

News from the Sun

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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In the evenings, as Franklin rested on the roof of the abandoned clinic, he would often remember Trippett, and the last drive he had taken into the desert with the dying astronaut and his daughter. On impulse he had given in to the girl's request, when he found her waiting for him in the dismantled laboratory, her father's flight jacket and solar glasses in her hands, shabby mementoes of the vanished age of space. In many ways it had been a sentimental gesture, but Trippett was the last man to walk on the moon, and the untended landscape around the clinic more and more resembled the lunar terrain. Under that cyanide-blue sky perhaps something would stir, a lost memory engage, for a few moments Trippett might even feel at home again.

Followed by the daughter, Franklin entered the darkened ward. The other patients had been transferred, and Trippett sat alone in the wheelchair at the foot of his bed. By now, on the eve of the clinic's closure, the old astronaut had entered his terminal phase and was conscious for only a few seconds each day. Soon he

would lapse into his last deep fugue, an invisible dream of the great tideways of space.

Franklin lifted the old man from his chair, and carried his child-like body through the corridors to the car park at the rear of the clinic. Already, however, as they moved into the needle-sharp sunlight, Franklin regretted his decision, aware that he had been manipulated by the young woman. Ursula rarely spoke to Franklin, and like everyone at the hippy commune seemed to have all the time in the world to stare at him. But her patient, homely features and uninnocent gaze disturbed him in a curious way. Sometimes he suspected that he had kept Trippett at the clinic simply so that he could see the daughter. The younger doctors thought of her as dumpy and unsexed, but Franklin was sure that her matronly body concealed a sexual conundrum of a special kind.

These suspicions aside, her father's condition reminded Franklin of his own accelerating fugues. For a year these had lasted little more than a few minutes each day, manageable within the context of the hours he spent at his desk, and at times barely distinguishable from musing. But in the past few weeks, as if prompted by the decision to close the clinic, they had lengthened to more than thirty minutes at a stretch. In three months he would be housebound, in six be fully awake for only an hour each day.

The fugues came so swiftly, time poured in a torrent from the cracked glass of their lives. The previous summer, during their first excursions into the desert, Trippett's waking periods had lasted at least half an hour. He had taken a touching pleasure in the derelict landscape, in the abandoned motels and weed-choked swimming pools of the small town near the air base, in the silent runways with their dusty jets sitting on flattened tyres, in the over-bright hills waiting with the infinite guile of the geological kingdom for the organic world to end and a more vivid mineral realm to begin.

Now, sadly, the old astronaut was unaware of all this. He sat beside Franklin in the front seat, his blanched eyes open behind the glasses but his mind set to some private time. Even the motion of the speeding car failed to rouse him, and Ursula had to hold his shoulders as he tottered like a stuffed toy into the windshield.

'Go on, doctor—he likes the speed...' Sitting forward, she tapped Franklin's head, wide eyes fixed on the speedometer. Franklin forced himself to concentrate on the road, conscious of the girl's breath on his neck. This highway madonna, with her secret dream of speed, he found it difficult to keep his hands and mind off her. Was she planning to abduct her father from the clinic? She lived in the small commune that had taken over the old solar city up in the hills, Soleri II. Every morning she cycled in, bringing Trippett his ration of raisins and macrobiotic cheer. She sat calmly beside him like his young mother as he played with the food, making strange patterns on his paper plate.

'Faster, Dr Franklin—I've watched you drive. You're always speeding.'

'So you've seen me? I'm not sure. If I had a blackout now...' Giving in again, Franklin steered the Mercedes into the centre of the road and eased the speedometer needle towards fifty. There was a flare of headlights as they overtook the weekly bus to Las Vegas, a medley of warning shouts from the passengers left behind in a tornado of dust. The Mercedes was already moving at more than twice the legal limit. At twenty miles an hour, theoretically, a driver entering a sudden

fugue had time to pass the controls to the obligatory front-seat passenger. In fact, few people drove at all. The desert on either side of the road was littered with the wrecks of cars that had veered off the soft shoulder and ended up in a sand-hill a mile away, their drivers dying of exposure before they could wake from their fugues.

Yet, for all the danger, Franklin loved to drive, illicit high-speed runs at dusk when he seemed to be alone on a forgotten planet. In a locked hangar at the air base were a Porsche and an antique Jaguar. His colleagues at the clinic disapproved, but he pursued his own maverick way, as he did in the laboratory, shielding himself behind a front of calculated eccentricity that excused certain obsessions with speed, time, sex... He needed the speed more than the sex now. But soon he would have to stop, already the fast driving had become a dangerous game spurred on by the infantile hope that speed in some way would keep the clock hands turning.

The concrete towers and domes of the solar city approached on their left, Paulo Soleri's charming fantasy of a self-sufficient community.

Franklin slowed to avoid running down a young woman in a sari who stood like a mannequin in the centre of the highway. Her eyes stared at the dust, a palaeontology of hopes. In an hour she would snap out of it, and complete her walk to the bus stop without realizing that time, and the bus, had passed her by.

Ursula sombrely embraced her father, beckoning Franklin to accelerate.

'We're dawdling, doctor. What's the matter? You enjoyed the speed. And so did Dad.'

'Ursula, he doesn't even know he's here.'

Franklin looked out at the desert, trying to imagine it through Trippett's eyes. The landscape was not so much desolate as derelict - the untended irrigation canals, the rusting dish of a radio-telescope on a nearby peak, a poor man's begging bowl held up to the banquet of the universe. The hills were waiting for them to go away. A crime had been committed, a cosmic misdemeanour carried on the shoulders of this fine old astronaut sitting beside him. Every night Trippett wept in his sleep. Spectres strode through his unlit dreams, trying to find a way out of his head.

The best astronauts, Franklin had noticed during his work for NASA, never dreamed. Or, at least, not until ten years after their flights, when the nightmares began and they returned to the institutes of aviation medicine which had first helped to recruit them.

Light flickered at them from the desert, and raced like a momentary cathode trace across the black lenses of Trippett's glasses. Thousands of steel mirrors were laid out in a semi-circular tract beside the road, one of the solar farms that would have provided electric current for the inhabitants of Soleri II, unlimited power donated in a perhaps too kindly gesture by the economy of the sun.

Watching the reflected light dance in Trippett's eyes, Franklin turned the car on to the service road that ran down to the farm.

'Ursula, we'll rest here—I think I'm more tired than your father.'

Franklin stepped from the car, and strolled across the white, calcinated soil towards the nearest of the mirrors. In his eye he followed the focal lines that converged on to the steel tower two hundred feet away. A section of the collector

dish had fallen on to the ground, but Franklin could see images of himself flung up into the sky, the outstretched sleeves of his white jacket like the wings of a deformed bird.

'Ursula, bring your father...' The old astronaut could once again see himself suspended in space, this time upside down in the inverted image, hung by his heels from the yardarm of the sky.

Surprised by the perverse pleasure he took in this notion, Franklin walked back to the car. But as they helped Trippett from his seat, trying to reassure the old man, there was a clatter of metallic noise across the desert. An angular shadow flashed over their faces, and a small aircraft soared past, little more than twenty feet above the ground. It scuttled along like a demented gnat, minute engine buzzing up a storm, its wired wings strung around an open fuselage.

A white-haired man sat astride the miniature controls, naked except for the aviator's goggles tied around his head. He handled the plane in an erratic but stylish way, exploiting the sky to display his showy physique.

Ursula tried to steady her father, but the old man broke away from her and tottered off among the mirrors, his clenched fists pummelling the air. Seeing him, the pilot banked steeply around the sun-tower, then dived straight towards him, pulling up at the last moment in a blare of noise and dust. As Franklin ran forward and pressed Trippett to the ground the plane banked and came round again in a wide turn. The pilot steered the craft with his bare knees, arms trailing at his sides as if mimicking Franklin's image in the dish above the tower.

