

Studio 5, The Stars

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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Every evening during the summer at Vermilion Sands the insane poems of my beautiful neighbour drifted across the desert to me from Studio 5, The Stars, the broken skeins of coloured tape unravelling in the sand like the threads of a dismembered web. All night they would flutter around the buttresses below the terrace, entwining themselves through the balcony railings, and by morning, before I swept them away, they would hang across the south face of the villa like a vivid cerise bougainvillaea.

Once, after I had been to Red Beach for three days, I returned to find the entire terrace filled by an enormous cloud of coloured tissues, which burst through the french windows as I opened them and pushed into the lounge, spreading across the furniture and bookcases like the delicate tendrils of some vast and gentle plant. For days afterwards I found fragments of the poems everywhere.

I complained several times, walking the three hundred yards across the dunes to deliver a letter of protest, but no one ever answered the bell. I had only once seen my neighbour, on the day she arrived, driving down the Stars in a huge El Dorado convertible, her long hair swept behind her like the head-dress of a goddess. She had vanished in a glimmer of speed, leaving me with a fleeting image of sudden eyes in an ice-white face.

Why she refused to answer her bell I could never understand, but I noticed that each time I walked across to Studio 5 the sky was full of sand-rays, wheeling and screeching like anguished bats. On the last occasion, as I stood by her black glass front door, deliberately pressing the bell into its socket, a giant sand-ray had fallen out of the sky at my feet.

But this, as I realized later, was the crazy season at Vermilion Sands, when Tony Sapphire heard a sand-ray singing, and I saw the god Pan drive by in a Cadillac.

Who was Aurora Day, I often ask myself now. Sweeping across the placid out-of-season sky like a summer comet, she seems to have appeared in a different role to each of us at the colony along the Stars. To me, at first, she was a beautiful neurotic disguised as a femme fatale, but Raymond Mayo saw her as one of Salvador Dali's exploding madonnas, an enigma serenely riding out the apocalypse. To Tony Sapphire and the rest of her followers along the beach she was a reincarnation of Astarte herself, a diamond-eyed time-child thirty centuries old.

I can remember clearly how I found the first of her poems. After dinner one evening I was resting on the terrace—something I did most of the time at Vermilion Sands—when I noticed a streamer lying on the sand below the railing. A few yards away were several others, and for half an hour I watched them being blown lightly across the dunes. A car's headlamps shone in the drive at Studio 5, and I assumed that a new tenant had moved into the villa, which had stood empty for several months.

Finally, out of curiosity, I straddled the rail, jumped down on to the sand and picked up one of the ribbons of pink tissue. It was a fragment about three feet long, the texture of rose petal, so light that it began to flake and dissolve in my fingers.

Holding it up I read:

COMPARE THEE TO A SUMMER'S DAY,
THOU ART MORE LOVELY

I let it flutter away into the darkness below the balcony, then bent down and carefully picked up another, disentangling it from one of the buttresses.

Printed along it in the same ornate neo-classical type was:

SET KEEL TO BREAKERS, FORTH ON THAT GODLY SEA...

I looked over my shoulder. The light over the desert had gone now, and three hundred yards away my neighbour's villa was lit like a spectral crown. The

exposed quartz veins in the sand reefs along the Stars rippled like necklaces in the sweeping headlights of the cars driving into Red Beach.

I glanced at the tape again.

Shakespeare and Ezra Pound? My neighbour had the most curious tastes. My interest fading, I returned to the terrace.

Over the next few days the streamers continued to blow across the dunes, for some reason always starting in the evening, when the lights of the traffic illuminated the lengths of coloured gauze. But to begin with I hardly noticed them—I was then editing Wave IX, an avant-garde poetry review, and the studio was full of auto-tapes and old galley proofs. Nor was I particularly surprised to find I had a poetess for my neighbour. Almost all the studios along the Stars are occupied by painters and poets—the majority abstract and non-productive. Most of us were suffering from various degrees of beach fatigue, that chronic malaise which exiles the victim to a limbo of endless sunbathing, dark glasses and afternoon terraces.

Later, however, the streamers drifting across the sand became rather more of a nuisance. When the protest notes achieved nothing I went over to my neighbour's villa with a view to seeing her in person. On this last occasion, after a dying ray had plummeted out of the sky and nearly stung me in its final spasm, I realized that there was little chance of reaching her.

A hunchbacked chauffeur with a club foot and a twisted face like a senile faun's was cleaning the cerise Cadillac in the drive. I went over to him and pointed to the strands of tissue trailing through the first-floor windows and falling on to the desert below.

„These tapes are blowing all over my villa,“ I told him. „Your mistress must have one of her VT sets on open sequence.“

He eyed me across the broad hood of the El Dorado, sat down in the driving seat and took a small flute from the dashboard.

As I walked round to him he began to play some high, irritating chords. I waited until he had finished and asked in a louder voice: „Do you mind telling her to close the windows?“

He ignored me, his lips pressed moodily to the flute. I bent down and was about to shout into his ear when a gust of wind swirled across one of the dunes just beyond the drive, in an instant whirled over the gravel, flinging up a miniature tornado of dust and ash. This miniature tornado completely enclosed us, blinding my eyes and filling my mouth with grit. Arms shielding my face, I moved away towards the drive, the long streamers whipping around me.

As suddenly as it had started, the squall vanished. The dust stilled and faded, leaving the air as motionless as it had been a few moments previously. I saw that I had backed about thirty yards down the drive, and to my astonishment realized that the Cadillac and chauffeur had disappeared, although the garage door was still open.

My head rang strangely, and I felt irritable and short of breath. I was about to approach the house again, annoyed at having been refused entry and left to suffer the full filthy impact of the dust squall, when I heard the thin piping refrain sound again into the air.

Low, but clear and strangely menacing, it sang in my ears, the planes of sound shifting about me in the air. Looking around for its source, I noticed the dust flicking across the surface of the dunes on either side of the drive.

Without waiting, I turned on my heel and hurried back to my villa.

Angry with myself for having been made such a fool of, and resolved to press some formal complaint, I first went around the terrace, picking up all the strands of tissue and stuffing them into the disposal chute. I climbed below the villa and cut away the tangled masses of streamers.

Cursorily, I read a few of the tapes at random. All printed the same erratic fragments, intact phrases from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats and Eliot. My neighbour's VT set appeared to have a drastic memory fault, and instead of producing a variant on the classical model the selector head was simply regurgitating a dismembered version of the model itself. For a moment I thought seriously of telephoning the IBM agency in Red Beach and asking them to send a repair man round.

That evening, however, I finally spoke to my neighbour in person.

I had gone to sleep at about eleven, and an hour or so later something woke me. A bright moon was at apogee, moving behind strands of pale green cloud that cast a thin light over the desert and the Stars. I stepped out on to the veranda and immediately noticed a curiously luminescent glow moving between the dunes. Like the strange music I had heard from the chauffeur's flute, the glow appeared to be sourceless, but I assumed it was cast by the moon shining through a narrow interval between the clouds.

Then I saw her, appearing for a moment among the dunes, strolling across the midnight sand. She wore a long white gown that billowed out behind her, against which her blue hair drifted loosely in the wind like the tail-fan of a paradise bird. Streamers floated about her feet, and overhead two or three purple rays circled endlessly. She walked on, apparently unaware of them, a single light behind her shining through an upstairs window of her villa.

Belting my dressing gown, I leaned against a pillar and watched her quietly, for the moment forgiving her the streamers and her illtrained chauffeur. Occasionally she disappeared behind one of the greenshadowed dunes, her head raised slightly, moving from the boulevard towards the sand reefs on the edge of the fossil lake.

