

MARTIN AMIS

GOD'S DICE

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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God's Dice

Bujak? Yeah, I knew him. The whole street knew Bujak. I knew him before and I knew him after. We all knew Bujak – sixty years old, hugely slabbed and seized with muscle and tendon, smiling at a bonfire in the yard, carrying desks and sofas on his back, lifting a tea-chest full of books with one hand. Bujak, the strongman. He was also a dreamer, a reader, a babbler . . . You slept a lot sounder knowing that Bujak was on your street. This was 1980. I was living in London, West London, carnival country, what the police there call the *front line*. DR ALIMANTADO, SONS OF THUNDER, RACE WAR, NO FUTURE: dry thatched dreadlocks, the scarred girls in the steeped pubs. Those black guys, they talked like combative drunks, all the time. If I went up to Manchester to stay with my girlfriend, I always left a key with Bujak. Those hands of his, as hard as coal, the nails quite square and symmetrical, like his teeth. And the forearms, the Popeye forearms, hefty and tattoo-smudged and brutal, weapons of monstrous power. Large as he was, the energies seemed impacted in him, as though he were the essence of an even bigger man; he stood for solidity. I am as tall as Bujak, but half his weight. No, less. Bujak once told me that to create a man out of nothing would require the equivalent energy of a thousand-megaton explosion. Looking at Bujak, you could believe this. As for me, well, a single stick of TNT might do the job – a hand-grenade, a firecracker. In his physical dealings with me (you know, the way someone moves across a room towards you, this can be a physical event) he showed the tender condescension

that the big man shows to the small. Probably he was like that with everyone. He was protective. And then, to good Bujak, thoughtful, grinning Bujak, the worst thing happened. A personal holocaust. In the days that followed I saw and felt all of Bujak's violence.

His life went deep into the century. Warrior-caste, he fought in Warsaw in 1939. He lost his father and two brothers at Katyn. He was in the resistance – all his life he was in the resistance. In that capacity he visited (and this is a story of violence, of visitation) many neat tortures on Nazi collaborators. He rose up with the *Armia Kraiova* and was imprisoned in December 1944. During the post-war years he worked in a touring circus, a strongman, bending bars, butting brick walls, tugging trucks with his teeth. In 1956, the year of my birth, he was there for the Polish October, and for the November in 'Hungaria'. Then the United States, the halls, queues and cubicles of Ellis Island, with wife, mother, small daughter. His wife Monika was hospitalized in New York for a minor condition; she came down with a hospital supergerm and died overnight. Bujak worked as a long-shoreman in Fort Lauderdale. He took and gave many crunchy beatings – strike-breakers, mob men, union goons. But he prospered, as you're meant to do, in America. What brought him to England, I think, was a certain kind of (displaced) Polish nostalgia or snobbery, and a desire for peace. Bujak had lived the twentieth century. And then, one day, the twentieth century, a century like no other, came calling on him. Bookish Bujak himself, I'm sure, saw the calamity as in some sense post-nuclear, einsteinian. It was certainly the end of his existing universe. Yes, it was Bujak's Big Crunch.

I first met Bujak one wintry morning in the late spring of
2 1980 – or of PN 35, if you use the post-nuclear calendar he

sometimes favoured. Michiko's car had something wrong with it, as usual (a flat, on this occasion), and I was down on the street grappling with the burglar tools and the spare. Compact and silent, Michiko watched me sadly. I'd managed to loosen the nuts on the collapsed wheel – but the aperture for the jack was ominously soft and sticky with rust. The long-suffering little car received the vertical spear in its chassis, and stayed stoically earthbound. Now I have to say that I am already on very bad terms with the inanimate world. Even when making a cup of coffee or changing a lightbulb (or a fuse!), I think – what is it with objects? Why are they so aggressive? What's their beef with *me*? Objects and I, we can't go on like this. We must work out a compromise, a freeze, before one of us does something rash. I've got to meet with their people and hammer out a deal.

'Stop it, Sam,' said Michiko.

'Get a real car,' I told her.

'Please, just stop. Stop it! I'll call a towtruck or something.'

'Get a real car,' I said, and thought – yeah, or a real boyfriend. Anyway, I was throwing the tools into their pouch, dusting my palms and wiping away my tears when I saw Bujak pacing across the road toward us. Warily I monitored his approach. I had seen this hulking Bohunk or throwback Polack from my study window, busying himself down on the street, always ready to flex his primitive can-do and know-how. I wasn't pleased to see him. I have enough of the standard-issue paranoia, or I did then. Now I've grown up a little and realize that I have absolutely nothing to fear, except the end of the world. Along with everybody else. At least in the next war there won't be any special wimps, punchbags or unpopularity contests. Genocide has had its day and we're on to something bigger now. Suicide.

'You a Jew?' asked Bujak in his deeply speckled voice.

‘Yup,’ I said.

‘Name?’

And number? ‘Sam,’ I told him.

‘Short for?’

I hesitated, and felt Michi’s eyes on my back.

‘Is it Samuel?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Actually it’s Samson.’

The smile he gave told me many things, most obviously that here – here was a happy man. All eyes and teeth, the smile was ridiculous in its gaiety, its candour. But then happiness is a pretty clownish condition, when you stop to think about it. I mean, round-the-clock happiness, it’s hardly an appropriate response. To me, this gave him an element of instability, of counter-strength, of violence. But Bujak here was clearly happy, in his universe. Bujak, with his happiness accessory.

‘Jews usually good up here,’ he said, and knocked a fingertip on his shaved head. ‘No good with their hands.’

Bujak was good with *his* hands: to prove it, he bent forward and picked up the car with them.

‘You’re kidding,’ I said. But he wasn’t. As I got to work he was already shooting the breeze with Michiko, nonchalantly asking her if she’d lost any family at Nagasaki or Hiroshima. Michi had, as it happened – a cousin of her father’s. This was news to me but I felt no surprise. It seems that everyone loses someone in the big deaths. Bujak changed stance freely, and, at one point, lifted a forgetful hand to scratch his skull. The car never wavered. I watched Bujak as I worked, and saw the strength he called on owed nothing to the shoulders or the great curved back – just the arms, the arms. It was as if he were raising the lid of a cellar door, or holding up a towel while a little girl dressed on the beach. Then he roughly took the tyre iron

from my hands and knelt on one knee to rivet the bolts. As the grained slab of his head loomed upwards again Bujak's eyes were tight and unamused, and they moved roughly too across my face. He nodded at Michi and said to me,

'And who did you lose?'

'Uh?' I said. If I understood his question, then the answer was none of his business.

'I give money to Israel every year,' he said. 'Not much. Some. Why? Because the Polish record on the Jews is disgraceful. After the war even,' he said, and grinned. 'Quite disgraceful. Look. There is a tyre-mender in Basing Street. Tell them Bujak and they will make it for you fairly.'

Thanks, we both said. Off he went, measuring the road with his strides. Later, from my study window, I saw him pruning roses in the small front garden. A little girl, his granddaughter, was crawling all over his back. I saw him often, from my study window. In those days, in 1980, I was trying to be a writer. No longer. I can't take the study life, the life of the study. This is the only story I'll ever tell, and this story is true . . . Michiko was sold on Bujak right away and dropped a thankyou note through his door that same afternoon. But it took a while before I was really on terms with Bujak.

I asked around about this character, as you will when you're playing at writing. Like I said, everybody knew Bujak. In the streets, the pubs, the shops, they spoke of him as a fixer and handyman, omniscient: all the systems that keep a house going, that keep it alive - Bujak could handle them, the veins, the linings, the glands and the bowels. He was also marked down as a definite eccentric, a stargazer, a 'philosopher' - not, I gathered, a valued calling in these parts - and on occasion as an

out-and-out *nutter* (one of those words that never sound right on American lips, like *quid* and *bloody*). People gave Bujak his due as a family man: once Michi and I glimpsed him quite far afield, outside the Russian church on the junction of St Petersburg Place and Moscow Road, erect in his suit, with his mother, his daughter and his granddaughter; I remember thinking that even huge Bujak could show the fussed delicacy you get from living in a house full of ladies. But most eagerly and vehemently, of course, they spoke of Bujak the peacekeeper, the vigilante, the rough-justice artist. They spoke of skirmishes, vendettas, one-man wars, preemptive strikes. Standing there in the pub, the shoulderless and bespectacled American with beermug awkwardly poised, or peering over a counter, or standing on a corner with milk-carton and newspaper under my arm, I was indulged with tales of Bujak and the strong force.

The time he caught two black kids prying at a neighbour's basement window and sent them twirling into the street with two flicks of his wrist, like someone mucking out a trench. Or what he did to their big brothers when they jumped him in Golborne Road the following night. Any brawler or burglar nabbed by Bujak soon wished himself under the hosepipe in some nice safe slammer. He took on all-comers. Feuding with the council, he once dragged a skip full of rubbish a hundred yards from his front door. He went out one night and upended a truck after a row about a generator with some local building contractors. The Bujak women could walk the All Saints Road at any hour and expect no bother. And Bujak himself could silence a pub just by walking past it. He was popular, though. He was the community man, and such community as the street had devolved upon Bujak. He was our deterrent.

6 And it wasn't enough . . . Now, in 1985, it is hard for me to

believe that a city is anything more or other than the sum of its streets, as I sit here with the Upper West Side blatting at my window and fingering my heart. Sometimes in my dreams of New York danger I stare down over the city – and it looks half made, half wrecked, one half (the base, perhaps) of something larger torn in two, frayed, twangy, moist with rain or solder. And you mean to tell me, I say to myself, that this is supposed to be a *community*? . . . My wife and daughter move around among all this, among the violations, the life-trashers, the innocent murderers. Michiko takes our little girl to the day-care centre where she works. Day-care – that’s good. But what about dawn-care, dusk-care, what about night-care? If I just had a force I could enfold them with, oh, if I just had the strong force . . . Bujak was right. In the city now there are loose components, accelerated particles – something *has* come loose, something is wriggling, lassoing, spinning towards the edge of its groove. Something must give and it isn’t safe. You ought to be terribly careful. Because safety has left our lives. It’s gone for ever. And what do animals do when you give them only danger? They make more danger, more, much more.