'Slade! Calm down, for once...' Franklin wiped the stinging grit from his mouth. He had seen the man up to too many extravagant tricks ever to be sure what he would do next. This former air force pilot and would-be astronaut, whose application Franklin had rejected three years earlier when he was chairman of the medical appeals board, had now returned to plague him with these absurd antics - spraying flocks of swallows with gold paint, erecting a circle of towers out in the desert ('my private space programme,' he termed it proudly), building a cargo cult airport with wooden control tower and planes in the air base car park, a cruel parody intended to punish the few remaining servicemen.

And this incessant stunt flying. Had Slade recognized Franklin's distant reflection as he sped across the desert in the inverted aircraft, then decided to buzz the Mercedes for the fun of it, impress Trippett and Ursula, even himself, perhaps?

The plane was coming back at them, engine wound up to a scream. Franklin saw Ursula shouting at him soundlessly. The old astronaut was shaking like an unstuffed scarecrow, one hand pointing to the mirrors. Reflected in the metal panes were the multiple images of the black aircraft, hundreds of vulture-like birds that hungrily circled the ground.

'Ursula, into the car!' Franklin took off his jacket and ran through the mirrors, hoping to draw the aircraft away from Trippett. But Slade had decided to land. Cutting the engine, he let the microlight die in the air, then stalled the flapping machine on to the service road. As it trundled towards the Mercedes with its still spinning propeller, Franklin held off the starboard wing, almost tearing the doped fabric.

‘Doctor! You’ve already grounded me once too often...’ Slade inspected the dented fabric, then pointed to Franklin’s trembling fingers. ‘Those hands... I hope you aren’t allowed to operate on your patients.’

Franklin looked down at the white-haired pilot. His own hands were shaking, an understandable reflex of alarm. For all Slade’s ironic drawl, his naked body was as taut as a trap, every muscle tense with hostility. His eyes surveyed Franklin with the ever-alert but curiously dead gaze of a psychopath. His pallid skin was almost luminous, as if after ending his career as an astronaut he had made some private pact with the sun. A narrow lap belt held him to the seat, but his shoulders bore the scars of a strange harness—the restraining straps of a psychiatric unit, Franklin guessed, or some kind of sexual fetishism.

‘My hands, yes. They’re always the first to let me down. You’ll be glad to hear that I retire this week.’ Quietly, Franklin added: ‘I didn’t ground you.’

Slade pondered this, shaking his head. ‘Doctor, you practically closed the entire space programme down singlehanded. It must have provoked you in a special way. Don’t worry, though, I’ve started my own space programme now, another one.’ He pointed to Trippett, who was being soothed by Ursula in the car. ‘Why are you still bothering the old man? He won’t buy off any unease.’

‘He enjoys the drives—speed seems to do him good. And you too, I take it. Be careful of those fugues. If you want to, visit me at the clinic.’

‘Franklin...’ Controlling his irritation, Slade carefully relaxed his jaw and mouth, as if dismantling an offensive weapon. ‘I don’t have the fugues any longer. I found a way of... dealing with them.’

‘All this flying around? You frightened the old boy.’

‘I doubt it.’ He watched Trippett nodding to himself. ‘In fact, I’d like to take him with me - we’ll fly out into space again, one day. Just for him I’ll build a gentle space-craft, made of rice paper and bamboo..’

‘That sounds your best idea yet.’

‘It is.’ Slade stared at Franklin with sudden concern and the almost boyish smile of a pupil before a favourite teacher. ‘There is a way out, doctor, a way out of time.’

‘Show me, Slade. I haven’t much time left.’

‘I know that, doctor. That’s what I wanted to tell you. Together, Marion and I are going to help you.’

‘Marion—?’ But before Franklin could speak, the aircraft’s engine racketed into life. Fanning the tailplane, Slade deftly turned the craft within its own length. He replaced the goggles over his eyes, and took off in a funnel of dust that blanched the paintwork of the Mercedes. Safely airborne, he made a final circuit, gave a curious underhand salute and soared away.

Franklin walked to the car and leaned against the roof, catching his breath. The old man was quiet again, his brief fit forgotten.

‘That was Slade. Do you know him, Ursula?’

‘Everyone does. Sometimes he works on our computer at Soleri, or just starts a fight. He’s a bit crazy, trying all the time not to fugue.’

Franklin nodded, watching the plane disappear towards Las Vegas, lost among the hotel towers. ‘He was a trainee astronaut once. My wife thinks he’s trying to kill me.’

‘Perhaps she’s right. I remember now—he said that except for you he would have gone to the moon.’

‘We all went to the moon. That was the trouble...’

Franklin reversed the Mercedes along the service road. As they set off along the highway he thought of Slade’s puzzling reference to Marion. It was time to be wary. Slade’s fugues should have been lengthening for months, yet somehow he kept them at bay. All that violent energy contained in his skull would one day push apart the sutures, burst out in some ugly act of revenge.

‘Dr Franklin! Listen!’

Franklin felt Ursula’s hands on his shoulder. In a panic he slowed down and began to search the sky for the returning microlight.

‘It’s Dad, doctor! Look!’

The old man had sat up, and was peering through the window in a surprisingly alert way. The slack musculature of his face had drilled itself into the brisk profile of a sometime naval officer. He seemed uninterested in his daughter or Franklin, but stared sharply at a threadbare palm tree beside a wayside motel, and at the tepid water in the partly drained pool.

As the car swayed across the camber Trippett nodded to himself, thoroughly approving of the whole arid landscape. He took his daughter’s hand, emphasizing some conversational point that had been interrupted by a pot-hole.

‘... it’s green here, more like Texas than Nevada. Peaceful, too. Plenty of cool trees and pasturage, all these fields and sweet lakes. I’d like to stop and sleep for a while. We’ll come out and swim, dear, perhaps tomorrow. Would you like that?’

He squeezed his daughter’s hand with sudden affection. But before he could speak again, a door closed within his face and he had gone.

They reached the clinic and returned Trippett to his darkened ward. Later, while Ursula cycled away down the silent runways, Franklin sat at his desk in the dismantled laboratory. His fingers sparred with each other as he thought of Trippett’s curious utterance. In some way Slade’s appearance in the sky had set it off. The old astronaut’s brief emergence into the world of time, those few lucid seconds, gave him hope. Was it possible that the fugues could be reversed? He was tempted to go back to the ward, and bundle Trippett into the car for another drive.

Then he remembered Slade’s aircraft speeding towards him across the solar mirrors, the small, vicious propeller that shredded the light and air, time and space. This failed astronaut had first come to the clinic seven months earlier. While Franklin was away at a conference, Slade arrived by air force ambulance, posing as a terminal patient. With his white hair and obsessive gaze, he had instantly charmed the clinic’s director, Dr Rachel Vaisey, into giving him the complete run of the place. Moving about the laboratories and corridors, Slade took over any disused cupboards and desk drawers, where he constructed a series of little tableaux, psychosexual shrines to the strange gods inside his head.

He built the first of the shrines in Rachel Vaisey’s bidet, an ugly assemblage of hypodermic syringes, fractured sunglasses and blood-stained tampons. Other shrines appeared in corridor alcoves and unoccupied beds, relics of a yet to be experienced future left here as some kind of psychic deposit against his treatment’s probable failure. After an outraged Dr Vaisey insisted on a thorough

inspection Slade discharged himself from the clinic and made a new home in the sky.

The shrines were cleared away, but one alone had been carefully preserved. Franklin opened the centre drawer of his desk and stared at the assemblage laid out like a corpse on its bier of surgical cotton. There was a labelled fragment of lunar rock stolen from the NASA museum in Houston; a photograph taken with a zoom lens of Marion in a hotel bathroom, her white body almost merging into the tiles of the shower stall; a faded reproduction of Dali's *Persistence of Memory*, with its soft watches and expiring embryo; a set of leucotomes whose points were masked by metal peas; and an emergency organ-donor card bequeathing to anyone in need his own brain. Together the items formed an accurate anti-portrait of all Franklin's obsessions, a side-chapel of his head. But Slade had always been a keen observer, more interested in Franklin than in anyone else.

How did he elude the fugues? When Franklin had last seen him at the clinic Slade was already suffering from fugues that lasted an hour or more. Yet somehow he had sprung a trapdoor in Trippett's mind, given him his vision of green fields.

