

THE ROAD TO RA AN OPERA

For Tristan 1996

It wasn't the first time I traveled abroad. Extravagant shrubs made this different. Words mixed with their secretions.

Rhymes collided with the foliage as if the natives had recalled bits of poems lost in a forest. They flipped from arias to monotone chants without warning.

I memorized their melodies in a night correspondence course designed for travelers. And I met a couple of characters, Gail and Leo, pals of mine, we hung out for a time. I've forgotten much since.

Back here in Pennsylvania we say, "Throw the cow over the fence some hay."

Burning Pyres

On the road, close to the sea, burning pyres sucked the night sky then collapsed. Shouts rose with the smoke and flames. The fires might have been burning garbage. (After all it was Monday night.)

Evidently, this was a commemoration of those who died in Albino riots. A band of imprisoned Albinos gathered secretly at dawn in the twilight purple it brought to their complexions. They tried to escape. The local militia tracked them down the night of July 15, 1858 -- a slaughter. Red blood curdled on alabaster skin.

For this anniversary, a rowdy crowd gathered in the town square and pushed towards the flames, round the pyres. Police sprayed water on their clothing. Embers turned to ashes. Coals expired in the square. The screen went blank and flickered darkly. A ragged barefoot girl held her thumb up there.

The smell of sweet tobacco seeped through hotel cracks and mingled with the scent of mildew. After the news I fell asleep, and woke hours later with the squeak of bed springs in the next room. A soprano in the adjoining room pled in a minor key, "Lits bug no mor."

At breakfast I guessed who woke with that sigh. A blue eyed girl with a pout approached and asked if she and a friend could accompany me. "Wa nod a luft," she begged pointing to a balding paunchy baritone with a stubby six o'clock shadow who looked like a cat burglar. "Wil shore the gis and glove directions."

I told her I could play the trumpet. She swished orange juice, then stretched her neck and gazed at the morning star through a ceiling crack, and gargled, "Me Gail, hymn Leo."

Parked outside was the car I had rented for the trip, a 1956 Citroen convertible. It looked a little spacy with bullet indicator lights, rear view mirrors, and various other War of the World accouterments. It had the profile of an overturned bathtub. The cockpit seated four people comfortably. The very innovative feature was the hydraulic suspension system. The parked car sits just a few inches off the ground. But when you turn on the key, water rushes into the shock absorbers from a central pond apparatus just behind the engine. This causes the shocks to expand and the car rises to a proper driving height. At the end of your drive the water flows back into the pond, and the car sinks to the ground. The ride itself is smooth. You float along the road, dreamy. You lean with the turns as you corner the way you might maneuver a sailboat.

There are three circular dials on the instrument panel, a speedometer, an odometer, and a clock. The clock, a chronograph, was obsessively detailed with large numbers for the hours and minutes and a succession of concentric rings--one for days of the month, one for months of the year, and a last for years, ending with the year 1999. What I liked best was the steering wheel. Its shaft rose from the dash and then curved to one side attaching to the wheel only at one point.

The Eucalyptus Spring

Light fell through shade
 Of Eucalyptus. A cool spring
 Flowed from a bamboo stem.
 Eucalyptus clacked and
 Clattered. The bumpy road
 Was straight and marrowed.
 Bones bleached white
 Came to litter
 Traveling east,
 We turned a corner,
 Fell down a slope
 A treeless plain.

We pulled into a dusty lot next to a white cafe. The lot was crowded with chickens. A circular globe, "Taxica" graced the pump. An attendant shooshed a goose, and asked,

"How much mam? "

"Thriller up,"

"No thrills here, your muffler's loose.
 Wait inside
 Have a lime
 Its happy hour
 Your just in time."

"In tomb for wit?"

"To watch the fright."

The bar smelled dank and musty. Smoked sausages hung from rusty hooks.. A fat old man slouched at a table facing a young boy. As the old man dozed, the youth fiddled with some green beans. The younger man wore shiny red shorts that read "EVERLASTING." The older man's shorts read "EVERLASTING" too, but his were blue.

"Wots the smill?" Gail trilled.

"Don't look at me, that's sausage aging,"

"Wits the gum?"

"Wait and see."

"Who err, they"

The bartender inhaled and sang with his arms outstretched:

"Two contenders,
Odds are even,
Make a play
Come, on girl,
Don't take all day

Gail threw in a few coins. Outside old horse side stepped and jerked its neck. A bell round its neck jingled. The boy stopped shucking. The old man slouched. The one horse grazed on hay.

