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THE BEST OF
KIM STANLEY
ROBINSON

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THE BEST OF KIM STANLEY ROBINSON

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Venice Drowned

By the time Carlo Tafur struggled out of sleep, the baby was squalling, the teapot whistling, the smell of stove smoke filled the air. Wavelets slapped the walls of the floor below. It was just dawn. Reluctantly he untangled himself from the bedsheets and got up. He padded through the other room of his home, ignoring his wife and child, and walked out the door onto the roof.

Venice looked best at dawn, Carlo thought as he pissed into the canal. In the dim mauve light it was possible to imagine that the city was just as it always had been, that hordes of visitors would come flooding down the Grand Canal on this fine summer morning.... Of course, one had to ignore the patchwork constructions built on the roofs of the neighborhood to indulge the fancy. Around the church—San Giacomo du Rialto—all the buildings had even their top floors awash, and so it had been necessary to break up the tiled roofs, and erect shacks on the roof beams made of materials fished up from below: wood, brick, lath, stone, metal, glass. Carlo's home was one of these shacks, made of a crazy combination of wood beams, stained glass from San Giacometta, and drainpipes beaten flat. He looked back at it and sighed. It was best to look off over the Rialto, where the red sun blazed over the bulbous domes of San Marco.

"You have to meet those Japanese today," Carlo's wife, Luisa, said from inside.

"I know." Visitors still came to Venice, that was certain.

"And don't go insulting them and rowing off without your pay," she went on, her voice sounding clearly out of the doorway, "like you did with those Hungarians. It really doesn't matter what they take from under the water, you know. That's the past. That old stuff isn't doing anyone any good under there, anyway."

"Shut up," he said wearily. "I know."

"I have to buy stovewood and vegetables and toilet paper and socks for the baby," she said.

"The Japanese are the best customers you've got; you'd better treat them well."

Carlo reentered the shack and walked into the bedroom to dress. Between putting on one boot and the next he stopped to smoke a cigarette, the last one in the house. While smoking he stared at his pile of books on the floor, his library as Luisa sardonically called the collection; all books about Venice. They were tattered, dog-eared, mildewed, so warped by the damp that none of them would close properly, and each moldy page was as wavy as the Lagoon on a windy day. They were a miserable sight, and Carlo gave the closest stack a light kick with his cold boot as he returned to the other room.

"I'm off," he said, giving his baby and then Luisa a kiss. "I'll be back late—they want to go to Torcello."

"What could they want up there?"

He shrugged. "Maybe just to see it." He ducked out the door.

Below the roof was a small square where the boats of the neighborhood were moored. Carlo slipped off the tile onto the narrow floating dock he and the neighbors had built, and crossed to his boat, a wide-beamed sailboat with a canvas deck. He stepped in, unmoored it, and rowed out of the square onto the Grand Canal.

Once on the Grand Canal he tipped the oars out of the water and let the boat drift downstream. The big canal had always been the natural course of the channel through the mudflats of the Lagoon; for a while it had been tamed, but now it was a river again, its banks made of tile rooftops and stone palaces, with hundreds of tributaries flowing into it. Men were working on roof-houses in the early-morning light; those who knew Carlo waved hammers or rope in hand, and shouted hello. Carlo wiggled an oar perfunctorily before he was swept past. It was foolish to build so close to the Grand Canal, which now had the strength to knock the old structures down, and often did. But that was their business. In Venice they were all fools, if one thought about it.

Then he was in the Basin of San Marco, and he rowed through the Piazzetta beside the Doge's Palace, which was still imposing at two stories high, to the Piazza. Traffic was heavy as usual. It was the only place in Venice that still had the crowds of old, and Carlo enjoyed it for that reason, though he shouted curses as loudly as anyone when gondolas streaked in front of him. He jockeyed his way to the basilica window and rowed in.

Under the brilliant blue and gold of the domes it was noisy. Most of the water in the room had been covered with a floating dock. Carlo moored his boat to it, heaved his four scuba tanks on, and clambered up after them. Carrying two tanks in each hand he crossed the dock, on which the fish market was in full swing. Displayed for sale were flats of mullet, lagoon sharks, tunny, skates, and flatfish. Clams were piled in trays, their shells gleaming in the shaft of sunlight from the stained-glass east window; men and women pulled live crabs out of holes in the dock, risking fingers in the crab-jammed traps below; octopuses inked their buckets of water, sponges oozed foam; fishermen bawled out prices, and insulted the freshness of their neighbors' product.

In the middle of the fish market, Ludovico Salerno, one of Carlo's best friends, had his stalls of scuba gear. Carlo's two Japanese customers were there. He greeted them and handed his tanks to Salerno, who began refilling them from his machine. They conversed in quick, slangy Italian while the tanks filled. When they were done, Carlo paid him and led the Japanese back to his boat. They got in and stowed their backpacks under the canvas decking, while Carlo pulled the scuba tanks on board.

"We are ready to voyage at Torcello?" one asked, and the other smiled and repeated the question. Their names were Hamada and Taku. They had made a few jokes concerning the latter name's similarity to Carlo's own, but Taku was the one with less Italian, so the sallies hadn't gone on for long. They had hired him four days before, at Salerno's stall.

"Yes," Carlo said. He rowed out of the Piazza and up back canals past Campo San Marco Formosa, which was nearly as crowded as the Piazza. Beyond that the canals were empty and only an occasional roof-house marred the look of flooded tranquillity.

"That part of city Venice here not many people live," Hamada observed. "Not houses or houses."

"That's true," Carlo replied. As he rowed past San Zanipolo and the hospital, he explained. "It's too close to the hospital here, where many diseases were contained. Sickneses, you know."

"Ah, the hospital!" Hamada nodded, as did Taku. "We have swam hospital in our Venice voyage previous to that one here. Salvage many fine statues from lowest rooms."

"Stone lions," Taku added. "Many stone lions with wings in room below Twenty-four waterline."

"Is that right," Carlo said. Stone lions, he thought, set up in the entryway of some Japanese businessman's expensive home around the world.... He tried to divert his thoughts by watching the brilliantly healthy, masklike faces of his two passengers as they laughed over their reminiscences.

Then they were over the Fondamente Nuova, the northern limit of the city, and on the Lagoon. There was a small swell from the north. Carlo rowed out a way and then stepped forward to raise the boat's single sail. The wind was from the east, so they would make good time north to Torcello. Behind them, Venice looked beautiful in the morning light, as if they were miles away, and a watery horizon blocked their full view of it.

The two Japanese had stopped talking and were looking over the side. They were over the cemetery of San Michele, Carlo realized. Below them lay the island that had been the city's chief cemetery for centuries; they sailed over a field of tombs, mausoleums, gravestones, obelisks that at low tide could be a navigational hazard.... Just enough of the bizarre white blocks could be seen to convince one that they were the result of the architectural thinking of fishes. Carlo crossed himself quickly to impress his customers, and sat back down at the tiller. He pulled the sail tight and they heeled over slightly, slapped into the waves.

In no more than forty minutes they were east of Murano, skirting its edge. Murano, like Venice an island city crossed with canals, had been a quaint little town before the floods. But it didn't have as many tall buildings as Venice, and it was said that an underwater river had undercut its islands; in any case, it was a wreck. The two Japanese chattered with excitement.

"Can we visit to that city here, Carlo?" asked Hamada.

"It's too dangerous," Carlo answered. "Buildings have fallen into the canals."

