has ice underneath because the plants needed it but did not know if this is what was familiar or even if it was a true memory.

I went back into the ship and went off to the canteen to get something to eat. This meal consisted of some kind of fruit and cereal with an odd seeming taste that I decided was like oregano. I had decided that I would try and kit myself out somehow and start walking. I did not know why I wanted to do this and when I look back I realise that the idea must have been planted in my head somehow. I went past the exit doors and tried a few of the inner doors experimentally. The second one opened and lo and behold I found a store room. It was about this time that I realised that I was being pushed somehow. I could see no point in resisting and let my hands move and pick out equipment.

There were several interesting items. There was a flashlight that I knew somehow could also start fires and double as a heat weapon of some kind. I also picked up a lot of small boxes that later turned out to be shelters and clothing. These fitted very easily into a pack that was about the size of a large day sack used by hill walkers. There was a canteen and some cells for the flashlight. I also had what I knew somehow was a location finding device that had been set to take me somewhere. Food was simple and light and there was a light metal set of pans rather like the famous Tranjia aluminium. No tea, however, and I began to realise how much I missed the stuff.

I started to walk after some time after I had attended to the needs of my body and had a hot drink which was very like tea. I began to dislike this peeking in my mind although I did like the pseudo-tea.

I took a bearing on the direction finder and began to walk. There was no path I could see, just a trackless waste. In itself I think this was odd, because the most remote of places usually have some kind of animal tracks, even if there are no people. The ground rolled gently and the grass or whatever it was fairly short. I was reminded of what it was like at the top of Kinder scout in England but without the mountains, just the odd rock and the short grass. There was nothing like Kinder Zoo, where the rocks stand like abstract statues against the sky after you climb Jacob's Ladder, which has now been made into an easy path because the park authorities were worried about the erosion.

The horizon seemed too close somehow but I did not know what to make of it. I kept walking for a while and then sat on a hillock and ate what seemed to be honey cakes with yet another savoury spice. I drank a little from the canteen and walked some more. After a while I reached a small stream and refilled the canteen. I jumped across and started to walk again. I don't remember feeling this fit in years.

I saw something like a movement of air in front of me. It was some kind of distortion in the air in the distance. It was moving and changing shape like the darkness had, like some ripple across the face of reality. Then it moved and was far away again. I speculated that it could be some kind of vehicle or perhaps my objective. Like life, I mused, things are never clear and always recede into the distance.

Darkness began to fall and I followed the unbidden suggestions and ended up with a tent that was sufficient to keep the cold out and one of the tiny containers held a thin but very warm sleeping bag once it had been opened.

In my dreams that night I remember that I saw a bird flying across the sky, except that I was the bird and the observer at the same time. Later I was adrift on the sea on some kind of raft, watching the stars move overhead as the raft gently span in the currents. In my dreams I was quite alone but not lonely, which was a new thing for me.

I had seen nobody since I woke up the previous morning and saw no more people for the rest of the next day either. I kept walking and the landscape was unchanging. As I walked I started to muse about my predicament, not least why I was taking the whole thing so calmly, and I concluded that these mind readers were keeping my anxiety at bay some how.

When you walk any kind of distance on your own you become very aware of your body, its patterns of breathing and the like. My boots hit the ground and the ground hit back into my feet. These were good boots in fact and they absorbed a lot of the shock from walking. It was slightly springy underfoot, which I think contributed to the memory of Kinder.

I sat and looked out at the horizon. I saw the air ripple again like some kind of heat or maybe it was a *folding* of the air that I could see in the middle distance. I kept

following the guiding tool, stopping when I was tired and sleeping in the tent when it was dark. This went on for a few days while the landscape did not change. I kept seeing the folding in the distance, a shimmering. I began to suspect that I was making no progress because the landscape looked so familiar as I passed through it. In order to test this I lit a fire one day just before I saw the folding and built it up. Sure enough some time later the next day I came across the remains.