It was 1980, the birth-year of Solidarity, and Bujak was Polish. This combination of circumstances led me to assume that Bujak was liberal in his sentiments. Actually it didn’t follow. As I proudly strolled with him to the timber yard or the home-improvement stores off the Portobello Road, Bujak would fume against the blacks, the *czarnuchy*, as they strutted and gabbled round about us. The blacks were fine, he grinningly argued, in a context of sun, surf and plentiful bananas; but in a Western city they were just children – understandably angry children too. Once he stopped dead to marvel at two gay punks in NO FUTURE

T-shirts, with hair like old ladies' bonnets, as they walked towards us hand in hand. 'It's incredible, isn't it,' he said, rolling the *r*. With the faggots, Bujak saw their plight, and their profusion, as an einsteinian matter also. He confessed to the fantasy of leading a cavalry charge against the streets and their strange ensembles – the sound of the hooves, the twirling cutlasses. 'A desire which I suppress of course. But if I could just press a button,' he added, greedily eyeing the *pedaly*, the *czarnuchy*, the street-dwellers as they turned and gesticulated and reshuffled and moved on.

Violence in a man is usually the overspill of something else. You know how it is. You see these guys. I appear to have an almost disabling sensitivity to violence in other men, a fallout detector for those spots of waste or exorbitance that spill over into force. Like a canary in a prewar coal mine, I check out early when there is violence, when there is poison in the air. What is this propensity? Call it *fear*, if you like. *Fear* will do fine. The raised voice in the restaurant and its sour tang of brutality and booze, the look a man will give his wife which demotes her on the human scale, which prepares her for the human disgrace of violence, the pumping leg, the fizzing eye, the public bar at ten fifty-five. I see all this – my body sees it, and gives me adrenalin, gives me sweat. I faint at the sight of blood. I faint at the sight of a band-aid, an aspirin. This sense of critical fragility (myself, my wife, my daughter, even the poor planet, baby-blue in its shawls), it drove me from my study in the end. The study life is all thought and anxiety and I cannot take the study life any more.

Late at night, over at Bujak's large, aromatic, icon-infested apartment (the blue glow of saints, candles, vigils), I scanned the big Pole for the excrescences of violence. His mother, old Roża,

made the tea. The old woman ('rouge' with an *a* on the end), she calmed me with her iconic presence, the moist hair grained like silver, as Bujak talked about the strong force, the energy locked in matter. Grinning in the gloom, Bujak told me what he had done to the Nazi collaborator in Warsaw, in 1943. Boy, I thought; I bet the guy didn't do much collaborating after that. However, I couldn't conceal my distaste. 'But aren't you glad?' urged Bujak. No, I said, why should I be? 'You lost two grandparents to these people.' Yeah, I said. So? That doesn't change anything. 'Revenge,' said Bujak simply. Revenge is over-rated, I told him. And out of date. He looked at me with violent contempt. He opened his hands in an explanatory gesture: the hands, the arms, the policemen of his will. Bujak was a big fan of revenge. He had a lot of time for revenge.

I once saw him use those hands, those arms. I saw it all from my study window, the four-panelled screen (moon-spotted, with refracting crossbar) through which the world came in at me then. I saw the four guys climb from the two cars and steady themselves in front of Bujak's stoop. Did I hear a scream from within, a cry of warning or yearning? . . . Bujak's daughter gave the old man a lot of grief. Her first name was Leokadia. Her second name was trouble. Rural-looking yet glamorous also, thirty-three, tall, plump, fierce and tearful, she was the unstable element in Bujak's nucleus. She had, I noticed, two voices, one for truth, and one for nonsense, one for lies. Against the brown and shiny surface of her old-style dresses, the convex and the concave were interestingly disposed. *Her* daughter, little Boguslawa, was the byblow of some chaotic twelve-hour romance. It was well known on the street that Leokadia had round heels: the sort of girl (we used to say) who went into a hot flush every time she saw an army personnel carrier. She even made a pitch

at me, here at the flat one time. Needless to say I failed to come across. I had my reasons: fear of reprisal from Michiko and Bujak himself (they both loomed in my mind, incongruously equal in size); also, more basically, I'm by no means sure I could handle someone like Leokadia in the cot. All that breast and haunch. All those freckles and tears . . . For six months she had been living with a man who beat her, lithe little Pat, sinewy, angular, wired very tight. I think she beat him too, a bit. But violence is finally a masculine accomplishment. Violence – now that's man's work. Leokadia kept going back to Pat, don't ask me why. I don't know. They don't know. There she goes again, ticking back to him on her heels, with black eye, grazed cheek, wrenched hair. Nobody knows why. Not even they know. Bujak, surprisingly, stayed out of it, held his distance, remained solid though he did try to keep the little girl, Boguslawa, safely at home, out of the turbulence. You would often see old Roza ferrying the kid from one flat to the other. After her second spell in hospital (cracked ribs this time) Leokadia called it a day and went home for good. Then Pat showed up with his pals, and found Bujak waiting.

The three men (I saw it all) had an unmistakable look about them, with that English badboy build, proud guts and tapering legs which bent backwards from the knee down, sparse-haired with old-young faces, as if they had done their ageing a lot quicker than one year at a time. I don't know whether these guys would have frightened anybody much on the American circuit, but I guess they were big enough and their intention was plain. (Did you read about the Yablonsky murders? In the States these days, if you're on the list, they come in and do the whole family. Yes, they just nuke you now.) Anyway, they frightened me. I sat

writhing at my desk as Pat led them through the garden gate. I hated the flares of his jeans, the compact running shoes, the tight Fred Perry. Then the front door opened: bespectacled Bujak, wearing braces over his vest, old, huge. In a reflex that spelt seriousness and scorn, the men loosened their shoulders and let their hands dangle in readiness. Words were exchanged -- demand, denial. They moved forward.

Now I must have blinked, or shut my eyes, or ducked (or fainted). I heard three blows on a regular second-beat, clean, direct, and atrocious, each one like an axe splitting frozen wood. When I looked up, Pat and one of his friends were lying on the steps; the other guys were backing away, backing away from the site of this incident, this demonstration. Expressionlessly, Bujak knelt to do something extra to Pat on the floor. As I watched, he tugged back the hair and carefully poked a neutronium fist into Pat's upturned face. I had to go and lie down after that. But a couple of weeks later I saw Pat sitting alone in the London Apprentice; he was shivering remorsefully in the corner behind the jukebox; the pleated welt on his cheek bore all the colours of flame, and he was drinking his beer through a straw. In that one blow he had taken payment for everything he had given Leokadia.

With Bujak, I was always edging into friendship. I don't know if I ever really made it. Differences of age aren't easy. Differences of strength aren't easy. Friendship isn't easy. When Bujak's own holocaust came calling, I was some help to him; I was better than nothing. I went to the court. I went to the cemetery. I took my share of the strong force, what little I could take . . . Perhaps a dozen times during that summer, before the catastrophe came (it was heading toward him slowly, gathering speed), I sat up

late on his back porch when all the women had gone to bed. Bujak stargazed. He talked and drank his tea. 'Travelling at the speed of light,' he said one time, 'you could cross the whole universe in less than a second. Time and distance would be annihilated, and all futures possible.' No shit? I thought. Or again: 'If you could linger on the brink of a singularity, time would be so slow that a night would pass in forty-five seconds, and there would be three American elections in the space of seven days.' Three American elections, I said to myself. Whew, what a boring week. And why is *he* the dreamer, while I am bound to the low earth? Feeling mean, I often despised the dreaming Bujak, but I entertained late-night warmth for him too, for the accretions of experience (time having worked on his face like a sculptor, awful slow), and I feared him – I feared the energy coiled, seized and locked in Bujak. Staring up at our little disc of stars (and perhaps there are better residential galaxies than our own: cleaner, safer, more gentrified), I sensed only the false stillness of the black nightmap, its beauty concealing great and routine violence, the fleeing universe, with matter racing apart, exploding to the limits of space and time, all tugs and curves, all hubble and doppler, infinitely and eternally hostile . . . This evening, as I write, the New York sky is also full of stars – the same stars. There. There is Michiko coming down the street, hand in hand with our little girl. They made it. Home at last. Above them the gods shoot crap with their black dice: threes and fives and ones. The Plough has just rolled a four and a two. But who throws the six, the six, the six?

All peculiarly modern ills, all fresh distortions and distempers, Bujak attributed to one thing: einsteinian knowledge, knowledge of the strong force. It was his central paradox that the greatest – the purest, the most magical – genius of our time should have

introduced the earth to such squalor, profanity and panic. 'But how very like the twentieth century,' he said: this was always going to be the age when irony really came into its own. I have cousins and uncles who speak of Einstein as if he were some hero ballplayer captaining a team called the Jews ('the mind on him', 'look at the mind on the guy'). Bujak spoke of Einstein as if he were God's literary critic, God being a poet. I, more stolidly, tend to suspect that God is a novelist – a garrulous and deeply unwholesome one too . . . Actually Bujak's theory had a lot of appeal for me. It was, at least, holistic. It answered the big question. You know the question I mean, and its cumulative disquiet, its compound interest. You ask yourself the question every time you open a newspaper or switch on the TV or walk the streets among sons of thunder. New formations, deformations. Yogi know the question. It reads: *Just what the hell is going on around here?*

The world looks worse every day. Is it worse, or does it just look it? The world gets older. The world has seen and done it all. Boy, is it beat. It's suicidal. Like Leokadia, the world has done too many things too many times with too many people, done it this way, that way, with him, with him. The world has been to so many parties, been in so many fights, lost its keys, had its handbag stolen, fallen over, drunk too much. It all adds up. A tab is presented. Our ironic destiny. Look at the modern infamies, the twentieth-century sins. Some are strange, some banal, but they all offend the eye, covered in their newborn vernix. Gratuitous or recreational crimes of violence, the ever-less-tacit totalitarianism money (money – what is this shit anyway?), the pornographic proliferation, the nuclear collapse of the family (with the breeders all going supercritical, and now the children running too), the sappings and distortions of a mediated

reality, the sexual abuse of the very old and the very young (of the weak, the weak): what is the hidden denominator here, and what could explain it *all*?

To paraphrase Bujak, as I understood him . . . We live in a shameful shadowland. Quietly, our idea of human life has changed, thinned out. We can't help but think less of it now. The human race has declassed itself. It does not live any more; it just survives, like an animal. We endure the suicide's shame, the shame of the murderer, the shame of the victim. Death is all we have in common. And what does that do to life? Such, at any rate, was Bujak's damage check. If the world disarmed tomorrow, he believed, the species would still need at least a century of recuperation, after its entanglement, its flirtation, after its thing with the strong force.