They nodded, smiling. "Are people live here?" Taku asked.

"A few, yes. They live in the highest buildings on the floors still above water, and work in Venice. That way they avoid having to build a roof-house in the city."

The faces of his two companions expressed incomprehension.

"They avoid the housing shortage in Venice," Carlo said. "There's a certain housing shortage in Venice, as you may have noticed." His listeners caught the joke this time and laughed uproariously.

"Could live on floors below if owning scuba such as that here," Hamada said, gesturing at Carlo's equipment.

"Yes," he replied. "Or we could grow gills." He bugged his eyes out and waved his fingers at his neck to indicate gills. The Japanese loved it.

Past Murano, the Lagoon was clear for a few miles, a sunbeaten blue covered with choppy waves. The boat tipped up and down, the wind tugged at the sail cord in Carlo's hand. He began to enjoy himself. "Storm coming," he volunteered to the others and pointed at the black line over the horizon to the north. It was a common sight; short, violent storms swept over Brenner Pass from the Austrian Alps, dumping on the Po Valley and the Lagoon before dissipating in the Adriatic... once a week, or more, even in the summer. That was one reason the fish market was held under the domes of San Marco; everyone had gotten sick of

trading in the rain.

Even the Japanese recognized the clouds. "Many rain fall soon here," Taku said.

Hamada grinned and said, "Taku and Tafur, weather prophets no doubt, make b company!"

They laughed. "Does he do this in Japan, too?" Carlo asked.

"Yes indeed, surely. In Japan rains every day—Taku says, 'It rains tomorrow for surely Weather prophet!"

After the laughter receded, Carlo said, "Hasn't all the rain drowned some of your cities too?"

"What's that here?"

"Don't you have some Venices in Japan?"

But they didn't want to talk about that. "I don't understand... No, no Venice in Japan Hamada said easily, but neither laughed as they had before. They sailed on. Venice was out of sight under the horizon, as was Murano. Soon they would reach Burano. Carlo guided the boat over the waves and listened to his companions converse in their improbable language or mangle Italian in a way that alternately made him want to burst with hilarity or bite the gunwale with frustration.

Gradually, Burano bounced over the horizon, the campanile first, followed by the few buildings still above water. Murano still had inhabitants, a tiny market, even a midsummer festival; Burano was empty. Its campanile stood at a distinct angle, like the mast of a foundered ship. It had been an island town, before 2040; now it had "canals" between every rooftop. Carlo disliked the town intensely and gave it a wide berth. His companions discussed it quietly in Japanese.

A mile beyond it was Torcello, another island ghost town. The campanile could be seen from Burano, tall and white against the black clouds to the north. They approached in silence. Carlo took down the sail, set Taku in the bow to look for snags, and rowed cautiously to the edge of town. They moved between rooftops and walls that stuck up like reefs or like old foundations out of the earth. Many of the roof tiles and beams had been taken for use in construction back in Venice. This had happened to Torcello before; during the Renaissance it had been a little rival of Venice, boasting a population of twenty thousand, but during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it had been entirely deserted. Builders from Venice had come looking in the ruins for good marble or a staircase of the right dimensions.... Briefly a tiny population had returned, to make lace and host those tourists who wanted to be melancholy; but the waters rose, and Torcello died for good. Carlo pushed off a wall with his oar, and a big section of it tilted over and sank. He tried not to notice.

He rowed them to the open patch of water that had been the Piazza. Around them stood a few intact rooftops, no taller than the mast of their boat; broken walls of stone or rounded brick; the shadowy suggestion of walls just underwater. It was hard to tell what the street plan of the town would have been. On one side of the Piazza was the cathedral of San Maria Assunta, however, still holding fast, still supporting the white campanile that stood square and solid, as if over a living community.

"That here is the church we desire to dive," Hamada said.

Carlo nodded. The amusement he had felt during the sail was entirely gone. He rowed around the Piazza looking for a flat spot where they could stand and put the scuba gear on

The church outbuildings—it had been an extensive structure—were all underwater. At one point the boat's keel scraped the ridge of a roof. They rowed down the length of the barnlike nave, looked in the high windows: flooded with water. No surprise. One of the small windows in the side of the campanile had been widened with sledgehammer and directly inside it was the stone staircase and, a few steps up, a stone floor. They hooked the boat to the wall and moved their gear up to the floor. In the dim midday light the stone of the interior was pocked with shadows. It had a rough-hewn look. The citizens of Torcello had built the campanile in a hurry, thinking that the world would end at the millennium, the year 1000. Carlo smiled to think how much longer they had had than that. They climbed the steps of the staircase, up to the sudden sunlight of the bell chamber, to look around; view Burano, Venice in the distance... to the north, the shallows of the Lagoon, and the coast of Italy. Beyond that the black line of clouds was like a wall nearly submerged under the horizon, but it was rising; the storm would come.

They descended, put on the scuba gear, and flopped into the water beside the campanile. They were above the complex of church buildings, and it was dark; Carlo slowly led the two Japanese back into the Piazza and swam down. The ground was silted, and Carlo was careful not to step on it. His charges saw the great stone chair in the center of the Piazza (it had been called the Throne of Attila, Carlo remembered from one of his moldy books, and no one had known why), and waving to each other they swam to it. One of them made ludicrous attempts to stand on the bottom and walk around in his fins; he threw up clouds of silt. The other joined him. They each sat in the stone chair, columns of bubbles rising from them, and snapped pictures of each other with their underwater cameras. The silt would ruin the shots, Carlo thought. While they cavorted, he wondered sourly what they wanted in the church.

Eventually, Hamada swam up to him and gestured at the church. Behind the mask his eyes were excited. Carlo pumped his fins up and down slowly and led them around to the back entrance at the front. The doors were gone. They swam into the church.

Inside it was dark, and all three of them unhooked their big flashlights and turned them on. Cones of murky water turned to crystal as the beams swept about. The interior of the church was undistinguished, the floor thick with mud. Carlo watched his two customers swim about and let his flashlight beam rove the walls. Some of the underwater windows were still intact, an odd sight. Occasionally the beam caught a column of bubbles transmuting them to silver.

Quickly enough the Japanese went to the picture at the west end of the nave, a tile mosaic. Taku (Carlo guessed) rubbed the slime off the tiles, vastly improving their color. They had gone to the big one first, the one portraying the Crucifixion, the Resurrection of the Dead, and the Day of Judgment: a busy mural. Carlo swam over to have a better look. But not sooner had the Japanese wiped the wall clean than they were off to the other end of the church, where above the stalls of the apse was another mosaic. Carlo followed.

It didn't take long to rub this one clean; and when the water had cleared, the three of them floated there, their flashlight beams converged on the picture revealed.

It was the Teotoca Madonna, the God-bearer. She stood against a dull gold background holding the Child in her arms, staring out at the world with a sad and knowing gaze. Carlo pumped his legs to get above the Japanese, holding his light steady on the Madonna's face. She looked as though she could see all of the future, up to this moment and beyond; all of

her child's short life, all the terror and calamity after that. There were mosaic tears on his cheeks. At the sight of them Carlo could barely check tears of his own from joining the general wetness on his face. He felt that he had suddenly been transposed to a church on the deepest floor of the ocean; the pressure of his feelings threatened to implode him, but he could scarcely hold them off. The water was freezing, he was shivering, sending up a thick, nearly continuous column of bubbles... and the Madonna watched. With a kick he turned and swam away. Like startled fish his two companions followed him. Carlo led them out of the church into murky light, then up to the surface, to the boat and the window casement. Fins off, Carlo sat on the staircase and dripped. Taku and Hamada scrambled through the window and joined him. They conversed for a moment in Japanese, clearly excited. Carlo stared at them blackly.