On the road
A long time after
Blurs of heat,
And little shade.
All the fields were
Burnt and blackened.
Green glass balls
On telephone poles
Held silver lines
Which carried voices
Trysts and whispers
Through its lace.

I'm not sorry.
For this warning.
A simple fact
I say though lest,
I will forget
Before the morning:
The sun fast fades
In the west.

"Ho?"

"Tell?"

"If that's the star
Of the evening
Venus near the setting sun,

The hotel must be
 On the mesa
 Round the corner
 Up the run."

"Ho?"

"Tell?"

In the failing light atop the mesa a group of girls stood around a swimming pool which glowed sky blue. The sun was gone. The jagged lines of the distant hills intersected their aerobics in silhouette.

Morning Song

"Lots go."

"Jist a cripple mo,
 "Dent be tough."

"But wo ho miles to fro!"

"Jup a wink."

"No tomb to think."
 Oop and it at."

"I'll brush my heath."

"A relief."

A side street
 Beneath an arch
 Cobblestones
 A grove of larch
 On the side, some grazing sheep
 Shaded in a wooden keep.
 But things soon turned dry and then.....

"Tin rot again."

"Yon arid plain?"

"Woy nit, but what's those pricks?"

"Thorny stems of glissy geen."

"And pointy spikes,

Mak it seem
Like pincushs in a
Seemster's dream."

"True, there's flivers
On the tips,
But not enough
To wet my lips."

"Uts sow dry,
And war's the trees,
If only they would
Huv some leaves."

"Thus is tru
It's knot so shady."

"Din the road,
Who's that lady?"

Just ahead, thumbing, stood a statuesque woman wearing a white T shirt and cut off jeans.

"Peck er up."

"Ned a lift?
Just slid in Sid."

I must admit that's not her name,
And she's not a common dame,
Nor is she young, or is she old,
Last seen in Naples I am told.

"Who ear you?"

"What a frock. Muck ma
wan to liff alot.
(Gail was jealous.)
Thems strange duds."

"But don't be stupid,
She's not Diana
Nor is she Cupid.
Let's put this all aside,
And let her come
On for a ride.
After all, she's all we've got."

It doesn't sin
Lick it's, a lot.
And thor's some roam,
So why not."

"Hope in." warbled Leo.

"Pluzz. We're running lute."

The hitchhiker responded with a robust contralto:

"And to where
will you commute?"
"First in this livid light
Let me leisurely recite
Names and dates re. this plain,
Which seem most timely to explain.
And why the common folk are wrong,
With rain and plain in any song."

"Can't this wet till a little litter?
We're getting where.
I'm all a jitter.
My nez is red
I'm getting borned,"

"Lets lend an or
So we can lorn
There's nigh where ills
Thet we can torn.
We mist admit
We're probe
Lay lost
Or per chance,
At least adrift."

Leo was conciliatory, and Hitch, that's what we came to know her as, sang on:

"I should tell you soft and clear,
I have anecdotes for you to hear.
But most important,
It's I who know
The only way
For you to go.
Through the circles one, two, three,

It's the route, you will see.
 First the yellow, then the red,
 Then the blue,
 Though all are dead.
 Their lips still sing
 Of a time
 A quiet hymn."

"But all I wanted was a swim."
 (Gail was getting impatient.)

"Though the guns raged
 From the shore,
 And dead mysteries
 Are no more.
 And though high hopes have turned to stone,
 Now that we are left alone,
 In these ruins our souls dis sever,
 From the quick and from the clever.
 Not all is lost in this array."

(Leo conceded.)

"Lots be gin,
 And in our way."

"Pilocereus..."

There would a long pause. Gail sighed. She didn't trust Hitch.

"Opuntia vulgaris..."
 "Peireskia..."

"Nit much for smill talk."
 (Gail retorted.)

"Rhipsalis..."

"A diz is?
 Lets chugg the subject"

"Don Alonso Perez de Guzman,"

"Is that your husban?"

"took over the Armada reluctantly from the Marquis of Santa Cruz and sailed on the 20th of May 1588 according to the Julian Calender. On the 10th of June when the ships had rounded Cape Finisterre it was scattered by squalls. On

the 20th of July it was seen off Lizard and sailed past Plymouth. On the afternoon of July 25th when the fleets sailed near the Isle of Wight, a shift of wind offered a chance for close action, but it proved a false start. On the 29th the engagement was hot and the enemy so superior that the Duke of Medina Sidonia lost heart. His large vessels were indeed so helpless that only a timely shift of wind saved many from drifting on the banks of the Flanders."

"Wha?" Gail slurred.

"Mammi

Ilaria..."

"Now a nupple?