Academic in any case, since Bujak was insuperably convinced that the end was on its way. How could man (that dangerous creature - I mean, look at his *record*), how could man resist the intoxication of the Perfect Crime, one that destroys all evidence, all redress, all pasts, all futures? I was enough of a peacenik, optimist and funkier to take the other view. A dedicated follower of fear, I always thought that the fat brute and the big bastard would maintain their standoff: they know that if one fist is raised then the whole pub comes down anyway. Not a masterpiece of reassurance, I agree - not at ten fifty-five on a Saturday night, with the drink still coming.

'Deterrence theory,' said Bujak, with his grin. 'It's not just a bad theory. It's not even a theory. It's an insanity.'

'That's why you have to go further.'

'You are a unilateralist?'

'Well yeah,' I said. 'Someone's got to make a start sometime.'

14 Make a start. England is historically well placed to give it a try.

So the Russians take Europe, maybe. But that risk must be smaller than the other risk, which is infinite.'

'This changes nothing. The risk is unaltered. All you do here is make life easier to part with.'

'Well I just think you have to make a start.'

Our arguments always ended on the same side-street. I maintained that the victim of a first strike would have no reason to retaliate, and would probably not do so.

'Oh?' said Bujak.

'What would be the point? You'd have nothing to protect. No country, no people. You'd gain nothing. Why add to it all?'

'Revenge.'

'Oh yeah. "The heat of battle." But that's not a *reason*.'

'In war, revenge is a reason. Revenge is as reasonable as anything. They say nuclear war will not be really *war* but something else. True, but it will feel like war to those who fight it.'

On the other hand, he added, nobody could guess how people would react under the strong force. Having crossed that line the whole world would be crazy or animal and certainly no longer human.

One day in the fall of 1980 Bujak travelled north. I never knew why. I saw him on the street that morning, a formidable sight in the edifice of his dark blue suit. Something about his air of courtly gaiety, his cap, his tie, suggested to me that he was off to investigate an old ladyfriend. The sky was grey and gristly, with interesting bruises, the street damp and stickered with leaves. Bujak pointed a tight umbrella at his own front door. 'I come back tomorrow night,' he said. 'Keep an eye on them.'

'Me? Well, sure. Okay.'

‘Leokadia, I learn, is pregnant. Two months. Pat. Oh, Pat – he really was too bad.’ Then he shrugged powerfully and said, ‘But I’m pleased. Look at Boguslaw. Her father was an animal too. But look at her. A flower. An angel from heaven.’

And off he went, pacing out the street, content, if necessary, to walk the whole way. That afternoon I looked in on the girls and drank a cup of tea with old Roża. Christ, I remember thinking, what is it with these Polacks? Roża was seventy-eight. By that age *my* mother had been dead for twenty years. (Cancer. Cancer is the *other* thing – the third thing. Cancer will come for me too, I guess. Sometimes I feel it right in front of me, fizzing like television inches from my face.) I sat there and wondered how the quality of wildness was distributed among the Bujak ladies. With pious eyes and hair like antique silver, Roża was none the less the sort of old woman who still enjoyed laughing at the odd salacious joke – and she laughed very musically, one hand raised in gentle propitiation. ‘Hey, Roża,’ I would say: ‘I got one for you.’ And she would start laughing before I began. Little Boguslaw – seven, silent, sensitive – lay reading by the fire, her eyes lit by the page. Even the brawny beauty Leokadia seemed steadier, her eyes more easily containing their glow. She spoke to me now as levelly as she used to before we had that awkward tangle in my apartment. You know, I think the reason she put out for the boys so much was the usual thing about trying to accumulate approval. Approval is funny stuff, and some people need a lot more of it than others. Also she was obviously very rich in her female properties and essences; being prudent isn’t so easy for girls kitted out like that. Now she sat there equably doing nothing. The red flag was down. All was calm with her dangerous floods and tides. A moony peace –

16 Michi was like that herself sometimes, when our child was on

the way. Our little one. Expecting. That's what they're doing: expecting. I stuck around for an hour or so and then crossed the road again, back to my study and its small life. I sat and read *Mosby's Memoirs* for the rest of the evening; and through my window I did indeed keep an eye on the Bujak front door. The next day was Friday. I looked in on the ladies to drop off a key before heading north myself – to Manchester and to Michiko. Meanwhile, energetic actors, vivid representatives of the twentieth century Einstein's monsters – were on their way south.

At midnight on Saturday Bujak returned. All I know about what he found I got from the newspapers and the police, together with a couple of stray details that Bujak let slip. In any event I will add nothing; I will add nothing to what Bujak found . . . He had no premonition until he placed his key in the lock and saw that the door was open and gave softly to his touch. He proceeded in deep silence. The hall had an odd smell to it, the smell of cigarette-smoke and jam. Bujak tipped open the living-room door. The room looked like half of something torn in two. On the floor an empty vodka bottle seemed to tip slightly on its axis. Leokadia lay naked in the corner. One leg was bent at an impossible angle. Bujak moved through the terrible rooms. Roza and Boguslawka lay on their beds, naked, contorted, frozen, like Leokadia. In Leokadia's room two strange men were sleeping. Bujak closed the bedroom door behind him and removed his cap. He came closer. He leaned forward to seize them. Just before he did so he flexed his arms and felt the rustle of the strong force.

This happened five years ago. Yes, I'm here to tell you that the world is still around, in 1985. We live in New York now. I teach.

The students come to me, and then they leave. There are gaps, spaces in between things big enough for me to glimpse the study life and know again that I can't take it. My daughter is four years old. I was present at the birth, or I tried to be. First I was sick; then I hid; then I fainted. Yeah, I did real good. Located and revived, I was led back to the delivery room. They placed the blood-fringed bundle in my arms. I thought then and I think now: How will the poor little bitch make it? How will she *make* it? But I'm learning to live with her, with the worry-bomb, the love-bomb. Last summer we took her to England. The pound was weak and the dollar was strong – the bold, the swaggering dollar, plunderer of Europe. We took her to London, London West, carnival country with its sons of thunder. Bujak country. I'd called my landlady and established that Bujak, too, was still around, in 1984. There was a question I needed to ask him. And Michi and I wanted to show Bujak our girl, little Roza, named for the old woman.

It was old Roza whom I had thought of most fixedly, during the worst car journey of my life, as we drove from Manchester to London, from fair weather into foul, into Sunday weather. That morning, over coffee and yoghurt in her cubicle, Michi handed me the smudged and mangling tabloid. 'Sam?' she said. I stared at the story, at the name, and realized that the rat life is not somewhere else any more, is not on the other side but touches your life, my life . . . Cars are terrible things and no wonder Bujak hated them. Cars are cruel creatures, vicious bastards, pitiless and inexorable, with only this one idea, this A-to-B idea. They made no allowances. Down we slid through the motorway wheel-squirt. Neighbours gathered as we parked, the men bearing umbrellas, the women with their arms folded, shaking their

heads. I crossed the street and rang the bell. And again. And for what? I tried the back door, the kitchen porch. Then Michiko called me. Together we stared through the living-room window. Bujak sat at the table, hunched forward as if he needed all the power of his back and shoulders just to hold position, just to keep his rest energy seized, skewered. Several times I knocked on the glass. He never moved. There was a noise in my ear and the seconds fussed and fussed, slower than a fuse. The street felt like a cave. I turned to Michi and her four-lidded eyes. We stood and watched each other through the heavy rain.

Later, I was some help to him, I think, when it was my turn to tangle with the strong force. For some reason Michiko could bear none of this; the very next day she bowed out on me and went straight back to America. Why? She had and still has ten times my strength. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps she was too strong to bend to the strong force. Anyway I make no special claims here . . . In the evening Bujak would come and sit in my kitchen, filling the room. He wanted proximity, he wanted to be elsewhere. He didn't talk. The small corridor hummed with strange emanations, pulsings, fallout. It was often hard to move, hard to breathe. What do strong men feel when their strength is leaving them? Do they listen to the past or do they just hear things - voices, music, the cauldron-bubble of distant hooves? I'll be honest and say what I thought. I thought, maybe he'll have to kill me, not because he wants to or wishes me harm, but because he has taken so much harm himself. This would free him of it, for a while. Something had to give. I endured the aftermath, the radiation. That was the only thing I had to contribute.

Also I went with him to court, and was at his side throughout *that* injury, that serial injury. The two defendants were

Scotsmen, bail-beaters from Dundee, twentyish, wanted – not that it made much difference who they were. There was no plea of insanity, nor indeed any clear sign of it. Sanity didn't enter into the thing. You couldn't understand anything they said so a policeman translated. Their story went like this. Having had more pints of beer than were perhaps strictly good for them, the two men took up with Leokadia Bujak on the street and offered to walk her home. Asked inside, they in turn made passionate love to the young woman, at her invitation, and then settled down for a refreshing nap. While they slept, some other party had come in and done all these terrible things. Throughout Bujak sat there, quietly creaking. He and I both knew that Leokadia might have done something of the kind, on another night, in another life, Christ, she might have done – but with these dogs, these superdogs, underdogs, threadbare rodents with their orange teeth? It didn't matter anyway. Who *cared*? Bujak gave his evidence. The jury was out for less than twenty minutes. Both men got eighteen years. From my point of view, of course (for me it was the only imponderable), the main question was never asked, let alone answered: it had to do with those strange seconds in Leokadia's bedroom, Bujak alone with the two men. Nobody asked the question. I would ask it, four years later. I couldn't ask it then . . . The day after sentencing I had a kind of a breakdown. With raw throat and eyes and nose streaming I hauled myself on to a jet. I didn't even dare say goodbye. At Kennedy what do I find but Michiko staring me in the face and telling me she's pregnant. There and then I went down on my lousy knees and begged her not to have it. But she had it all right – two months early. Jesus, a new horror story by Edgar Allan Poe: The Premature Baby. Under the jar, under the lamp, jaundice, pneumonia – she even had a heart attack. So did I,

when they told me. She made it in the end, though. She's great now, in 1985. You should see her. It is the love-bomb and its fallout that energize you in the end. You couldn't begin to do it without the love . . . That's them on the stairs, I think. Yes, in they come, changing everything. Here is Roza, and here is Michiko, and here am I.