She was about a hundred yards from the nearest sand reef, a long inverted gallery of winding groyne and overhanging grottoes, when something about her straight path and regular unvarying pace made me wonder whether she might in fact be sleepwalking.

I hesitated briefly, watching the rays circling around her head, then jumped over the rail and ran across the sand towards her.

The quartz flints stung at my bare feet, but I managed to reach her just as she neared the edge of the reef. I broke into a walk beside her and touched her elbow.

Three feet above my head the rays spat and whirled in the darkness. The strange luminosity that I had assumed came from the moon seemed rather to emanate from her white gown.

My neighbour was not somnambulating, as I thought, but lost in some deep reverie or dream. Her black eyes stared opaquely in front of her, her slim white-skinned face like a marble mask, motionless and without expression. She looked

round at me sightlessly, one hand gesturing me away. Suddenly she stopped and glanced down at her feet, abruptly becoming aware of herself and her midnight walk. Her eyes cleared and she saw the mouth of the sand reef. She stepped back involuntarily, the light radiating from her gown increasing with her alarm.

Overhead the rays soared upwards into the air, their arcs wider now that she was awake.

„Sorry to startle you,“ I apologized. „But you were getting too close to the reef.“

She pulled away from me, her long black eyebrows arching.

„What?“ she said uncertainly. „Who are you?“ To herself, as if completing her dream, she murmured sotto voce „Oh God, Paris, choose me, not Minerva—“ She broke off and stared at me wildly, her carmine lips fretting. She strode off across the sand, the rays swinging like pendulums through the dim air above her, taking with her the pool of amber light.

I waited until she reached her villa and turned away. Glancing at the ground, I noticed something glitter in the small depression formed by one of her footprints. I bent down, picked up a small jewel, a perfectly cut diamond of a single carat, then saw another in the next footprint. Hurrying forwards, I picked up half-a-dozen of the jewels, and was about to call out after her disappearing figure when I felt something wet in my hand.

Where I had held the jewels in the hollow of my palm now swam a pool of ice-cold dew.

I found out who she was the next day.

After breakfast I was in the bar when I saw the El Dorado turn into the drive. The club-footed chauffeur jumped from the car and hobbled over in his curious swinging gait to the front door. In his black-gloved hand he carried a pink envelope. I let him wait a few minutes, then opened the letter on the step as he went back to the car and sat waiting for me, his engine running.

I'm sorry to have been so rude last night. You stepped right into my dream and startled me. Could I make amends by offering you a cocktail? My chauffeur will collect you at noon.

AURORA DAY

I looked at my watch. It was 11:55. The five minutes, presumably, gave me time to compose myself.

The chauffeur was studying his driving wheel, apparently indifferent to my reaction. Leaving the door open, I stepped inside and put on my beach-jacket. On the way out I slipped a proof copy of Wave IX into one of the pockets.

The chauffeur barely waited for me to climb in before moving the big car rapidly down the drive.

„How long are you staying in Vermilion Sands?“ I asked, addressing the band of curly russet hair between the peaked cap and black collar.

He said nothing. As we drove along the Stars he suddenly cut out into the oncoming lane and gunned the Cadillac forward in a tremendous burst of speed to overtake a car ahead.

Settling myself, I put the question again and waited for him to reply, then smartly tapped his black serge shoulder.

„Are you deaf, or just rude?“

For a second he took his eyes off the road and glanced back at me. I had a momentary impression of bright red pupils, ribald eyes that regarded me with a mixture of contempt and unconcealed savagery. Out of the side of his mouth came a sudden cackling stream of violent imprecations, a short filthy blast that sent me back into my seat.

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He jumped out when we reached Studio 5 and opened the door for me, beckoning me up the black marble steps like an attendant spider ushering a very small fly into a particularly large web.

Once inside the doorway he seemed to disappear. I walked through the softly lit hail towards an interior pool where a fountain played and white carp circled tirelessly. Beyond it, in the lounge, I could see my neighbour reclining on a chaise longue, her white gown spread around her like a fan, the jewels embroidered into it glittering in the fountain light.

As I sat down she regarded me curiously, putting away a slender volume bound in yellow calf which appeared to be a private edition of poems. Scattered across the floor beside her was a miscellaneous array of other volumes, many of which I could identify as recently printed collections and anthologies.

I noticed a few coloured streamers trailing through the curtains by the window, and glanced around to see where she kept her VT set, helping myself to a cocktail off the low table between us.

„Do you read a lot of poetry?“ I asked, indicating the volumes around her.

She nodded. „As much as I can bear to.“

I laughed. „I know what you mean. I have to read rather more than I want.“ I took a copy of *Wave IX* from my pocket and passed it to her. „Have you come across this one?“

She glanced at the title page, her manner moody and autocratic. I wondered why she had bothered to ask me over. „Yes, I have. Appalling, isn't it? *Paul Ransom*,“ she noted. „Is that you? You're the editor? How interesting.“

She said it with a peculiar inflection, apparently considering some possible course of action. For a moment she watched me reflectively. Her personality seemed totally dissociated, her awareness of me varying abruptly from one level to another, like light-changes in a bad motion picture. However, although her mask-like face remained motionless, I none the less detected a quickening of interest.

„Well, tell me about your work. You must know so much about what is wrong with modern poetry. Why is it all so bad?“

I shrugged. „I suppose it's principally a matter of inspiration. I used to write a fair amount myself years ago, but the impulse faded as soon as I could afford a VT set. In the old days a poet had to sacrifice himself in order to master his medium. Now that technical mastery is simply a question of pushing a button, selecting metre, rhyme, assonance on a dial, there's no need for sacrifice, no ideal to invent to make the sacrifice worthwhile—“

I broke off. She was watching me in a remarkably alert way, almost as if she were going to swallow me.

Changing the tempo, I said: „I’ve read quite a lot of your poetry, too. Forgive me mentioning it, but I think there’s something wrong with your Verse-Transcriber.“

Her face snapped and she looked away from me irritably. „I haven’t got one of those dreadful machines. Heavens above, you don’t think I would use one?“

„Then where do the tapes come from?“ I asked. „The streamers that drift across every evening. They’re covered with fragments of verse.“

Off-handedly, she said: „Are they? Oh, I didn’t know.“ She looked down at the volumes scattered about on the floor. „Although I should be the last person to write verse, I have been forced to recently. Through sheer necessity, you see, to preserve a dying art.“

She had baffled me completely. As far as I could remember, most of the poems on the tapes had already been written.

She glanced up and gave me a vivid smile.

„I’ll send you some.“

The first ones arrived the next morning. They were delivered by the chauffeur in the pink Cadillac, neatly printed on quarto vellum and sealed by a floral ribbon. Most of the poems submitted to me come through the post on computer punch-tape, rolled up like automat tickets, and it was certainly a pleasure to receive such elegant manuscripts.

The poems, however, were impossibly bad. There were six in all, two Petrarchan sonnets, an ode and three free-form longer pieces. All were written in the same hectoring tone, at once minatory and obscure, like the oracular deliriums of an insane witch. Their overall import was strangely disturbing, not so much for the content of the poems as for the deranged mind behind them. Aurora Day was obviously living in a private world which she took very seriously indeed. I decided that she was a wealthy neurotic able to over-indulge her private fantasies.