It was obvious that this was some kind of puzzle and after a while I stopped the fruitless movement and set down to think. The folding seemed to come just before the end of the day. I resolved this time not to sleep but walk towards it and wait the day through in an attempt to see what it was that kept giving rise to this phenomenon. Other alternatives were to take a line that was at a deliberate angle to the one being provided by the guiding tool. I knew that the tool itself was OK because I worked by sighting objectives and making my way to them. Even with the small hillocks of this landscape it was obvious that I was traveling in what appeared to be a straight line.

That night I kept towards the ripple in the air until I could no longer see. I sat then in the sleeping bag without the tent around me and tried to keep awake. In the morning I noticed that this time I had in fact moved to a new piece of the landscape, or at least was apparently new to me this time.

I found myself in a loop again after a while. It was also rather odd that I did not run out of food or drink in this period. I tried the other option of following a path at a different angle and at last came to a new landscape, except this one was impassable, basically the tundra or whatever it was stopped at the sheer face of a cliff. It looked like the land had slipped and there was a sheer drop like someone had cut the land with a cake knife for as far as I could see in any direction. The flora near the top of the cliff were slightly different which made me think of the ice under the tundra again.

There was no way I could see that it was at all sensible to try to climb down the cliff and indeed there was no reason to. Because of the landslip I could see a fair distance from where I stood and there was nothing to make for once the bottom had been gained. I took the opposite direction and traveled for a few more days.

I was stupefied with loneliness and by the silence at this point. This landscape was silent in line with the absence of animal tracks although I could not see what would keep the grass down otherwise. I began to wonder if this was some test of my gumption, my sticking power. I don't remember ever having much of this in the first place and I staggered from point to point without much motivation any more.

After still longer in this oppressive wilderness I had the idea that maybe I was being observed covertly using the mind links that had given me the tea and told me how to use the equipment. I decided to go on strike and then realised that this would show the end of my gumption if I did it in a way that made me appear apathetic. Instead I elected to stop eating and see if that brought a response from the ship.

It got me then, why had I not tried to get back to the ship? Also if the direction finder was aiming me at a certain point and I had been going off directly at an angle to

where it pointed then I had in fact been moving in the arc of a circle, assuming that the angle was fairly constant. I knew now that I had allowed myself to become disoriented and decided then and there to follow the direction finder again. This meant that going back to the ship would also not be a matter of traveling in the opposite direction because it would simply take me in a straight line away from wherever I was supposed to be going.

After a couple of days and feeling less disheartened than I had been I came to the ripple in the air again only this time I could see through it. There was in fact a stockade like the one at the village I had left all that time ago. It must be that I had needed to approach from a different angle. However I could not get through to the stockade.

I stood for some time and noticed that what I could see was changing every now and then like the channels on some demented TV. For want of a better strategy I tried to go through the rippling every time it changed and eventually I found myself in a forested glade and behind me there was nothing. My body was naked and it was just as well that it was quite warm. The pack had disappeared with all of the food and the canteen. I had expected this.

I was not too bothered in fact, just relieved that I had escaped the trackless waste. Although what happened next did not endear me to wherever this was. I was caught with a lasso and trussed up to a tree. My assailants were small simians of some kind who at least appeared to use a language of some kind for a change. They wore clothes of some kind of rough weave that helped camouflage them in the forest. My bonds were uncomfortable and after a struggle with my inhibitions I was forced to answer the calls of nature and stand there in my own excrement. Nothing I could do would make them notice me, which in itself was very ominous. Who notices a dumb animal that they would eat? Who notices their torture victim? If you see a person, someone as real as yourself, you cannot harm them easily, but everyone sits on furniture.

Even after this humiliation and the smell my captors did not laugh it or behave in a brutalising manner but I was firmly tied to the tree. They lit a small fire using the sticks technique beloved of documentary makers who talk to pigmies in Africa. They appeared to be waiting for something. Some of them chewed bark from the trees. It stained their teeth an odd blue colour. Each had a coil of rope and a flint knife with a wooden handle. There was a consistency to their dress and tools that spoke of mass production of some kind. In this I mean that their clothes did not look hand made despite the low technology of their weapons. A couple smoked what appeared to be cigarettes of a brown colour and dubious smell of garden leaves.