Hamada turned to him. "That here is the picture we desire," he said. "The Madonna with child."

"What?" Carlo cried.

Hamada raised his eyebrows. "We desire taking home that here picture to Japan."

"But it's impossible! The picture is made of little tiles stuck to the wall—there's no way to get them off!"

"Italy government permits," Taku said, but Hamada silenced him with a gesture.

"Mosaic, yes. We use instruments we take here—water torch. Archaeology method, you understand. Cut blocks out of wall, bricks, number them—construct on new place in Japan. Above water." He flashed his pearly smile.

"You can't do that," Carlo stated, deeply affronted.

"I don't understand," Hamada said. But he did. "Italian government permits us that."

"This isn't Italy," Carlo said savagely, and in his anger stood up. What good would the Madonna do in Japan, anyway? They weren't even Christian. "Italy is over there," he said in his excitement mistakenly waving to the southeast, no doubt confusing his listeners even more. "This has never been Italy! This is Venice! The Republic!"

"I don't understand." He had that phrase down pat. "Italian government has giving permits us."

"Christ," Carlo said. After a disgusted pause: "Just how long will this take?"

"Time? We work that afternoon, tomorrow: place the bricks here, go hire Venice barge to carry bricks to Venice—"

"Stay here overnight? I'm not going to stay here overnight, God damn it!"

"We bring sleeping bag for you—"

"No!" Carlo was furious. "I'm not staying, you miserable heathen hyenas—" He pulled on his scuba gear.

"I don't understand."

Carlo dried off, got dressed. "I'll let you keep your scuba tanks, and I'll be back for you tomorrow afternoon, late. *Understand?*"

"Yes," Hamada said, staring at him steadily, without expression. "Bring barge?"

"What?—yes, yes, I'll bring your barge, you miserable slime-eating catfish. Vultures..." He went on for a while, getting the boat out of the window.

"Storm coming!" Taku said brightly, pointing to the north.

"To hell with you!" Carlo said, pushing off and beginning to row. "Understand?"

He rowed out of Torcello and back into the Lagoon. Indeed, a storm was coming: he would

have to hurry. He put up the sail and pulled the canvas decking back until it covered everything but the seat he was sitting on. The wind was from the north now, strong but fitful. It pulled the sail taut: the boat bucked over the choppy waves, leaving behind a wake that was bright white against the black of the sky. The clouds were drawing over the sky like a curtain, covering half of it: half black, half colorless blue, and the line of the edge was solid. It resembled that first great storm of 2040, Carlo guessed, that had pulled over Venice like a black wool blanket and dumped water for forty days. And it had never been the same again, not anywhere in the world.

Now he was beside the wreck of Burano. Against the black sky he could see only the drunken campanile, and suddenly he realized why he hated the sight of this abandoned town: it was a vision of the Venice to come, a cruel model of the future. If the water level rose even three meters, Venice would become nothing but a big Burano. Even if the water didn't rise, more people were leaving Venice every year. One day it would be empty. Once again the sadness he had felt looking at the Teotaca filled him, a sadness become bottomless despair. "God damn it," he said, staring at the crippled campanile: but that wasn't enough. He didn't know words that were enough. "God *damn* it."

Just beyond Burano the squall hit. It almost blew the sail out of his hand; he had to hold on with a fierce clench, tie it to the stern, tie the tiller in place, and scramble over the pitching canvas deck to lower the sail, cursing all the while. He brought the sail down to its last reefing, which left a handkerchief-sized patch exposed to the wind. Even so, the boat yanked over the waves and the mast creaked as if it would tear loose.... The choppy waves had become whitecaps: in the screaming wind their tops were tearing loose and flying through the air, white foam in the blackness....

Best to head for Murano for refuge, Carlo thought. Then the rain started. It was colder than the Lagoon water and fell almost horizontally. The wind was still picking up: his handkerchief sail was going to pull the mast out.... "Jesus," he said. He got onto the decking again, slid up to the mast, took down the sail with cold and disobedient fingers. He crawled back to his hole in the deck, hanging on desperately as the boat yawed. It was almost broadside to the waves and hastily he grabbed the tiller and pulled it around, just in time to meet a large wave stern-on. He shuddered with relief. Each wave seemed bigger than the last: they picked up quickly on the Lagoon. Well, he thought, what now? Get on the oars? No, that wouldn't do; he had to keep stern-on to the waves, and besides, he couldn't row effectively in this chop. He had to go where the waves were going, he realized; and if they missed Murano and Venice, that meant the Adriatic.

As the waves lifted and dropped him, he grimly contemplated the thought. His mast alone acted like a sail in a wind of this force; and the wind seemed to be blowing from a bit to the west of north. The waves—the biggest he had ever seen on the Lagoon, perhaps the biggest *ever* on the Lagoon—pushed in about the same direction as the wind, naturally. Well, that meant he would miss Venice, which was directly south, maybe even a touch west of south. Damn, he thought. And all because he had been angered by those two Japanese and the Teotaca. What did he care what happened to a sunken mosaic from Torcello? He had helped foreigners find and cart off the one bronze horse of San Marco that had fallen. He had helped find more than one of the stone lions of Venice, symbol of the city... the entire Bridge of Sighs for Christ's sake! What had come over him? Why should he have cared about a forgotten mosaic?

Well, he had done it; and here he was. No altering it. Each wave lifted his boat stern first and slid under it until he could look down in the trough, if he cared to, and see his mast nearly horizontal, until he rose over the broken, foaming crest, each one of which seemed to want to break down his little hole in the decking and swamp him—for a second he was in midair, the tiller free and useless until he crashed into the next trough. Every time at the top he thought, this wave will catch us, and so even though he was wet and the wind and rain were cold, the repeated spurts of fear adrenaline and his thick wool coat kept him warm. A hundred waves or so served to convince him that the next one would probably slide under him as safely as the last, and he relaxed a bit. Nothing to do but wait it out, keep the boat exactly stern-on to the swell... and he would be all right. Sure, he thought, he would just ride these waves across the Adriatic to Trieste or Rijeka, one of those two tawdry towns that had replaced Venice as Queen of the Adriatic... the princesses of the Adriatic, so to speak, and two little sluts they were, too.... Or ride the storm out, turn around, and sail back in, better yet.

On the other hand the Lido had become a sort of reef in most places, and waves of this size would break over it, capsizing him for sure. And, to be realistic, the top of the Adriatic was wide; just one mistake on these waves (and he couldn't go on forever) and he would be broached, capsized, and rolled down to join all the other Venetians who had ended up on the bottom of the Adriatic. And all because of that damn Madonna. Carlo sat crouched at the stern, adjusting the tiller for the particulars of each wave, ignoring all else in the howling black chaos of water and air around him, pleased in a grim way that he was sailing to his death with such perfect seamanship. But he kept the Lido out of mind.

And so he sailed on, losing track of time as one does when there is no spatial reference. Wave after wave after wave. A little water collected at the bottom of his boat, and his spirits sank; that was no way to go, to have the boat sink by degrees under him.