I flipped through the sheets, smelling the musk-like scent that misted up from them. Where had she unearthed this curious style, these archaic mannerisms, the „arise, earthly seers, and to thy ancient courses pen now thy truest vows“? Mixed up in some of the metaphors were odd echoes of Milton and Virgil. In fact, the whole tone reminded me of the archpriestess in the Aeneid who lets off blistering tirades whenever Aeneas sits down for a moment to relax.

I was still wondering what exactly to do with the poems—promptly on nine the next morning the chauffeur had delivered a second batch—when Tony Sapphire called to help me with the make-up of the next issue. Most of the time he spent at his beach-chalet at Lagoon West, programming an automatic novel, but he put in a day or two each week on Wave IX.

I was checking the internal rhyme chains in an IBM sonnet sequence of Xero Paris’s as he arrived. While I held the code chart over the sonnets, checking the rhyme lattices, he picked up the sheets of pink quarto on which Aurora’s poems were printed.

„Delicious scent,“ he commented, fanning the sheets through the air. „One way to get round an editor.“ He started to read the first of the poems, then frowned and put it down.

„Extraordinary. What are they?“

„I’m not altogether sure,“ I admitted. „Echoes in a stone garden.“

Tony read the signature at the bottom of the sheets. „*Aurora Day*. A new subscriber, I suppose. She probably thinks Wave IX is the VT Times. But what is all this—*nor psalms, nor canticles, nor hollow register to praise the queen of night*—?“ He shook his head. „What are they supposed to be?“

I smiled at him. Like most other writers and poets, he had spent so long sitting in front of his VT set that he had forgotten the period when poetry was actually handspun.

„They’re poems, of a sort, obviously.“

„Do you mean she wrote these herself?“

I nodded. „It has been done that way. In fact the method enjoyed quite a vogue for twenty or thirty centuries. Shakespeare tried it, Milton, Keats and Shelley—it worked reasonably well then.“

„But not now,“ Tony said. „Not since the VT set. How can you compete with an IBM heavy-duty logomatic analogue? Look at this one, for heaven’s sake. It sounds like T.S. Eliot. She can’t be serious.“

„You may be right. Perhaps the girl’s pulling my leg.“

„Girl. She’s probably sixty and tipples her eau de cologne. Sad. In some insane way they may mean something.“

„Hold on,“ I told him. I was pasting down one of the Xero’s satirical pastiches of Rupert Brooke and was six lines short. I handed Tony the master tape and he played it into the IBM, set the metre, rhyme scheme, verbal pairs, and then switched on, waited for the tape to chunter out of the delivery head, tore off six lines and passed them back to me. I didn’t even need to read them.

For the next two hours we worked hard. At dusk we had completed over one thousand lines and broke off for a well-earned drink. We moved on to the terrace and sat, in the cool evening light, watching the colours melting across the desert, listening to the sand-rays cry in the darkness by Aurora’s villa.

„What are all these streamers lying around under here?“ Tony asked. He pulled one towards him, caught the strands as they broke in his hand and steered them on to the glass-topped table.

„— *nor canticles, nor hollow register*—“ He read the line out, then released the tissue and let it blow away on the wind.

He peered across the shadow-covered dunes at Studio 5. As usual a single light was burning in one of the upper rooms, illuminating the threads unravelling in the sand as they moved towards us.

Tony nodded. „So that’s where she lives.“ He picked up another of the streamers that had coiled itself through the railing and was fluttering instantly at his elbow.

„You know, old sport, you’re quite literally under siege.“

I was. During the next days a ceaseless bombardment of ever more obscure and bizarre poems reached me, always in two instalments, the first brought by the chauffeur promptly at nine o’clock each morning, the second that evening when the streamers began to blow across the dusk to me. The fragments of Shakespeare and Pound had gone now, and the streamers carried fragmented versions of the poems delivered earlier in the day, almost as if they represented her working drafts. Examining the tapes carefully I realized that, as Aurora Day had said, they were not produced by a VT set. The strands were too delicate to have passed through the spools and high-speed cams of a computer mechanism, and the

lettering along them had not been printed but embossed by some process I was unable to identify.

Each day I read the latest offerings, carefully filed them away in the centre drawer of my desk. Finally, when I had a week's production stacked together, I placed them in a return envelope, addressed it „Aurora Day, Studio 5, The Stars, Vermilion Sands“, and penned a tactful rejection note, suggesting that she would feel ultimately more satisfied if her work appeared in another of the wide range of poetry reviews.

That night I had the first of what was to be a series of highly unpleasant dreams.

Making myself some strong coffee the next morning, I waited blearily for my mind to clear. I went on to the terrace, wondering what had prompted the savage nightmare that had plagued me through the night. The dream had been the first of any kind I had had for several years—one of the pleasant features of beach fatigue is a heavy dreamless sleep, and the sudden irruption of a dream-filled night made me wonder whether Aurora Day, and more particularly her insane poems, were beginning to prey on my mind more than I realized.

My headache took a long time to dissipate. I lay back, watching the Day villa, its windows closed and shuttered, awnings retracted, like a sealed crown. Who was she anyway, I asked myself, and what did she really want?

Five minutes later, I saw the Cadillac swing out of the drive and coast down the Stars towards me.

Not another delivery! The woman was tireless. I waited by the front door, met the driver halfway down the steps and took from him a wax-sealed envelope.

„Look,“ I said to him confidentially. „I'd hate to discourage an emerging talent, but I think you might well use any influence you have on your mistress and, you know, generally...“ I let the idea hang in front of him, and added: „By the way, all these streamers that keep blowing across here are getting to be a damn nuisance.“

The chauffeur regarded me out of his red-rimmed foxy eyes, his beaked face contorted in a monstrous grin. Shaking his head sadly, he hobbled back to the car.

As he drove off I opened the letter. Inside was a single sheet of paper.

Mr Ransom, Your rejection of my poems astounds me. I seriously advise you to reconsider your decision. This is no trifling matter. I expect to see the poems printed in your next issue.

AURORA DAY

That night I had another insane dream.

The next selection of poems arrived when I was still in bed, trying to massage a little sanity back into my mind. I climbed out of bed and made myself a large Martini, ignoring the envelope jutting through the door like the blade of a paper spear.

When I had steadied myself I slit it open, and scanned the three short poems included.

They were dreadful. Dimly I wondered how to persuade Aurora that the requisite talent was missing. Holding the Martini in one hand and peering at the poems in the other, I ambled on to the terrace and slumped down in one of the chairs.

With a shout I sprang into the air, knocking the glass out of my hand. I had sat down on something large and spongy, the size of a cushion but with uneven bony contours.

Looking down, I saw an enormous dead sand-ray lying in the centre of the seat, its white-tipped sting, still viable, projecting a full inch from its sheath above the cranial crest.

Jaw clamped angrily, I went straight into my study, slapped the three poems into an envelope with a rejection slip and scrawled across it: „Sorry, entirely unsuitable. Please try other publications.“

Half an hour later I drove down to Vermilion Sands and mailed it myself. As I came back I felt quietly pleased with myself.

That afternoon a colossal boil developed on my right cheek.

Tony Sapphire and Raymond Mayo came round the next morning to commiserate. Both thought I was being pigheaded and pedantic.

„Print one,“ Tony told me, sitting down on the foot of the bed.

„I’m damned if I will,“ I said. I stared out across the desert at Studio 5. Occasionally a window moved and caught the sunlight but otherwise I had seen nothing of my neighbour.