When Rachel Vaisey called to complain about the unauthorized drive Franklin brushed this aside. He tried to convey his excitement over Trippett's outburst.

'He was there, Rachel, completely himself, for something like thirty seconds. And there was no effort involved, no need to remember who he was. It's frightening to think that I'd given him up for lost.'

'It is strange - one of those inexplicable remissions. But try not to read too much into it.' Dr Vaisey stared with distaste at the perimeter camera mounted beside its large turntable. Like most members of her staff, she was only too glad that the clinic was closing, and that the few remaining patients would soon be transferred to some distant sanatorium or memorial home. Within a month she and her colleagues would return to the universities from which they had been seconded. None of them had yet been affected by the fugues, and that Franklin should be the only one to succumb seemed doubly cruel, confirming all their longstanding suspicions about this wayward physician. Franklin had been the first of the NASA psychiatrists to identify the time-sickness, to have seen the astronauts' original fugues for what they were.

Sobered by the prospect facing Franklin, she managed a conciliatory smile. 'You say he spoke coherently. What did he talk about?'

'He babbled of green fields.' Franklin stood behind his desk, staring at the open drawer hidden from Dr Vaisey's suspicious gaze. 'I'm sure he actually saw them.'

'A childhood memory? Poor man, at least he seems happy, wherever he really is.'

'Rachel...!' Franklin drove the drawer into the desk. 'Trippett was staring at the desert along the road - nothing but rock, dust and a few dying palms, yet he saw green fields, lakes, forests of trees. We've got to keep the clinic open a little longer, I feel I have a chance now. I want to go back to the beginning and think everything through again.'

Before Dr Vaisey could stop him, Franklin had started to pace the floor, talking to his desk. 'Perhaps the fugues are a preparation for something, and we've been wrong to fear them. The symptoms are so widespread, there's virtually an invisible

epidemic, one in a hundred of the population involved, probably another five unaware that they've been affected, certainly out here in Nevada.'

'It's the desert—topography clearly plays a part in the fugues. It's been bad for you, Robert. For all of us.'

'All the more reason to stay and face it. Rachel, listen: I'm willing to work with the others more than I have done, this time we'll be a true team.'

'That is a concession.' Dr Vaisey spoke without irony. 'But too late, Robert. You've tried everything.'

'I've tried nothing...' Franklin placed a hand on the huge lens of the perimeter camera, hiding the deformed figure who mimicked his gestures from the glass cell. Distorted reflections of himself had pursued him all day, as if he were being presented with brief clips from an obscene film in which he would shortly star. If only he had spent more time on Trippett, rather than on the volunteer panels of housewives and air force personnel. But the old astronaut intimidated him, touched all his feelings of guilt over his complicity in the space programme. As a member of the medical support team, he had helped to put the last astronauts into space, made possible the year-long flights that had set off the whole time-plague, cracked the cosmic hour-glass.

'And Trippett? Where are you going to hide him away?'

'We aren't. His daughter has volunteered to take him. She seems a reasonable girl.'

Giving in to her concern, Dr Vaisey stepped forward and took Franklin's hand from the camera lens. 'Robert—are you going to be all right? Your wife will look after you, you say. I wish you'd let me meet her. I could insist...'

Franklin was thinking about Trippett—the news that the old astronaut would still be there, presumably living up in Soleri II, had given him hope. The work could go on. He felt a sudden need to be alone in the empty clinic, to be rid of Dr Vaisey, this well-meaning, middle-aged neurologist with her closed mind and closed world. She was staring at him across the desk, clearly unsure what to do about Franklin, her eyes distracted by the gold and silver swallows that swooped across the runways. Dr Vaisey had always regretted her brief infatuation with Slade. Franklin remembered their last meeting in her office, when Slade had taken out his penis and masturbated in front of her, then insisted on mounting his hot semen on a slide. Through the microscope eyepiece Rachel Vaisey had watched the thousand replicas of this young psychotic frantically swimming. After ten minutes they began to falter. Within an hour they were all dead.

'Don't worry, I'll be fine. Marion knows exactly what I need. And Slade will be around to help her.'

'Slade? How on earth...?'

Franklin eased the centre drawer from his desk. Carefully, as if handling an explosive device, he offered the shrine to Dr Vaisey's appalled gaze.

'Take it, Rachel. It's the blueprint of our joint space programme. You might care to come along...'

When Dr Vaisey had gone, Franklin returned to his desk. First, he took off his wristwatch and massaged the raw skin of his forearm. Every fifteen minutes he returned the hand of the stopwatch to zero. This nervous tic, a timetwitch, had long been a joke around the clinic. But after the onset of a fugue the accumulating

total gave him a reasonably exact record of its duration. A crude device, he was almost glad that he would soon escape from time altogether.

Though not yet. Calming himself, he looked at the last pages of his diary.

June 19—fugues: 8-30 to 9-11 am; 11-45 to 12-27 am; 5-15 to 6-08 pm; 11-30 to 12-14 pm. Total: 3 hours.

The totals were gaining on him. June 20 - 3 hours 14 mins; June 21 3 hours 30 mins; June 22—3 hours 46 mins. This gave him little more than ten weeks, unless the fugues began to slow down, or he found that trapdoor through which Trippett had briefly poked his head.

Franklin closed the diary and stared back at the watching lens of the perimeter camera. Curiously, he had never allowed himself to be photographed by the machine, as if the contours of his body constituted a secret terrain whose codes had to be held in reserve for his last attempt to escape. Standing or reclining on the rotating platform, the volunteer patients had been photographed in a continuous scan that transformed them into a landscape of undulating hills and valleys, not unlike the desert outside. Could they take an aerial photograph of the Sahara and Gobi deserts, reverse the process and reconstitute the vast figure of some sleeping goddess, an Aphrodite born from a sea of dunes? Franklin had become obsessed with the camera, photographing everything from cubes and spheres to cups and saucers and then the naked patients themselves, in the hope of finding the dimension of time locked in those undulating spaces.

The volunteers had long since retired to their terminal wards, but their photographs were still pinned to the walls—a retired dentist, a police sergeant on the Las Vegas force, a middle-aged hair stylist, an attractive mother of year-old twins, an air-traffic controller from the base. Their splayed features and distorted anatomies resembled the nightmarish jumble seen by all patients if they were deliberately roused from their fugues by powerful stimulants or electric shock - oozing forms in an elastic world, giddy and unpleasant. Without time, a moving face seemed to smear itself across the air, the human body became a surrealist monster.

For Franklin, and the tens of thousands of fellow sufferers, the fugues had begun in the same way, with the briefest moments of inattention. An overlong pause in the middle of a sentence, some mysteriously burnt-out scrambled egg, the air force sergeant who looked after the Mercedes annoyed by his off-hand rudeness, together led on to longer stretches of missed time. Subjectively, the moment-to-moment flow of consciousness seemed to be uninterrupted. But time drained away, leaking slowly from his life. Only the previous day he had been standing at the window, looking at the line of cars in the late afternoon sunlight, and the next moment there was dusk outside and a deserted parking lot.

All victims told the same story—there were forgotten appointments, inexplicable car crashes, untended infants rescued by police and neighbours. The victims would 'wake' at midnight in empty office blocks, find themselves in stagnant baths, be arrested for jay-walking, forget to feed themselves. Within six months they would be conscious for only half the day, afraid to drive or go out into the streets, desperately filling every room with clocks and timepieces. A week would flash past in a jumble of sunsets and dawns. By the end of the first year they would be alert for only a few minutes each day, no longer able to feed or care for

themselves, and soon after would enter one of the dozens of state hospitals and sanatoria.

After his arrival at the clinic Franklin's first patient was a badly burned fighter pilot who had taxied his jet through the doors of a hangar. The second was one of the last of the astronauts, a former naval captain named Trippett. The pilot was soon beyond reach in a perpetual dusk, but Trippett had hung on, lucid for a few minutes each day. Franklin had learned a great deal from Trippett, the last man to have walked on the moon and the last to hold out against the fugues - all the early astronauts had long since retreated into a timeless world. The hundreds of fragmentary conversations, and the mysterious guilt that Trippett shared with his colleagues, like them weeping in his dreams, convinced Franklin that the sources of the malaise were to be found in the space programme itself.