Then the high-pitched, airy howl of the wind was joined by a low booming, a bass roar. He looked behind him in the direction he was being driven and saw a white line, stretching from left to right; his heart jumped, fear exploded through him. This was it. The Lido, now a barrier reef tripping the waves. They were smashing down on it; he could see white sheets bouncing skyward and blowing to nothing. He was terrifically frightened. It would have been so much easier to founder at sea.

But there—among the white breakers, off to the right—a gray finger pointing up at the black—

A campanile. Carlo was forced to look back at the wave he was under, to straighten the boat; but when he looked back it was still there. A campanile, standing there like a dead lighthouse. "Jesus," he said aloud. It looked as if the waves were pushing him a couple hundred meters to the east of it. As each wave lifted him he had a moment when the boat was sliding down the face of the wave as fast as it was moving under him; during these moments he shifted the tiller a bit and the boat turned and surfed across the face, to the west, until the wave rose up under him to the crest and he had to straighten it out. He repeated the delicate operation time after time, sometimes nearly broaching the boat in his impatience. But that wouldn't do—just take as much from each wave as it will give you, he thought. And pray it will add up to enough.

The Lido got closer, and it looked as if he was directly upwind of the campanile. It was the one at the Lido channel entrance or perhaps the one at Pellestrina, he had no way of

knowing. He was just happy that his ancestors had seen fit to construct such solid be towers. In between waves he reached under the decking and by touch found his boathook and the length of rope he carried. It was going to be a problem, actually, when he got to the campanile—it would not do to pass it helplessly by a few meters; on the other hand he couldn't smash into it and expect to survive either, not in these waves. In fact the more he considered it the more exact and difficult he realized the approach would have to be, and fearfully he stopped thinking about it and concentrated on the waves.

The last one was the biggest. As the boat slid down its face, the face got steeper, until it seemed they would be swept on by this wave forever. The campanile loomed ahead, big and black. Around it waves pitched over and broke with sharp, deadly booms; from behind Carlo could see the water sucked over the breaks, as if over short but infinitely broad waterfalls. The noise was tremendous. At the top of the wave it appeared he could jump to the campanile's top window—he got out the boathook, shifted the tiller a touch, took three deep breaths. Amid the roaring, the wave swept him just past the stone tower, smacking against it and splashing him; he pulled the tiller over hard, the boat shot into the wake of the campanile—he stood and swung the boathook over a window casement above him. He was caught, and he held on hard.

He was in the lee of the tower. Broken water rose and dropped under the boat, hissing, but without violence, and he held. One-handed, he wrapped the end of his rope around the sail cord bolt in the stern, tied the other end to the boathook. The hook held pretty well; he took a risk and reached down to tie the rope firmly to the bolt. Then another risk: when the boiling soupy water of another broken wave raised the boat, he leaped off his seat, grabbed the stone windowsill, which was too thick to get his fingers over—for a moment he hung by his fingertips. With desperate strength he pulled himself up, reached in with one hand and got a grasp on the inside of the sill, and pulled himself in and over. The stone floor was about four feet below the window. Quickly he pulled the boathook in and put it on the floor and took up the slack in the rope.

He looked out the window. His boat rose and fell, rose and fell. Well, it would sink or it wouldn't. Meanwhile, he was safe. Realizing this, he breathed deeply, let out a shout. He remembered shooting past the side of the tower, face no more than two meters from it—getting drenched by the wave slapping the front of it—why, he had done it perfectly! He couldn't do it again like that in a million tries. Triumphant laughs burst out of him, short and sharp: "Ha! Ha! Ha! Jesus Christ! Wow!"

"Whoooo's theeeerre?" called a high scratchy voice, floating down the staircase from the floor above. "Whoooooo's there?..."

Carlo froze. He stepped lightly to the base of the stone staircase and peered up; through the hole to the next floor flickered a faint light. To put it better, it was less dark up there than anywhere else. More surprised than fearful (though he was afraid), Carlo opened his eyes as wide as he could—

"Whoooooo's theeeeeerrrrrrre?..."

Quickly he went to the boathook, untied the rope, felt around on the wet floor until he found a block of stone that would serve as anchor for his boat. He looked out the window; his boat still there; on both sides, white breakers crashed over the Lido. Taking up the boathook, Carlo stepped slowly up the stairs, feeling that after what he had been through he could slash any ghost in the ether to ribbons.

It was a candle lantern, flickering in the disturbed air—a room filled with junk—

"Eeek! Eeek!"

"Jesus!"

"Devil! Death, away!" A small black shape rushed at him, brandishing sharp metal points.

"Jesus!" Carlo repeated, holding the boathook out to defend himself. The figure stopped.

"Death comes for me at last," it said. It was an old woman, he saw, holding lace needles in each hand.

"Not at all," Carlo said, feeling his pulse slow back down. "Swear to God, Grandmother. I'm just a sailor, blown here by the storm."

The woman pulled back the hood of her black cape, revealing braided white hair, and squinted at him.

"You've got the scythe," she said suspiciously. A few wrinkles left her face as she unfocused her gaze.

"A boathook only," Carlo said, holding it out for her inspection. She stepped back and raised the lace needles threateningly. "Just a boathook, I swear to God. To God and Mary and Jesus and all the saints, Grandmother. I'm just a sailor, blown here by the storm from Venice." Part of him felt like laughing.

"Aye?" she said. "Aye, well then, you've found shelter. I don't see so well anymore, you know. Come in, then, sit down." She turned around and led him into the room. "I was just doing some lace for penance, you see... though there's scarcely enough light." She lifted a tombolo with the lace pinned to it; Carlo noticed big gaps in the pattern, as in the webs of an injured spider. "A little more light," she said and, picking up a candle, held it to the lantern. When it was fired, she carried it around the chamber and lit three more candles in lanterns that stood on tables, boxes, a wardrobe. She motioned for him to sit in a heavy chair by her table, and he did so.

As she sat down across from him, he looked around the chamber. A bed piled high with blankets, boxes and tables covered with objects... the stone walls around, and another staircase leading up to the next floor of the campanile. There was a draft. "Take off your coat," the woman said. She arranged the little pillow on the arm of her chair and began to poke a needle in and out of it, pulling the thread slowly.

Carlo sat back and watched her. "Do you live here alone?"

"Always alone," she replied. "I don't want it otherwise." With the candle before her face she resembled Carlo's mother or someone else he knew. It seemed very peaceful in the room after the storm. The old woman bent in her chair until her face was just above her tombolo; still, Carlo couldn't help noticing that her needle hit far outside the apparent pattern of lace, striking here and there randomly. She might as well have been blind. At regular intervals Carlo shuddered with excitement and tension; it was hard to believe he was out of danger. More infrequently they broke the silence with a short burst of conversation, then sat in the candlelight absorbed in their own thoughts, as if they were old friends.

"How do you get food?" Carlo asked, after one of these silences had stretched out. "Candles?"

"I trap lobsters down below. And fishermen come by and trade food for lace. They get a good bargain, never fear. I've never given less, despite what he said—" Anguish twisted his face as the squinting had, and she stopped. She needled furiously, and Carlo looked away.

Despite the draft, he was warming up (he hadn't removed his coat, which was wool, after all), and he was beginning to feel drowsy....

"He was my spirit's mate, do you comprehend me?"

Carlo jerked upright. The old woman was still looking at her tombolo.

"And—and he left me here, here in this desolation when the floods began, with words that I'll remember forever and ever and ever. Until death comes.... I wish you had been death," she cried. "I wish you had."

Carlo remembered her brandishing the needles. "What is this place?" he asked gently.

"What?"