I was in the shade and began to feel cold. I closed my eyes and leant against the bark of the tree. I suspect that the usual subliminal prompting made me think about the way I had been able to move between bodies earlier. I thought that if they were all apparently different aspects of myself then I would perhaps be able to change myself into one of them if I wanted to hard enough. I *pushed* again and was somewhat surprised to find that I was now a tree. This is a difficult experience to describe. I had no eyes or hands or feet or any of the many things that one can feel when one is moving or sitting. For example as you sit reading you can feel your

clothes or the pressure of your weight against your seat. A tree does not feel these things. It just *is*. There is no dark or light but warmth. No space but where you are. The equivalent to the kinesthetic feelings that you usually ignore are those of transpiration. I was at peace, I did not have to think or try to be anything or anyone in particular.

This was as near to a state of bliss as I can describe. There was nothing to worry about or care for, and there were no thinking parts of me to think. I was just there in some kind of corporeal form. I do not know how long this process continued for but after an immeasurable time I was again outside the tree, only this time I was a bird upon the branch looking down at myself and the figures moving in the glade. I think that I was some kind of magpie-like bird because left to its own devices the body I waited in was drawn to look sharply at bright objects and movement.

As earlier when I had found myself in another body and I could walk without too much difficulty. I knew how to use this one to fly and I flew down closer to the figure tied to the tree. It was not my own body again, although I had not realised this in the short time since I had passed through the portal to the glade. In fact it was one of the simian creatures itself. The figure was drooling and had relieved itself again, without a spark of sentience in its eyes. I admit that it made me feel quite ill to look at it, except that I am not sure what this meant to a magpie.

I sat for a while on the captive's shoulder and had a long think about what the options were from here. I could try to get through the bonds using the magpie body to cut them but did not know how long this would take, or even if it was feasible. Another option was just to fly off. I could just wait in comparative safety and see what was going to happen. I decided on the latter course and moved to a branch on another tree.

Birds, like most animals, are good at waiting without physical complaint. If an animal is not hungry or breeding then it does nothing, except perhaps sleep. It is only human beings that run about without any real purpose, or with invented purpose. Most of a day passed with myself in a state of semi-dozing in the bird body looking on the tableau below. The simians moved and chattered amongst each other as I looked on. They smoked and drank from canteens. The bird body could smell alcohol in what they were drinking. They too were waiting for something but I did not know what.

One of the simians seemed to be the leader of the group and sat away from the others a little. This seems to me to be very similar to the way human beings handle this kind of thing too. The others talked in whatever passed for a language but this one sat apart. They would not look him in the eye when their gaze would stray in his direction.

After some time it was beginning to get dark and the simian nearest the fire built it up against the cold that was coming after the sun leached out of the trees. I realised that there was a pack of bedding and the like that had been hung up in one of the trees out of the way when the leader stood up and walked towards it. He reached into the centre of the bundle and pulled out his bedding. He proceeded to find a place near the fire where he could lay it out. After he had done so he produced a long knife

from the pack. The others had taken his action as a signal and were also going to the bundle, with the last one untying the knot and coiling the rope up around his waist.

While this happened the leader sharpened his blade, which was fully as long as his forearm. It was like a large cooking knife with a curved edge and a straight back. I could hear the rattle of cutlery and pots. These must have been in the bedding also.

Mercifully the figure tied to the tree was asleep when the leader walked over, cut its bonds and slashed its jugular vein with an appalling casualness. I was transfixed in the magpie body while the arms and legs were expertly removed and placed over the fire. I was reminded of nothing more than a documentary that I had seen once where a monkey was shot with an arrow and then thrown on the fire and all to be cooked, except that this appeared to be cannibalism.

The more thinking part of me that was not the magpie woke up from its torpor at this sight and began to wonder what was going to happen next. A rich smell like pork filled the air and if I had been in my normal body I think I would have been sick.