Tony shrugged. „All you’ve got to do is accept one and she’ll be satisfied.“

„Are you sure?“ I asked cynically. „This may be only the beginning. For all we know she may have a dozen epics in the bottom of her suitcase.“

Raymond Mayo wandered over to the window beside me, slipped on his dark glasses and scrutinized the villa. I noticed that he looked even more dapper than usual, dark hair smoothed back, profile adjusted for maximum impact.

„I saw her at the *psycho i* last night,“ he mused. „She had a private balcony upon the mezzanine. Quite extraordinary. They had to stop the floor show twice.“ He nodded to himself. „There’s something formless and unstated there, reminded me of Dali’s *Cosmogonic Venus*. Made me realize how absolutely terrifying all women really are. If I were you I’d do whatever I was told.“

I set my jaw, as far as I could, and shook my head dogmatically. „Go away. You writers are always pouring scorn on editors, but when things get tough who’s the first to break? This is the sort of situation I’m prepared to handle, my whole training and discipline tell me instinctively what to do. That crazy neurotic over there is trying to bewitch me. She thinks she can call down a plague of dead rays, boils and nightmares and I’ll surrender my conscience.“

Shaking their heads sadly over my obduracy, Tony and Raymond left me to myself.

Two hours later the boil had subsided as mysteriously as it had appeared. I was beginning to wonder why when a pick-up from *The Graphis Press* in Vermilion Sands delivered the advance five-hundred of the next issue of Wave IX.

I carried the cartons into the lounge, then slit off the wrapping, thinking pleasurably of Aurora Day’s promise that she would have her poems published in the next issue. She had failed to realize that I had passed the final pages two days

beforehand, and that I could hardly have printed her poems even if I had wanted to.

Opening the pages, I turned to the editorial, another in my series of examinations of the present malaise affecting poetry.

However, in place of the usual half-dozen paragraphs of 10-point type I was astounded to see a single line of 24point, announcing in italic caps: A CALL TO GREATNESS!

I broke off, hurriedly peered at the cover to make sure Graphis had sent me advance copies of the right journal, then raced rapidly through the pages.

The first poem I recognized immediately. I had rejected it only two days earlier. The next three I had also seen and rejected, then came a series that were new to me, all signed *Aurora Day* and taking the place of the poems I had passed in page proof.

The entire issue had been pirated! Not a single one of the original poems remained, and a completely new make-up had been substituted. I ran back into the lounge and opened a dozen copies. They were all the same.

Ten minutes later I had carried the three cartons out to the incinerator, tipped them in and soaked the copies with petrol, then tossed a match into the centre of the pyre. Simultaneously, a few miles away Graphis Press were doing the same to the remainder of the 5,000 imprint. How the misprinting had occurred they could not explain. They searched out the copy, all on Aurora's typed notepaper, but with editorial markings in my handwriting! My own copy had disappeared, and they soon denied they had ever received it.

As the heavy flames beat into the hot sunlight I thought that through the thick brown smoke I could see a sudden burst of activity coming from my neighbour's house. Windows were opening under the awnings, and the hunchbacked figure of the chauffeur was scurrying along the terrace.

Standing on the roof, her white gown billowing around her like an enormous silver fleece, Aurora Day looked down at me.

Whether it was the large quantity of Martini I had drunk that morning, the recent boil on my cheek or the fumes from the burning petrol, I'm not sure, but as I walked back into the house I felt unsteady, and sat down hazily on the top step, closing my eyes as my brain swam.

After a few seconds my head cleared again. Leaning on my knees, I focused my eyes on the blue glass step between my feet. Cut into the surface in neat letters was: Why so pale and wan, fond lover? Prithee, why so pale?

Still too weak to more than register an automatic protest against this act of vandalism, I pulled myself to my feet, taking the door key out of my dressing-gown pocket. As I inserted it into the lock I noticed, inscribed into the brass seat of the lock: *Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards.*

There were other inscriptions all over the black leather panelling of the door, cut in the same neat script, the lines crossing each other at random, like filigree decoration around a baroque salver.

Closing the door behind me, I walked into the lounge. The walls seemed darker than usual, and I realized that their entire surface was covered with row upon row of finely cut lettering, endless fragments of verse stretching from ceiling to floor.

I picked my glass off the table and raised it to my lips. The blue crystal bowl had been embossed with the same copperplate lines, spiralling down the stem to the base.

Drink to me only with thine eyes.

Everything in the lounge was covered with the same fragments—the desk, lampstands and shades, the bookshelves, the keys of the baby grand, even the lip of the record on the stereogram turntable.

Dazed, I raised my hand to my face, in horror saw that the surface of my skin was interlaced by a thousand tattoos, writhing and coiling across my hands and arms like insane serpents.

Dropping my glass, I ran to the mirror over the fireplace, saw my face covered with the same tattooing, a living manuscript in which the ink still ran, the letters running and changing as if the pen still cast them.

You spotted snakes with double tongue... Weaving spiders, come not here.

I flung myself away from the mirror, ran out on to the terrace, my feet slipping in the piles of coloured streamers which the evening wind was carrying over the balcony, then vaulted down over the railing on to the ground below.

I covered the distance between our villas in a few moments, raced up the darkening drive to the black front door. It opened as my hand reached for the bell, and I plunged through into the crystal hallway.

Aurora Day was waiting for me on the chaise longue by the fountain pool, feeding the ancient white fish that clustered around her. As I stepped across to her she smiled quietly to the fish and whispered to them.

„Aurora!“ I cried. „For heaven’s sake, I give in! Take anything you want, anything, but leave me alone!“

For a moment she ignored me and went on quietly feeding the fish. Suddenly a thought of terror plunged through my mind. Were the huge white carp now nestling at her fingers once her lovers?

We sat together in the luminescent dusk, the long shadows playing across the purple landscape of Dali’s *Persistence of Memory* on the wall behind Aurora, the fish circling slowly in the fountain beside us.

She had stated her terms: nothing less than absolute control of the magazine, freedom to impose her own policy, to make her own selection of material. Nothing would be printed without her first approval.

„Don’t worry,“ she had said lightly. „Our agreement will apply to one issue only.“ Amazingly she showed no wish to publish her own poems—the pirated issue had merely been a device to bring me finally to surrender.

„Do you think one issue will be enough?“ I asked, wondering what really she would do with it now.

She looked up at me idly, tracing patterns across the surface of the pool with a green-tipped finger. „It all depends on you and your companions. When will you come to your senses and become poets again?“

I watched the patterns in the pool. In some miraculous way they remained etched across the surface.

In the hours, like millennia, we had sat together I seemed to have told her everything about myself, yet learned almost nothing about Aurora. One thing alone was clear—her obsession with the art of poetry. In some curious way she

regarded herself as personally responsible for the present ebb at which it found itself, but her only remedy seemed completely retrogressive.

„You must come and meet my friends at the colony,“ I suggested.

„I will,“ she said. „I hope I can help them. They all have so much to learn.“

I smiled at this. „I’m afraid you won’t find them very sympathetic to that view. Most of them regard themselves as virtuosos. For them the quest for the perfect sonnet ended years ago. The computer produces nothing else.“

Aurora scoffed. „They’re not poets but mere mechanics. Look at these collections of so-called verse. Three poems and sixty pages of operating instructions. Nothing but volts and amps. When I say they have everything to learn, I mean about their own hearts, not about technique; about the soul of music, not its form.“

She paused to stretch herself, her beautiful body uncoiling like a python. She leaned forward and began to speak earnestly. „Poetry is dead today, not because of these machines, but because poets no longer search for their true inspiration.“

„Which is?“

Aurora shook her head sadly. „You call yourself a poet and yet you ask me that?“

She stared down at the pool, her eyes listless. For a moment an expression of profound sadness passed across her face, and I realized that she felt some deep sense of guilt or inadequacy, that some failing of her own was responsible for the present malaise. Perhaps it was this sense of inadequacy that made me unafraid of her.