It mocks no sense."

"I'm grotting tense.

Let's drip her off.

And then commence."

"Wit

Upon reflection

There may be a rail

connection."

Leo was hopeful.

"I'm sorry for this boring train,

If you'd like I'll try again."

"Moby we could dick a brick.

Thus a cafe by a lic."

"There's no cafe.

There's no lake.

That's why I'm here,

It's for your sake.

A mirage, you're all a blister

Sip this up,

My little sister."

The hitchhiker pulled out a thermos, and offered Gail some water.

"The names I gave were cacti there.

The dates of the Armada fair,

Which sailed the seas then ran aground.

And that is why no trees abound.

Cut for masts, bows and decks,

These cacti grow in there place.

But all of that was years ago
 And all of this is now and so,
 Let's be calm and make our way
 Through the rings by end of day.

The road will soon turn down a glen
 To the baths, we'll wait till then.
 So to you my wayfare fellows,
 The first we'll see:
 A certain yellow."

I was happy to get back to a yellow road. The sky was clear and filled with fluffy white tennis clouds. But down the road, the first circle was not yellow. A concession stand sold only bleach and vanilla icecream. Tiers of seats surrounded the circle. White pillars supported the small overhang of every tier and curved arches connected them. A parched wooden gate opened to a ramp which led under the tiers to dark and shoddy stalls.

The vast sandy circle was almost empty. In the elliptical shade of a cockeyed sun a crumpled paper cup rolled in the dust.

Bits of litter blew about. Various hoofed and human footprints pocked the ring. Particles of sand broke from the surface carried by wind. First a few, then so many flew, they obliterated the tiers of seats, the litter and the shadow of the litter.

Yellow

At the south end of town a tall arched bridge crossed a deep ravine with a stream below. The brick road veered sharply round and down the steep incline. At the foot of the hill we passed a shady nook where, according to Hitch, exiles had built underground baths. They were long abandoned. A grove of lemon trees shaded the spot. Buttercups sprouted between cracks in the stones.

Honeysuckles clung to the lemon trees. Seven tunnels stood in tangent. Yellow lichen crusted the damp stones of their interiors. Water bubbled from cracks in the ceiling walls. It soaked the spongy moss and puddled in the dank.

No one used the baths any more. They lay empty after the war.

"On November 9,
 1939
 In the shade of the lemon trees,
 A child was murdered,"

Hitch sang in her rich contralto.

"The thieving murderer
 Snatched her nose.
 (Torn from her tender face
 With a rusty pair of pliers.)

The pliers were recovered in a nearby stream. The girl had gone to buy tomatoes, a bad idea, but never reached the market. They searched for days. In consideration for her grieving parents the inspector didn't mention what happened to her nose. No one heard the screams. A kid found her panties floating in the stream, further evidence snagged on a branch of rosemary.

A woman who lived several doors away from the girl's house refused to give her name, but said early the next morning as a radiant sun rose above the distant hills at the far side of the valley, "It's like panic in the building. You don't know what's going on. Everybody is afraid to go out. "

Red

"We're gonna day it all in a do?" Gail trilled, jumping back and fourth from a low B to a middle A, as she bounced into the car. Leafless trees appeared, broken masts on the horizon. Their dead branches supported enormous nests intricately woven with weathered twigs and faded strips of cloth. Ospreys stood motionless on shaggy lofts like porcelain statues. Their belly feathers fluttered. The earth turned sienna then black. Hills folded over to vermilion nooks. Thistles flapped by the road like pom poms in a silent cheer. Palms sheltered four fluted pillars. A couple of old statues lay crumbled in dirt next to a stripped mattress and rotting cherries. Spotted amber beetles clung to a neatly trimmed hedge, as assure crickets posed. A cat slinked through the underbrush.

Hitch lifted the mattress. Five pale fingers twitched in the underlying soil like the spindly air roots a different orchid. Their rancid flesh stank. Salamanders slithered to find darkness. Worms withdrew from the light. Spiders crawled left and right. A centipede curled into a ball. A mouse sat up on its haunches. It blinked an eye then froze. The cat spotted prey and pounced crying,

"Mao,
Mao,
Mao."

The putrid side of a face lay partly submerged. It was an angular face with an arched eyebrow. An ear was missing. Gail trembled. In her mind there were unanswered questions:

" Ear in the hit afternin,
With a kill evening briz,
Who sicked kick, or
Licked pissy hir?
Did they
Strip niked in the rifus,
And fick
In
Flickering pitches of sinlot .
In Niples by the bay,
I wiked where cripples leaned
against thick trinks and rubbed
their bidies tigither and tried, and

gripped groins with fingers and
gripped trees. Nit ear, nit ear."