As they ate they drank from flasks and became extremely drunk. It was then that they used what remained of the body in a disgusting sex game. It appeared that they were competing to see who would take the longest to finish a sexual activity. There were perhaps bets and the like happening alongside but it was difficult to follow.

The leader did not drink with the others and eventually called a halt to their activities. He cut the head off the corpse and threw it into the forest. The party played cards in the fading light of the fire and then slept with complete abandon. There was no watch on the fire or the encampment.

I roosted in the tree and slept for a while. When I came to myself it was very still in the forest. No sound or movement that I could perceive reached me but something had disturbed me. I realised that what had woken me was the silence itself. All of the noises of the night had stopped, indicating the presence of something that might be a danger, hence the forest had become quiet, except for the movement of the trees.

It came suddenly on the breath of the trees. A loud crack and a steady hissing noise indicated that something was on the edge of the clearing. To me it was an odd sight, there was an albino scorpion at the edge of the clearing. The simians were oblivious to it, unconscious in their slumbers. I thought that the leader may have woken, as he had not drunk very much, but maybe he had the sense to avoid attracting attention to himself. The scorpion darted and danced into the clearing at great speed and took the remains of the corpse away into the forest, holding it lightly in its claws.

In watching the scorpion I realised that it was a chameleon. The albino colours must have been a warning to the simians to do nothing for it faded into the forest as it left the glade. I certainly did not want to tangle with such a beast. The noise of the eating of the remains was awful and the cracking of bones and tearing of flesh made me shiver. The magpie was beginning to get both hungry and thirsty and I knew both that it was an eater of carrion, which was unappealing, and that I would be stuck with

it if I was not careful. I did not want to become something like the scorpion, the thought filled me with dread and loathing, but the short and humanly unpleasant life of a magpie was even less appealing.

Dawn came a couple of hours later and I flew off in search of food and drink. I managed to locate some bitter berries on a bush and supped from a puddle formed from some rain deep in the gloaming of the forest. I flew on away from the simians, probably prompted to this because there was no reason to do so. I did feel that I had exhausted the possibilities there, however. I flew up above the canopy of the forest until I could see some way. There was mostly forest about but I did smell smoke in one direction so I decided to follow the scent and see where it got me.

After some time I realised that this smoke was not a village but a forest fire. Over and down into a valley I could see it raging. It was progressing relatively slowly but I decided that I would fly away from it for some distance before resting. The body I was in was beginning to tire and get hungry again. This is unsurprising when you consider that for a human being to be able to fly in the same manner as a bird the breast bone would need to be as thick as a strong man's leg. This is why birds are relatively small, twice as big is four times the volume.

I let the magpie body do what it wanted as I had already worked out that this time there had not been a transfer of minds so much as a take over. We stopped and ate some more and began rapid flight away from the fire for several hours, stopping only long enough to gain enough energy to move further away. I suppose that this bird was a juvenile because it had no mate and it was young and strong, but it is impossible to know even what season we were in.

After a long and exhausting time it passed into night and flight was more difficult so we roosted in a tree. I was awoken by the noise of a party passing below. It was some simians again, only they were carrying a sedan chair. I could not make out if it was the same party I had been eaten by or some others in the restricted light so I flew down and perched on the chair to have a look. If it was the same party they had probably travelled fifteen or twenty kilometers with their burden through a dense forest, which was some feat of endurance.

I gripped the edge of the chair as it swayed, the carriers were making a dead run and I could see that for all the appearance of density there was enough room between the trees for them to make excellent progress. Every forty or so paces the carriers would swap around from running guards and back again without pausing. This was a feat of discipline and training that surprised me, sixteen of these beasts working in concert.

In the half light I could see that there were quite noticeable differences between them, in that some were probably man sized and carried metal weapons. These did not help carry the chair but ran just in sight at the periphery. These had more human faces than the simians, with flatter foreheads and deep set eyes.