By leaving his planet and setting off into outer space man had committed an evolutionary crime, a breach of the rules governing his tenancy of the universe, and of the laws of time and space. Perhaps the right to travel through space belonged to another order of beings, but his crime was being punished just as surely as would be any attempt to ignore the laws of gravity. Certainly the unhappy lives of the astronauts bore all the signs of a deepening sense of guilt. The relapse into alcoholism, silence and pseudo-mysticism, and the mental breakdowns, suggested profound anxieties about the moral and biological rightness of space exploration.

Sadly, not only the astronauts were affected. Each space-launch left its trace in the minds of those watching the expeditions. Each flight to the moon and each journey around the sun was a trauma that warped their perception of time and space. The brute-force ejection of themselves from their planet had been an act of evolutionary piracy, for which they were now being expelled from the world of time.

Preoccupied with his memories of the astronauts, Franklin was the last to leave the clinic. He had expected his usual afternoon fugue, and sat at his desk in the silent laboratory, finger on his stopwatch. But the fugue had not occurred, perhaps deflected by his buoyant mood after the drive with Trippett. As he walked across the car park he looked out over the deserted air base. Two hundred yards from the control tower, a young woman with an apron around her waist stood on the concrete runway, lost in her fugue. Half a mile away, two more women stood in the centre of the huge cargo runway. All of them came from the nearby town. At twilight these women of the runways left their homes and trailers and strayed across the air base, staring into the dusk like the wives of forgotten astronauts waiting for their husbands to return from the tideways of space.

The sight of these women always touched Franklin in a disturbing way, and he had to force himself to start the car. As he drove towards Las Vegas the desert seemed almost lunar in the evening light. No one came to Nevada now, and most of the local population had long since left, fearing the uneasy perspectives of the desert. When he reached home the dusk filtered through a cerise haze that lay over the old casinos and hotels, a ghostly memory of the electric night.

Franklin liked the abandoned gambling resort. The other physicians lived within a short drive of the clinic, but Franklin had chosen one of the half-empty motels in the northern suburbs of the city. In the evenings, after visiting his few patients in their retirement homes, he would often drive down the silent Strip, below the

sunset fades of the vast hotels, and wander for hours through the shadows among the drained swimming pools. This city of spent dreams, which had once boasted that it contained no clocks, now seemed itself to be in fugue.

As he parked in the forecourt of the motel he noted that Marion's car was missing. The third-floor apartment was empty. The television set was drawn up by the bed, playing silently to a clutch of medical textbooks Marion had taken from his shelves and an overflowing ashtray like a vent of Vesuvius. Franklin hung the unracked dresses in the wardrobe. As he counted the fresh cigarette burns in the carpet he reflected on the remarkable disarray that Marion could achieve in a few hours, here as in everything else. Were her fugues real or simulated? Sometimes he suspected that she half-consciously mimicked the time-slips, in an effort to enter that one realm where Franklin was free of her, safe from all her frustration at having come back to him.

Franklin went on to the balcony and glanced down at the empty swimming pool. Often Marion sunbathed nude on the floor at the deep end, and perhaps had been trapped there by her fugue. He listened to the drone of a light aircraft circling the distant hotels, and learned from the retired geologist in the next apartment that Marion had driven away only minutes before his arrival.

As he set off in the car he realized that his afternoon fugue had still not occurred. Had Marion seen his headlamps approaching across the desert, and then decided on impulse to disappear into the unlit evening of the Strip hotels? She had known Slade at Houston three years earlier, when he tried to persuade her to intercede with Franklin. Now he seemed to be courting her from the sky, for reasons that Marion probably failed to realize. Even their original affair had been part of his elaborate stalking of Franklin.

The aircraft had vanished, disappearing across the desert. Franklin drove along the Strip, turning in and out of the hotel forecourts. In an empty car park he saw one of the ghosts of the twilight, a middle-aged man in a shabby tuxedo, some retired croupier or cardiologist returning to these dreaming hulks. Caught in mid-thought, he stared sightlessly at a dead neon sign. Not far away, a strong-hipped young woman stood among the dusty pool-furniture, her statuesque figure transformed by the fugue into that of a Delvaux muse.

Franklin stopped to help them, if possible rouse them before they froze in the cold desert night. But as he stepped from his car he saw that the headlamps were reflected in the stationary propeller blade of a small aircraft parked on the Strip.

Slade leaned from the cockpit of his microlight, his white skin an unhealthy ivory in the electric beams. He was still naked, gesturing in an intimate way at a handsome woman in a streetwalker's fur who was playfully inspecting his cockpit. He beckoned her towards the narrow seat, like some cruising driver of old trying to entice a passer-by.

Admiring Slade for his nerve in using the sky to accost his wife, Franklin broke into a run. Slade had taken Marion's waist and was trying to pull her into the cockpit.

'Leave her, Slade!' Fifty feet from them, Franklin stumbled over a discarded tyre. He stopped to catch his breath as an engine of noise hurtled towards him out of the darkness, the same metallic blare he had heard in the desert that morning. Slade's aircraft raced along the Strip, wheels bouncing on the road, its propeller lit

by the car's headlamps. As Franklin fell to his knees the plane banked to avoid him, climbed steeply and soared away into the sky.

Hunting for Slade, the excited air surged around Franklin. He stood up, hands raised to shield his face from the stinging dust. The darkness was filled with rotating blades. Silver lassoes spiralled out of the night, images of the propeller that launched themselves one after another from the wake of the vanished aircraft.

Still stunned by the violent attack of the machine, Franklin listened to its last drone across the desert. He watched the retinal display that had transformed the shadowy streets. Silver coils spun away over his head and disappeared among the hotels, a glistening flight path that he could almost touch with his hands. Steadying himself against the hard pavement under his feet, he turned to follow his wife as she fled from him through the drained swimming pools and deserted car parks of the newly lit city.

'Poor man—couldn't you see him? He flew straight at you. Robert...?'

'Of course I saw him. I don't think I'd be here otherwise.'

'But you stood there, totally mesmerized. I know he's always fascinated you, but that was carrying it too far. If that propeller had...'

'It was a small experiment,' Franklin said. 'I wanted to see what he was trying to do.'

'He was trying to kill you!'

Franklin sat on the end of the bed, staring at the cigarette burns in the carpet. They had reached the apartment fifteen minutes earlier, but he was still trying to calm himself. He thought of the rotating blade that had devoured the darkness. Delayed all afternoon, his fugue had begun as he tripped over the tyre, and had lasted almost an hour. For her own reasons Marion was pretending that the fugue had not occurred, but when he woke his skin was frozen. What had she and Slade been doing during the lost time? Too easily, Franklin imagined them together in Marion's car, or even in the cockpit of the aircraft, watched by the sightless husband. That would please Slade, put him in just the mood to scare the wits out of Franklin as he took off.

Through the open door Franklin stared at his wife's naked body in the white cube of the bathroom. A wet cigarette smouldered in the soap dish. There were clusters of small bruises on her thighs and hips, marks of some stylized grapple. One day soon, when the time drained out of her, the contours of her breasts and thighs would migrate to the polished walls, calm as the dunes and valleys of the perimeter photographs.

Sitting down at the dressing table, Marion peered over her powdered shoulder with some concern. 'Are you going to be all right? I'm finding it difficult enough to cope with myself. That wasn't an attack...?'

'Of course not.' For months now they had kept up the pretence that neither of them was affected by the fugues. Marion needed the illusion, more in Franklin's case than in her own. 'But I may not always be immune.'

'Robert, if anyone's immune, you are. Think of yourself, what you've always wanted - alone in the world, just you and these empty hotels. But be careful of Slade.'

'I am.' Casually, Franklin added: 'I want you to see more of him. Arrange a meeting.'

‘What?’ Marion looked round at her husband again, her left contact lens trapped under her eyelid. ‘He was naked, you know.’

‘So I saw. That’s part of his code. Slade’s trying to tell me something. He needs me, in a special way.’

