

"Name your daughter *Fecund*," she said.

I thought that name more beautiful than any I had ever heard. "I will come to you," I said. "Down this river when it flows again, to these trees."

She smiled, and behind her I saw the desert greening.

I made my recommendation to the World Bank, and they accepted it. But Aissa Seibou did not leave me in anger. I agreed to stay on with her in Niamey through the summer to help her find outside funding to develop the Zermaganda mines. Ahmid and I followed her jeep back to Niamey, down the dry Niger. We stayed maybe half a kilometer behind her, out of her dust.

Once we rounded a bend and ahead of us, against the bank, I could see the whitened bones of some great animal.

"Hippopotamus," Ahmid said. "Extinct here now forever."

"Maybe not," I said.

"Ah, that Allah should send us hippopotamus again," Ahmid said.

I had him stop by the bones, and we walked over to them. The skull was gone. "It is worth money in the markets of Niamey," Ahmid explained.

All that was left were the ribs and leg bones, a few neck vertebrae. Dry leaves had blown in under the hips. I pulled out a handful of leaves and crumpled it.

"We should go," Ahmid said. "Aissa Seibou will be far ahead of us."

I picked up one dry leaf to take with me. We walked to the jeep and started driving again for Niamey. I held the leaf in my fingers, but it crumbled away piece by piece and blew off into the dust billowing behind us.

Dust

JOHN BENNION

*D*ry Springs, Utah: My Father's Property.

Since morning my eye has inclined toward the road below my cabin, perhaps because today marks the second anniversary of my removal to the desert. I'm expecting no one in particular, but the wavering, ground-heated air gives the alkali flat the appearance of movement, as if a cloud of white dust billows from its surface. Such a cloud could signify either an approaching vehicle or a misdirected shell, a gift from the chemical weapons testing facility north of here. My polygamist neighbors to the south might read the coil of dust as a sign of the Apocalypse. Leaving my window, I walk three hundred steps to the butte behind my cabin, halfway between Salt Lake City and Ely, Nevada.

Like the uncertain cloud, the butte presents diverse aspects: breast-shaped but with a column of lava on top, an igneous plug which my eye reads as either the thick phallus of the volcano's last thrust or as a hardened black nipple. From this vantage I inspect for any change in the size or direction of the potential cloud. The white blotch shimmers in the heat, dust motes whirling, as real as the pillar of fire in De Mille's *Ten Commandments*.

Rockwood, Utah: forty miles north-east. From my position I can see the range of mountains around my former home. My wife Sylvia and our five children—Benjamin, Abigail, Joshua, Ruth, and Heather—live there with my mother in the town named after my violent great-grandfather, James Darren Rockwood, who was once a body-guard to the prophet Joseph Smith. Anti-Mormon historians claim that Great-grandpa shot the mayor of Carthage, Illinois, Frederick Diggs, because Diggs harassed the People of God. Grandpa J. D.'s violence is genetic: my brother poisoned his boss after being fired and I experienced a sigh of religious fulfillment after completing the chemical blueprint for the nerve gas that killed the sheep.

In Rockwood, when I changed my daughter's diapers, she raised her arms above her head so I could tickle her. "Doat," she said. "Doat, Daddy." Her laugh comes from her belly, a gurgle of mirth. The faces of my wife and older son were identically solemn when I left them two years ago.

Alone on my inherited section of desert, I try to isolate my fear of the Apocalypse (predicted by the Book of Revelations, Jeanne Dixon, and anti-nuclear activists), but the core of my fear is as various as the cloud of dust.

Skull Valley Testing Grounds: The Limits of Non-radioactive Gas. Formerly I worked thirty miles to the northwest of here, where the government designs, tests, and stores lesser tools of the Apocalypse. To approach my bunker I passed through three barriers—woven wire, chain link, brick—presenting my I.D. to three sets of guards. My fingerprints were taken daily to insure that the guards, who saw me daily, hadn't mistaken my face.

As head chemist my duty was to create equations on a blackboard. Two second-level chemists transferred the numbers and letters to paper, a committee ordered the batch, and technicians, dozens of them, manipulated the stuff with long-armed machinery from behind thick glass windows. Working over my abstractions, I was elevated to a pure sphere, like a high priest delineating the mind of God.

Once on my way home from work, a great ball of orange gas

flung outward from one of the army's testing bunkers, boiling toward my car past the boundary fence. I shit myself, understanding that the mind of God held subtleties I hadn't yet grasped. I didn't breathe while I bounced across the desert road for three miles. Behind me the wind gathered the potent molecules, dissipating them upward toward the bench land of the nearby mountains.