I watched as we were carried at speed into an open area and towards a rock in the middle distance. They kept up their pace right up to the rock, with the periphery gathering in closer, shielding with their bodies. The rock was a hologram of some

kind and they ran right through it and down into the ground. There was a heavy thump behind us and I expected to be discovered sometime soon but nothing happened.

The corridor ran on for what felt like an age. The bird was getting jittery, not liking enclosure but I kept it where it was and it was unable to resist me. The corridor was smooth and appeared to be made of concrete. It had electric lights spaced fairly regularly along it. I could see doors leading off and smell the bright ozone of electrical machinery and oil. We reached a platform and stopped. I was at an underground station of some kind but there were no rails.

The chair was set down and I began to look wonder why they had not done anything about me when the curtains opened and out stepped the lizard creature from months ago. This time he was wearing a three cornered hat and a short tunic over a leather kilt. He wore a small dirk at his waist. He reached out and the bird stepped onto his hand. Opening the curtain again he placed us into the sedan. I saw myself lying asleep across some cushions. Before I knew it I was back in my own body in the small confined space with a frenzied bird. I rolled out of the chair and onto the floor and left the bird behind me. In my youth I took *soft* drugs and got into some very dangerous situations but birds in a room still leave me out of it so it was some time before I came to myself and realised that I was back now. They bundled the bird, protesting volubly, into a sack and one of them ran back up the corridor with it.

I was wearing clothes like you would wear to a formal dinner party. It was deliciously comfortable after being in the bird body and watching myself being eaten. The lizard creature reached into the chair and brought out a walking stick. It opened the stick and showed me that it was in fact a sword stick and then handed it to me. An overcoat and a shoulder bag followed. When I looked in the bag I discovered a neatly folded waistcoat and a blue wallet. The wallet contained what appeared to be different coloured credit cards with my photograph on them. I noticed that my left hand had a scar on the back which I did not remember.

The breeze started and I knew that something must be coming through the tunnel at speed. Everyone in the party relaxed visibly which I took to be a good sign. The train arrived but it was unlike any train I had seen before. It was transparent and the structure was only discernable by what appeared to be a trick of the eye, an odd bending of the light. The rest of the party trooped on board but I stood for a time looking at them standing several feet above the ground in this shimmering object. Then it was *what the hell* and I stepped aboard.

The floor underfoot was soft and springy. I finally noticed that my feet were clad in incongruous trainers or squash shoes that did not fit with the evening clothes at all. The doors (if there were any) closed and the timbre of the sounds changed. I played follow the leader and we sat down on thin air. The train moved off at speed and I found myself pressed into the seat as it took the strain of the inertia.

It was a ride from hell, making the dentist look like nothing. I would have preferred the dentist without anaesthetic in fact. There was no sense of the air moving but the speed was phenomenal. We broke out into the forest, or what was left of it after the fire had passed and I could not focus in the near distance without hurting my eyes. In

the middle to far distance it looked like an imagined aftermath of a nuclear explosion. Just burning stumps of trees and blackened ground. There were no buildings or people though.

I looked back behind from where we had come and saw a ship in the sky. It was like a large dirigible. The fire was coming from the ship. Great cannons of flame leaped from its sides. The smell of burning, of scorching, came to my nose and my eyes began to stream with tears. I was not sure whether I was crying for the destruction or the death of beauty. I felt the forest in me, like I had felt the village and the blue planet before and it hurt me inside to see this.

The train took off and we climbed into the sky. As we did the dirigible slowly turned towards us and I could see an observation platform strung below it. There I could see the insectoids again. I shouted in my anger and my anger was made real. A bolt of lightning came from the ground and joined with one in the clear sky, passing right through the machine. It split in half and tumbled slowly down upon the destruction it had wrought. I realised that this linking with the planet was a fearsome thing. I fainted.