"Is this Pellestrina? San Lazzaro?"

"This is Venice," she said.

Carlo shivered convulsively, stood up.

"I'm the last of them," the woman said. "The waters rise, the heavens howl, love's pledges crack and lead to misery. I—I live to show what a person can bear and not die. I'll live till the deluge drowns the world as Venice is drowned, I'll live till all else living is dead; I'll live..." Her voice trailed off; she looked up at Carlo curiously. "Who are you, really? Oh, I know. I know. A sailor."

"Are there floors above?" he asked, to change the subject.

She squinted at him. Finally she spoke. "Words are vain. I thought I'd never speak again, not even to my own heart, and here I am, doing it again. Yes, there's a floor above intact but above that, ruins. Lightning blasted the bell chamber apart, while I lay in that very bed." She pointed at her bed, stood up. "Come on, I'll show you." Under her cape she was tiny.

She picked up the candle lantern beside her, and Carlo followed her up the stairs, stepping carefully in the shifting shadows.

On the floor above, the wind swirled, and through the stairway to the floor above that, he could distinguish black clouds. The woman put the lantern on the floor, started up the stairs. "Come up and see," she said.

Once through the hole they were in the wind, out under the sky. The rain had stopped. Great blocks of stone lay about the floor, and the walls broke off unevenly.

"I thought the whole campanile would fall," she shouted at him over the whistle of the wind. He nodded, and walked over to the west wall, which stood chest high. Looking over it, he could see the waves approaching, rising up, smashing against the stone below, spraying back and up at him. He could feel the blows in his feet. Their force frightened him; it was hard to believe he had survived them and was now out of danger. He shook his head violently. To his right and left, the white lines of crumbled waves marked the Lido, a broad swath of them against the black. The old woman was speaking, he could see; he walked back to her side to listen.

"The waters yet rise," she shouted. "See? And the lightning... you can see the lightning breaking the Alps to dust. It's the end, child. Every island fled away, and the mountains were not found... the second angel poured out his vial upon the sea, and it became as the blood of a dead man: and every living thing died in the sea." On and on she spoke, her voice mingling with the sound of the gale and the boom of the waves, just carrying over all... until Carlo, cold and tired, filled with pity and a black anguish like the clouds rolling over them, put his arm around her thin shoulders and turned her around. They descended

the floor below, picked up the extinguished lantern, and descended to her chamber, which was still lit. It seemed warm, a refuge. He could hear her still speaking. He was shivering without pause.

"You must be cold," she said in a practical tone. She pulled a few blankets from her bed. "Here, take these." He sat down in the big heavy chair, put the blankets around his legs, put his head back. He was tired. The old woman sat in her chair and wound thread onto a spool. After a few minutes of silence she began talking again; and as Carlo dozed and shifted position and nodded off again, she talked and talked, of storms, and drownings, and the world's end, and lost love....

In the morning when he woke up, she wasn't there. Her room stood revealed in the dim morning light: shabby, the furniture battered, the blankets worn, the knickknacks of Venetian glass ugly, as Venetian glass always was. But it was clean. Carlo got up and stretched his stiff muscles. He went up to the roof; she wasn't there. It was a sunny morning. Over the east wall he saw that his boat was still there, still floating. He grinned—the first one in a few days, he could feel that in his face.

The woman was not in the floors below, either. The lowest one served as her boathouse, but he could see. In it were a pair of decrepit rowboats and some lobster pots. The biggest "boatslip" was empty; she was probably out checking pots. Or perhaps she hadn't wanted to talk with him in the light of day.

From the boathouse he could walk around to his craft, through water only knee deep. He sat in the stern, reliving the previous afternoon, and grinned again at being alive.

He took off the decking and bailed out the water on the keel with his bailing can, keeping an eye out for the old woman. Then he remembered the boathook and went back upstairs for it. When he returned there was still no sight of her. He shrugged; he'd come back and say good-bye another time. He rowed around the campanile and off the Lido, pulled up the sail, and headed northwest, where he presumed Venice was.

The Lagoon was as flat as a pond this morning, the sky cloudless, like the blue dome of the great basilica. It was amazing, but Carlo was not surprised. The weather was like that these days. Last night's storm, however, had been something else. That was the mother of all squalls; those were the biggest waves in the Lagoon ever, without a doubt. He began rehearsing his tale in his mind, for wife and friends.

Venice appeared over the horizon right off his bow, just where he thought it would be: first the great campanile, then San Marco and the other spires. The campanile... Thank God his ancestors had wanted to get up there so close to God—or so far off the water—the urge had saved his life. In the rain-washed air the sea approach to the city was more beautiful than ever, and it didn't even bother him as it usually did that no matter how close you got to it it still seemed to be over the horizon. That was just the way it was, now. The Serenissima. He was happy to see it.

He was hungry, and still very tired. When he pulled into the Grand Canal and took down the sail, he found he could barely row. The rain was pouring off the land into the Lagoon, and the Grand Canal was running like a mountain river. It was tough going. At the fire station where the canal bent back, some of his friends working on a new roof-house waved at him, looking surprised to see him going upstream so early in the morning. "You're going the wrong way!" one shouted.

Carlo waved an oar weakly before plopping it back in. "Don't I know it!" he replied.

Over the Rialto, back into the little courtyard of San Giacometta. Onto the sturdy dock built by his neighbors had built, staggering a bit—careful there, Carlo.

"Carlo!" his wife shrieked from above. "Carlo, Carlo, Carlo!" She flew down the ladder from the roof.

He stood on the dock. He was home.

"Carlo, Carlo, Carlo!" his wife cried as she ran onto the dock.

"Jesus," he pleaded, "shut up." And pulled her into a rough hug.

"Where have you been, I was so worried about you because of the storm, you said you'd be back yesterday, oh, Carlo, I'm so glad to see you...." She tried to help him up the ladder.

The baby was crying. Carlo sat down in the kitchen chair and looked around the little makeshift room with satisfaction. In between chewing down bites of a loaf of bread, he told Luisa of his adventure: the two Japanese and their vandalism, the wild ride across the Lagoon, the madwoman on the campanile. When he had finished the story and the loaf of bread, he began to fall asleep.

"But, Carlo, you have to go back and pick up those Japanese."

"To hell with them," he said slurrily. "Creepy little bastards.... They're tearing the Madonna apart, didn't I tell you? They'll take everything in Venice, every last painting and statue and carving and mosaic and all.... I can't stand it."

"Oh, Carlo. It's all right. They take those things all over the world and put them up and say this is from Venice, the greatest city in the world."

"They should be here."

"Here, here, come in and lie down for a few hours. I'll go see if Giuseppe will go to Torcello with you to bring back those bricks." She arranged him on their bed. "Let them have what's under the water, Carlo. Let them have it." He slept.

He sat up struggling, his arm shaken by his wife.

"Wake up, it's late. You've got to go to Torcello to get those men. Besides, they've got your scuba gear."

Carlo groaned.

"Maria says Giuseppe will go with you; he'll meet you with his boat on the Fondamente."

"Damn."

"Come on, Carlo, we need that money."

"All right, all right." The baby was squalling. He collapsed back on the bed. "I'll do it, don't pester me."

He got up and drank her soup. Stiffly he descended the ladder, ignoring Luisa's good-byes and warnings, and got back in his boat. He untied it, pushed off, let it float out of the courtyard to the wall of San Giacometta. He stared at the wall.