Bujak was still on the street. He had moved, from 45 to 84, but he was still on the street. We asked around. The whole street knew Bujak. And there he was in the front garden, watching a fire as it flexed and cracked, the snakeheads of flame taking sudden bites from the air – snakes of fire, in the knowledge garden. After all, we coped with fire, when it came; we didn't all get broiled and scorched. He looked up. The ogre's smile hadn't changed that much, I thought, although the presence of the man was palpably reduced. Still old and huge in his vest, but the mass, the holding energy softened and dispersed. Well, something had to give. Bujak had adopted or been adopted by or at any rate made himself necessary to a large and assorted household, mostly Irish. The rooms were scrubbed, bare, vigorous and orderly, with all that can-do can do. There was lunch on the sun-absorbing pine table: beer, cider, noise, and the sun's phototherapy. The violence with which the fiftyish redhead scolded Bujak about his appearance made it plain to me that there was a romantic attachment. Even then, with the old guy nearer seventy than sixty, I thought with awe of Bujak in the sack. Bujak in the bag! Incredibly, his happiness was intact – unimpaired, entire. How come? Because, I think, his generosity extended not just to the earth but to the universe – or simply that he loved all matter, its spin and charm, redshifts and blueshifts, its underthings. The happiness was there. It was the strength that had gone from him

for ever. Over lunch he said that, a week or two ago, he had seen a man hitting a woman on the street. He shouted at them, and broke it up. Physically, though, he was powerless to intercede – *helpless*, he said, with a shrug. Actually you could feel the difference in the way he moved, in the way he crossed the room toward you. The strength had gone, or the will to use it.

Afterwards he and I stepped out on to the street. Michiko had ducked out of this last encounter, choosing instead to linger with the ladies. But we had the girl with us, little Roza, asleep on Bujak's shoulder. I watched him without fear. He wouldn't drop the folded child. He had taken possession of Roza with his arms.

As if by arrangement we paused at number 45. Black kids now played in the garden with a winded red football. Things were falling away between Bujak and me, and suddenly it seemed that you could say what you liked. So I said,

'Adam. No offence. But why didn't you kill them? I would have. I mean, if I think of Michi and Roza . . .' But in fact you cannot think it, you cannot go near it. The thought is fire. 'Why didn't you kill the sons of bitches? What stopped you?'

'Why?' he asked, and grinned. 'What would have been the reason?'

'Come on. You could have done it, easy. Self-defence. No court on earth would have sent you down.'

'True. It occurred to me.'

'Then what happened? Did you – did you feel too weak all of a sudden? Did you just feel too weak?'

'On the contrary. When I had their heads in my hands I thought how incredibly easy to grind their faces together – until they drowned in each other's faces. But no.'

But no. Bujak had simply dragged the men by the arms (half a

mile, to the police station in Harrow Road), like a father with two frantic children. He delivered them, and dusted his hands.

‘Christ, they’ll be out in a few years. Why *not* kill them? Why not?’

‘I had no wish to add to what I found. I thought of my dead wife Monika. I thought – they’re all dead now. I couldn’t add to what I saw there. Really the hardest thing was to touch them at all. You know the wet tails of rats? Snakes? Because I saw that they weren’t human beings at all. They had no idea what human life was. No idea! Terrible mutations, a disgrace to their human moulding. An eternal disgrace. If I had killed them then I would still be strong. But you must start somewhere. You must make a start.’

And now that Bujak has laid down his arms, I don’t know why, but I am minutely stronger. I don’t know why – I can’t tell you why.

He once said to me: ‘There must be more matter in the universe than we think. Else the distances are horrible. I’m nauseated.’ Einsteinian to the end, Bujak was an Oscillationist, claiming that the Big Bang will forever alternate with the Big Crunch, that the universe would expand only until unanimous gravity called it back to start again. At that moment, with the cosmos turning on its hinges, light would begin to travel backward, received by the stars and pouring from our human eyes. If, and I can’t believe it, time would also be reversed, as Bujak maintained (will we move backward too? will we have any say in things?), then this moment as I shake his hand shall be the start of my story, his story, our story, and we will slip downtime of each other’s lives, to meet four years from now, when, out of the fiercest grief, Bujak’s lost women will reappear, born in blood (and we will leave our conversations, too, backing away from the

same conclusion), until Boguslawa folds into Leokadia, and Leokadia folds into Monika, and Monika is there to be enfolded by Bujak until it is her turn to recede, kissing her fingertips, backing away over the fields to the distant girl with no time for him (will that be any easier to bear than the other way around?), and then big Bujak shrinks, becoming the weakest thing there is, helpless, indefensible, naked, weeping, blind and tiny, and folding into Roža.

The Little Puppy That Could

The little puppy came bounding and tumbling over the fallow fields. Here he comes, bounding, tumbling. Like all the most adorable little puppies, this little puppy had large pleading brown eyes, wobbly half-cocked ears, and loose folds of flesh on the join of his neck. His coat was a subtle grey (like silver in shadow), with a triangle of white on his chest, like a shirtfront, and white tufts on each paw, like socks, like shoes, like little spats! He was a bit plump, this little puppy, it had to be said – but adorably so. Puppy fat, not doggy fat. He had been running and running for days and days. Where had the little puppy come from? Where was the little puppy heading, and so eagerly? His proud tail high, his front paws gaily out-thrust, his – whoops! Over he goes again. Then he's up, undismayed, bounding, tumbling, towards huge discoveries, towards wonderful transformations. Of course, the little puppy had no idea where he had come from or where he was heading. But he was going to get there.

Now, the puppy probably sniffed or sensed the village before he saw it – the fires, the crescents, the human place. In truth, his eyesight was not all that reliable, floppy, tousled, subject to passionate distortions of fear and desire. But he saw something new out there, shape and pattern, evidence, a great manifestation pressed or carved upon the random world through which he bounded. The little puppy tumbled to a halt, then wriggled himself upright. He knew at once that he had found the place that his heart sought – his destination. Down in the round valley

he could descry moving figures, and circles within circles, and, at their crux, a flaming parabola: a swan-neck, a scythe, a query of fire! The little puppy stood there, anxiously snapping his jaws. His head craned forward, urging the little puppy on, but his paws just jostled and danced. His tail started wagging, hesitantly at first, then with such reckless vigour that he almost pulled a muscle in his plump little rump. On he bounded, nearer, nearer, down through the dawn shadows, almost flying, his young blood aflame – until he saw a human group moving stolidly from a gateway in the low palisade. Now the little puppy really turned on the speed. He hurtled towards them, then leapt into the air and swivelled, skidlanding back-first at their feet – the four paws limply raised, the shivering tail, his soft belly exposed in reflexive surrender and trust.

And nothing happened . . . The puppy awoke in a pool of bafflement and hurt. He hadn't been asleep or anything, but life was like that for the little puppy, it all being so much more fervent down there, so pressing, so sudden. The people just stood there in a stoical arc, six or seven of them; some faces wore fear, some disgust; none showed kindness. At last the puppy climbed sadly to his feet and looked up at them with beseeching eyes, his worked jaw forming a question. His question was your question. Why should they want to act this way towards a little puppy, his puzzled heart full of bruised love, a puppy made for cuddles and romps? And the people had no answer. They too (the puppy seemed to sense) were full of confusion, full of pain. Wishing to comfort them, and hoping there had been some sort of misunderstanding, the little puppy crept forward again, in trembling supplication. But now the people began to turn away. The men mumbled and sneered. One woman yelled; another woman spat – spat at the little puppy. Blinking, he watched

them go through the gate. It was strange. The little puppy didn't know much but he did know this: that the people were not unkind. No, they were not. They were not unkind.

And so, keeping his distance, foraging for food (grubs, roots, a special kind of flower, certain intoxicating though regrettable substances that his nose liked but his tongue loathed), and with many an exhausted sigh, the little puppy padded round the human place, until the day began to turn. As he searched for the tongue-tickling ants and the fairy toast of butterflies among the rocks and hollows, he kept glancing hopefully towards the ringed settlement – itself a termitary, full of erratic yet significant motion. His hunger appeased, propitiated, the puppy waited, there on the hillside, watching, sighing. Despite his wretchedness he nursed an intense presentiment of great things, of marvellous revelations – a feeling that may well have been delusive, since he always had it. Later in the day he encountered a damp and steaming hillock whose very interesting smells he investigated busily. Moments later he found himself lying on his side, being helplessly sick. The little puppy kept away from that hillock and all others with the same smell, a smell he came to think of as meaning danger. As night fell in folds over the disquieted landscape, he heard from across the valley the frazzled snarling of a beast, tireless and incarnadine, a sound that chimed in his head with the jeopardy of the special smell. All the little puppy could see or hear of the village now was the dreadful fire, the long flaming curve at the heart of the human place.

It was love, unquestionably love, and with classic symptoms. Each morning the little girl came with her basket, over the hills and far away, to gather flowers, and to swim in the varnished creek. Her wandering gait brought her there, punctually (the day

was always *exactly* the same colour when she came), barefoot, in her white dress. The flowers themselves all swooned and pouted at her approach. They wanted to be picked. Pick *me*. The flowers, the fantastic flowers – watch them as they hobnob and canoodle in the haze! Imagine too the little puppy, staring out from the shadows of the secretive tree, his nose on his paws, his tail lazily swishing, the brown eyes all gooey and gummed. Now he raised his head (the neck suddenly erect and astonished) as the young girl slipped out of her dress, tiptoed naked into the shallow pool – and sang as she bached her breasts! The little puppy sighed. He loved her from his distance, a love instant and wordless and full of hunger. He would exchange the pigments and pain of life – and all its great presentiments – for a single caress of her hand, a pat, a smack. It was a love he would never show. People didn't like him: he knew that by now. In the fields above the valley he had approached at least a couple of dozen of them, singly and in groups, assuming various styles and postures (crawling, strolling, skipping); in every case he had been thoroughly jeered and gestured at for his pains – and they *were* pains, and there were so many of them now. So while every cell in the little puppy's body desperately urged him to join the young girl and her flowers, to declare himself, to gambol and prance and snuggle and spoon, he stayed in his shadows and loved from his distance. It was love, at any rate. And of this the little puppy was sure: he would never settle for anything less than love.

Transfigured, she climbed from the caressing water, and knelt on the bank to warm her body in the sun. Edging forward an inch or two, a foot, a yard, the puppy kept his vigil, sighing, wincing, smacking his jaws in sleepy fever. For he was by now a rather sick little puppy – bruised and pining, quite starved of the

detailed tenderness that every little puppy needs. And this morning he lay there doubly traumatized by fear and relief. Violent events had forced him actually to skip the assignation of the previous day; and, in the little puppy's drowsy world of cause and effect, he believed that if he failed to appear at the nervous creek then, well, the loved one would fail to appear also, would never reappear, would disappear for ever. Hence his shock of relief, his seizure of consolation, when he peered out from the secretive shadows and saw her there once more.