I woke again and I was in the city I had been shown when I piloted the ship, lying in a roadside bunker full of winter sand. My clothes smelt like they had been slept in, possibly pissed in. I had a hangover like an old migraine complete with flashing lights and nausea. Maybe it was migraine but in my experience they are not usually accompanied by a ravening thirst. I lay in the yellow bunker and blinked in the strong sunlight, looking with narrow eyes at my surroundings. It was quiet here. The buildings had a condemned, wasted look. I knew it was the city because of the smell of the sea and other more dubious things that ended up in it. A bus passed and it looked very familiar except that I could not read what was written on it. It was no alphabet that I could recognise. This jarred terribly with the feeling of familiarity.

It was a long time before I could move. I felt like an old man, for all I knew I was in this incarnation. I could not even tell if I was in my own body, just that I was not in the best of condition. I did not climb so much as fall out of the yellow bunker, its lid slamming shut and nearly catching me on the way down. I knelt on all fours for a while and tried to catch my breath. It was as if I weighed twice as much as I normally do. I reached the lip of the bunker and hauled myself up to my feet, with my head swimming round like I was wearing a swimming pool on my head. My stomach heaved dryly and I felt my body trying to reject something, probably itself.

There were small holes in the knees of the trousers. It looked like I had fallen at some point and the friction had torn them. The jacket I was wearing was smelly and stiff under the armpits with sweat. I do not want to discuss the shirt or undergarments. I think that my skin was bleeding in places with friction and heat sores at the crotch and the armpits. I started staggering towards the main road hoping to find help but knowing in my heart of hearts that there would be none. Had I not turned away from people like I was now on many occasions? It was fear of your own safety, wanting to be away from bitter reminders of what you could yourself become that kept you walking, never mind the self justification of the moral high ground beloved of politicians.

The nausea did not subside so much as become familiar enough to deal with. My head felt as if someone had tried to rearrange it by shaking it for a long time. The neck it stood on was so sore that it would hardly lift the head. I shambled forwards with sickness in the pit of my stomach and my head resting on my chest. The back, the legs, the feet aching and complaining. The teeth were a mumbling agony. I stopped and squinted up at the sun, trying to call out my thirst and despair but was as usual completely dumb. I felt myself beginning to fall and started putting the feet one in front of the other in order to prevent it. The only problem with this strategy was that it became very difficult to stop moving. I think that it was possible I had been punched in the eye because one of the eyes kept wanting to close and it was weeping as well. It may have been sand in there from the bunker.

The thirst became everything after a while. This was a busy street but the mass of people magically opened before me as I staggered slowly through them. I fumbled through the pockets as best I could and found no money. I reached a traffic interchange and was forced to sway and hop from foot to foot in order to stop myself falling over. There were no seats but I knew that I would get into trouble if I tried to sit on one if there had been any. The behaviour of the people I was seeing told me that quickly enough. I wanted to jump again to another person but in the event could not wish this on anyone, even an enemy, and I did not know what prompted this jumping anyway.

Eventually I fell down and could not get up, crunching the back and neck even more. I lay there retching emptily while my head felt like it was a crunched up paper bag being blown into and re-crunched alternatively. I wept and mumbled back into unconsciousness with the people walking around me. I woke again briefly to feel the hot unpleasantness of being pissed on by a group of passers by, they did not laugh while they did this and just walked off.

I think this body died where it was in the street because I woke again in a child's bed. It was night and I could see toys and books strewn in ordered chaos around the room. I could smell fresh paint. This was different from the previous human swaps in that I was still aware of the child's mind. It was not afraid of me but knew that I was there. I could not move the body around like I normally could but watch and feel what the child did. It lay down and slept.

I remained awake but could see nothing because the eyes were closed. After a while my mind began to make things out of the darkness and I could see moving kaleidoscopic patterns that suggested but never quite became anything. This reminded me of an old insomnia. The child started to dream and I moved into the dream. We were sitting on the floor in a nursery. Other children ran around making the noise and clatter of play. The child was building with blocks. There was a small tower with a door after a while. Like all dreams the bricks did not run out. The door to the tower became a tunnel and the dream shifted back into the forest and the tunnel I had come from some time ago.