„Have you ever heard the legend of Melander and Corydon?“ she asked.

„Vaguely,“ I said, casting my mind back. „Melander was the Muse of Poetry, if I remember. Wasn’t Corydon a court poet who killed himself for her?“

„Good,“ Aurora told me. „You’re not completely illiterate, after all. Yes, the court poets found that they had lost their inspiration and that their ladies were spurning them for the company of the knights, so they sought out Melander, the Muse, who told them that she had brought this spell upon them because they had taken their art for granted, forgetting the source from whom it really came. They protested that of course they thought of her always—a blatant lie—but she refused to believe them and told them that they would not recover their power until one of them sacrificed his life for her. Naturally none of them would do so, with the exception of a young poet of great talent called Corydon, who loved the goddess and was the only one to retain his power. For the other poets’ sake he killed himself...“

„...to Melander’s undying sorrow,“ I concluded. „She was not expecting him to give his life for his art. A beautiful myth,“ I agreed. „But I’m afraid you’ll find no Corydons here.“

„I wonder,“ Aurora said softly. She stirred the water in the pool, the broken surface throwing a ripple of light across the walls and ceiling. Then I saw that a long series of friezes ran around the lounge depicting the very legend Aurora had been describing. The first panel, on my extreme left, showed the poets and troubadours gathered around the goddess, a tall white-gowned figure whose face bore a remarkable resemblance to Aurora’s. As I traced the story through the successive panels the likeness became even more marked, and I assumed that she had sat as Melander for the artist. Had she, in some way, identified herself with

the goddess in the myth? In which case, who was her Corydon?—perhaps the artist himself. I searched the panels for the suicidal poet, a slim blond-maned youth whose face, although slightly familiar, I could not identify. However, behind the principal figures in all the scenes I certainly recognized another, her faun-faced chauffeur, here with ass's legs and wild woodwind, representing none other than the attendant Pan.

I had almost detected another likeness among the figures in the friezes when Aurora noticed me searching the panels. She stopped stirring the pool. As the ripples subsided the panels sank again into darkness. For a few seconds Aurora stared at me as if she had forgotten who I was. She appeared to have become tired and withdrawn, as if recapitulating the myth had evoked private memories of pain and fatigue. Simultaneously the hallway and glass-enclosed portico seemed to grow dark and sombre, reflecting her own darkening mood, so dominant was her presence that the air itself paled as she did. Again I felt that her world, into which I had stepped, was completely compounded of illusion.

She was asleep. Around her the room was almost in darkness. The pool lights had faded, the crystal columns that had shone around us were dull and extinguished, like trunks of opaque glass. The only light came from the flowerlike jewel between her sleeping breasts.

I stood up and walked softly across to her, looked down at her strange face, its skin smooth and grey, like some pharaonic bride in a basalt dream. Then, beside me at the door I noticed the hunched figure of the chauffeur. His peaked cap hid his face, but the two watchful eyes were fixed on me like small coals.

As we left, hundreds of sleeping sand-rays were dotted about the moonlit floor of the desert. We stepped between them and moved away silently in the Cadillac.

When I reached the villa I went straight into the study, ready to start work on assembling the next issue. During the return ride I had quickly decided on the principal cue-themes and key-images which I would play into the VT sets. All programmed for maximum repetition, within twenty-four hours I would have a folio of moon-sick, muse-mad dithyrambs which would stagger Aurora Day by their heartfelt simplicity and inspiration.

As I entered the study my shoe caught on something sharp. I bent down in the darkness, and found a torn strip of computer circuitry embedded in the white leather flooring.

When I switched on the light I saw that someone had smashed the three VT sets, pounding them to a twisted pulp in a savage excess of violence.

Mine had not been the only targets. Next morning, as I sat at my desk contemplating the three wrecked computers, the telephone rang with news of similar outrages all the way down the Stars. Tony Sapphire's 50-watt IBM had been hammered to pieces, and Raymond Mayo's four new Philco Versomatics had been smashed beyond hope of repair. As far as I could gather, not a single VT set had been left untouched. The previous evening, between the hours of six and midnight, someone had moved rapidly down the Stars, slipped into the studios and apartments and singlemindedly wrecked every VT set.

I had a good idea who. As I climbed out of the Cadillac on my return from Aurora I had noticed two heavy wrenches on the seat beside the chauffeur. However, I decided not to call the police and prefer charges. For one thing, the

problem of filling Wave IX now looked almost insoluble. When I telephoned Graphis Press I found, more or less as expected, that all of Aurora's copy had been mysteriously mislaid.

The problem remained—what would I put in the issue? I couldn't afford to miss an edition or my subscribers would fade away like ghosts.

I telephoned Aurora and pointed this out.

„We should go to press again within a week, otherwise our contract expires and I'll never get another. And reimbursing a year's advance subscriptions would bankrupt me. We've simply got to find some copy. As the new managing editor have you any suggestions?“

Aurora chuckled. „I suppose you're thinking that I might mysteriously reassemble all those smashed machines?“

„It's an idea,“ I agreed, waving at Tony Sapphire who had just called in. „Otherwise I'm afraid we're never going to get any copy.“

„I can't understand you,“ Aurora replied: „Surely there's one very simple method.“

„Is there? What's that?“

„Write some yourself!“

Before I could protest she burst into a peal of high laughter. „I gather there are some twenty-three able-bodied versifiers and so-called poets in Vermilion Sands“—this was exactly the number of places broken into the previous evening—„well, let's see some of them versify.“

„Aurora!“ I snapped. „You can't be serious. Listen, for heaven's sake, this is no joking—“

But she had put the phone down. I turned to Tony Sapphire, then sat back limply and contemplated an intact tape spool I had recovered from one of the sets. „It looks as if I've had it. Did you hear that—*Write some yourself?*“

„She must be insane,“ Tony agreed.

„It's all part of this tragic obsession of hers,“ I explained, lowering my voice. „She genuinely believes she's the Muse of Poetry, returned to earth to re-inspire the dying race of poets. Last night she referred to the myth of Melander and Corydon. I think she's seriously waiting for some young poet to give his life for her.“

Tony nodded. „She's missing the point, though. Fifty years ago a few people wrote poetry, but no one read it. Now no one writes it either. The VT set merely simplifies the whole process.“

I agreed with him, but of course Tony was somewhat prejudiced there, being one of those people who believed that literature was in essence both unreadable and unwritable. The automatic novel he had been „writing“ was over ten million words long, intended to be one of those gigantic grotesques that tower over the highways of literary history, terrifying the unwary traveller. Unfortunately he had never bothered to get it printed, and the memory drum which carried the electronic coding had been wrecked in the previous night's pogrom.

I was equally annoyed. One of my VT sets had been steadily producing a transliteration of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in terms of a Hellenic Greek setting, a pleasant academic exercise which would have provided an objective test of Joyce's

masterpiece by the degree of exactness with which the transliteration matched the original Odyssey. This too had been destroyed.

We watched Studio 5 in the bright morning light. The cerise Cadillac had disappeared somewhere, so presumably Aurora was driving around Vermilion Sands, astounding the caf crowds.

I picked up the terrace telephone and sat on the rail. „I suppose I might as well call everyone up and see what they can do.“

I dialled the first number.