It happened the night before the night before. It happened like this. The little puppy was soundly sleeping in his usual place (a sheltered hollow by a leaning tree) and in his usual posture (one of utter abandonment), when a flurry of sounds and smells suddenly wrestled him to his feet. Frowning, the little puppy registered curious stirrings in the texture of the earth, and sensed faint splittings and crashings, drawing nearer. The scent, still diluted by distance, keenly intrigued the puppy but also awakened in him the glands of danger. He hesitated, there in the changeable night. Too weak and confused to make a run for it, he eyed the burrow where he had recently spent a pleasant hour, sniffing and scratching and trying out a powerful new bark. Then the sounds were upon him: louder, worse, hot and toxic with limitless hunger. And still the little puppy hesitated, the head bending slightly in its trance, the tail twitching in a reflex of hope – of play. But now the gust of gas and blood swept over his coat: the little puppy slithered whimpering to the burrow and shouldered himself into the clinging damp. Or he tried. The locked front paws searched for purchase, yet that plump little rump of his was still exposed while the back legs skidded and thrashed. And now he could actually feel the torch of breath, the scalding saliva playing on his rear. Terror couldn't do it – but

horror could. Horror gouged him into the earth with an audible pop; and he lay there coughing and weeping until the infamous rage had vented, had wrecked itself on the ground above his head . . . So shaken was the little puppy that he failed to emerge for a good thirty-six hours, and then only a famished despair had him backing towards the daylight. It wasn't easy getting into the burrow, but it was easy getting out. For the little puppy, it seemed, was getting littler all the time.

And so he sighed and gazed, and gazed and sighed. 'The flowers had all lost their swoon and now arched and strained to meet the young girl's touch. Oh, low they longed to be picked. Light and naked she moved among them, leaning to free a stem from the earth, then straightening to fix the petals in her costly black hair. Loved by the little puppy (mutely, proudly – how many lifetimes would he not joyously spend, unrequited, unregarded, in this half-love, this half-life?), the young girl sang, the young girl swam, the young girl lay back on her dress, drying herself and dreaming of growth, of change, of mysterious metamorphoses. Humming, murmuring, she sought another sun-dazed shape in which to drowse, opened her eyes – and what should she see? Why, a little puppy, a very tentative little puppy, inching through the flowers, its tail anxiously shrivelled, the hot nose brushing the grass. The puppy had had absolutely no intention of approaching the girl in this way. But then, the puppy just found that he'd gone ahead and done it – as little puppies will. The girl sat up and, with no waste of attention, stared at him strictly, a hand raised to her mouth. The little puppy, sensing the gravity of his error, was about to slink miserably away, to the ends of the earth, never to return – but then she laughed and said,

30 'Hello. Who are you then? Come on. Come here. It's all right.

Ooh, what a funny little creature you are . . . I'd take you home with me. But they won't like you. Because of the dog. Keithette won't like you. I don't think Tom will either. My name is Andromeda. And I like you. Yes, I really do.'

All this of course was pure Greek to the little puppy but who cared? Her voice, with its infant lilt and music, was just another vast extra in his ambient bower of bliss. Not in his dreams, in his wagging, whimpering dreams . . . While it might be pushing it to say that little puppies have fantasies, it is certainly the case that they have sentiments, powerful ones too – down there, where everything rips and tears like hunger. Lying on his back among the envious flowers, her hand on his tummy (lightly steadied by a speculative paw), the tail in tune with the slow heartbeat, the little puppy fairly choked and drowned in his little sea of joy. Ah, the piercing peace. All covered in heaven – puppy heaven! For many hours they rolled and cuddled and snuggled and nuzzled, until the colour of the day began to change.

'Oh no,' said the girl.

She ran away in vivid terror. Told to stay, the little puppy followed her, as unobtrusively as possible, averting his glance whenever she turned to shoo him back (as though he believed that if he couldn't see her, then she couldn't see him). But now Andromeda paused in her flight and stood her ground to give warning.

'Stay. Be careful of the dog. Come tomorrow. Promise. Stay, but please don't go away. Stay! Oh *stay*.'

Deeply puzzled, his tail uncertainly working, the little puppy watched her run, down the valley towards the gaping crater, where the fires were already boiling, black-veined, as they started to consume the air of the dusk.

During the next wave or packet of time, the life of the little puppy that could resembled a gorgeous and dreadful dream, the two states – panic and rapture – welded as close as the two faces of a knife; sometimes he felt his heart might crack and ooze with the incredible uncertainty of it all. But, being a puppy, he spent much of his time in the unaltered conditions, the extremes. When Andromeda loomed above him, her sunwarmed hair patterned with magical flowers, when she tickled both sets of ribs and kissed his hot belly, do you think the little puppy was anything but definitively flattened with joy? Life was all foreplay, wonderful foreplay. The little puppy devised other games too: the game where he ran very fast towards her and then veered off at the last second; the game where he ran around her in concentric circles wherever she went; the game where he ran away quite languidly and then skipped out of reach when she approached; and so on. Andromeda seemed uncharacteristically slow to catch on to his games – perhaps because the little puppy was so weak and sickly now, and so easily tired. Yet he wouldn't stop. There was an edge of delirium in his romps. Often, too, he came a cropper on some of his more ambitious manoeuvres. One afternoon, after hours of prompting, she was persuaded to play the stick game, whereby she threw a stick and the little puppy ran after it – returning it to her, or not, depending on his puppyish whim. By accident she once threw the stick into the creek, and the little puppy hurled himself in there after it. He appeared to be in some difficulties for a while; certainly he had quite a coughing fit on the bank when Andromeda hauled him out. She noticed then, as he lay recovering by her side, that his tail and back paws were badly scalded and enflamed. She looked down at him with a worried frown. The little puppy blinked up at her gratefully. Through the spokes of his wet lashes, and what

with all the photospheric brilliance above and behind her, well, – she looked to him like a stern and formidable angel, divine essence, a Power, a Dominion, a Throne, covered in prismatic jewellery, sliding down the sun's rays. Of course we must remember the little puppy's poor eyesight . . . oh that poor little puppy.

Because the nights were so different, so much longer than days (at least three times as long), and so full of fear. Squirming in his burrow, while the great animal, senior and atrocious, tore greedily at the narrow opening, the little puppy had no thought for the day – the distant, the derisory day. He didn't understand. How had he unleashed such rage in a creature which, or so he felt, he might have looked to for love, for protection, for play? He didn't understand. But he understood one thing: he made a certain distinction, a nice one too. The little puppy understood the difference between terror and horror. Terror was when the girl had gone and night began to come, wiping colour from the world. Horror was when the beast was actually *there*, the flames of its breath at the opening of the burrow, the saliva that seared the little puppy's rump.

'This can't go on,' said Andromeda one morning, when she found the little puppy sneezing and dozing and trembling by the nervous creek. He couldn't eat the food she had smuggled out for him. Reflexively he lifted himself up for a romp, but his back legs gave way, and he rolled back on to the grass with a fatalistic sigh. Usually when she looked at the little puppy Andromeda always thought: *life!* Here is *life*: But now the possibility occurred to her (long-postponed, an idea that made her whole body bend with nausea) that the little puppy was dying. It could be that the little puppy just wasn't going to make it. For you understand that fear had quite emptied him – fear, and intense puppy loneliness, the need for inclusion, the need to be . . . *inside*.

Andromeda gulped and said, 'I don't care. I'm taking you home with me. Now. I don't care.'

And so, very, very carefully, Andromeda bedded down the little floppy-limbed puppy at the bottom 'of her basket, and covered his weak protesting form – with flowers and white grapes and a pink handkerchief. The little puppy was slow to understand this game and would persistently writhe and struggle, and seem to grin, and then play dead. 'Shsh,' Andromeda kept telling him, but he went on whimpering and elbowing about until at last he was aloft. The air-travel appeared to soothe him. A mile from the village, on the brink of the enfolding hill, she plonked the basket down, lifted the hanky, and gave the little puppy a good talking-to, with much play of the raised forefinger, the stamped foot, the meaning frown. In fact the little puppy was so flummoxed and confused by this stage that he stared up at Andromeda with candid incuriosity – and even yawned in her face. On they went, down into the ringed village. 'Good day, good day,' came the voices, and Andromeda sang songs at the top of her voice, lest the little puppy should unwarily choose to whinny or yelp. But the little puppy was very good and didn't make a sound. (To be quite honest, he was fast asleep.) When she reached the cabin Andromeda got up on tiptoe, and peered in. Keithette was not about. Nor was Tom. So little Andromeda took the little puppy straight to her little room.

Now Andromeda had a lot of explaining to do (this had better be good!). And so, come to that, have we.

As things now stood, the village was the food of the dog – and the dog was, if not the worst of all possible dogs, then certainly the worst dog yet. The genetic policemen and bouncers that once kept species apart had loosened their hold on the living

world. In less temperate zones than where lies our scene, there were creatures that limped and flapped in strange crevices between the old kingdoms, half fauna half flora, half insect half reptile, half bird half fish. Natural selection had given way to a kind of reverse discrimination – or tokenism. Any bloody fool of an amphibious parrot or disgraceful three-winged stoat had as much chance of survival, of success, as the slickest, the niftiest, the most single-minded dreck-eating ratlet or invincibly carapaced predator. Many human beings, too, were mildly dismayed to find themselves travelling backwards down their evolutionary flarepaths – or, worse, sideways, into some uncharted humiliation of webs and pouches, of trotters and beaks. People, of whom there were few, tended to thin out near the deserts, of which there were plenty. In the deserts the lower forms flourished unchecked in their chaos: you could hardly turn your head without seeing some multipedal hyena or doubledecker superworm pulsing towards you over mottled sands. The village lay to the north, not too far from the glasslands of ice. At these select latitudes, after its decades of inimical quiet, the planet earth was once again an hospitable, even a fashionable address. With so much food – with so much space and weather – nature had little selecting to do. Until the dog.

Perhaps the dog, then, was the Natural Selector. The dog was eight feet long and four feet high, very lumpily put together, the rolling, snapping head loosely joined to the top-heavy shoulders. In place of a tail he sported an extra limb, bare tibia, tendon and talon – quite useless, and far from decorative. His eyes were a scurvy yellow, his saliva a loud crimson, venomous and also acidic, capable of entirely dissolving human bones. The dog was the beneficiary of a new symbiotic arrangement whereby he healthily played host to several serious but by now ineffective diseases, his numerous parasites having (in this case) taken on

rather more than they could handle. In times of yore the dog ate pretty well anything he could keep down, like a shark. These days, though, he was exclusively, even religiously homovorous. He looked bad on his diet. There never was a clearer demonstration of the fact that you shouldn't eat human beings. The dog's chief personal breakthrough was his coat, which was thick, patchy, fungoid and yet synthetic-looking, too shiny, like rayon or lurex. He was the first dog to earn a crust, to eke out a living in the northern lands. The village was his food. He seemed to need about one human being a week. He wasn't all that greedy, and human beings, he found, went a long way.