‘Needs you? He doesn’t need you, believe me. But for you he would have gone to the moon. You took that away from him, Robert.’

‘And I can give it back to him.’

‘How? Are the two of you going to start your own space programme?’

‘In a sense we already have. But we really need you to help us.’

Franklin waited for her to reply, but Marion sat raptly in front of the mirror, lens case in one hand, fingers retracting her upper and lower eyelids around the trapped lens. Fused with her own reflection in the finger-stained glass, she seemed to be shooting the sun with a miniature sextant, finding her bearings in this city of empty mirrors. He remembered their last month together after the end at Cape Kennedy, the long drive down the dead Florida coast. The space programme had expressed all its failure in that terminal moraine of deserted hotels and apartment houses, a cryptic architecture like the forgotten codes of a discarded geometric language. He remembered Marion’s blood flowing into the hand-basin from her slashed palms, and the constant arguments that warped themselves out of the air.

Yet curiously those had been happy days, filled with the quickening excitements of her illness. He had dreamed of her promiscuity, the deranged favours granted to waitresses and bellboys. He came back alone from Miami, resting beside the swimming pools of the empty hotels, remembering the intoxications of abandoned parking lots. In a sense that drive had been his first conscious experiment with time and space, placing that body and its unhappy mind in a sequence of bathrooms and pools, watching her with her lovers in the diagrammed car parks, emotions hung on these abstract webs of space.

Affectionately, Franklin placed his hands on Marion’s shoulders, feeling the familiar clammy skin of the fugue. He lowered her hands to her lap, and then removed the contact lens from her eyeball, careful not to cut the cornea. Franklin smiled down at her blanched face, counting the small scars and blemishes that had appeared around her mouth. Like all women, Marion never really feared the fugues, accepting the popular myth that during these periods of lapsed time the body refused to age.

Sitting beside her on the stool, Franklin embraced her gently. He held her breasts in his palms, for a moment shoring up their slipping curvatures. For all his fondness for Marion, he would have to use her in his duel with Slade. The planes of her thighs and shoulders were segments of a secret runway along which he would one day fly to safety.

July 5

Not one of my best days. Five long fugues, each lasting over an hour. The first started at 9 am as I was walking around the pool towards the car. Suddenly I found myself standing by the deep end in much steeper sunlight, the old geologist poking me in a concerned way. Marion had told him not to disturb me, I was deep

in thought! I must remember to wear a hat in future, the sunlight brought out a viral rash on my lips. An excuse for Marion not to kiss me, without realizing it she's eager to get away from here, can't pretend for much longer that the fugues don't exist. Does she guess that in some way I plan to exploit that keening sex of hers?

These long fugues are strange, for the first time since the airplane attack I have a vague memory of the dead time. The geometry of that drained pool acted like a mirror, the sky seemed to be full of suns. Perhaps Marion knew that she was doing when she sunbathed there. I ought to climb down that rusty chromium ladder into a new kind of time? Lost time total: 6 hours 50 mm.

July 11

A dangerous fugue today, and what may have been another attempt on my life by Slade. I nearly killed myself driving to the clinic, must think hard about going there again. The first fugue came at 8.15 a.m., synchronized with Marion's—our sole connubial activity now. I must have spent an hour opening the bathroom door, staring at her as she stood motionless in the shower stall. Curious after-images, sections of her anatomy seemed to be splayed across the walls and ceiling, even over the car park outside. For the first time I felt that it might be possible to stay awake during the fugues. A weird world, spatial change perceived independently of time.

Fired by all this, I set off for the clinic, eager to try something out on the perimeter camera. But only a mile down the highway I must have gone straight off the road, found myself in the parking lot of some abandoned hypermarket, surrounded by a crowd of staring faces. In fact, they were department store mannequins. Suddenly there was a volley of gunshots, fibreglass arms and heads were flying everywhere. Slade at his games again, this time with a pump-gun on the roof of the hypermarket. He must have seen me stranded there and placed the mannequins around me. The timeless people, the only mementoes of homo sapiens when we've all gone, waiting here with their idiotic smiles for the first stellar visitor.

How does Slade repress the fugues? Perhaps violence, like pornography, is some kind of evolutionary standby system, a last-resort device for throwing a wild joker into the game? A widespread taste for pornography means that nature is alerting us to some threat of extinction. I keep thinking about Ursula, incidentally... Total time lost 8 hours 17 mm.

July 15

Must get out of this motel more often. A curious by-product of the fugues is that I'm losing all sense of urgency. Sat here for the last three days, calmly watching time run through my fingers. Almost convinces me that the fugues are a good thing, a sign that some great biological step forward is about to take place, set off by the space flights. Alternatively, my mind is simply numbing itself through sheer

fear This morning I forced myself into the sunlight. I drove slowly around Las Vegas, looking out for Marion and thinking about the links between gambling and time. One could devise a random world, where the length of each time interval depended on chance. Perhaps the high-rollers who came to Vegas were nearer the truth than they realized. 'Clock time' is a neurophysiological construct, a measuring rod confined to homo sapiens. The old labrador owned by the geologist next door obviously has a different sense of time, likewise the cicadas beside the pool. Even the materials of my body and the lower levels of my brain have a very different sense of time from my cerebrum—that uninvited guest within my skull.

Simultaneity? It's possible to imagine that everything is happening at once, all the events "past" and "future" which constitute the universe are taking place together. Perhaps our sense of time is a primitive mental structure that we inherited from our less intelligent forebears. For prehistoric man the invention of time (a brilliant conceptual leap) was a way of classifying and storing the huge flood of events which his dawning mind had opened for him. Like a dog burying a large bone, the invention of time allowed him to postpone the recognition of an eventsystem too large for him to grasp at one bite.

If time is a primitive mental structure we have inherited, then we ought to welcome its atrophy, embrace the fugues—Total time lost 9 hours 15 min.

July 25

Everything is slowing down, I have to force myself to remember to eat and shower. It's all rather pleasant, no fear even though I'm left with only six or seven hours of conscious time each day. Marion comes and goes, we literally have no time to talk to each other. A day passes as quickly as an afternoon. At lunch I was looking at some album photographs of my mother and father, and a formal wedding portrait of Marion and myself, and suddenly it was evening. I feel a strange nostalgia for my childhood friends, as if I'm about to meet them for the first time, an awakening premonition of the past. I can see the past coming alive in the dust on the balcony, in the dried leaves at the bottom of the pool, part of an immense granary of past time whose doors we can open with the right key. Nothing is older than the very new - a newborn baby with its head emerging from its mother has the smooth, time-worn features of Pharaoh. The whole process of life is the discovery of the immanent past contained in the present.

At the same time, I feel a growing nostalgia for the future, a memory of the future I have already experienced but somehow forgotten. In our lives we try to repeat those significant events which have already taken place in the future. As we grow older we feel an increasing nostalgia for our own deaths, through which we have already passed. Equally, we have a growing premonition of our births, which are about to take place. At any moment we may be born for the first time. Total time lost 10 hours 5 mm.

July 29

Slade has been here. I suspect that he's been entering the apartment while I fugue. I had an uncanny memory of someone in the bedroom this morning, when I came out of the 11 a.m. fugue there was a curious after-image, almost a pentecostal presence, a vaguely bio-morphic blur that hung in the air like a photograph taken with the perimeter camera. My pistol had been removed from the dressing-table drawer and placed on my pillow. There's a small diagram of white paint on the back of my left hand. Some kind of cryptic pattern, a geometric key.

Has Slade been reading my diary? This afternoon someone painted the same pattern across the canted floor of the swimming pool and over the gravel in the car park. Presumably all part of Slade's serious games with time and space. He's trying to rally me, force me out of the apartment, but the fugues leave me with no more than two hours at a stretch of conscious time. I'm not the only one affected. Las Vegas is almost deserted, everyone has retreated indoors. The old geologist and his wife sit all day in their bedroom, each in a straight-backed chair on either side of the bed. I gave them a vitamin shot, but they're so emaciated they won't last much longer. No reply from the police or ambulance services. Marion is away again, hunting the empty hotels of the Strip for any sign of Slade. No doubt she thinks that he alone can save her. Total time lost 12 hours 35 mm.