Raymond Mayo said: „Write some myself? Paul, you're insane.“

Xero Paris said: „Myself? Of course, Paul, with my toes.“

Fairchild de Mille said: „It would be rather chic, but...“

Kurt Butterworth said, sourly: „Ever tried to? How?“

Marlene McClintic said: „Darling, I wouldn't dare. It might develop the wrong muscles or something.“

Sigismund Lutitsch said. „No, no. Siggy now in new zone. Electronic sculpture, plasma in super-cosmic collisions. Listen—“

Robin Saunders, Macmillan Freebody and Angel Petit said: „No.“

* * * * *

Tony brought me a drink and I pressed on down the list. „It's no good,“ I said at last. „No one writes verse any more. Let's face it. After all, do you or I?“

Tony pointed to the notebook. „There's one name left—we might as well sweep the decks clean before we take off for Red Beach.“

„Tristram Caldwell,“ I read. „That's the shy young fellow with the footballer's build. Something is always wrong with his set. Might as well try him.“

A soft honey-voiced girl answered the phone.

„Tristram?“ she purred. „Er, yes, I think he's here.“ There were sounds of wrestling around on a bed, during which the telephone bounced on the floor a few times, and then Caldwell answered.

„Hello, Ransom, what can I do for you?“

„Tristram,“ I said, „I take it you were paid the usual surprise call last night. Or didn't you notice? How's your VT set?“

„VT set?“ he repeated. „It's fine, just fine.“

„What?“ I shouted. „You mean yours is undamaged? Tristram, pull yourself together and listen to me!“ Quickly I explained our problem, but Tristram suddenly began to laugh.

„Well, I think that's just damn funny, don't you? Really rich. I think she's right. Let's get back to the old crafts—“

„Never mind the old crafts,“ I told him irritably. „All I'm interested in is getting some copy together for the next issue. If your set is working we're saved.“

„Well there, wait a minute, Paul. I've been slightly preoccupied recently, haven't had a chance to see the set.“

I waited while he wandered off. From the sounds of his footsteps and an impatient shout of the girl's, to which he replied distantly, it seemed he had gone outside into the yard. A door slammed open somewhere and there was a vague rummaging. A curious place to keep a VT set, I thought. Then there was a loud hammering noise.

Finally Tristram picked up the phone again. „Sorry, Paul, but it looks as if she paid me a visit too. The set’s a total wreck.“ He paused while I cursed the air, then said: „Look, though, is she really serious about the hand-made material? I take it that’s what you were calling about?“

„Yes,“ I told him. „Believe me, I’ll print anything. It has to get past Aurora, though. Have you got any old copy lying around?“

Tristram chuckled again. „You know, Paul, old boy, I believe I have. Rather despaired of ever getting it into print but I’m glad now I held on to it. Tell you what, I’ll tidy it up and let you have it tomorrow. Few sonnets, a ballad or two, you should find it interesting.“

He was right. Five minutes after I opened his parcel the next morning I knew he was trying to fool us.

„This is the same old thing,“ I explained to Tony. „That cunning Adonis. Look at these assonances and feminine rhymes, the drifting caesura—the unmistakable Caidwell signature, worn tapes on the rectifier circuits and a leaking condenser. I’ve been having to re-tread these for years to smooth them out. He’s got his set there working away after all.“

„What are you going to do?“ Tony asked. „He’ll just deny it.“

„Obviously. Anyway, I can use the material. Who cares if the whole issue is by Tristram Caldwell.“

I started to slip the pages into an envelope before taking them round to Aurora, when an idea occurred to me.

„Tony, I’ve just had another of my brilliancies. The perfect method of curing this witch of her obsession and exacting sweet revenge at the same time. Suppose we play along with Tristram and tell Aurora that these poems were hand-written by him. His style is thoroughly retrograde and his themes are everything Aurora could ask for—listen to these—*Homage to Cleo*, *Minerva 231*, „*Silence becomes Electra*. She’ll pass them for press, we’ll print this weekend and then, lo and behold, we reveal that these poems apparently born out of the burning breast of Tristram Caldwell are nothing more than a collection of clich-ridden transcripts from a derelict VT set, the worst possible automatic maunderings.“

Tony whooped. „Tremendous! She’d never live it down. But do you think she’ll be taken in?“

„Why not? Haven’t you realized that she sincerety expects us all to sit down and produce a series of model classical exercises on *Night and Day*, *Summer and Winter*, and so on. When only Caldwell produces anything she’ll be only too glad to give him her imprimatur. Remember, our agreement only refers to this issue, and the onus is on her. She’s got to find material somewhere.“

So we launched our scheme. All afternoon I pestered Tristram, telling him that Aurora had adored his first consignment and was eager to see more. Duly the next day a second batch arrived, all, as luck would have it, in longhand, although remarkably faded for material fresh from his VT set the previous day. However, I was only too glad for anything that would reinforce the illusion. Aurora was more and more pleased, and showed no suspicions whatever. Here and there she made a minor criticism but refused to have anything altered or rewritten.

„But we always rewrite, Aurora,“ I told her. „One can’t expect an infallible selection of images. The number of synonyms is too great.“ Wondering whether I

had gone too far, I added hastily: „It doesn't matter whether the author is man or robot, the principle is the same.“

„Really?“ Aurora said archly. „However, I think we'll leave these just as Mr Caldwell wrote them.“

I didn't bother to point out the hopeless fallacy in her attitude, and merely collected the initialled manuscripts and hurried home with them. Tony was at my desk, deep in the phone, pumping Tristram for more copy.

He capped the mouthpiece and gestured to me. „He's playing coy, probably trying to raise us to two cents a thousand. Pretends he's out of material. Is it worth calling his bluff?“

I shook my head. „Dangerous. If Aurora discovers we're involved in this fraud of Tristram's she might do anything. Let me talk to him.“ I took the phone. „What's the matter, Tristram, production's way down. We need more material, old boy. Shorten the line, why are you wasting tapes with all these alexandrines?“

„Ransom, what the hell are you talking about? I'm not a damned factory, I'm a poet, I write when I have something to say in the only suitable way to say it.“

„Yes, yes,“ I rejoined, „but I have fifty pages to fill and only a few days in which to do it. You've given me about ten so you've just got to keep up the flow. What have you produced today?“

„Well, I'm working on another sonnet, some nice things in it—to Aurora herself, as a matter of fact.“

„Great,“ I told him, „but careful with those vocabulary selectors. Remember the golden rule: the ideal sentence is one word long. What else have you got?“

„What else? Nothing. This is likely to take all week, perhaps all year.“

I nearly swallowed the phone. „Tristram, what's the matter? For heaven's sake, haven't you paid the power bill or something? Have they cut you off?“

Before I could find out, however, he had rung off.

„One sonnet a day,“ I said to Tony. „Good God, he must be on manual. Crazy idiot, he probably doesn't realize how complicated those circuits are.“

We sat tight and waited. Nothing came the next morning, and nothing the morning after that. Luckily, however, Aurora wasn't in the least surprised; in fact, if anything she was pleased that Tristram's rate of progress was slowing.

„One poem is enough,“ she told me, „a complete statement. Nothing more needs to be said, an interval of eternity closes for ever.“

Reflectively, she straightened the petals of a hyacinth. „Perhaps he needs a little encouragement,“ she decided.

I could see she wanted to meet him.

„Why don't you ask him over for dinner?“ I suggested.

She brightened immediately. „I will.“ She picked up the telephone and handed it to me.