Nobody in the village had any idea what to do about the dog. Well, they had their shameful strategy; but it wasn't working. Idlers in a rejuvenated world, they had long lost the noble arts of survival and advantage, let alone fighting and killing. No one knew how to raise hell any more. They milked the land of its rich life: indeed, some of the plants were as nutritious and sanguinary as meat itself; yes, many plants bled. They used few tools, and no weapons. Even fire they hoped soon to forswear. This was the way the world was now.

For the next couple of days the little puppy was so very poorly that Andromeda was able to keep him bedded down in her clothes cupboard without much fear of detection. Sometimes, in a trance of foreboding, she found herself on the brink of resigning herself to the loss of her new friend. 'Stay,' she would whisper to him. 'Don't leave me. Stay, oh please *stay*.' At night Andromeda brought the little puppy a selection of juicy vegetables and encouraged him to eat. He seemed grateful for the sympathy, for the comfort, but turned away from the food, and sighed his longsuffering sigh. Then on the third day . . . Well, Andromeda

was slowly eating breakfast with Keithette and Tom, her mother and 'father'. In the silence the sun played subatomic ball with the moody motes of dust. Both Andromeda and Tom were eyeing Keithette a little warily. No one had spoken with any freedom that morning, because Keithette had yet to select and announce her mood-day. There were seven to choose from (all different now, all sad days, since the dog): Shunday, Moanday, Tearsday, Woundsday, Thirstday, Fireday, Shatterday . . . Tom was crushing henna into a mortar bowl and saying,

'I prefer the single braid anyway.'

'Why?' asked Keithette pitilessly. She was a rosy, broadfaced woman, stocky and flat-chested (the standard female form these days); but at such moments her mouth looked as thin as a fissure in glass. 'Why? Please tell me, Tom.'

Tom laid aside his pestle and made a two-handed gesture of shaping. 'Perhaps because it shows – it shows the essential oneness of your nature.'

This was a bit much for Keithette. '*What* oneness?' she said, and folded her arms tightly. 'Go on. *What* oneness?'

And now Tom too was stumped. 'I don't really know,' he said. 'But I'm sure that ribbon looks very nice with the dress.'

Keithette may have been about to soften. We shall never know. At that moment, just as Andromeda watchfully raised the wooden spoon to her lips – they heard a distinct little bark from beyond the kitchen door . . . The three figures reared and stiffened. Time went on for a while with nothing happening inside it, and the moment might well have passed in tact if there hadn't come a second yelp, more emboldened and demanding than the first. Andromeda's alarm was acute. She made to speak but was quickly checked by an unpierceable glare from her mother. Then came the third yelp.

‘Shatterday,’ said Keithette.

But now she rose up, seeming to swell and take fire with the woman’s need to confront the worst. Keithette strode to the passage door, Andromeda and Tom a couple of feet behind her. She turned, resolute and incensed, before she seized the handle. The door opened like a lid.

And what should they see but the little puppy, quite recovered, full of beans in fact, only briefly startled and now skipping and twisting, feinting this way and that, and wagging his tail with such violence that his entire rear-end was just a furry little blur. Then he swooned on to his back with his cocked paws aloft. Andromeda burst out crying, and pushed herself through to kneel at the little puppy’s side.

‘What’s *that*?’ said Keithette.

‘Leave him alone,’ said Andromeda. ‘He’s a little – “puppy”,’ she explained, with a new effort showing in her eyes. ‘A little *puppy*.’

Adorably the little puppy gazed upwards.

‘My little puppy,’ said Andromeda.

‘Why do I put up with her?’ Keithette began. ‘Answer me, Tom. Please answer me. Where did it come from? Right from the start she never gave me a moment’s peace. Why can’t she be like any other little girl? Why? Why? That’s right. I’ll pack you off to live with the children. Or the Queers! Where did you find it? Now you listen to me, Andromeda. *Andromeda*, indeed. Her own name’s not good enough for her. She has to go and call herself Andromeda! What’s it doing now? Well, I’ll tell you one thing, young lady. It’s not staying *here*.’

It took many hours of supplication, many Blametakes and Faultfinds, and much work for Tom on the mat, over the tub and in the sack, great play being made with the hot towels and

cold compresses, the back-scratchers and skin-loofahs, not to mention all the hair-stroking, neck-nuzzling and breast-kissing – plus the tireless and tearful pleas of tiny Andromeda – but in the end Keithette was pretty well won over to the little puppy's presence, a presence that was understood to be temporary, contingent, multi-provisoed. Naturally, the ruling could be reversed at a single snap of Keithette's brawny red fingers. Ah, but what could you do when it came to a little puppy like this one, with his ridiculous frown and his beseeching eyes? All the little puppy had going for him, really, was his adorability. And he was adorable – yes he *was*. After the countless promises and penances, the clauses and covenants of the long afternoon, Keithette herself seemed quite exhausted by the fray.

'All right,' she said. 'It can live here for a while.'

'He,' said Andromeda.

'Where is it anyway?'

Where was the little puppy? Snuggling at Keithette's feet, of course, and blinking up at her gratefully. By nightfall the little puppy was ensconced on Keithette's lap. It was all Andromeda could do to prise him free for a cuddle. Tom looked on from his leisurebench with hard-won relief. He monitored Keithette for signs of sudden mood-swing or theme-change. Everything seemed all right for now. But it had been some Shatterday.

Oiled, groomed, distinctly plump and impeccably toilet-trained, the little puppy was nowadays to be found, more often than not, on his favourite perch: the window ledge in Andromeda's little bedroom. Through the mists of the half curtain, his tail wagging uncertainly, then quickening in sudden bursts of recognition or general enthusiasm, the little puppy watched the people come and go, for hours on end. Because the people – the people were

beautiful! The women striding about with their hands on their hips, occasionally pausing to talk and nod among themselves, arms folded. The girls, regal and remote, with expensive self-awareness in oval cheeks and artful hair. All colours and sizes the people were. Yes, and the old, too, with their more careful tread (easy does it), and the way light seemed to pour from their human eyes. The little boys were stern and watchful, shut-faced, on their guard. Why weren't they playing? wondered the little puppy, in his way. Why weren't they playing – bounding and tumbling like packs of puppies?

No one played except the little puppy. But the little puppy played a lot. The jumping games, the rolling games, the hiding games. He very nearly exasperated his young mistress with these endless larks and sprees of his. One quiet Shunday she found the little puppy frenziedly prying at a round red bauble fixed (by Tom) to the foot of her bed. Encouraged by his barking she managed to free the thing from its clasp; she then rolled it into the little puppy's path. A ball, a red ball! The little puppy proceeded to chase it round the room. And he chased it round the room again. Holding the ball in his jaws, he challenged Andromeda to shake it free and then throw it for him. Then he retrieved it and bounced around her until she threw it again. Really, the hysteria of the little puppy at such moments. Andromeda didn't understand. But the little puppy clearly needed his play, as badly as he needed his love and his food. Now, when she brought him his vegetables and fruit, the little puppy often thrust his whole head into the bowl.

Some passing people stared in once, and saw the little puppy on his perch. He yelped at them playfully, and tensed, hair-triggering himself for a romp. The people recoiled in hostile amazement. A small crowd gathered, and after a while, even

though the little puppy had by now hidden himself under the bed, there came a stubborn thumping on the back door. This shuffling posse was confronted by Keithette – who settled their hash with a fearful blast. Andromeda was then called into the parlour to join Keithette and Tom in a three-hour discussion. The subject: Keithette's imagination. At this point, however, Andromeda resolved to act boldly.

With Tom's help and collusion, she fashioned a little collar for the little puppy - and a little lead. And out she walked into the village with him. Twisting and writhing and half-throttling himself at first, the little puppy soon fell into an obedient trot, only the head busy and indocile, bolting all shapes and colours as if the whole world might be food. It must be said that the experiment was not an obvious success. Many people jeered, or backed away, or burst into tears, and the little puppy himself gave a whine from some sluice in his sinuses, a whine of dismay at the unhappiness he somehow seemed to represent and personify. Andromeda walked on in full obstinacy and pride, the little puppy rather cowering now at her ankles. On their return – she could still hear the hecklers in her wake – Andromeda was greeted by Keithette who surprised everyone, including herself, by giving her daughter a smile of approval and by openly ruffling the shiny folds of the little puppy's neck. Andromeda adorned his collar with silver bells and took him out again the next day too. She had made up her mind. But the little puppy, it ought to be said, was a good deal daunted.

'I've got a name for you,' Andromeda whispered in the dark. 'Jackajack. Do you like it?' The little puppy was in bed with Andromeda. He liked it. He liked everything. 'If you weren't an animal,' she whispered, 'I would call you John and you would be

my boy.' The little puppy gazed up at her, his eyes lit by an unbounded willingness.

Why do people love children? Why do children love babies? Why do we all love animals? What do animals love, that way? Everything, the whole world, more, even the stars up there – stars like the star called Andromeda, fixed in the scattered heavens, burning bright.

You couldn't really blame the villagers. They were all having a very bad time, and they weren't equipped for bad times. Whereas, in days gone by, the people would go about their tasks with tears of contentment in their eyes, now they wept the other tears. And where were they to turn? Down the soft decades they had lost the old get up and go – the know-how, the can-do. Predation and all its paraphernalia had quite petered out of their gene cams and pulse codes. Given a generation or two, and given their new knack or curse of sudden *and* active adaptation, oh, I suppose they might have come up with something, in time. But there wasn't time.

They looked for authority, and what did they find? The natural leaders were, of course, the women with the loudest voices and the strongest personalities; and if you think Keithette is redoubtable enough, you should check out Clivonne – or Kevinia! At first they tried to hate the dog away. They sat around hating it and hating it, but still the dog lumbered in for his weekly debauch. They tried to cry the dog away, and that didn't work either. They tried ignoring it; but being ignored didn't make much odds to a dog like this dog. So there were more consultations. They didn't hold a meeting: it was simply a matter of a few dozen exhausted and terrified husbands – all the Toms and Tims and Tams – sprinting with messages from hut

to hut. Incidentally, no one had ever decided any of this. It wasn't a reaction to the deep past. You see, there was no deep *memory*. This was just the way the world was now.