The newspapers soon discovered that five thousand head of Hyrum Jorgenson's sheep had died. Government veterinarians explained that the animals were undernourished and had eaten loco weed. Within a year two movies were made about the event: *Rage*, starring George C. Scott, whose son was killed by the descending gas, and *Whiffs*, a spoof which showed tendrils of white drifting through nearby Tooele, Utah. The excitement of seeing their children as extras caused all my friends to forget the dead sheep. After viewing both movies I had the recurring dream that a technician found a way to disseminate my gas using an atomic warhead.

The summer of our first wedding anniversary, my water turn came between one and three in the morning. Several times Sylvia crept down through the cedars above our horse pasture, wrapped only in a blanket, and seduced me before I could remove my irrigation boots.

Lot's Wife: Does Flesh Turn to Sodium Inside Ground Zero? The morning after my bolt of terror, a Saturday, Sylvia and I lay in bed late. The children played in the next room, waiting for breakfast. "That's Daddy's briefcase," Benjamin said. "He won't like you playing with it."

"He won't mind," Ruth said. "He won't mind at all."

"He will."

"Daddy, Daddy, Daddy," the baby said into the shut door. Sylvia smiled but I couldn't: the word didn't seem to apply to me. We heard struggling and a shower of papers. Then I smiled. I didn't go to work the next Monday.

After the third month without a paycheck, Sylvia began to think my fears were silly. "You've got to face it that accidents happen." She shouted arguments at me. I shouted my fear back. Abigail started taking long walks. The baby crawled into our bed every

night, unable to sleep alone. Finally, insecure myself, I spanked her to make her stay in her own bed. Joshua wet his pants three days out of five at school. "I try to make it to the toilet, but I can't get there in time," he said. Their troubles, poignant as they were, had little to do with me. I told Sylvia I was going to live on my father's property in the desert.

"Dramatic," she said. "It's really just Andrea, isn't it? You're going to pretend you're pioneering with her." Hungry for land, my father had homesteaded farther and farther west. He finally abandoned my mother, who wouldn't leave Salt Lake to live in the desert with him. I couldn't understand either my father's motivating dream or the adulterous one Sylvia supplied for me.

When she plays the guitar, Sylvia sits in her rocking chair, eyes closed. Her fingers ripple on the strings, moving according to laws of clarity, grace, and intuition, marked by the rhythm of the moving chair.

An Acolyte's Guide to Androgynous Thinking. On this, the second anniversary of leaving my job, my town, and my family, I don't trust my eye's interest in the cloud of dust. My mental/emotional apparatus will take any non-event today and say, "This is what you were waiting for. The reverberation of the coming event impinged on your neurons, causing the condition you call anticipation." I say to my neurons, "Parascience." I deny that my brain picks up invisible signals and creates an impossible tension between me and some other object in time or space. Despite my lack of faith in my own nervous system, my flesh still organizes itself for someone's possible arrival. And I'm double minded again, split between rationality and mysticism, unable to be either a scientist or a saint, as if the bolt of fear at the swarming gas traumatized my corpus callosum, the bridge in my brain.

Coriantumr, Utah: Five miles south of my cabin lives a community of apostates from the Mormon church, two hundred strong, who have returned to the practices of the nineteenth-century pioneers—living in polygamy with all things in common. In preparation for the last day, they have hoarded wheat, honey, and rifles. To satisfy present needs they have a Montessori school and a dairy.

They sent a group of their brethren to Switzerland to purchase a strain of bacteria for culturing milk into cheese which they trade in Paradise, Utah, farther south. They want to pipe the water from my spring to their alfalfa fields so they can grow feed for another fifty cows, but they never mention that. A hundred miles southwest of them lies Ely, where madames and casino owners also live with everything in common.

A Star Named Kolob. My father, the former owner of this property, is in heaven, which the polygamists have determined to be on a planet near the star Kolob, a hundred trillion miles past our sun. God lives there, they believe, with all the spirits who are waiting to come to earth. My sixth through twelfth children are presently on Kolob also, they say. I doubt that my wife's rhythm and my own will coincide seven more times, but that doesn't concern the polygamists.

A Six-by-four Patch of Floor Under My Chalkboard: Vive Vas Deferens. During lunch in my bunker at Skull Valley Testing Grounds, I ate tomato sandwiches, the juice running down my fingers onto the floor. My co-chemist, Andrea Armstrong, looked at me across my red and dripping hands. Suddenly we were tumbling on the floor in the chalk dust and sandwich remains. Upon confessing this to my bishop, I was disfellowshipped. My lack of guilt disgusted him. My emotional incontinence worried me.