A tool normally used for snipping lay nearby. Gail trilled:
"I thit he wa uh
Red Sqa, pre
Served,
And not ear ritting."

A Chorus of Fire Flies

Late night bullfrogs croaked full force. No one had booked a hotel. We looked to the stars, but ominous clouds crowded the sky,
and it seemed like rain for ever and ever.

We stumbled on a shed the size of an outhouse with a gothic opening at eye level which was covered with a screen. Behind the screen hung a curtain.

A refreshment stand improvised with a barrel stood off to one side. We bought a couple sodas and asked directions. The urchin who sold us the drinks peddled us tickets to the evening's performance,

And it seemed like rain for ever and ever.

A man and a woman on either side of the shed held jars filled with fire flies. They released the insects gradually. A gramophone provided background music, and the two ventriloquists sang vocals. The kid who sold cokes played a snare.

The bugs spent most of their time in the air. The performance opened with a comedian that circled and blinked a few inches above the floor while one of the ventriloquists threw an existential joke, "Knock, Knock" -- "Who's"

And it seemed like rain for ever and ever.

For a strip-tease, microscopic bits of meticulously sewn clothing dropped on the stage, a couple of gloves, and a garter the size of a curled eyelash. This garter was so small you could only spot it by using one of the magnifying glasses which hung on strings on either side of the curtain.

As a finale, a miniature pipe organ rose from a trap door in the floor of the platform. They rigged it with tiny water spouts that rose and fell with the volume of the music,

And it seemed like rain for ever and ever.

They released a dozen or so scantily clad bugs glued to micro umbrellas singing slowly.

"Welcome and hail to thee!
Patron, to-day:
We're flying and humming,
We hear and obey."

But with the change of pace one ventriloquist stomped his foot on the stool bumping the stage. The screen fell off. The ventriloquists stood aghast as they saw their entire troop fly away blinking a Sagittarian flight through the night sky.

Undaunted they threw their voices heavenward, following the insects aloft,

"It's time to make hay
 What can we say?
 We're taking our walkin' canes
 To the fast lane
 We're putting on our high hats
 And our white spats,

Cause we got lightning,
 Lightening, lightening
 Where we

Blue

Crunchy snow covered the road aside a frozen stream. Smoke whiffed from a wooden hovel. Burning peat flavored the crisp night air.

Hoves had compacted the snow into half round sheaves of ice. High round rolls of hay flanked the door. A blazing fire warmed black manure piled high on the floor. Two foals snuggled.

Luminescent horizon light silhouetted three gigantic forms around back. The beasts grunted, exhaled, and stared at us. They nudged our shoulders with their noses and fogged our glasses with their breath. There were two black stallions, one a few hands taller than the other. We didn't see the massive gray mare at first. Wanton gray spots speckled her haunches like camouflage in the snowy scene. A thick mane cascaded over the side of her neck and great swathes of hair covered her feet. Light fluffs of snow fell. A halo in the still dark gray sky surrounded the moon. Beyond a gutter, metallic fragments lay scattered in the snow, chrome bumpers and grills glittered.

An old Chevy pulled up the path, fan-tailing side to side. The car stopped near the horses and parked long enough for the rear windows to steam. The tail fins glistened. Thick white smoke billowed from the exhaust. The mist tumbled over itself in the cold air folding into the vapor of the horse's heavy breath. The head lights illuminated the dump like a stage.

Engravings embellished the scattered metal junk. Twisted bumpers and mail, door handles, helmets, odometers, breastplates, gas caps, tonlets, rear view mirrors, sheilds, alettes, hubcaps, jambeis, and corslets lay frozen in the snow. Occasionally a swatch of velvet popped stiff above the surface near whisky and scattered petals.

What evidence now?--a philips-head screw driver? a stained patch of snow?

A swath of hair twisted through metal and brambles. We stood round the tangle. Gail broke the silence; her voice was hollow in the thin air. She began low and soft then gradually rose but did not peak. The syllables fluttered, fell, rose again and died. Leo lingered on a high note. Then his voice faltered and died. I tried to hum. My valves were frozen. My horn was dumb.

The face in the virgin snow was dreamy. The glassy eyes froze open, the mouth a melancholy smile. Two punctures like dimples on either side of the lips marked where her jaw was screwed. Suddenly I recalled a girl one summer sunning herself on the beach, flipping through pages.

The Chevy turned round and shimmied down the slippery lane obliterating the icy

hoof prints of the hot breathed horses.