August 12

Rachel Vaisey called today, concerned about me and disappointed not to find Marion here. The clinic has closed, and she's about to go east. A strange pantomime, we talked stiffly for ten minutes. She was clearly baffled by my calm appearance, despite my beard and coffee-stained trousers, and kept staring at the white pattern on my hand and at the similar shapes on the bedroom ceiling, the car park outside and even a section of a small apartment house half a mile away. I'm now at the focus of a huge geometric puzzle radiating from my left hand through the open window and out across Las Vegas and the desert.

I was relieved when she had gone. Ordinary time—so-called 'real time'—now seems totally unreal. With her discrete existence, her prissy point-to-point consciousness, Rachel reminded me of a figure in an animated tableau of Time Man in an anthropological museum of the future. All the same, it's difficult to be too optimistic. I wish Marion were here. Total time lost 15 hours 7 mill.

August 21 Down now to a few stretches of consciousness that last barely an hour at the most. Time seems continuous, but the days go by in a blur of dawns and sunsets. Almost continuously eating, or I'll die of starvation. I only hope that Marion can look after herself, she doesn't seem to have been here for weeks—the pen snapped in Franklin's hand. As he woke, he found himself slumped across his diary. Torn pages lay on the carpet around his feet. During the two-hour fugue a violent struggle had taken place, his books were scattered around an overturned lamp, there were heel marks in the cigarette ash on the floor. Franklin touched his bruised shoulders. Someone had seized him as he sat there in his fugue, trying to shake him into life, and had torn the watch from his wrist.

A familiar noise sounded from the sky. The clacking engine of a light aircraft crossed the nearby roof-tops. Franklin stood up, shielding his eyes from the vivid

air on the balcony. He watched the aircraft circle the surrounding streets and then speed towards him. A molten light dripped from the propeller, spraying the motel with liquid platinum, a retinal tincture that briefly turned the street dust to silver.

The plane flew past, heading north from Las Vegas, and he saw that Slade had recruited a passenger. A blonde woman in a ragged fur sat behind the naked pilot, hands clasped around his waist. Like a startled dreamer, she stared down at Franklin.

As the microlight soared away, Franklin went into the bathroom. Rallying himself, he gazed at the sallow, bearded figure in the mirror, a ghost of himself. Already sections of his mind were migrating towards the peaceful geometry of the bathroom walls. But at least Marion was still alive. Had she tried to intercede as Slade attacked him? There was a faint image on the air of a wounded woman Las Vegas was deserted. Here and there, as he set off in the car, he saw a grey face at a window, or a blanket draped across two pairs of knees on a balcony. All the clocks had stopped, and without his watch he could no longer tell how long the fugues had lasted, or when the next was about to begin.

Driving at a cautious ten miles an hour, Franklin slowed to a halt every five miles, then waited until he found himself sitting in the car with a cold engine. The temperature dial became his clock. It was almost noon when he reached the air base. The clinic was silent, its car park empty. Weeds grew through the fading marker lines, an empty report sheet left behind by those unhappy psychiatrists and their now vanished patients.

Franklin let himself into the building and walked through the deserted wards and laboratories. His colleagues' equipment had been shipped away, but when he unlocked the doors to his own laboratory he found the packing cases where he had left them.

In front of the perimeter camera a rubber mattress lay on the turntable. Next to it an ashtray overflowed with cigarette ends that had burned the wooden planks.

So Slade had turned his talents to a special kind of photography a pornography in the round. Pinned to the walls behind the camera was a gallery of huge prints. These strange landscapes resembled aerial photographs of a desert convulsed by a series of titanic earthquakes, as if one geological era were giving birth to another. Elongated clefts and gulleys stretched across the prints, their contours so like those that had lingered in the apartment after Marion's showers.

But a second geometry overlaid the first, a scarred and aggressive musculature he had seen borne on the wind. The aircraft was parked outside the window, its cockpit and passenger seat empty in the sunlight. A naked man sat behind the desk in Franklin's office, goggles around his forehead. Looking at him, Franklin realized why Slade had always appeared naked.

'Come in, doctor. God knows it's taken you long enough to get here.' He weighed Franklin's wristwatch in his hand, clearly disappointed by the shabby figure in front of him. He had removed the centre drawer from the desk, and was playing with Franklin's shrine. To the original objects Slade had added a small chromium pistol. Deciding against the wristwatch, he tossed it into the waste basket.

'I don't think that's really part of you any longer. You're a man without time. I've moved into your office, Franklin. Think of it as my mission control centre.'

'Slade...' Franklin felt a sudden queasiness, a warning of the onset of the next fugue. The air seemed to warp itself around him. Holding the door-frame, he restrained himself from rushing to the waste basket. 'Marion's here with you. I need to see her.'

'See her, then...' Slade pointed to the perimeter photographs. 'I'm sure you recognize her, Franklin. You've been using her for the last ten years. That's why you joined NASA. You've been pilfering from your wife and the agency in the same way, stealing the parts for your space machine. I've even helped you myself.'

'Helped...? Marion told me that—'

'Franklin!' Slade stood up angrily, knocking the chromium pistol on to the floor. His hands worked clumsily at his scarred ribs, as if he were forcing himself to breathe. Watching him, Franklin could almost believe that Slade had held back the fugues by a sheer effort of will, by a sustained anger against the very dimensions of time and space.

'This time, doctor, you can't ground me. But for you I would have walked on the moon!'

Franklin was watching the pistol at his feet, uncertain how to pacify this manic figure. 'Slade, but for me you'd be with the others. If you'd flown with the space-crews you'd be like Trippett.'

'I am like Trippett.' Calm again, Slade stepped to the window and stared at the empty runways. 'I'm taking the old boy, Franklin. He's coming with me to the sun. It's a pity you're not coming. But don't worry, you'll find a way out of the fugues. In fact, I'm relying on it.'

He stepped around the desk and picked the pistol from the floor. As Franklin swayed, he touched the physician's cooling forehead with the weapon. 'I'm going to kill you, Franklin. Not now, but right at the end, as we go out into that last fugue. Trippett and I will be flying to the sun, and you... you'll die forever.'

There were fifteen minutes, at the most, before the next fugue. Slade had vanished, taking the aircraft into the sky. Franklin gazed round the silent laboratory, listening to the empty air. He retrieved his wristwatch from the waste basket and left. As he reached the parking lot, searching for his car among the maze of diagonal lines, the desert landscape around the air base resembled the perimeter photographs of Marion and Slade together. The hills wavered and shimmered, excited echoes of that single sexual act, mimicking every caress.

Already the moisture in his body was being leached away by the sun. His skin prickled with an attack of hives. He left the clinic and drove through the town, slowing to avoid the filling-station proprietor, his wife and child who stood in the centre of the road. They stared sightlessly into the haze as if waiting for the last car in the world.

He set off towards Las Vegas, trying not to look at the surrounding hills. Ravines fondled each other, rock-towers undulated as if the earth itself were on its marriage bed. Irritated by his own sweat and the oozing hills, Franklin urged on the accelerator, pushing the car's speed to forty miles an hour. The whole mineral world seemed intent on taking its revenge on him. Light stabbed at his retinas from the exposed quartz veins, from the rusting bowls of the radar dishes on the hill crests. Franklin fixed his eyes on the speeding marker line between the car's wheels, dreaming of Las Vegas, that dusty Samarkand.

Then time side-stepped in front of him again.

He woke to find himself lying under the torn ceiling liner of the overturned car, his legs stretched through the broken windshield. Burst from their locks, the open doors hung above him in a haze of idle dust. Franklin pushed aside the loose seats that had fallen across him and climbed from the car. A faint steam rose from the fractured radiator, and the last of the coolant trickled into the culvert of the old irrigation system into which the car had slewed. The blue liquid formed a small pool, then, as he watched it, sank into the sand.

A single kite circled the sky over his head, but the landscape was empty.