As I dialled Tristram's number I felt a sudden pang of envy and disappointment. Around me the friezes told the story of Melander and Corydon, but I was too preoccupied to anticipate the tragedy the next week would bring.

During the days that followed Tristram and Aurora Day were always together. In the morning they would usually drive out to the film sets at Lagoon West, the chauffeur at the wheel of the huge Cadillac. In the evenings, as I sat out alone on the terrace, watching the lights of Studio 5 shine out into the warm darkness, I

could hear their fragmented voices carried across the sand, the faint sounds of crystal music.

I would like to think that I resented their relationship, but to be truthful I cared very little after the initial disappointment had worn off. The beach fatigue from which I suffered numbed the senses insidiously, blunting despair and hope alike.

When, three days after their first meeting, Aurora and Tristram suggested that we all go ray-fishing at Lagoon West, I accepted gladly, eager to observe their affair at closer quarters.

As we set off down the Stars there was no hint of what was to come. Tristram and Aurora were together in the Cadillac while Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo and I brought up the rear in Tony's Chevrolet. We could see them through the blue rear window of the Cadillac, Tristram reading the sonnet to Aurora which he had just completed. When we climbed out of the cars at Lagoon West and made our way over to the old abstract film sets near the sand reefs, they were walking hand in hand. Tristram in his white beach shoes and suit looked very much like an Edwardian dandy at a boating party.

The chauffeur carried the picnic hampers, and Raymond Mayo and Tony the spear-guns and nets. Down the reefs below we could see the rays nesting by the thousands, scores of double mambas sleek with off-season hibernation.

After we had settled ourselves under the awnings Raymond and Tristram decided on the course and then gathered everyone together. Strung out in a loose line we began to make our way down into one of the reefs, Aurora on Tristram's arm.

„Ever done any ray-fishing?“ Tristram asked me as we entered one of the lower galleries.

„Never,“ I said. „I'll just watch this time. I hear you're quite an expert.“

„Well, with luck I won't be killed.“ He pointed to the rays clinging to the cornices above us, wheeling up into the sky as we approached, whistling and screeching. In the dim light the white tips of their stings flexed in their sheaths. „Unless they're really frightened they'll stay well away from you,“ he told us. „The art is to prevent them from becoming frightened, select one and approach it so slowly that it sits staring at you until you're close enough to shoot it.“

Raymond Mayo had found a large purple mamba resting in a narrow crevice about ten yards on our right. He moved up to it quietly, watching the sting protrude from its sheath and weave menacingly, waiting just long enough for it to retract, lulling the ray with a low humming sound. Finally, when he was five feet away, he raised the gun and took careful aim.

„There may seem little to it,“ Tristram whispered to Aurora and me, „but in fact he's completely at the ray's mercy now. If it chose to attack he'd be defenceless.“ The bolt snapped from Raymond's gun and struck the ray on its spinal crest, stunning it instantly. Quickly he stepped over and scooped it into the net, where it revived after a few seconds, thrashed its black triangular wings helplessly and then lay inertly.

We moved through the groynes and galleries, the sky a narrow winding interval overhead, following the pathways that curved down into the bed of the reef. Now and then the wheeling rays rising out of our way would brush against the reef and drifts of fine sand would cascade over us. Raymond and Tristram shot several

more rays, leaving the chauffeur to carry the nets. Gradually our party split into two, Tony and Raymond taking one pathway with the chauffeur, while I stayed with Aurora and Tristram.

As we moved along I noticed that Aurora's face had become less relaxed, her movements slightly more deliberate and controlled. I had the impression she was watching Tristram carefully, glancing sideways at him as she held his arm.

We entered the terminal fornix of the reef, a deep cathedral-like chamber from which a score of galleries spiralled off to surface like the arms of a galaxy. In the darkness around us the thousands of rays hung motionlessly, their phosphorescing stings flexing and retracting like winking stars.

Two hundred feet away, on the far side of the chamber, Raymond Mayo and the chauffeur emerged from one of the galleries. They waited there for a few moments. Suddenly I heard Tony shouting out. Raymond dropped his speargun and disappeared into the gallery.

Excusing myself, I ran across the chamber. I found them in the narrow corridor, peering around in the darkness.

„I tell you,“ Tony was insisting. „I heard the damn thing singing.“

„Impossible,“ Raymond told him. They argued with each other, then gave up the search for the mysterious song-ray and stepped down into the chamber. As we went I thought I saw the chauffeur replace something in his pocket. With his beaked face and insane eyes, his hunched figure hung about with the nets of writhing rays, he looked like a figure from Hieronymus Bosch.

After exchanging a few words with Raymond and Tony I turned to make my way back to the others, but they had left the chamber. Wondering which of the galleries they had chosen, I stepped a few yards into the mouth of each one, finally saw them on one of the ramps curving away above me.

I was about to retrace my steps and join them when I caught a glimpse of Aurora's face in profile, saw once again her expression of watchful intent. Changing my mind, I moved quietly along the spiral, just below them, the falls of sand masking my footsteps, keeping them in view through the intervals between the overhanging columns.

At one point I was only a few yards from them, and heard Aurora say clearly: „Isn't there a theory that you can trap rays by singing to them?“

„By mesmerizing them?“ Tristram asked. „Let's try.“

They moved farther away, and Aurora's voice sounded out softly, a low crooning tone. Gradually the sound rose, echoing and re-echoing through the high vaults, the rays stirring in the darkness.

As we neared the surface their numbers grew, and Aurora stopped and guided Tristram towards a narrow sun-filled arena, bounded by hundred-foot walls, open to the sky above.

Unable to see them now, I retreated into the gallery and climbed the inner slope on to the next level, and from there on to the stage above. I made my way to the edge of the gallery, from which I could now easily observe the arena below. As I did so, however, I was aware of an eerie and penetrating noise, at once toneless and all-pervading, which filled the entire reef, like the high-pitched sounds perceived by epileptics before a seizure. Down in the arena Tristram was searching the walls, trying to identify the source of the noise, hands raised to his head. He had taken

his eyes off Aurora, who was standing behind him, arms motionless at her sides, palms slightly raised, like an entranced medium.

Fascinated by this curious stance, I was abruptly distracted by a terrified screeching that came from the lower levels of the reef. It was accompanied by a confused leathery flapping, and almost immediately a cloud of flying rays, frantically trying to escape from the reef, burst from the galleries below.

As they turned into the arena, sweeping low over the heads of Tristram and Aurora, they seemed to lose their sense of direction, and within a moment the arena was packed by a swarm of circling rays, all diving about uncertainly.

Screaming in terror at the rays whipping past her face, Aurora emerged from her trance. Tristram had taken off his straw hat and was striking furiously at them, shielding Aurora with his other arm. Together they backed towards a narrow fault in the rear wall of the arena, which provided an escape route into the galleries on the far side. Following this route to the edge of the cliffs above, I was surprised to see the squat figure of the chauffeur, now divested of his nets and gear, peering down at the couple below.

By now the hundreds of rays jostling within the arena almost obscured Tristram and Aurora. She reappeared from the narrow fault, shaking her head desperately. Their escape route was sealed! Quickly Tristram motioned her to her knees, then leapt into the middle of the arena, slapping wildly at the rays with his hat, trying to drive them away from Aurora.

For a few seconds he was successful. Like a cloud of giant hornets the rays wheeled off in disorder. Horrified, I watched them descend upon him again. Before I could shout Tristram had fallen. The rays swooped and hovered over his outstretched body, then swirled away, soaring into the sky, apparently released from the vortex.