The Way Out

From these icy heights we descended. The snow gradually melted. In time, the lane turned to dust. Just before our final descent which would take us to the sea, we all had an incredible urge to pee. A dust storm left several cars stranded above a precipice. We could hardly see. The sloped road curved so sharply. Leo had brewed morning Dejong tea. Where the road finally leveled another spring flowed like the first spring, a long time ago.

Interlude

Several months had passed since the lemon murder, the cherry assassination, and the moon homicide. We found a cheap hotel, got drunk on J et B, a local whisky, and lost track of time.

Hitch grew distant. One day she just packed her T-shirt and left. She said she had shown us what she betrothed, and that was that.

We could hear the bustle of the streets: the vendors, the electric zip of the streetcar turning the corner, the bicycle bells, the clack of sandals on the cobblestones, the chickens carried to market, the street urchins peddling tea, the three penny gamblers, the bells in the steeples competing with time, the shouts and greetings, whispered trysts through the wooden slats of our French shutters. The blades of a ceiling fan drooped down as it sluggishly churned the heavy air. The bed was a tangle of brass spirals, bookends to a saggy mattress.

We jammed in the cramped shower stall and slopped around. This led to further intimacies and painting. Leo painted tigers, parrots, fish and cows. One day I found him panting.

On hangover days we sent out for mushrooms. We made breakfast love and fried eggs and had sex lettuce for lunch. We didn't sing about the nights we had seen or the days we had heard, or the smells we had felt on our song.

Summer faded, and September with its cumulus melodies and crisp skies --its weight towards an end--brought with it the gusty sirens of fall.

Mixing the Ruins

A long time ago, before anyone danced a tango or swayed to a samba, the sea hollowed out a tunnel in the lava rock near Sorrento. The cove wasn't far from the place where, Vesuvius erupted. Some people made it to the water and escaped in boats, but the hot lava foiled anyone who attempted to swim. As the lava flowed down the mountain it buried a dog that was making its way to the sea. The ruins of a Roman fortification stand on the bluffs just above the cove. In the fading distance you can see the town of Sorrento draped over the cliffs. You can hear the church bells ringing faintly.

It was late afternoon. Soft grass covered the knoll where a group of young scouts sang quiet folk songs with guitars. A small stack of handbooks lay piled in the center of the circle. A fishing boat turned the corner around the jutting rocks far below, flocked by delirious gulls. Two fragile boys, naked except for their scuba masks and snorkels, waded in the cool November water of the little cove, searching. They stooped and pushed their faces under the water with the coming of each wave. The language they spoke segregated

vowels and consonants. Was this good?

They stuttered some t's, v's, b's, or d's. The wave swept in and flooded the little pool. They put their faces down in the water while it was high and peered beneath the surface as the wave receded. After they caught their breath, they mumbled a few a's, e's, o's, i's or u's. The waves swelled anew. They put their faces under again. As it ebbed their mouths uttering consonants rose once more above the water.

"What are they looking for?" a boy scout asked. The voice was curiously distant like the bells of Sorrento. "I don't have a clue," replied a girl scout softly. "Perchance they are looking for soft shelled crabs," said the boy scout. "I don't think so," said the girl scout, "It's November and there are no soft shelled crabs here. All the crabs have discarded their shells and gone south. "Then they are looking for black sea urchins," said the boy scout. "They can't be looking for black sea urchins," the girl scout said, "The urchins too prefer warm water this time of year.

There was a long pause. Several waves washed ashore and the horizon, which had been amber, turned lavender. "They must be mixing the ruins," whispered the girl scout as if to tell a secret. "Every November about this time, children walk about ancient sites and place bits of pottery, glass and other shards which have washed ashore from elsewhere in the world. The children take the broken fragments and plant them in the ruins above, as if they had been there since antiquity. Quite often they bring bits and pieces, coins, and broken pots from places as far away as Madagascar. This secret practice is ancient and widespread. Archaeologists have made countless erroneous assumptions as a result. There is no way of knowing."

The boys muttered. The innocents sang, and new waves washed the shore. Soon it was dark and the boys, swinging their sack of deceptions, scaled the stone stairs to the bluffs.

Finding an "I"

Further south a small road runs along the cliffs. The lane has no line marking the middle and no signs to indicate directions or speed limits. Turnoffs appear unannounced, their destinations enigmas. These options occur less frequently and in time, disappear completely. This is the "scenic" route which avoids cities, even small towns. The road twists and turns as it follows the coast.

After we drove for twenty miles or so, a makeshift sign, a weathered board nailed to a wooden post, read "DEAD END AHEAD." A ferry schedule announced the time of a single crossing, 6 P.M.

