

RATBIRD

By Brian Aldiss

... To warn and warn: that one night, never more
To light and warm us, down will sink the lurid sun
Beneath the sea, and none
Shall see us more upon this passionate shore.

The disintegration of the old world? Easy. I'll manage it. Everything will end not with a bang but a whisper — a whisper of last words. Words. So it began. So it will end. When I grow up.

Here I lie on this crimson equatorial shore, far from where the great electronic city dissolves itself under its own photochemical smogs.

Here I lie, about to tell you the legend of the *Other Side*. Also about to go on a journey of self-discovery which must bring me back to my beginnings. As sure as I have tusks, this is ontology on the hoof.

So to begin with what's overhead. The sun disputes its rights to rule in the sky above. Every day it loses the struggle, every morning it begins the dispute over again. Brave, never-disheartened sun!

I lie under the great sea almond tree which sprouts from the sand, looking up into its branches where light and shade dispute their rival territories. This is called beauty. Light and shade cohabit like life and death, the one more vivid for the dread presence of the other.

In my hand I clutch —

... But the great grave ocean comes climbing up the beach. There's another eternal dispute. The ocean changes its colours as it sweeps towards where I lie. Horizon purple, mid-sea blue, shore-sea green, lastly golden. Undeterred by however many failures, the waves again attempt to wet my feet. Brave remorseless sea!

(What should a legend contain? Should it be of happiness or of sorrow? Or should it permit them to be in — that word again — dispute?)

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— What I clutch in my hand is a fruit of the sea almond. It's not large, it's of a suitable nut shape, it's covered with a fine but coarse fibre like pubic hair. In fact, the nut resembles a girl's pudendum. Else why clutch it? Is that not where all stories lie, in the dumb dell of the pudendum? The generative power of the story lies with the organ of generation — and veneration.

* * * *

Let me assure you, for it's all part of the

legend, at the miracle of my birth I came forth when summoned by my father. He tapped. I emerged. A star burned on my forehead. I'm unique. You believe you are unique? But no, I am unique. In their careless journeys across the worlds, the gods create myriads of everything, of almond trees, of waves, of days, of people. But there's only one Dishayloo, with no navel and a star on his forehead.

So my journey and tale are about to commence. Knowing as much, my friends, who sit or stand with me under the tree, stare out to sea in silence. They think about destiny, oysters or sex. I have on my t-shirt saying 'Perestroika Hots Fax'.

A distant land. That's what's needed. I've met old men who never went to sea. They speak like spiders and don't know it. They have lost something and don't know what they have lost. Like all young men I must make a journey. The dispute between light and shade must be carried elsewhere, waves must be surmounted, pudenda must open with smiles of welcome, fate must be challenged. Before the world disappears.

We all must change our lives.

So I rise and go along the blazing beach to the jetty, to see Old Man Monsoon. They call him Monsoon. His real name has been forgotten in these parts, funny old garbled Christian that he is. He can

predict the exact hour the rains will come. And many more things.

Once Monsoon was called Krishna. Once he visited the *Other Side*, as I will relate.

He saw me coming and stood up in his boat. He's a good storyteller. He says, What is the human race (looking obliquely at my tusks as he speaks) but a fantastic tale? Told, he might add, with a welter of cliché and a weight of subordinate clauses, while we await a punchline.

The friends accompany me to the jetty. At first in a bunch, then stringing out, some hastening, some loitering, though

the distance is short. So with life.

Monsoon and I shake hands. He wears nothing but a pair of shorts. He is burnt almost black. His withered skin mummifies him, though those old Golconda eyes are golden-black still. People say of Monsoon that he has a fortune buried in a burnt-out refrigerator on one of the many little islands standing knee-deep in the sea. I don't believe that. Well, I do, but only in the way you can believe and not believe simultaneously. Like Rolex watches from a different time zone.

He shows yellow teeth between grey lips and says in a voice from which all colour has faded, 'Isn't there enough

trouble in the world without youngsters like you joining in?’

Grey lips, yellow teeth, yet a colourless voice ... Well, let us not linger over these human paradoxes.