Salt Lake City, Utah: A Hundred Miles North-east of Rockwood. On the highest spire of the temple the gold statue of Moroni, his horn to his lips, prepares to signal the rolling together of the scroll. Sometimes in my dreams I hear his trump then sense the stealthy movement of the quivering gas.

My Journal: The Tao of Listing. Like Robinson Crusoe, I have a "certain Stupidity of Soul" and like him I trust lists, not of provisions, but of anchors in space and time. Lists are beautiful—they don't whine. They require no explanation, are non-ardent, non-causal, calm, static, unpretentious, a periodic table of my own elements. However I'm wary of listing *toward*, as in "Our ship listed toward starboard after it struck the rock" or "Since morning my eye has listed toward the junction."

A selection from Robinson Crusoe's list:

small Ropes and Rope-twine
 a Piece of spare Canvass
 a barrel of wet Gunpowder
 a great Hogshead of Bread
 three large Runlets of Rum or Spirits
 a Box of Sugar

My list:

the black ridge extending between here and Ely, Nevada,
 looking like God's darkening brow
 the bank of the spring my father cleared out twenty-five
 years ago
 the pattern of tomato seeds on Andrea's back
 my son skipping rocks across a green pond
 the harmony of equations across the blackboard, the
 purer image of the orange gas
 the Rorschach blots created in a mobile cloud

Andrea, Kolob, and I: The Physics of Attraction between Bodies. Sitting on the butte with the border of Nevada a wall behind me, I can sense the faint reverberations of these places and events. Closing my eyes, I sense here the great salt sea, here the mounds of stored bombs and gasses, here my wife and children, my friends, Kolob, the potential cloud, the polygamists. I feel the lines of tension—physical, disinterested—between myself and them.

The Angle of the Cloud: Playing the Futures. If the dust materializes from the north today, it may be Sergeant Mertzke, Recreation Administrator for the Officers' Club at Skull Valley Testing Grounds. He was once a hunting buddy of my father and me, but when I see his dust, I'll compose myself, adopting a persona which will fit into his consciousness—the cautious, land-loving son of my father or the chemist who strained after one too many formulae.

"Have they left?" he says, referring to the deer he wants to shoot by spotlight from the back of his jeep.

"A five-point, two spikes, six doe." I count on my fingers.

"Where're you going to get a better offer?" And he explains

again the idea of the R&R Area. He looks over this desert property, barren except for the fifty square yards around the spring, and sees officers and women of the New Army frolicking through the sagebrush.

"I don't know," I say. "Land's stable, money's mobile."

"But gauge the possibilities."

I won't disturb his vision of my father's property, but before he gets to the part about the raw hunters returning to the tents of their women, I will recast myself as the religious ascetic—a desert saint. I motion for silence, bowing my head. "I will ask." Holding him with my silence for five, maybe ten minutes. "No. My father on Kolob says no. He warns you that God is as displeased with you as he was with the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. His wrath is kindled."

"The hell it is," he says. He comes in the evening despite my warning, the fever for killing heavy in him. I flash the spotlight on this doe, that buck. He shoots and I hear the thud as his hollow-points hit muscle and bone. Even the shower of blood creates no motion inside of me. I could be butcher, conservationist, harvester, accomplice. Any of these could explain my relationship to the event: the spurting blood. Nothing moves.

On winter mornings my son built elaborate houses out of chairs, blankets, boards, and cushions. Once he and his siblings decided that the structure was a houseboat and that I was the shark. My baby lifted her body onto her toes, pumping her legs in place as she tried to escape. I ate her squealing body four times.

The Ark: How Many Roentgens Will Kill a Dove? If the dust arrives from the south, it will come slowly: three of the brethren from the polygamous camp navigating the ruts and rocks in their decrepit pickup.

"Brother Rockwood," the Elders say. "Toward the end of the world, wars and pestilence will be poured out upon the land. The moon will turn red like blood, and lightning will flash from the east to the west as the Son of Man approaches. Only the righteous—those who have entered the new order—will be spared."

I lead them along. "Vanity, vanity," I say. "The work of man's own hands will destroy the world. The only thing that will spare any

of us is your buried vault.”

“The mind of God moves in mysterious ways.”

They have a stainless steel and cement ark buried fifty feet under the desert. Its walls are six feet thick. They plan to go down there and emerge two by two, or rather one by seven, into the millennium. I could believe their myth that the Pentagon, public education, and the mind of Satan move in collusion toward the Apocalypse, but I don't let myself trust major abstractions anymore. At this point I profane the name of their God and deny their pragmatic mysticism. “I am a rational, enlightened humanist,” I say. “A member of a powerful conspiracy.” And they leave saddened because I can't comprehend their God or their milk barn.