A barrier blocked the ever narrowing road. It consisted of three wooden beams. Two of these measured thirty inches long, the third measured sixty inches. The two shorter pieces fastened to the longer perpendicularly at their centers.

To put it simply, it looked like an "I," but it lay on its side. If we considered it a barrier it should have remained in this reclining position. Then, of course, abiding by the rules of the road, Gail, I, and Leo, could have advanced no further. But if we considered it an "I" there was no problem. All we had to do was move it. It was all white. In Pennsylvania barriers are customarily painted with red diagonal stripes. In any case, whether one considered it a barrier or an "I," it was blocking the road. If 6 P.M. was the only crossing we would have to hurry.

We pushed it aside, but Gail felt an attachment. So we tied it to the roof of the car.

To make up for lost time, I stepped on the gas. The "I" rattled and the wind whistled through it.

The Tulip Tree and a W.C.

An plentiful tulip tree shaded a last turnaround. The budding tree smelled like all the perfumes of Grasse. Waves lashed against rocks at the foot of the cliff. Far away, an old man fished in a small green boat that flopped in the waves. An outhouse door swung and creaked beneath the tree. The auto's engine died, but an old Hogie Carmichel tune still crackled from the radio. I would have attributed this malady to spark plugs or to a leak in the radiator, or to a broken fan belt, or a clogged fuel line. But, whatever the diagnosis, it didn't matter. The road ended here.

If this wasn't enough for one day, far up in the tulip tree, a man swayed. He hung from a rope. His suit was wrinkled, and the shirt collar frayed as if it had constantly rubbed up against something raspy. His jacket hung open and an inside label read: "Are-man-I?" Worn soles on scuffed wingtips dangled beneath exposed ankles. His arms hung softly behind his back. The fingers twitched. The assassins of Lincoln had stood on a platform to be hanged; There was no platform here. The assassins of Lincoln had asked the hangman to hold an umbrella to shade them from the sun; There was no umbrella here. It was all so circumstantial.

A distant rumble interrupted the image. A black cloud, the shape of a Mediterranean pine mushroomed from the distant hills. A few minutes after the initial blast, black ash rained from the sky. First it drizzled, but soon it poured dirty. Broad sheets of fire raged brightly against the dark sky and leaping flames flared in distant hills. The earth shook tremendously which caused the tulip tree and hanging body to sway in opposite directions from each other. Hot pumice, often used to take off dead skin in the bath, rained down with black ash. Shrubs and bushes, which bordered the cliff, parted at one point, indicating a path down the side. The path looked steep and treacherous. Black ash covered both the man and the pink buds as if he had become part of the tree, and the tree had become him.

The white "I" was still tied to the top of the car. Like the man and tulips, the ash had blackened it. Gail demurred. She wouldn't leave the "I" behind so I flipped it on my shoulder.

Then a glimmer of hope appeared in the murk. A deep horn sounded long signaling the docking ferry for Capri, right on time. It was a long way down. Stone steps facilitated descent in some places, but slippery ash covered the path. Small trees grew on the side so it was possible to let yourself fall and then grab a trunk to stop the momentum. The great hulk of the ferry pulled into shore and docked. Its port and starboard lights flickered through the din. A metal gate lowered and the lights of its interior blasted from the rear abyss.

It was six to six. Sweat poured over our faces as we scrambled. We tumbled, she over me, and I over he. The "I" flew wildly overhead. We slung an arm and caught a branch. But the branch, a birch, snapped, and we fell further. Luckily the "I" had propped itself horizontally between two trunks, and we rolled up against it like three stooges dazed and bruised, black and blue. We heard the departing horn. When we arrived at the clearing, the ferry had already pulled out. It was evening raining ash, but you could see the T.V.s inside the ship tuned to late night strip show called Culpo Grosso. Hope waned.

Hot lava which flowed steadily from the hills reached the top of the cliff above us. Huge drops of it slurped off and fell down the side of the cliff like icing from a cake. It set the brush on fire. The sky filled with black smoke and the temperature of the water rose dramatically.

Then the fisherman appeared, riding waves through the black ash and smoke. The sail was ripped and useless, but he had one oar which he used to pull the boat ashore. A small outboard engine marked "Alpha" dangled on the back of the boat. His arthritic hand twitched as he tried to thread an ignition wire through the top of the single spark plug. The raining ash subsided as we sailed further from shore. We sailed all night. The only sounds were the pattering motor and the waves lapping the bow. The boatman sang stories with a rough voice like Jimmy Durante's. He sang of sweeping popcorn in cinemas after silent films. Then I fell asleep.