And so they asked death in through the back door, and let him feast on the malevolved, the beakmen and wingwomen, the furred or shelled or slippery beings with their expressions of stunned disgrace. It was subliminally decided that everything was all their fault. Ah, the poor Queers . . . One Fireday, Andromeda took the little puppy that could to the place where the malevolved often hung out; he was tolerantly greeted, and even made much of by some old hinny or hcteroclite, who cosseted the puppy's coat with a limp flippered hand. The little puppy took to the Queers, as indeed he took to everyone. They were defeatist, lackadaisical and inert: faulty survival machines, they knew they weren't made to last. They knew they probably wouldn't be selected, not in the end, not in that sense. And how few of them there were now. Soon, thought Andromeda, the poor Queers will be all used up. Then what? Only one outcome. She considered ways of perhaps saving the little puppy, if it came to that.

On the way home they were followed for a while by a group of women who shrieked and chanted at the little puppy, and made unpleasant faces, cowing him rather badly. 'Come on, Jackajack,' said Andromeda loudly. 'Never mind them.' So he jinked along beside her, glancing back uneasily over his dropped shoulders. But Andromeda did not glance back. She walked straight and true, filling her given space. For Andromeda enjoyed an ambiguous prestige in the village; she certainly had rarity value. It was partly to do with such things as her refusal to go and live in the child pool, and the fact that she had changed her own name. She had changed it from Briana – to Andromeda, if you please. But

it was really all about beauty; beauty. Nobody knew what people were supposed to look like any more or could guess at the human forms they once had graced. The women all rugged and ruddy and right; the men all drab, effaced, annulled. And yet everyone has time for beauty, for art, for pattern and plan. We all come round to beauty in the end. As instinctively as the dog salivated with pleasure on encountering human remains in some patch of his own chaotic excretions (his heart soared like a hawk), so the people gazed at little Andromeda's round-eyed face, her dark clefts and latencies, and felt pride in the human moulding.

'Look, Jackajack,' she said. They had come to the edge of the crater, the core, the deep dish and its great query of fire. Now the flames ate the air, spitting and chewing and clearing their throats. No one fed the fire but it burned anyway, with no fuel – but with fission, perhaps; perhaps fission's daughters lay trapped beneath the crust. Although the village was godless, the crater was agreed to be at least semi-sacred, and the people felt its codes, sensed its secrets with reluctant awe. Certainly no one went down there just for the hell of it. And now of course it served a different function. 'Look, Jackajack,' whispered Andromeda. Down in the contoured chasm, ringed by fire, some women were tethering an old Queer to the stake, ready for Shatterday. The little puppy barked. He didn't like fire. Nor did the dog. But the dog didn't mind fire *that* much. He could put up with it, if he had to.

Keithette sat heftily at the round table, micromonitored by Tom and Andromeda. Both had been present at the informal, morning-long seminar which Keithette had convened. The subject: Keithette's sensibility. The really warm work of the

afternoon, though, had fallen on Tom alone – a tight regime of scalp-kneading, hair-braiding, intertoe-loofahing and hourly sexual intercourse. It hadn't worked. Nothing worked now. Because tonight was a night of the dog. And now it seemed that every day was Shatterday.

True to Andromeda's prediction, the inevitable came to pass and soon the supply of Queers was pretty much exhausted. Actually they were picked off a lot quicker than anybody bargained for, because even the dog turned his nose up at some of them. He killed them all right, with one swipe of his bleeding claws, and gave the corpses a frightful worrying; but he wouldn't eat them. He just stood there, stupid and implacable, for hour after hour (he stayed upright at all times, even during his egregious naps), before tearing off the dead Queer's best limb and trudging away with it – to return the next night, and the next. Now he would peer down into the lit crater and see no offering for him there. Just the crackling fire, no louder or brighter than the fire of hunger in his heart.

'Here he comes,' said Keithette.

Yes, here he comes. You could hear him liquidly snorting and yodelling as he loped towards them over the fields, nearer, ever nearer. The whole village listened – listened in darkness to a world of sound. His creaking gait, his grunts, his great gurglings at the prospect of messy satiation. Next, his long silence at the brink of the crater, his thwarted howl of disappointment, his final scream of ravenous rage. Then the sniffings and rootlings round the huts, the latherings and flappy droolings, the regular flinging of his bulk against any weakness, the splitting of wood, the human cries, the heavy arhythmical bounding of the chase, the incensed rippings and gulplings of the kill. . . Once, as the dog was fizzily consuming his prey, the little puppy (held fast on

Andromeda's lap) gave out a piercing yelp. Outside there was sudden silence – followed, several minutes later, by a growl of fabulous greed and hatred, inches from the front door. But the dog's hunger had lost its rawness (and there'd be another night), and all they heard then were the usual sounds of grumbling haulage as the dog dragged the half-eaten carcass out of the village and into the hills.

'He's going now,' said Keithette. She closed her eyes and wiggled a finger at Tom, who moved grimly towards her. 'When will the dog stop coming? When? When? Why don't I know what to do? Why? Why? Tomorrow I'll speak to Royene, and to Clivonne. I might even speak to Kevinia. I don't know why but I think I'll be the last to go. Not there,' she told Tom. 'There. There.'

When the danger of predation is great, communities of whatever phylum tend to interknit more closely, and hierarchical roles become sharper and more keenly contested. Or at any rate that's the idea. This particular community, for instance, had long lost all genetic heft. Probably their best bet would have been to move out and go nomad for a while. But site-tenacity was, alas, pretty well the only stable element in the local DNA transcription. How could you run when, in your head, this was the only place?

With a square meal inside him, and a decent cadaver to nibble and gnaw on, the dog would be gone for six nights. This seemed a clear gain, after the post-Queer chaos, and in fact everyone was secretly impressed by the dog's asceticism in restricting himself to one human per week. It would take him at least a couple of years to account for them all. That Shunday, however, brought unpleasant surprises.

46 On his last sortie the dog had forced his way into the spare-

husband compound and selected his victim from the sixteen men who huddled there. In the skirmish three spare husbands had been wounded or nicked by the dog's teeth and claws. By Moanday afternoon they had swelled outlandishly in the belly and sprouted coarse hair on their backs and buttocks. All three died during the night, in speechless horror. On Woundsday it was reported that seven spare husbands who had merely come into contact with the dog's coat had developed cutaneous conditions of incredible virulence; they too passed away, in a frothing nightmare of serpigo and yaws. By Fireday the remaining five men - who had done no more than smell the dog's breath -- checked out with toxic shock.

The women's thoughts naturally turned to the child pool, housed in a none too sturdy structure just behind the spare-husband compound. Well, I say 'naturally', but it should be stressed that things had quietened down very noticeably on the bearing-and-caring circuit, the operative genes being, if not selfless, then fairly unambitious in tendency. So were they all meant to, die, quickly, without a fight? Nothing wants to evolve but everyone wants to survive. We just don't want to go. Even when life is poor and mostly fearful, and there are pressing reasons to quit - we don't want to. We don't want to go.

Again there was talk, and the sending of messages, and the distraught husbands making their rounds. At noon on Shatterday, as if by mass somnambulism, the entire village gathered in the crater by the swan-neck of fire. Yes, Andromeda was there with the little puppy, reflexively shielding him from the grimaces of the crowd. They all knew what was going to happen - knew it with exhausted shame, with a consciousness of falling far short of any human destiny. Royene and Clivonne presided over a stout barrel. The villagers then filed past, each of them dropping

into the tub a personal possession – a scarf, a tool, a headband, an earring. There were no exceptions. Tom held the little puppy as Andromeda took her turn . . . At last Kevinia strode forward, looked round about her, and rolled up her sleeves, her hard face shining in the silent heat. It was at that moment that the little puppy barked – barked at Kevinia! He even started *growling*. Kevinia stared on, with scandalized disdain, as Andromeda fought to contain the little puppy, and with Tom's help eventually subdued her struggling, snapping charge. So it was with the extra radiance of flame-eyed rectitude that Kevinia reached into the barrel, held aloft, and then, with a gesture of explanation, of disclosure, dropped to the ground the little red ball.

The sky said *war*. 'War,' declared the sky. Up above, the evening stars were sending light, the nuclear way, their fuel-counts stretched by vast equations, pulsar, quasar, giant and dwarf – with Andromeda burning too in rich implosions, changing and charging through the electric firmament. Below, the heavy clouds looked as hard and clearly etched as granite, the work of abrupt propulsions, strong interactions . . .

Now the little puppy lay in the arms of his mistress, for the last hours. His senses all had missions: to find a way through the veils of her grief and, perhaps, to help assuage it. His passionate vigilance also had an animal edge. You've seen those puppies at the playground or the seaside, tethered to a fence while the whole world romps and dances. This is the maximum puppy suffering; it stings far worse than hunger. But now the little puppy went through that pain to the other side, twisting and tugging within himself, just to hold the grief and make it lighter.

48 'Thank you, Jackajack,' Andromeda murmured, as she felt the

hot squirmings – the unbounded willingness – of his love. Their little room held a blushful glow: early to bed in summer, curtailment, just exclusion. Andromeda had the pride to meet her fate, like a woman. But she didn't want to go. She thought of escape, of flight (no one would have stopped her), just herself and the little puppy. It was a big bare planet now, though, and very lonely. Great emptinesses pressed in on the human place. Andromeda had the pride. But she didn't want to go.

Soon they heard the apologetic whispers in the yard. Keithette sat at the round table, deep in her own drama. She would not, she would *never* say goodbye. Tom looked up shyly (still tired and faint after four hours of unpunctuated cunnilingus). 'I'm going now,' said Andromeda, and she thought: what strange creatures we are -- really. 'I'm going now. Goodbye, Jackajack,' she said. 'Stay . . . Stay.'

The dog was coming. Already you could sense his maimed skirling as it poured forth, over the hills. Flanked by her two husbands, the burly Kevinia led Andromeda to the lip of the great concavity, down the widely looping path, down to where the fire was eating its meal of dusk. The ugly crucifix stood there waiting, like a Queer. Kevinia gave instructions. Number-one husband secured Andromeda's little hands, relying on number-two husband to bind her little feet. She looked from face to face but nothing was said and they soon hurried away, back up the winding path. And so Andromeda stared at the fire, its sprites and genies and their pure pandemonium.