Masters and Johnson on Solitude: Why Crusoe Kept Goats. Through a pleasant inversion of perspective, for a moment the potential dust is my own as I drive my white Ford Fairlane southward to Ely for the weekly venting of my seminal vesicles. In the back are stacks of *Chemical Review*, a weight which keeps me from getting stuck when it's winter. As I drive I call myself adulterer, hedonist, lecher, fallen saint: but all the fragments crumble before I can build them into a consistent foundation. I drive quickly past the polygamist town, made of two-story houses large as dormitories. Beyond their community the volcanic ridge resurfaces, connecting me with Ely.

I park my car in the city and shuffle toward a casino under the swirl of lights. For the girls and the card dealers, I am the rich and eccentric desert rat, dusty, hunch-shouldered. I engage the first prostitute I see, a sad-eyed woman with long black hair. In our room she takes off her clothing slowly, teasing my expectation. The absurdity of our puny climax drains the life from my penis, and I feel disconnected even from it. However she is an efficient woman, improvising with clever lips and tongue, and she makes my body perform. I spend the rest of the evening flipping the lever of a slot machine, anticipating a windfall.

The Prodigal Father. A northern originating dust could also signify my friend, Jonathan Boone, driving from Rockwood. “Howard, your wife is pining,” he says. “She's got no money. She's

getting food and clothing from the Bishop's Storehouse and that makes her ashamed. What can I tell her? Is what you're doing worth the problems you're causing?”

“I'm making no stand,” I say to him.

“Why do you stay here?”

“I've got no reform in mind,” I say.

“Just come back with me.”

“Please don't talk anymore,” I ask him. He doesn't understand the ways his questions strain my introspective faculty. For an hour we walk in the cool of the evening. The breeze has died and, bending low, we smell the mint growing on the banks of my spring.

Options on My Father's Property. If I wait long enough, my back against the butte, someone comes. Last week a friend who was a Democratic Socialist in college drove through. Still an idealist after twenty years, he looked around and his vision was powerful enough to transform the dead soil.

“This is like paradise,” he said.

“No, that's twenty miles farther on.”

“Can you picture a community here, all friends, lovers, family? People who have repudiated hate.” His voice nearly revived my own dreams of Zion, a place where people live in peace. “We could cast off the dead husk of society,” he said, and I understood he wanted to build a nudist retreat.

“I won't sell.”

“I don't want you to sell.” He was eager, running through the greasewood and shadscale, blinded by his narrow optimism, believing that, along with their socks and underwear, people can discard their impulse to aggression.

For him I was the sharp agribusinessman. “My god. This land can produce seven maybe eight tons of prime alfalfa to the acre, and you talk to me about a damn spa. That artesian spring brings up two or three feet of water per second, and all you can think of is some kind of orgy.” He left in his jeep, driving with only a centimeter of metal between him and the sky.

The Penultimate Human. Once a man drove through looking for the road to Topaz Mountain. He had his wife and children with

him—a family man on an outing. He showed me a sample of a geode he'd found. "We cut and polish these nippers. A real fine hobby for the kids, and it teaches them something. Might as well kill two birds with one stone." He laughed, watching for my response. "Every second they're polishing, they're learning geology. And then we sell them. Isn't it something? A real tidy income." The pleasant wife and children smiled and nodded.

His soft-bellied words irritated me, violated my integrity. I told him the blacktop began twenty miles farther. If the heat is great enough when the lightning flashes from east to west, his stones will melt to glass. For him my eyes became hard and clear, glistening with intensity. "Gog and Magog are gathering for battle: the Apocalypse draws near," I said. "I-Am-That-I-Am says 'Beware the wrath of the Lamb.'" Wide-eyed, he left me alone to ruminate on my father's property.

Personal History: An Escape from My True Self Before God. I can establish no relationship with any point or person secondary to myself in space which is as important as my fear. No end depends from a middle in my life, no new and glorious future grows organically out of my past, as Aristotle, Alexander Hamilton, Walt Whitman, Brigham Young, Horatio Alger, and Karl Marx promised.

When my son was two, he backed into a kettle we had set for scalding chickens. I tore off his diaper and turned the hose full across him. His back and buttocks peeled white wherever the water touched. Later he clawed the healing skin, biting my hands when I held his. I slapped his mouth, hard, and the print faded slowly.

When he was three he helped me harvest corn from our garden, pulling the sheath downward from the silk, breaking out the yellow ears. We filled ten buckets with corn for bottling.