As I woke, the island of Capri appeared in the misty half light of morning. Its jagged profile etched on the horizon. He dropped us off at an ancient dock, a place of vast porticoes. He told us we would never see him again. He asked us what we wanted to do with our belonging. We told him he could keep the "I" if he wanted it. Maybe he could use it as a shelf or something. He tipped his hat and sang a brisk good-by in C.

Port Ancienne

A ramp led from the water to a metal gate. Light and airy it was. Cherubs adorned it. Most of the town was in ruin. But it was extremely tidy. A crew of street cleaners swept in the wake of each person's path thereby eradicating all footprints. Recently restored roofs covered most of the houses. Stores sold grains, and wine. One shop pressed clothing. A fire ravaged its wooden press two thousand years before. Laurel and other Latin shrubs grew in the hardy gardens. A phallus carved in a stone oven at the bakery joked of rising. The aroma of fresh bread wafted through the gardens.

The elaborate bath houses were spectacular and varied: some for men, some for women, some for both, some for hot water, some for cold, some for men with hot water and some for woman with hot water....Cleansing possibilities seemed endless. Red frescoes depicting floggings adorned walls.

Everyone had gone to market. Ancient vegetables filled the stalls--blimp cucumbers without any bumps, glider lemons, parachute artichokes, jet apples, night calabash, kipper beans, and hop peppers used for making spicy beer. Piper cub grapes, flirt lemons with blood centers, eyelash dill, and sweet cherries lay side by side in the overflowing bins.

A hunch backed old woman bought a flowered twig and nibbled on the bark. The petals shimmered, fell, and bounced on the ground. She paid for it with a red note and received a pink penny in change.

A lane led up the hill from the far side of the market square. A row of brightly painted shops lined the shady road. One shop sold Spanish guitars inlaid with exotic woods: Indigo teak, Honduras rosewood, and Brazilian porn. The proprietor had only one arm, his left. He said he lost his right arm in the navy. He never married, but was proud of the medals dangling on his chest.

This was the last shop at the edge of the park. Further up at a turn in the road marble statues of athletes spouted water from their mouths on either side of a basketball net sculpted in stone. A granite ball lay still in the pool beneath. An inscription on the

stone headboard read:

"soft push shot,"
 "junior sky hook,"
 "high legged dash up the middle,"
 "finger roll lay-up," and
 "final nifty pass."

A few more twists and turns.
 Green park benches.
 Spots of sunlight
 And sparrows flitting from light to dark.

A suicidal squirrel jumped from the top of a tree. But after a tumble in the air, he spread his legs and floated, landing noiselessly on a bed of leaves.

The Palaces of the Moors

A ragged beggar stood beside a tall boxwood hedge at the top of the hill. He jiggled a cup and stuttered a Dylan tune.

A narrow entrance cut through the leafy green wall. It led to a maze. Signs pointed the way through. They consisted of quotations with arrows like Brillcream ads on old country lanes. The first sign read: "Beauty of mine, sit before me. Let me peruse you and always remember you like this." Its arrow pointed straight ahead. The second sign said: "Oh!" Its arrow pointed left. The third read, "Waiter, champagne!" This sign pointed right, then:

<-- "If music be the food of love, play on!"
 "What's the matter with you?" -->
 <-- "It's finished."
 "What's finished?" -->
 <-- "We're never going to see each other again, never."
 "That's ridiculous. That's ridiculous." -->
 <-- "It's not a joke."
 "Oh, you dirty rat.!" -->
 <-- "It's finished."

With the last inscription the maze opened to a spacious garden. Here you could see the valley below planted with vineyards, glistening in golden sunlight. At the far end of the garden cedar trees grew on both sides of a tall door. A grimacing sculpted face stared from the center of the door. Shoulder length curls flanked the head.

Inside, an officious bespeckled ticket agent sat stiffly at a desk. An infant slept beside her in a wicker crib. She took a pencil from a knot in her hair and tallied the numbers one, two, three, but sold us one ticket, the only one for the day. It was late afternoon. Swirled adornments and scrolls filled the first room. Low anterior rooms led one to the other. Tapestries of unicorns and rams romping hung on their walls. This air smelled of mildew.

A doorway opened to a room with a high white ceiling. A highbacked chair set in the center under the axis of the ceiling and faced a fountain. Five stone lions sat on their haunches in a circle. Streams of water shot from holes in their mouths and splashed to the pool beneath. From this pool a narrow stream of water flowed through a channel cut in the floor. The channel flowed under an archway and out of the chamber. After several yards it trickled to a moat which surrounded a circular dome. Plump fish with bulbous eyes wiggled in the doughnut pool. Forget-me-nots sprouted round the lawn.