Tristram lay face downwards, his blond hair spilled across the sand, arms twisted loosely. I stared at his body, amazed by the swiftness with which he had died, and looked across to Aurora.

She too was watching the body, but with an expression that showed neither pity nor terror. Gathering her skirt in one hand, she turned and slipped away through the fault—The escape route had been open after all! Astonished, I realized that Aurora had deliberately told Tristram that the route was closed, virtually forcing him to attack the rays.

A minute later she emerged from the mouth of the gallery above. Briefly she peered down into the arena, the black-uniformed chauffeur at her elbow, watching the motionless body of Tristram. Then they hurried away.

Racing after them, I began to shout at the top of my voice, hoping to attract Tony and Raymond Mayo. As I reached the mouth of the reef my voice boomed and echoed into the galleries below. A hundred yards away Aurora and the chauffeur were stepping into the Cadillac. With a roar of exhaust it swung away among the sets, sending up clouds of dust that obscured the enormous abstract patterns.

I ran towards Tony's car. By the time I reached it the Cadillac was half a mile away, burning across the desert like an escaping dragon.

That was the last I saw of Aurora Day. I managed to follow them as far as the highway to Lagoon West, but there, on the open road, the big car left me behind, and ten miles farther on, by the time I reached Lagoon West, I had lost them

completely. At one of the gas stations where the highway forks to Vermilion Sands and Red Beach I asked if anyone had seen a cerise Cadillac go by. Two attendants said they had, on the road towards me, and although they both swore this, I suppose Aurora's magic must have confused them.

I decided to try her villa and took the fork back to Vermilion Sands, cursing myself for not anticipating what had happened. I, ostensibly a poet, had failed to take another poet's dreams seriously. Aurora had explicitly forecast Tristram's death.

Studio 5, The Stars, was silent and empty. The rays had gone from the drive, and the black glass door was wide open, the remains of a few streamers drifting across the dust that gathered on the floor. The hallway and lounge were in darkness, and only the white carp in the pool provided a glimmer of light. The air was still and unbroken, as if the house had been empty for centuries.

Cursorily I ran my eye round the friezes in the lounge, then saw that I knew all the faces of the figures in the panels. The likenesses were almost photographic. Tristram was Corydon, Aurora Melander, the chauffeur the god Pan. And I saw myself, Tony Sapphire, Raymond Mayo, Fairchild de Mille and the other members of the colony.

Leaving the friezes, I made my way past the pool. It was now evening, and through the open doorway were the distant lights of Vermilion Sands, the headlights sweeping along the Stars reflected in the glass roof-tiles of my villa. A light wind had risen, stirring the streamers, and as I went down the steps a gust of air moved through the house and caught the door, slamming it behind me. The loud report boomed through the house, a concluding statement upon the whole sequence of fantasy and disaster, a final notice of the departure of the enchantress.

As I walked back across the desert and last streamers were moving over the dark sand, I strode firmly through them, trying to reassemble my own reality again. The fragments of Aurora Day's insane poems caught the dying desert light as they dissolved about my feet, the fading debris of a dream.

Reaching the villa, I saw that the lights were on. I raced inside and to my astonishment discovered the blond figure of Tristram stretched out lazily in a chair on the terrace, an ice-filled glass in one hand.

He eyed me genially, winked broadly before I could speak and put a forefinger to his lips.

I stepped over to him. „Tristram,“ I whispered hoarsely. „I thought you were dead. What on earth happened down there?“

He smiled at me. „Sorry, Paul, I had a hunch you were watching. Aurora got away, didn't she?“

I nodded. „Their car was too fast for the Chevrolet. But weren't you hit by one of the rays? I saw you fall, I thought you'd been killed outright.“

„So did Aurora. Neither of you know much about rays, do you? Their stings are passive in the on season, old chap, or nobody would be allowed in there.“ He grinned at me. „Ever hear of the myth of Melander and Corydon?“

I sat down weakly on the seat next to him. In two minutes he explained what had happened. Aurora had told him of the myth, and partly out of sympathy for her, and partly for amusement, he had decided to play out his role. All the while

he had been describing the danger and viciousness of the rays he had been egging Aurora on deliberately, and had provided her with a perfect opportunity to stage his sacrificial murder.

„It was murder, of course,“ I told him. „Believe me, I saw the glint in her eye. She really wanted you killed.“

Tristram shrugged. „Don't look so shocked, old boy. After all, poetry is a serious business.“

Raymond and Tony Sapphire knew nothing of what had happened. Tristram had put together a story of how Aurora had suffered a sudden attack of claustrophobia, and rushed off in a frenzy.

„I wonder what Aurora will do now,“ Tristram mused. „Her prophecy's been fulfilled. Perhaps she'll feel more confident of her own beauty. You know, she had a colossal sense of physical inadequacy. Like the original Melander, who was surprised when Corydon killed himself, Aurora confused her art with her own person.“

I nodded. „I hope she isn't too disappointed when she finds poetry is still being written in the bad old way. That reminds me, I've got twenty-five pages to fill. How's your VT set running?“

„No longer have one. Wrecked it the morning you phoned up. Haven't used the thing for years.“

I sat up. „Do you mean that those sonnets you've been sending in are all hand-written?“

„Absolutely, old boy. Every single one a soul-grafted gem.“

I lay back groaning. „God, I was relying on your set to save me. What the hell am I going to do?“

Tristram grinned. „Start writing it yourself. Remember the prophecy. Perhaps it will come true. After all, Aurora thinks I'm dead.“

I cursed him roundly. „If it's any help, I wish you were. Do you know what this is going to cost me?“

After he had gone I went into the study and added up what copy I had left, found that there were exactly twenty-three pages to fill. Oddly enough that represented one page for each of the registered poets at Vermilion Sands. Except that none of them, apart from Tristram, was capable of producing a single line.

It was midnight, but the problems facing the magazine would take every minute of the next twenty-four hours, when the final deadline expired. I had almost decided to write something myself when the telephone rang. At first I thought it was Aurora Day—the voice was high and feminine—but it was only Fairchild de Mille.

„What are you doing up so late?“ I growled at him. „Shouldn't you be getting your beauty sleep?“

„Well, I suppose I should, Paul, but do you know a rather incredible thing happened to me this evening. Tell me, are you still looking for original hand-written verse? I started writing something a couple of hours ago, it's not bad really. About Aurora Day, as a matter of fact. I think you'll like it.“

Sitting up, I congratulated him fulsomely, noting down the lineage.

Five minutes later the telephone rang again. This time it was Angel Petit. He too had a few hand-written verses I might be interested in. Again, dedicated to Aurora Day.

Within the next half hour the telephone rang a score of times. Every poet in Vermilion Sands seemed to be awake. I heard from Macmillan Freebody, Robin Saunders and the rest of them. All, mysteriously that evening, had suddenly felt the urge to write something original, and in a few minutes had tossed off a couple of stanzas to the memory of Aurora Day.

I was musing over it when I stood up after the last call. It was 12.45, and I should have been tired out, but my brain felt keen and alive, a thousand ideas running through it. A phrase formed itself in my mind. I picked up my pad and wrote it down.

Time seemed to dissolve. Within five minutes I had produced the first piece of verse I had written for over ten years. Behind it a dozen more poems lay just below the surface of my mind, waiting like gold in a loaded vein to be brought out into daylight.

Sleep would wait. I reached for another sheet of paper and then noticed a letter on the desk to the IBM agency in Red Beach, enclosing an order for three new VT sets.

Smiling to myself, I tore it into a dozen pieces.