Half a mile away was the tarry strip of the highway. As he fugued the car had veered off the road, then sped in a wide circle across the scrub, upending itself as it jumped the first of the irrigation ditches. Franklin brushed the sand from his face and beard. He had been unconscious for almost two hours, part-concussion and part-fugue, and the harsh, noon light had driven all shadows from the sandy soil. The northern suburbs of Las Vegas were ten miles away, too far for him to walk, but the white domes of Soleri II rose from the foothills to the west of the highway, little more than two miles across the desert. He could see the metallic flicker of the solar mirrors as one of the canted dishes caught the sun.

Still jarred by the crash, Franklin turned his back to the road and set off along the causeway between the irrigation ditches. After only a hundred yards he sank to his knees. The sand liquefied at his feet, sucking at his shoes as if eager to strip the clothes from his back and expose him to the sun.

Playing its private game with Franklin, the sun changed places in the sky. The fugues were coming at fifteenminute intervals. He found himself leaning against a rusting pump-head. Huge pipes emerged thirstlessly from the forgotten ground. His shadow hid behind him, scuttling under his heels. Franklin waved away the circling kite. All too easily he could imagine the bird perching on his shoulder as he fugued, and lurching off his eyes. He was still more than a mile from the solar mirrors, but their sharp light cut at his retinas. If he could reach the tower, climb a few of its steps and signal with a fragment of broken glass, someone might. The sun was trying to trick him again. More confident now, his shadow had emerged from beneath his heels and slid silkily along the stony ground, unafraid of this tottering scarecrow who made an ordeal of each step. Franklin sat down in the dust. Lying on his side, he felt the blisters on his eyelids, lymph-filled sacs that had almost closed his orbits. Any more fugues and he would die here, blood, life and time would run out of him at the same moment.

He stood up and steadied himself against the air. The hills undulated around him, the copulating bodies of all the women he had known, together conceiving this mineral world for him to die within.

Three hundred yards away, between himself and the solar mirrors, a single palm tree dipped its green parasol. Franklin stepped gingerly through the strange light, nervous of this mirage. As he moved forward a second palm appeared, then a third and fourth. There was a glimmer of blue water, the calm surface of an oasis pool.

His body had given up, the heavy arms and legs that emerged from his trunk had slipped into the next fugue. But his mind had scrambled free inside his skull. Franklin knew that even if this oasis were a mirage, it was a mirage that he could

see, and that for the first time he was conscious during a fugue. Like the driver of a slow-witted automaton, he propelled himself across the sandy ground, a half-roused sleepwalker clinging to the blue pool before his eyes. More trees had appeared, groves of palms lowered their fronds to the glassy surface of a serpentine lake.

Franklin hobbled forward, ignoring the two kites in the sky above his head. The air was engorged with light, a flood of photons crowded around him. A third kite appeared, joined almost at once by half a dozen more.

But Franklin was looking at the green valley spread out in front of him, at the forest of palms that shaded an archipelago of lakes and pools, together fed by cool streams that ran down from the surrounding hills. Everything seemed calm and yet vivid, the young earth seen for the first time, where all Franklin's ills would be soothed and assuaged in its sweet waters. Within this fertile valley everything multiplied itself without effort. From his outstretched arms fell a dozen shadows, each cast by one of the twelve suns above his head.

Towards the end, while he made his last attempt to reach the lake, he saw a young woman walking towards him. She moved through the palm trees with concerned eyes, hands clasped at her waist, as if searching for a child or elderly parent who had strayed into the wilderness. As Franklin waved to her she was joined by her twin, another grave-faced young woman who walked with the same cautious step. Behind them came other sisters, moving through the palms like schoolgirls from their class, concubines from a pavilion cooled by the lake. Kneeling before them, Franklin waited for the women to find him, to take him away from the desert to the meadows of the valley.

Time, in a brief act of kindness, flowed back into Franklin. He lay in a domed room, behind a verandah shaded by a glass awning. Through the railings he could see the towers and apartment terraces of Soleri II, its concrete architecture a reassuring shoulder against the light. An old man sat on a terrace across the square. Although deeply asleep, he remained inwardly alert and gestured with his hands in a rhythmic way, happily conducting an orchestra of stones and creosote bushes.

Franklin was glad to see the old astronaut. All day Trippett sat in his chair, conducting the desert through its repertory of invisible music. Now and then he sipped a little water that Ursula brought him, and then returned to his colloquy with the sun and the dust.

The three of them lived alone in Soleri II, in this empty city of a future without time. Only Franklin's wristwatch and its restless second hand linked them to the past world.

'Doctor Franklin, why don't you throw it away?' Ursula asked him, as she fed Franklin the soup she prepared each morning on the solar fireplace in the piazza. 'You don't need it any more. There's no time to tell.'

'Ursula, I know. It's some kind of link, I suppose, a telephone line left open to a world we're leaving behind. Just in case.'

Ursula raised his head and dusted the sand from his pillow. With only an hour left to her each day, housework played little part in her life. Yet her broad face and handsome body expressed all the myths of the maternal child. She had seen

Franklin wandering across the desert as she sat on her verandah during an early afternoon fugue.

'I'm sorry I couldn't find you, doctor. There were hundreds of you, the desert was covered with dying men, like some kind of lost army. I didn't know which one to pick.'

'I'm glad you came, Ursula. I saw you as a crowd of dreamy schoolgirls. There's so much to learn.'

'You've made a start, doctor. I knew it months ago when we drove Dad out here. There's enough time.'

They both laughed at this, as the old man across the piazza conducted the orchestral sands. Enough time, when time was what they were most eager to escape. Franklin held the young woman's wrist and listened to her calm pulse, impatient for the next fugue to begin. He looked out over the arid valley below, at the cloud-filled mirrors of the solar farm and the rusting tower with its cracked collector dish. Where were those groves of palms and magic lakes, the sweet streams and pastures from which the grave and beautiful young women had emerged to carry him away to safety? During the fugues that followed his recovery they had begun to return, but not as vividly as he had seen them from the desert floor in the hours after his crash. Each fugue, though, gave him a glimpse of that real world, streams flowed to fill the lakes again.

Ursula and her father, of course, could see the valley bloom, a dense and vivid forest as rich as the Amazon's.

'You see the trees, Ursula, the same ones your father saw?'

'All of them, and millions of flowers, too. Nevada's a wonderful garden now. Our eyes are filling the whole state with blossom. One flower makes the desert bloom.'

'And one tree becomes a forest, one drop of water a whole lake. Time took that away from us, Ursula, though for a brief while the first men and women probably saw the world as a paradise. When did you learn to see?'

'When I brought Dad out here, after they shut the clinic. But it started during our drive. Later we went back to the mirrors. They helped me open my eyes. Dad's already were open.'

'The solar mirrors—I should have gone back myself.'

'Slade waited for you, doctor. He waited for months. He's almost out of time now - I think he only has enough time for one more flight.' Ursula dusted the sand from the sheet. For all the Amazon blaze during their fugues, clouds of dust blew into the apartment, a gritty reminder of a different world. She listened to the silent wind. 'Never mind, doctor, there are so many doors. For us it was the mirrors, for you it was that strange camera and your wife's body in sex.'

She fell silent, staring at the verandah with eyes from which time had suddenly drained. Her hand was open, letting the sand run away, fingers outstretched like a child's to catch the brilliant air. Smiling at everything around her, she tried to talk to Franklin, but the sounds came out like a baby's burble.

Franklin held her cold hands, happy to be with her during the fugue. He liked to listen to her murmuring talk. Socalled articulate speech was an artefact of time. But the babbling infant, and this young woman, spoke with the lucidity of the timeless, that same lucidity that others tried to achieve in delirium and brain-damage. The babbling new-born were telling their mothers of that realm of wonder

from which they had just been expelled. He urged Ursula on, eager to understand her. Soon they would go into the light together, into that last fugue which would free them from the world of appearances.

He waited for the hands to multiply on his watch-dial, the sure sign of the next fugue. In the real world beyond the clock, serial time gave way to simultaneity. Like a camera with its shutter left open indefinitely, the eye perceived a moving object as a series of separate images. Ursula's walking figure as she searched for Franklin had left a hundred replicas of herself behind her, seeded the air with a host of identical twins. Seen from the speeding car, the few frayed palm trees along the road had multiplied themselves across the screen of Trippett's mind, the same forest of palms that Franklin had perceived as he moved across the desert. The lakes had been the multiplied images of the water in that tepid motel pool, and the blue streams were the engine coolant running from the radiator of his overturned car.