Unevenly the homovore sidled through the outskirts of the village, the heavy threads of saliva whirring -- almost rattling -- in savage nostalgia as he passed the site of some earlier kill or decisive mangling, the jaws slackly ajar and then cracking shut in a vestigial spasm, the nailed talons splitting and spoking on the

bare earth. There he goes now, very horribly, the needled fur, the flapped and misshapen genitals, the fifth leg protruding from the rear like the aftermath of some deeply injudicious sexual exploit. The Natural Selector. Although resilient himself – he could pretty well boast pan-immunity – the dog was boiling and bursting with whole ecologies of trapped viruses, germs and microbes: anthrax, foul brood, rinderpest, staggers, scours, glanders, hard pad, sheep rot and mange. He shimmered like heat haze. The flowers were always dead where the dog had slept.

We all know the normal posture of the village when the dog was on its way. It played dead. In humiliated torpor it hid its human face. But on this night of sacrifice, of new nausea and defeat, the shouldered heads would not bow to receive their blows. Why? It was Andromeda, it was pride, it was beauty – was it also, perhaps, in some perverse way, the girl's championship of the little puppy? Now you could feel the low rumble of hot temper, of petulant mutiny. Among the clustered cabins, windows and even doors were thrown open, and husbands appeared, shouting and waving, while the women too jeered and hated, trying and trying to hate the dog away.

Not that the dog seemed much abashed by this treatment. After a few stupid pauses and directionless snarls (the snarls like weary swearing), he moved on, towards the ring. Stupidly, he paused again, as some rogue cramp or seizure coursed through his system. In truth he looked far from well. His diet was surely getting to him. You couldn't imagine a more vivid commercial for the non-man-eating lifestyle. Yes, even the dog was capable of deteriorating on such a regime: these days he wasn't so friendly with his own emanations, and could deck himself with a single burp . . . He came to the edge of the circle. With scarlet eyes he peered down through the distorted air – and saw a figure, ready

at the stake. He grunted, and started down the track: this was good, this was more like it, this was the way things were supposed to be run. Halfway down he looked up and saw the emboldened villagers gathered at the crater's rim, all around him, full of noise and gesture. What's the big deal? the dog seemed to wonder, and turned, and stared down through the tips of the flames to inspect the sacrifice, confident that he would find the usual knucklewalker or nervously yawning throwback tethered to the post. When he saw the little brown limbs, writhing (as indeed everything was writhing down there), the dog's stomach thumped and rumbled, and a pint or two of smoking saliva slopped from his mouth. Slowly now, with anticipation, with due reverence, the dog moved down the curling track.

Andromeda watched him, through the fire. Why, the flames themselves seemed to want to consume the dog, reaching out for him with tongues and fingers to consume, to transform, to chew him up and spit him out again, detoxified. One little flamelet couldn't resist, and leaned out to stroke the dog's fiery fur. The dog growled abstractedly as a stray patch of his coat briefly crackled like torched gorse. But he plodded on – he could take it – and at last nosed into the query of fire. When he saw Andromeda, when he smelled her, and sensed the quality of the provender staked out before him, his limbs galloped forward (the head and body lurching after them), before pulling to an untidy halt, twenty feet away. Now he paused again. The dog valued beauty, too, in his way. He was going to eat it very very slowly.

Andromeda met his crimson eyes. Her personal bodyguards or body gods, her gods of swooning, wished to take her elsewhere and mother her into sleep. But with all the fever and magic down there in the ring – you couldn't block the hot oxygen, the

performing blood. The fire hissed louder than the crowd, here in the burning pan. She saw the dog's jaw drop open: the carcinogenic teeth, the tumour of the tongue, the flamelets of sizzling drool. Then, as abruptly as an uppercut, the dog's mouth chopped shut, his head dipped, and he lumbered carefully towards her.

Who sensed it first, Andromeda or the dog? In retreating waves the ringed crowd fell slowly silent, spherical music falling through the frequencies and dying on its band. The dog himself seemed struck by the orderly swooning hush. What was that they heard in the flame-flecked quiet? Was it the jink of tiny bells? With a painful twist of the neck the dog looked up at the crater's rim. On the brink of the curling path, the bright red ball in his mouth, stood the little puppy Jackajack.

He too had come to meet his destiny; and down he started, the little puppy, at a prancing trot, the front paws evenly out-thrust, the head held pompously erect. The dog watched him with a loathing that bordered on fear. Yes, fear. Of course the dog was as brave as a lion, and a lot stupider; but everything fears its own reverse image, its antimatter or Antichrist. Everything fears itself. Salivating anew, and dully grunting, the dog watched as the little puppy (staring straight ahead) swanked his way down the wide spiral, disappeared behind the veils of flame, and strutted out into the ring. He marched straight up to the dog, right into his ambient miasma, dropped the red ball, skipped backwards to crouch with his nose on his paws – and barked.

The dog hesitated, his eyes lit by a weak leer. This shrimp, this morsel, this starter: what was its game? The little puppy yelped again, jumping forward to straddle the ball, then sprang

back to his posture of cocked entreaty. For several seconds the dog stared on in leaden surprise, his inner templates shuffling and dealing, looking for stalled memories, messages, codes. The crowd, too, mumbled in confusion, until someone started yelling, hooting – goading, goading the dog on. Now the little puppy dribbled the red ball into the dog's path and repeated his bouncing dance, with many a coquettish swivel and feint. Gruffly the dog pitched forward. But in a trice the little puppy swooped down on the ball and ran two sharp circles – then flopped to the ground with his back to the dog, kissing and nuzzling his incomparable prize. With his flooded mouth gaping the dog watched the puppy's tail sweep unconcernedly back and forth, saw the plump little buttocks tensed and tuned. Suddenly he pitched forward again – and the puppy was up and away, the ball held high as he sauntered out of range. Ooh, that little *puppy* – good enough to *eat*.

As the game continued, watched by the crowd and the excited fire (each with its own catcalls and applause), the dog seemed to be getting other ideas about the puppy, judging by the great palatinate extension craning from his warped nethers, his malarial eyes and tempestuous breath. Now the little puppy had trotted some yards off, and languished on his back with his paws upraised, the red ball apparently unregarded at his side. Stupidly, the dog sensed his moment. He came forward, hurdling into his run, picking up speed until, sure of triumph (though the face showed some alarm at his own ballistic daring), he launched himself heavily through the air. Of course the ball and the puppy had both disappeared – and the dog landed with such crunchy chaos on the smelted rock that the crowd momentarily winced into silence, wondering if the dog was dead or damaged, wondering to what fury he would now aspire when he awoke . . .

Seconds passed and the body never stirred. With a quick pining glance at Andromeda the little puppy approached the venomous heap, the steaming wreckage of the dog. No one breathed as the puppy sniffed and barked, and reached out a paw towards the dog's open mouth. He nosed about among growing murmurs of hope. Now the little puppy even raised a back leg and seemed about to . . . but it was Andromeda's cry that forewarned him. Although he jumped back with a squeal, the dog's claws had done their work, swiping a flash of blood on to the puppy's pink belly.

The dog was playing too: playing dead. But he wasn't playing any more. Hugely he reared up on four legs, on two legs, and hugely he shook the bloody rags of his rage. Now the chase began, in earnest, the great dog bounding after the little puppy, in tightening circles, skidding and twisting, turned this way, that way, this, that. For a time the puppy seemed freer than air, whimsically lithe, subatomic, superluminous, all spin and charm, while the dog moved on rails like a bull, pure momentum and mass, and for ever subject to their laws. It couldn't last. The puppy was always tumbling, as puppies will, and leaving blood on the earth, and looking weaker and smaller each time he mustered himself for the turn, with the dog seeming to fill all space, seeming to fill all hell and more . . . At last the puppy led the dog into a wide arc at the end of the scythe of fire. Out they came, the large animal following the small, and gaining, gaining. 'Turn,' said the crowd. 'Turn,' said Andromeda, as they flashed past. The puppy could now feel the dog's hot breath on his rump, the bunsen of inflamed saliva and gums, and yet he tumbled and bounded on, seemingly propelled only by the desperate rhythm of his stride. Together they fast approached the great join of fire, almost one animal now, the puppy's tail

tickling the frothing nose of the dog, whose jaws opened ready for the first seizing snap. Turn, turn –

‘Turn,’ said Andromeda.

But the little puppy did not turn. With a howl of terror and triumph he hurled himself high into the flames – and the dog, like a blind missile, heat-seeking, like a weapon of spittle and blood, could only follow.

And so at last the flames settled down to eat. And what a meal they made of the dog. What coughing and gagging, what outrageous retching and hawking, what bursts and punctures of steam and gas, what eructations, what disgorgements – and the leaping plumes and flashes and pulsing brain-scans the flames made, until they relaxed and quietened, and began to breathe again.

When Tom untethered her, Andromeda pushed past him and walked the length of the scythe of fire. She found the still-smoking body of the little puppy, belly-upwards, just beyond the join of fire, and she knelt to cradle him in her arms. The flames hadn’t wanted to eat him; they had wanted to bear him through and deliver him safely to the other side. Now the little puppy coughed, and flinched, and blinked up at her for the last time. Yes, the puppy music was fading. The little puppy could not persist, not in little-puppy form – the singed tail, the blood on the delicate tummy, the poor paws limp now, holding no life. Andromeda looked up. The villagers had lined the curling path, silently. But as her grief began they too began to weep, to make moan, until the sounds, borne heavenwards by the fire, drifted up into the fleeces of the sky.

Late that night Andromeda lay awake, her hot face pressed against the soaked pillow. Her thoughts, naturally, were with the little puppy Jackajack. She had carried his little body to the

stake, and placed it there on a scarf of white. The villagers had all knelt in homage, and cursed themselves for shame that they had ever scorned or doubted the little puppy, the little puppy that could. There was grief and there was joy. And there was shame. Tomorrow the little puppy would lie in state, for the propitiations of the villagers. Then Andromeda would bury him outside the village, over the hills – by the nervous creek. But the scythe would be a sacred place, and everyone who passed there would always think of the little puppy. Now he is gone from life, she said to herself. And what does life look like without him? If he could drink all my tears, she murmured; if he could just lap them up. She thought of his face as he smiled at her for the last time – so gentle, full of such intimate forgiveness. Infinitely intimate, and lit by secrets, too.

Then she heard a soft tapping on her window, patient and remote. She climbed from the bed and looked out. All was dark and grieving. Andromeda wrapped herself in a shawl and went quickly to the passage. She opened the door and said,

‘Jackajack?’

The boy stood there, against a swirl of stars, his body still marked by the claws and the flames. She reached up to touch the tears in his human eyes.

‘John,’ she said.

His arms were strong and warlike as he turned and led her into the cool night. They stood together on the hilltop and gazed down at their new world.