Once, he remembered, he had put on his scuba gear and swum down into the church. He had sat down in one of the stone pews in front of the altar, adjusting his weight belts and tanks to do so, and had tried to pray through his mouthpiece and the facemask. The silver bubbles of his breath had floated up through the water toward heaven; whether his prayers had gone with them, he had no idea. After a while, feeling somewhat foolish—but not entirely—he had swum out the door. Over it he had noticed an inscription and stopped to read it: *facemask centimeters from the stone. Around This Temple Let the Merchant's Law Be Just and His Weight True, and His Covenants Faithful.* It was an admonition to the old usurers of the

Rialto, but he could make it his, he thought; the true weight could refer to the diving belt
not to overload his clients and sink them to the bottom....

The memory passed and he was on the surface again, with a job to do. He took in a deep
breath and let it out, put the oars in the oarlocks and started to row.

Let them have what was under the water. What lived in Venice was still afloat.

Ridge Running

Three men sit on a rock. The rock is wet granite, a bouldertop surrounded by snow that has melted just enough to reveal it. Snow extends away from the rock in every direction. To the east it drops to treeline, to the west it rises to a rock wall that points up and ends at sky. The boulder the three men are on is the only break in the snow from the treeline to rock wall. Snowshoe tracks lead to the rock, coming from the north on a traverse across the slope. The men sit sunning like marmots.

One man chews snow. He is short and broad-chested, with thick arms and legs. He adjusts blue nylon gaiters that cover his boots and lower legs. His thighs are bare, he wears gray gym shorts. He leans over to strap a boot into an orange plastic snowshoe. The man sitting beside him says, "Brian, I thought we were going to eat lunch." The second man is big, and he wears sunglasses that clip onto prescription wire-rims. "Pe-ter," Brian drawls. "We can't eat here comfortably, there's barely room to sit. As soon as we get around that shoulder"—he points south—"the traverse will be done and we'll be at the pass."

Peter takes in a deep breath, lets it out. "I need to rest." "O.K.," Brian says, "do it. I'm just going to go around to the pass, I'm tired of sitting." He picks up the other orange snowshoe, sticks his boot in the binding. The third man, who is medium height and very thin, has been staring at the snow granules on his boot. Now he picks up a yellow snowshoe and kicks into it. Peter sees him do it, sighs, bends over to yank his aluminum-and-cord snowshoes out of the snow they are stuck in.

"Look at that hummingbird," the third man says with pleasure and points. He is pointing at blank snow. His two companions look where he is pointing, then glance at each other uncomfortably. Peter shakes his head, looks at his boots. "I didn't know there were hummingbirds in the Sierras," the third man says. "What a beauty!" He looks at Brian uncertainly. "Are there hummingbirds in the Sierras?" "Well," Brian says, "actually, I think there are. But..." "But not this time, Joe," Peter finishes.

"Ah," Joe says, and stares at the spot in the snow. "I could have sworn..." Peter looks at Brian, his face squinched up in distress. "Maybe the light breaking on that clump of snow," Joe says, mystified. "Oh, well."

Brian stands and hoists a compact blue pack onto his shoulders, and steps off the boulder onto the snow. He leans over to adjust a binding. "Let's get going, Joe," he says. "Don't worry about it." And to Peter: "This spring snow is great." "If you're a goddamn polar bear," Peter says.

Brian shakes his head, and his silvered sunglasses flash reflections of snow and Peter. "This is the best time to be up here. If you would ever come with us in January or February you'd know that."

"Summer!" Peter says as he picks up his long frame pack. "Summer's what I like—catch the rays, see the flowers, walk around without these damn flippers on—" He swings his pack onto his back, steps back quickly (clatter of aluminum on granite) to keep his balance. He buckles his waistbelt awkwardly, looks at the sun. It is near midday. He wipes his forehead. "You don't even come up with us in the summer anymore," Brian points out. "What has been, four years?"

"Time," Peter says. "I don't have any time, and that's a fact."

"Just all your life," Brian scoffs. Peter shakes off the remark with an irritated scowl, and steps onto the snow.

They turn to look at Joe, who is still inspecting the snow with a fierce squint.

"Hey, Joe!" Brian says.

Joe starts and looks up.

"Time to hike, remember?"

"Oh, yeah, just a second." Joe readies himself.

Three men snowshoeing.

Brian leads. He sinks about a foot into the snow with every step. Joe follows, placing his yellow snowshoes carefully in the prints of Brian's, so that he sinks hardly at all. Peter pays no attention to prints, and his snowshoes crash into and across the holes. His snowshoes slide left, downhill, and he slips frequently.

The slope steepens. The three men sweat. Brian slips left one time too often and stops to remove his snowshoes. They can no longer see the rock wall above them, the slope is so steep. Brian ties his snowshoes to his pack, puts the pack back on. He puts a glove on his right hand and walks canted over so he can punch into the slope with his fist.

Joe and Peter stop where Brian stops, to make the same changes. Joe points ahead to Brian, who is now crossing a section of slope steeper than forty-five degrees.

"Strange three-legged hill animal," says Joe, and laughs. "Snoweater."

Peter looks in his pack for his glove. "Why don't we go down into the trees and avoid this damn traverse?"

"The view isn't as good."

Peter sighs. Joe waits, scuffs snow, looks at Peter curiously. Peter has put suntan oil on his face, and the sweat has poured from his forehead, so that his stubbled cheeks shine with reflected light. He says, "Am I imagining this, or are we working really hard?"

"We're working very hard," Joe says. "Traverses are difficult."

They watch Brian, who is near the middle of the steepest section. "You guys do this snow stuff for *fun*?" Peter says.

After a moment Joe starts. "I'm sorry," he says. "What were we talking about?"

Peter shrugs, examines Joe closely. "You O.K.?" he asks, putting his gloved hand to Joe's arm.

"Yeah, yeah. I just... *forgot*. Again!"

"Everyone forgets sometimes."

"I know, I know." With a discouraged sigh Joe steps off into Brian's prints. Peter follows.

~~From above they appear little dots, the only moving objects in a sea of white and black.~~ Snow blazes white and prisms flash from sunglasses. They wipe their foreheads, stop now and then to catch their breath. Brian pulls ahead, Pete falls behind. Joe steps out to traverse with care, talking to himself in undertones. Their gloves get wet, there are ice bracelets around their wrists. Below them solitary trees at treeline wave in a breeze, but on the slope it is windless and hot.

The slope lessens, and they are past the shoulder. Brian pulls off his pack and gets out his groundpad, sits on it. He roots in the pack. After a while Joe joins him. "Whew!" Joe says. "That was a hard traverse."

"Not really hard," Brian replies. "Just boring." He eats some M&M's, waves a handful up to the ridge above. "I'm tired of traversing, though, that's for sure. I'm going up to the ridge so I can walk down it to the pass."

Joe looks at the wall of snow leading up to the ridge. "Yeah, well, I think Pete and I will continue around the corner here and go past Lake Doris to the pass. It's almost level from here on."

"True. I'm going to go up there anyway."

"All right. We'll see you in the pass in a while." Brian looks at Joe. "You'll be all right?"

"Sure."

Brian gets his pack on, turns and begins walking up the slope, bending forward to take big slow strides. Watching him, Joe says to himself, "Humped splayfoot pack beast, yellow House-backed creature. Giant snow snail. Yo ho for the mountains. Rum de dum. Rum de dum de dum."

Peter appears around the shoulder, walking slowly and carelessly. He spreads his groundpad, sits beside Joe. After a time his breathing slows. "Where's Brian?"