When I was four I walked across this property, following my father as he planned where the fences would go on his new homestead—640 acres of desert land. He bought a faded red diesel engine to pump water from the slow-flowing spring.

I was six. My father sent me to this cabin from the fields a mile eastward, where he was working. "You start dinner," he said. "I'll be along." The road I watched back over became dark through the

window. The coyotes yelping made the loneliest sound I have ever heard. He didn't come until an hour after the food was cold.

For years from behind our kitchen door in Rockwood, I heard my mother and father arguing religion: evolution, modern revelation, Christ's miracles, Joseph Smith talking to God. "If the prophet in Salt Lake told you to walk off a cliff, you would do it, wouldn't you?" my father said.

"But he wouldn't ask," said my mother.

"But if he did?"

"But he won't."

Once I fell asleep while listening, and my father discovered me, from my snoring he said, and carried me to my bed.

When I was nine I cut out the heart of a newly dead rattlesnake and watched it beat eighty-three times in the palm of my hand. During my seventeenth summer, as my friend and I irrigated the farm, we grew a potato plant which we watered with only our urine.

When I was twenty-two and Sylvia wouldn't see me any more, my father rode on horseback with me over the mountains surrounding Rockwood and down into the desert toward this homestead. Each night he talked to me about his life, telling me stories, singing songs to me his mother had sung to him—administering to my pain with his voice. Sometimes now I hear him murmuring to me out of the rocks above my cabin.

In 1973 when diesel prices started rising with gasoline prices and he couldn't afford to pump water from the spring anymore, my father sold the ranch on mortgage and repossessed it four times: from some dairy farmers out of central Utah, from a group of Salt Lake bankers, from a machinist who wanted to live in the desert with his family, and from a sheepman who wanted to build sheds for his herds. None of them could make the property produce.

One year before my father died, the day we finished hauling our second crop of hay, I drove him to the shack someone built over a mineral pool ten miles west of here. His mind was already partly in the next world, and he howled and swore as I lugged him into the water, which was heavy as amniotic fluid. I guess he thought I would

scald him. I only wanted to ease his joints, but I howled with him as we floated.

When I was thirty my father imagined that the sighing of the wind through the boulders was Marilyn Monroe and her sirens, who had inhabited the butte. He renamed it Whorehouse Rock in her honor. One night he climbed naked through the snow to visit her. When we found him, near where I'm sitting, coyotes had gnawed his nose, ears, and penis.

In the genealogical library in Salt Lake, I tried to trace my ancestry back to Adam. Once I discovered their names and dates of birth, temple officiators could seal each family member to me by ordinance, soul by soul creating an eternal indivisible unity. As I worked I felt a completeness-in-others: I was the epiphany toward which all those souls had been living. In my research I only made it back to 1698 to a man who had to run away from Wales because he murdered his landlord.

When Abigail was small she squirted steaming sauce on the back of her hand while eating a Sloppy Joe. I placed a leaf of iceberg lettuce on the burn to draw the heat out. She ate the rest of the meal with one hand, balancing the green leaf on her other fist.

The Broken Flask. I have more fragments of my own history, but if I add them point by point, measuring the degree of gravity between each one, what is their sum?—a minute and irrepressible motion of my chromosomes toward the Apocalypse. From whom can I learn how to think about this singular and revolutionary inclination?

Can I sacrifice my wife and children to warn the people as Abraham and Tolstoy did? Can I like Moses carry myself and my children toward a new world after the fire storms and plagues? Like Einstein or Newton can I invent a new mathematics, a tool for analyzing my inscrutable impulse toward destruction? The prophet of the polygamists and a Navaho Indian I once knew both believed that they could make it rain by thinking. Can I like Kierkegaard concentrate so fully, a Knight of Vital Faith, that mental impulses become corporeal, and I purge this violence from my blood? I can find no myth, no introspective process through

which I can reconnect myself to my father, to my wife, or my children: a double-minded man is uncertain in all his ways. I am here, not farming my father's property, while my autobiography unravels itself.

On good days, after someone leaves, it is only me independent—no frustrated motion. No pointing finger or angle of apprehension. During those minutes I float in benevolent stasis, a calm which is always violated by my anticipation. As of this moment I repudiate the road from which dust does not yet rise. The iron-gray igneous rocks dribbled out over the land in confusion, the ashen alkali desert: these are the emblems of my new world, the world which waits for the cloud.

As I leave the butte behind my cabin, I make an oath that I will hold myself firm against returning to watch again. I will not picture her face and the firm line along her jaw as she drives across the desert—four children in the back of the car, one in the front. The children sit with their hands on their knees, and they say nothing though the air inside the car is stifling.