A vertical slit cut the far side of the white dome. No windows, just a door. A sculpture of a nose doubled as a peephole, the bronze door knob was shaped like an ear, the keyhole, a mouth.

Gail pressed a button over a letterslot which in another country might have been a doorbell. The door shook, clanked and spewed out a thin can. She popped it open and gulped. The sudden intake of gas gave her hiccups.

Tawana's Sonata

We knocked. There was no answer. With a turn of the ear the door slipped ajar. Inside: Moonlight and a girl.

Her dark skin glistened. Fluffs of white fur littered the floor--fallen comets torn from white leatherette. A couple of chinzy boots lay sprawled beneath a table piled with star charts. She gazed into a long brassy tube which pointed to the sky. Sweeping brass arms craddled the instrument. A polished gauge listed planets, its arrow zeroed on Venus. She steadied the tube with her fingertips as she adjusted the eyepiece with the forefinger and thumb of her right hand. Her song shared silence with the strains of a distant guitar, a guitar from the far away, single, one armed admiral's Spanish guitar shop. She sang of her father:

Who adored watching Venus,
But thought it an asteroid
That flies the earth once,
A pilgrim through Brooklyn.

Her father, a killer,
Grew ancient, not wiser.
His tastes were post modern.
She spent the night here,
Fearing his passion.
And discovered that
Venus suckles the fun,
And that mirth like a sister
Circles it too.

She dare not let on
And risk her demise,
Nor would she comply
With misguided concepts:
The sun like an ember,

Circles the earth.
Or that Venus
Will fade in the future.

Gail offered :

"Near woods she would lie,
With it, dating convicts
Ta sin, Look an umber! hic
Cycles the mirth.
End! that meaneath
Ill food for the new chores.

Leo, blissed, improvised :

"Ner words shall we die,
Will is mating kinship.
The din licks a slumber
Sickles and birth.
In he who he dreameth
He soothest no more."

The stuttering beggar who had been standing outside the maze, and the ticket taker with the tied up bun, lisp, and baby, left their posts for the rehearsal. They stood by the door in harmony. As for me, I could see incoherent images of fantastic beginnings flit by me like dreams to the sky. Or if I would delight my private hours with music or with poem, where so soon as in our native language can I find that sollace?

"I hip that ithers,"
Nix chince a rind,

Will feel not melancholy.
That a time will come

Win sings such as thus

Will no longer be....
ahara ga ega a.
(The baby woke.)

And nay win will fier,

Going home in the

Ra, laa, umpf--

gadown

or meanlight.

Do wop

Becaouth of, hic

Astronomical differences.

And what of the moon?

Her father never argued the moon. He ignored its risings as it measured each month with silver increments.

Of Saturn? Or Mars?

bunbuh;hpp,mm.
mmmNg
llgplplex
GGGGGGH YYUG

The key changed.
 The tempo slowed,
 A melody ascended a scale.
 And the last I heard of Gail
 and Leo,
 They were doing dusk somersaults
 And Saturn cartwheels
 Like a couple of kids
 In the twilight garden
 Of our time,
 Or Jupiter?

She forgave him *pfff* Mars,
 For she had *ga gillimph pa*
 Seen Mars for the f-f-first
 Time too. So I thought
 You were dying, but you were just living your life. Your eyes fell
 back, your body shook. Your cheeks were red and your feet were blue. I knew without
 your little hands and toes I had already lived most my life through. But now I wanted to
 live it again, all our law and story strewed.

"Shhhhhhhhh" (The ticket taker tried to quiet the baby, but to no
 avail.)

Sh-sh-sh-e can never....
 Return and
dah dah dah

I played revelry.

Must stay here *dayahavrrrum* for *umpppp* ever,
 'Neath high vaulted *ba ba* ceilings
 s-s-surrounded b-b-by
da plzzz zzzzzz (The baby drooled, the silvery spit dangled
 and swayed.)

Splendor

 And old c-c-c-crusted
 ah ddd da yi

a girl sunning herself?
 Fountains,

Ahhgruphfzzzz lah ga
 Trickling.
 Bah bah black sheep,
 Have you any wool?

 With great golden fish,
 And marvelous pillars,
 Yes sir, yes sir,
 And the dark empty thrones...
 (Three bags full)

 ...of the Moors.
 For the master
 Won! for the dame,
 And sun for the little boy
 Who lives down the lane.

Bill Beckley, New York, April 17, 1996