I woke to the green smell of moss and crushed ferns. I lay on a bed made of them while I regained myself. Was this still the child's dream? I have always said that I can tell sleeping from waking, even when the nightmare is at its worst I can feel my eyes are shut. I have often lain between wakefulness and sleep afraid of surrendering to

the sleep but unable to move my body. I think that I was nearly thirty years old before I was courageous enough to drop the fight for consciousness and wake normally a little later. It still unnerves me at times. But I knew that my eyes were open and that my nose could smell the real green smell.

Now the child looked through my eyes and I could feel it was looking through the fuzzy disconnection of sleep. This was like a wood I knew from childhood. A wood where I had lain on the ground and watched the sky form a blue tree bordered pool which birds crossed and recrossed leaving ripples in its' fabric. I had once sat and watched a sky full of subtle catharine wheels from the top of a hill. I did not remember the deep peace I felt now, one with the slow, gentle movement of the trees

This time my hands looked like my own, which in turn look like my vague memories of my father's. I also have freckles on my arms and a lot of hair. I looked and it was there. The scar from the simian forest was still there and there was also a callous on my right thumb. The hair on my head seemed no longer than usual.

I lay back in the bed of moss and watched the sky. I felt such peace I could see no point in moving. Gradually I became aware of a rushing sound and I could feel my pulse in my veins. I could hear my own breathing. It stopped eventually and I passed into a state of complete stillness where there was nothing. Not even thoughts about thoughts. It is said the Buddha saw the great wheel of becoming when he started to achieve enlightenment. I suppose that he stepped out of its way in a sense. The great thing they talk about in Buddhist writing is breaking this wheel and attaining non-attachement. This is not the same as unattachment, nor is it without compassion, but the pain of the world is not a pain that belongs to you any more.

The child woke and got out of bed. It played with its toys for a while and attended to its physical needs. I watched vicariously again as it went through a day like the one before where I was left a lot of time to think. We played outside, running across the grass in a big garden and in and out of toy vehicles. I helped it work out how to throw a ball properly and reminded it to keep its sun hat on. I don't know how I did this. The process was co-operative not coercive.

At night I returned to the forest again and began to explore. It was the forest I remembered with the features and man-made pits. It was a victorian period park full of silver birch and rhododendrons. Across the far side was the hill dipping down to the road but there was no road, no cemetery and no people. The outlines of the landscape were roughly the same but made up of open spaces and trees. The fences I remembered were gone.

Down the hill I discovered that there was a road, but here it was little more than a cart track without any metalling. There were no ruts in the path. Just the reddish colour of the local pebble bed sandstone indicating wear. I walked in the general direction of my childhood home, although it was a few miles distant. I replayed the sunny memories of cycle rides with friends and playing in the parks before we were made too adult by the passing of time and circumstance and hid from school in the parks and golf courses. I remember being infected with books for young people full of adventures and longing for one to happen to me. The only adventures they may

happen these days are part of the brutalisation that goes with growing up. I think we were innocent, whatever that may mean now.

The landscape was dislocated in that where my home was there was in fact the park further on. There was no wall or roads around the park and I remembered it as much by its features as anything else. I walked to the central lake and watched the ducks sitting lazily on the water. The boating hut was gone and there was no landing stage, just a piece of raw earth where it should have been. I swam the lake to the island in the middle. The water was like warm bath water. This was all the structure of a dream as far as I was concerned but it was a dream with human beings edited out.

Again the child woke and pulled me from this improbable land. Today must have been a weekend because the routine was different. We stayed in the house in the morning and went shopping later. The child was held under control by the use of a wrist strap. I saw through new eyes how interesting everything was and the child wanted to go off and look at things. It simply did not understand why its parents wanted it close and under their control, although I certainly did. I looked at familiar shops but could not read the signs because the child could not. I had a lot of time to think as I played passenger looking through these eyes. I looked carefully out of the car windows as we drove through the town and out into the suburbs but we both fell asleep on the journey.