"He went up there."

"Is that where we're going?"

"I thought we might go around to the pass the way the trail goes."

"Thank God."

"We'll get to go by Lake Doris."

"The renowned Lake Doris," Peter scoffs.

Joe waves a finger to scold. "It is nice, you know."

Joe and Peter walk. Soon their breathing hits a regular rhythm. They cross a meadow tucked into the side of the range like a terrace. It is covered with suncones, small meadow depressions in the snow, and the walking is uneven.

"My feet are freezing," Pete says from several yards behind Joe.

Joe looks back to reply. "It's a cooling system. Most of my blood is hot—so hot I can hold snow in my hand and my hand won't get cold. But my feet are chilled. It cools the blood. I figure there's a spot around my knees that's perfect. My knees feel great. I live there and everything's comfortable."

"My knees hurt."

"Hmm," Joe says. "Now that is a problem."

After a silence filled by the squeak of snow and the crick of boot against snowshoe, Pete says, "I don't understand why I'm getting so tired. I've been playing full-court basketball all winter."

"Mountains aren't as flat as basketball courts."

Joe's pace is a bit faster than Pete's, and slowly he pulls ahead. He looks left, to the tree-filled valley, but slips a few times and turns his gaze back to the snow in front of him. He breathes rasp in his throat. He wipes sweat from an eyebrow. He hums unmusically, then starts a breath-chant, muttering a word for each step: *animal, animal, animal, animal, animal*. He watches his snowshoes crush patterns onto the points and ridges of the pocket-glaring snow. White light blasts around the sides of his sunglasses. He stops to tighten his binding, looks up when he is done. There is a tree a few score yards ahead—he adjusts his course for it, and walks again.

After a while he reaches the tree. He looks at it; a gnarled old Sierra juniper, thick and not very tall. Around it hundreds of black pine needles are scattered, each sunk in its own tiny pocket in the snow. Joe opens his mouth several times, says "Lugwump?" He shakes his head, walks up to the tree, puts a hand on it. "I don't know who you are?" He leans in, his nose is inches from bark. The bark peels away from the tree like papery sheets of fire-dough. He puts his arms out, hugs the trunk. "Tr-eeeeee," he says. "Tr-eeeeeeeeee." He is still saying it when Peter, puffing hard, joins him. Joe steps around the tree, gestures at a drop beyond the tree, a small bowl notched high in the side of the range.

"That's Lake Doris," he says, and laughs.

Blankly Peter looks at the small circle of flat snow in the center of the bowl. "Mostly a summer phenomenon," Joe says. Peter purses his lips and nods. "But not the pass," Joe adds, and points west.

West of the lake bowl the range—a row of black peaks emerging from the snow—drops a bit, in a deep, symmetrical U, an almost perfect semicircle, a glacier road filled with blue sky. Joe smiles. "That's Rockbound Pass. There's no way you could forget a sight like that. I think I see Brian up there. I'm going to go up and join him."

He takes off west, walking around the side of the lake until he can go straight up the slope rising from the lake to the pass. The snow thins on the slope, and his plastic snowshoes grate on stretches of exposed granite. He moves quickly, takes big steps and deep breaths. The slope levels and he can see the spine of the pass. Wind blows in his face, growing stronger with every stride. When he reaches the flat of the saddle in mid-pass it is a full gale. His shirt is blown cold against him, his eyes water. He can feel sweat drying on his face. Brian is higher in the pass, descending the north spine. His high shouts are blown past Joe. Joe takes off his pack and swings his arms around, stretches them out to the west. He is in the pass.

Below him to the west is the curving bowl of a cirque, one dug by the glacier that carved the pass. The cirque's walls are nearly free of snow, and great tiers of granite gleam in the sun. A string of lakes—flat white spots—mark the valley that extends westward out of the cirque. Lower ranges lie in rows out to the haze-fuzzed horizon.

Behind him Lake Doris's bowl blocks the view of the deep valley they have left behind. Joe looks back to the west; wind slams his face again. Brian hops down the saddle to him, and

Joe whoops. "It's windy again," he calls.

"It's always windy in this pass," Brian says. He strips off his pack, whoops himself. He approaches Joe, looks around. "Man, for a while there about a year ago I thought we never be here again." He claps Joe on the back. "I'm sure glad you're here," he says, voice full.

Joe nods. "Me, too. Me, too."

Peter joins them. "Look at this," calls Brian, waving west. "Isn't this amazing?" Peter looks at the cirque for a moment and nods. He takes off his pack and sits behind a rock, out of the wind.

"It's cold," he says. His hands quiver as he opens his pack.

"Put on a sweatshirt," Brian says sharply. "Eat some food."

Joe removes his snowshoes, wanders around the pass away from Brian and Peter. The exposed rock is shattered tan granite, covered with splotches of lichen, red and black and green. Joe squats to inspect a crack, picks up a triangular plate of rock. He tosses it west. It falls in a long arc.

Brian and Peter eat lunch, leaning against a boulder that protects them from the wind. Where they are sitting it is fairly warm. Brian eats slices of cheese cut from a big block of it. Peter puts a tortilla in his lap, squeezes peanut butter out of a plastic tube onto it. He picks up a bottle of liquid butter and squirts a stream of it over the peanut butter. Brian looks at the concoction and squints. "That looks like shit."

"Hey," Peter says. "Food is food. I thought you were the big pragmatist."

"Yeah, but..."

Pete wolfs down the tortilla, Brian works on the block of cheese.

"So how did you like the morning's hike?" Brian asks.

Pete says, "I read that snowshoes were invented by Plains Indians, for level places. In the mountains, those traverses"—he takes a bite—"those traverses were terrible."

"You used to love it up here."

"That was in the summers."

"It's better now, there's no one else up here. And you can go anywhere you want over snow."

"I've noticed you think so. But I don't like the snow. Too much work."

"Work," Brian scoffs. "The old law office is warping your conception of work, Peter."

Peter chomps irritably, looking offended. They continue to eat. One of Joe's nonsense songs floats by.

"Speaking of warped brains," Peter says.

"Yeah. You keeping an eye on him?"

"I guess so. I don't know what to do when he loses it, though."

Brian arches back and turns to look over the boulder. "Hey, Joe!" he shouts. "Come eat some lunch!" They both watch Joe jerk at the sound of Brian's voice. But after a moment's glance around, Joe returns to playing with the rocks.

"He's out again," says Brian.

"That," Peter says, "is one sick boy. Those doctors really did it to him."

"That *crash* did it to him. The doctors saved his life. You didn't see him at the hospital like I did. Man, ten or twenty years ago an injury like that would have left him a vegetable for

sure. When I saw him I thought he was a goner."

"Yeah, I know, I know. The man who flew through his windshield."

"But you don't know what they *did* to him."

"So what did they do to him?"

"Well, they stimulated what they call axonal sprouting in the areas where neuronal connections were busted up—which means, basically, that they grew his brain back!"

"Grew it?"

"Yeah! Well some parts of it—the broken connections, you know. Like the arm of a starfish. You know?"

"No. But I'll take your word for it." Peter looks over the boulder at Joe. "I hope they grew back everything, yuk yuk. He might have one of his forgetting spells and walk over the edge there."

"Nah. He just forgets how to talk, as far as I can tell. Part of the reorganization, I think. It doesn't matter much up here." Brian arches up. "Hey, JOE! FOOD!"