During the following days, when he left his bed and began to move around the apartment, Franklin happily embraced the fugues. Each day he shed another two or three minutes. Within only a few weeks, time would cease to exist. Now, however, he was awake during the fugues, able to explore this empty suburb of the radiant city. He had been freed by the ambiguous dream that had sustained him for so long, the vision of his wife with Slade, then copulating with the surrounding hills, in this ultimate infidelity with the mineral kingdom and with time and space themselves.

In the mornings he watched Ursula bathe in the piazza below his verandah. As she strolled around the fountain, drying herself under a dozen suns, Soleri II seemed filled with beautiful, naked women bathing themselves in a city of waterfalls, a seraglio beyond all the fantasies of Franklin's childhood.

At noon, during a few last minutes of time, Franklin stared at himself in the wardrobe mirror. He felt embarrassed by the continued presence of his body, by the sticklike arms and legs, a collection of bones discarded at the foot of the clock. As the fugue began he raised his arms and filled the room with replicas of himself, a procession of winged men each dressed in his coronation armour. Free from time, the light had become richer, gilding his skin with layer upon layer of golden leaf. Confident now, he knew that death was merely a failure of time, and that if he died this would be in a small and unimportant way. Long before they died, he and Ursula would become the people of the sun.

* * * * *

It was the last day of past time, and the first of the day of forever.

Franklin woke in the white room to feel Ursula slapping his shoulders. The exhausted girl lay across his chest, sobbing into her fists. She held his wristwatch in her hand, and pressed it against his forehead.

'...wake, doctor. Come back just once...'

'Ursula, you're cutting—'

'Doctor!' Relieved to see him awake, she rubbed her tears into his forehead. 'It's Dad, doctor.'

'The old man? What is it? Has he died?'

'No, he won't die.' She shook her head, and then pointed to the empty terrace across the piazza. 'Slade's been here. He's taken Dad!'

She swayed against the mirror as Franklin dressed. He searched unsteadily for a hat to shield himself from the sun, listening to the rickety engine of Slade's microlight. It was parked on the service road near the solar farm, and the reflected light from its propeller filled the air with knives. Since his arrival at Soleri he had seen nothing of Slade, and hoped that he had flown away, taking Marion with him. Now the noise and violence of the engine were tearing apart the new world he had constructed so carefully. Within only a few more hours he and Ursula would escape from time for ever.

Franklin leaned against the rim of the washbasin, no longer recognizing the monk-like figure who stared at him from the shaving mirror. Already he felt exhausted by the effort of coping with this small segment of conscious time, an adult forced to play a child's frantic game. During the past three weeks time had been running out at an ever faster rate. All that was left was a single brief period of a few minutes each day, useful only for the task of feeding himself and the girl. Ursula had lost interest in cooking for them, and devoted herself to drifting through the arcades and sundecks of the city, deep in her fugues.

Aware that they would both perish unless he mastered the fugues, Franklin steered himself into the kitchen. In the warm afternoons the steam from the soup tureen soon turned the solar city into an island of clouds. Gradually, though, he was teaching Ursula to eat, to talk and respond to him even during the fugues. There was a new language to learn, sentences whose nouns and verbs were separated by days, syllables whose vowels were marked by the phases of the sun and moon. This was a language outside time, whose grammar was shaped by the contours of Ursula's breasts in his hands, by the geometry of the apartment. The angle between two walls became an Homeric myth. He and Ursula lisped at each other, lovers talking between the transits of the moon, in the language of birds, wolves and whales. From the start, their sex together had taken away all Franklin's fears. Ursula's ample figure at last proved itself in the fugues. Nature had prepared her for a world without time, and he lay between her breasts like Trippett sleeping in his meadows.

Now he was back in a realm of harsh light and rigid perspectives, wristwatch in hand, its mark on his forehead.

'Ursula, try not to follow me.' At the city gates he steadied her against the portico, trying to rub a few more seconds of time into her cooling hands. If they both went out into the desert, they would soon perish in the heat of that angry and lonely sun. Like all things, the sun needed its companions, needed time leached away from it. As Franklin set off across the desert the microlight's engine began to race at full bore, choked itself and stuttered to a stop. Slade stepped from the cockpit, uninterested in Franklin's approach. He was still naked, except for his goggles, and his white skin was covered with weals and sun-sores, as if time itself were an infective plague from which he now intended to escape. He swung the propeller, shouting at the flooded engine. Strapped into the passenger seat of the aircraft was a grey-haired old man, a scarecrow stuffed inside an oversize flying jacket. Clearly missing the vivid flash of the propeller, Trippett moved his hands up and down, a juggler palming pieces of light in the air.

‘Slade! Leave the old man!’

Franklin ran forward into the sun. His next fugue would begin in a few minutes, leaving him exposed to the dreamlike violence of Slade’s propeller. He fell to his knees against the nearest of the mirrors as the engine clattered into life.

Satisfied, Slade stepped back from the propeller, smiling at the old astronaut. Trippett swayed in his seat, eager for the flight to begin. Slade patted his head, and then surveyed the surrounding landscape. His gaunt face seemed calm for the first time, as if he now accepted the logic of the air and the light, the vibrating propeller and the happy old man in his passenger seat. Watching him, Franklin knew that Slade was delaying his flight until the last moment, so that he would take off into his own fugue. As they soared towards the sun, he and the old astronaut would make their way into space again, on their forever journey to the stars.

‘Slade, we want the old man here! You don’t need him now!’

Slade frowned at Franklin’s shout, this hoarse voice from the empty mirrors. Turning from the cockpit, he brushed his sunburnt shoulder against the starboard wing. He winced, and dropped the chromium pistol on to the sand.

Before he could retrieve it, Franklin stood up and ran through the lines of mirrors. High above, he could see the reflection of himself in the collector dish, a stumbling cripple who had pirated the sky. Even Trippett had noticed him, and rollicked in his seat, urging on this lunatic aerialist. He reached the last of the mirrors, straddled the metal plate and walked towards Slade, brushing the dust from his trousers.

‘Doctor, you’re too late.’ Slade shook his head, impatient with Franklin’s derelict appearance. ‘A whole life too late. We’re taking off now.’

‘Leave Trippett...’ Franklin tried to speak, but the words slurred on his tongue. ‘I’ll take his place..’

‘I don’t think so, doctor. Besides, Marion is out there somewhere.’ He gestured to the desert. ‘I left her on the runways for you.’

Franklin swayed against the brightening air. Trippett was still conducting the propeller, impatient to join the sky. Shadows doubled themselves from Slade’s heels. Franklin pressed the wound on his forehead, forcing himself to remain in time long enough to reach the aircraft. But the fugue was already beginning, the light glazed everything around him. Slade was a naked angel pinioned against the stained glass of the air.

‘Doctor? I could save...’ Slade beckoned to him, his arm forming a winged replica of itself. As he moved towards Franklin his body began to disassemble. Isolated eyes watched Franklin, mouths grimaced in the vivid light. The silver pistols multiplied.

Like dragonflies, they hovered in the air around Franklin long after the aircraft had taken off into the sky.

The sky was filled with winged men. Franklin stood among the mirrors, as the aircraft multiplied in the air and crowded the sky with endless armadas. Ursula was coming for him, she and her sisters walking across the desert from the gates of the solar city. Franklin waited for her to fetch him, glad that she had learned to feed herself. He knew that he would soon have to leave her and Soleri II, and set off in search of his wife. Happy now to be free of time, he embraced the great

fugue. All the light in the universe had come here to greet him, an immense congregation of particles.

Franklin revelled in the light, as he would do when he returned to the clinic. After the long journey on foot across the desert, he at last reached the empty air base. In the evenings he sat on the roof above the runways, and remembered his drive with the old astronaut. There he rested, learning the language of the birds, waiting for his wife to emerge from the runways and bring him news from the sun.