At home again we played with some balloons, blowing and batting them across the front room of the house. The child was fed, bathed, soothed and put to bed because it was very tired. I lay there watching the wall the way one does when there is nothing else to watch and saw the light fade slowly outside. I surmised that it must be summer.

When I returned to the edited landscape of my childhood I went back some way and discovered that it was different from when I passed it. I was in another park with a steep dip that had marked the passage of a brook at one time. On the nearby golf course it was an obstacle that would punish the unwary and tire out the caddy going down and up its steep face. Farther on in the park we would ride our bikes down the hill at speed for the sheer pleasure of it, falling off as often as not.

I was bored with this and wanted to get out of this trackless land. My childhood was not happy because of the pain and suffering of myself and others and the cute hinting and missing people was beginning to distress me. I knew that this was not my construct because the buildings and roads would have been there.

I realised that although I was walking through this landscape it was a televisual experience. I did not have a body in this land, I was a floating essence. I tried to move quickly, telescoping my movements and it happened. I moved over to a pool in what would have been the golf course where some of the kids I went to school with had sat after someone slipped them some LSD in the punch at a party.

After some time I thought about the orientation of this window I was looking through. What would happen if I went straight up?

The clouds looked like cotton wool. They had closed in after I rose above them. Maybe it was no longer summer below. It was all atemporal bits and pieces from my childhood anyway but no *people* just *things*. I went on up where the air became thin but while I knew that this was the case I could not feel it thinning. This was constructed, after all, and I felt that most of what was there was from my own mental landscape, but made by someone else. I had some thoughts about going to the moon but knew that it would be even less real than the stratosphere. So instead I plunged down under the clouds again and went looking for some sea to plunge underneath. This time, however, I was back at the tundra, looking at the tent I had left so long ago.

I could see myself sleeping in it, it was dark again. I rose up to look at the surroundings and noticed that the surroundings ended at the putative horizon. The tundra was another construct, only more real-looking. Probably some Freudian thing, if you believe in sex controlling everything. I personally don't because evolution and variation are too complex to for something like that to be a sole factor.

I carried on to the horizon and went underneath it. The tundra and the hillocks making it up looked like paper folding. The land was hollow underneath. I moved away from it as fast as I could until I could see nothing of it, allowing it to metamorphose out of sight. All I could see was a pearly grey nothing around me. I moved back towards the paper land and it was gone, assuming I had navigated correctly.

Finally, after some long time in this pseudo-nirvana I began to hear the sound of water and hushed voices of people in the background. I also felt the sensations of a corporeal body, which at first was a welcome thing after so long. I felt alternate waves of nausea at the pit of my stomach and pain in my head. My limbs were aching and I felt my legs moving, trembling like I was in some kind of fit.

A synthetic voice spoke softly nearby.

"System shut down due to abnormal program self-modification. Rolling back to last fixed checkpoint."

White light like the dream of an orgasm flooded me. I wanted to scream either pleasure or pain as it took me. My head began to hurt excruciatingly badly and the bile started to rise. There was something in my mouth blocking my voice. White light took me again and pulsed everywhere in out.

"Rolling forward to interval marker"

How I wanted to scream but I could not. My eyes stang with tears I realised then that they were being held shut by some mask. I tried to shake, to move.

"Rolling forward to interval marker"

The picture formed slowly around me and the pain faded. I was on a train racing at some speed through the countryside. I front of me were half a dozen cans of lager, still unopened. I could smell the hacking crisp smell of rolling tobacco and realised that it was on my clothes.

The executive function in my head, I suppose it could be called my credibility marker, started to cut in and try to work out what had happened this time, even then I couldn't work it out. *Rolling forward from last fixed checkpoint?* Didn't that mean I had to have been here before? Was that pain any more real than the other pain I had felt earlier. What was real, anyway?

There were others on this train, I suppose that they were the smoking pariahs, but it is difficult to know when this train journey was supposed to be taking place, before or after the obsession with smoking got so out of control? I was too hacked off with this experience to care much and started on the lager, how could things get any worse?