"It does too matter," Peter says. "Say he forgets the word *cliff*. He forgets the concept, he says to himself I'm just going to step down to that lake there, and whoops, over the edge he goes."

"Nah," Brian says. "It doesn't work that way. Concepts don't need language."

"What?" Peter cries. "Concepts don't need language? Are you kidding? Man I thought Joe was the crazy one around here."

"No seriously," Brian says, shifting rapidly from his usual reserve to interested animation.

"Sensory input is already a thought, and the way we field it is conceptual. Enough to keep you from walking off cliffs anyway." Despite this assertion he looks over his shoulder again. There stands Joe nodding as if in agreement with him.

"Yes, language is a contact lens," Joe says.

Peter and Brian look at each other.

"A contact lens at the back of the eyeball. Color filters into this lens, which is made of nameglass, and its reflected to the correct corner of the brain, tree corner or rock corner."

Peter and Brian chew that one over.

"So you lose your contact lenses?" Brian ventures.

"Yeah!" Joe looks at him with an appreciative glance. "Sort of."

"So what's in your mind then?"

Joe shrugs. "I wish I knew." After a while, struggling for expression: "I feel things. I feel that something's not right. Maybe I have another language then, but I'm not sure. Nothing looks right, it's all just... color. The names are gone. You know?"

Brian shakes his head, involuntarily grinning.

"Hmm," Peter says. "It sounds like you might have some trouble getting your driver's license renewed." All three of them laugh.

Brian stands, stuffs plastic bags into his pack. "Ready for some ridge running?" he says to the other two.

"Wait a second," Peter says, "we just got here. Why don't you kick back for a while? The pass is supposed to be the high point of the trip, and we've only been here half an hour."

"Longer than that," says Brian.

"Not long enough. I'm tired!"

"We've only hiked about four miles today," Brian replies impatiently. "All of us worked equally hard. Now we can walk down a ridge all afternoon, it'll be great!"

Peter sucks air between his teeth, holds it in, decides not to speak. He begins jamming bags into his pack.

They stand ready to leave the pass, packs and snowshoes on their backs. Brian makes a final adjustment to hipbelt—Pete looks up the spine they are about to ascend—Joe starts down at the huge bowl of rock and snow to the west. Afternoon sun glares. The shadow of a cloud hurries across the cirque toward them, jumps up the west side of the pass and they are in it, for a moment.

"Look!" Joe cries. He points at the south wall of the pass. Brian and Pete look—A flash of brown. A pair of horns, blur of legs, the distant *clacks* of rock falling.

"A bighorn sheep!" says Brian. "Wow!" He hurries across the saddle of the pass to the south spine, looking up frequently. "There it is again! Come on!"

Joe and Pete hurry after him. "You guys will never catch that thing," says Peter.

The south wall is faulted and boulderish, and they zig and zag from one small shelf of snow to the next. They grab outcroppings and stick fists in cracks, and strain to push themselves up steps that are waist-high. The wind peels across the spine of the wall and keeps them cool. They breathe in gasps, stop frequently. Brian pulls ahead, Peter falls behind. Brian and Joe call to each other about the bighorn.

Brian and Joe top the spine, scramble up the decreasing slope. The ridge edge—a hump of shattered rock, twenty or twenty-five feet wide, like a high road—is nearly level, but still rises enough to block their view south. They hurry up to the point where the ridge levels and suddenly they can see south for miles.

They stop to look. The range rises and falls in even swoops to a tall peak. Beyond the peak it drops abruptly and rises again, up and down and up, culminating in a huge knot of black peaks. To the east the steep snowy slope drops to the valley paralleling the range. To the west a series of spurs and cirques alternate, making a broken desert of rock and snow.

The range cuts down the middle of it all, high above everything else that can be seen. Joe taps his boot on solid rock. "Fossil backbone, primeval earth being," he says.

"I think I still see that sheep," says Brian, pointing. "Where's Peter?"

Peter appears, face haggard. He stumbles on a rock, steps quickly to keep his balance. When he reaches Brian and Joe he lets his pack thump to the ground.

"This is ridiculous," he says. "I have to rest."

"We can't exactly camp here," Brian says sarcastically, and gestures at the jumble of rocks they are sitting on.

"I don't care," Peter says, and sits down.

"We've only been hiking an hour since lunch," Brian objects, "and we're trying to close in on that bighorn!"

"Tired," Peter says. "I have to rest."

"You get tired pretty fast these days!"

An angry silence.

Joe says in a mild voice. "You guys sure are bitching at each other a lot."

A long silence. Brian and Peter look in different directions.

Joe points down at the first dip in the ridge, where there is a small flat of granite slabs and corners filled with sand. "Why don't we camp there? Brian and I can drop our packs and go on up the ridge for a walk. Pete can rest and maybe start a fire later. If you can find wood." Brian and Pete both agree to the plan, and they descend to the saddle campsite.

Two men ridge running. They make swift progress up the smooth rise, along the jumbled road at the top of the range. The bare rock they cross is smashed into fragments, splintered by ice and lightning. Breaking out of the blackish granite are knobs of tan rock, crushed into concentric rings of shards. They marvel at boulders which look like they have sat on the range since it began to rise. They jump from rock to rock, flexing freed shoulders. Brian points ahead and calls out when he sees the sheep. "Do you see it?"

"Sure do," Joe says, but without looking up. Brian notices this and snorts disgustedly. Shadows of the range darken the valley to the east. Joe hops from foothold to foothold babbling at Brian all the while from several yards behind him. "Name it, name it. You name it. Naammme. What an idea. I've got three blisters on my feet. I named the one on the left heel Amos." Pause to climb a shoulder-high slab of granite. "I named the one on the right heel Crouch. Then I've got one on the front of my right ankle, and I named that one Achilles. That way when I feel it it's not like pain, it's like a little joke. Twinges in my heel"—panting so he can talk—"are little hellos, hellos with every step. Amos here, hi, Joe Crouch here, hi, Joe. It's amazing. The way I feel I probably don't need boots at all. I should take them off!"

"You'd probably better keep them on," Brian says seriously. Joe grins.

The incline becomes steeper and the edge of the ridge narrows. They slow down, step more carefully. The shattered rock gives way to great faulted blocks of solid mountain. They find themselves straddling the ridge on all fours, left feet on the east slope and right feet on the west. Both sides drop sharply away, especially the west. Sun gilds this steeper slope. Joe runs his hand down the edge of the range.

The ridge widens out, and they can walk again. The rock is shattered, all brittle plate and angular splinters, covered with lichen. "Great granite," Joe says.

"This is actually diorite," Brian says. "Diorite or gabbro. Made of feldspar and dark stuff."

"Oh, don't give me that," Joe says. "I'm doing well just to remember granite. Besides, the stuff has been granite for a lot longer than geologists have been naming things. They can go messing with a name like that." Still, he looks more closely at the rock. "Gabbro... gabbro... sounds like one of my words."

They wind between boulders, spring up escarpments. They come upon a knob of quartz that rises out of the black granite. The knob is infinitely cracked, as if struck on top by a giant sledgehammer. "Rose quartz," says Brian, and moves on. Joe stares at the knob, mouth open. He kneels to pick up chunks of the quartz, peers at them. He sees that Brian is moving on. Rising, he says to himself, "I wish I knew everything."

Suddenly they are at the top. Everything is below them. Beside Brian, Joe stops short. They stand silently, inches apart. Wind whips around them. To the south the range drops and

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