I make up something by way of reply. ‘I’ve lost my shadow, Monsoon, and must find it if I have to go to the end of the Earth. Perhaps you can foretell when the end of the Earth will be?’

He points to the puddle of dark at my feet, giggling, raising an eyebrow to my friends for support.

‘That’s not *my* shadow,’ I tell him. ‘I borrowed this one off a pal who wants it

back by nightfall. He has to wear it at his mother's wedding.'

When I have climbed into the boat, Monsoon starts the engine with one tug of the starter rope. It's like hauling at a dog's lead. The hound wakes, growls, shakes itself, and with a show of haste begins to pull us towards the four corners of the great morning.

The craft creaks and murmurs to itself, in dispute with the waters beneath its hull. And the sweet playful sound of the waves against old board. The ocean, some idiot said, is God's smile.

Monsoon picks up my thought and distorts it. 'You smile like a little god,

Dishayloo, with that star on your brow.
Why always so happy?’

I gaze back at my friends ashore. They shrink as they wave. Everything grows smaller. Hasten, hasten, Dishayloo, before the globe itself shrinks to nothing!

‘The smile’s so as not to infect others with sorrow. It’s therapy—a big hospitable hospital. Antidote to the misery virus. Did you ever hear tell of the great white philosopher Bertrand Russell?’

The Golconda eyes are on the horizon to which our boat is hounding us, but Monsoon’s never at a loss for an answer. ‘Yes, yes, of course. He was a

friend of mine. He and I used to sail together to the Spice Islands to trade in vitamin pills and conch shells. I made a loss but Bertra Muscle became a rupee millionaire. These days, he lives in Singapore in a palace of unimaginable concrete and grandeur.’

Now the friends form no more than a frieze, spread thin along the shore, like bread on a lake of butter. Soon, soon, the dazzle has erased them. My memory does the same. Sorry, one and all, but the legend has begun.

Talk’s still needed, of course, so I say, ‘This was a different man, pappy. The guy I mean said ...’

But those words too were forgotten.

‘. .. Why should I recall what he said? Are we no better than snails, to carry round with us a whole house of past circumstance?’

My hands were trailing in the water. Prose was not my main concern. Monsoon picked up on that.

‘Pah. “House of past circumstance ...” What are you, a poet or something?’

Something or nothing? The Lord Jesus had a better idea. He knew nothing dies. Even when he snuffed it on Mount Cavalry, he knew he would live again.’

‘Easy trick if you’re the son of God.’

The Golconda gold eyes flared at me. ‘He was a bloke in a million. Go anywhere, do anything.’

“‘Have mission, will travel.’” All the time the dear water like progress under the prow.

‘Born in India, I believe, sailed in Noah’s boat because there was no room at the Indus.’ His face had taken on the expression of imbecile beatitude the religious sometimes adopt. ‘Jesus was poor, like me. He couldn’t pay Noah one cent for the trip. Noah was a hard man. He gave him a broom and told him to go and sweep the animal turds off the deck.’

‘What happened?’

‘Jesus swept.’

Cloud castles stood separately on the horizon, bulbous, like idols awaiting worship.

Something above moving over a smooth sea prompted Monsoon to chatter. I scarcely listened as he continued his thumbnail portrait of Jesus.

‘He wasn’t exactly a winner but he was honest and decent in every way. Or so the scriptures tell us. And a good hand with a parable.’

The little boat was in the lap of the

ocean. The shoreline behind was indistinct; it could have been anything—like a parable. Ahead, two small humps of islands lay stunned with light. I began to feel the charge of distance, its persuasive power.

Perhaps the islands were like humpbacked whales. But the world's old. Everything has already been compared with everything else.

The old man said, 'You'll soon have left us. We'll be no more in your mind, and will die a little because of it. So I'll tell you a story — a parable, perhaps — suitable for your life journey.'

And he began the tale of the ratbird.

Monsoon spoke in more than one voice. I abridge the tale here, there being only so many hours in a day. Also I've removed his further references to Jesus, diluting it. Same tale, different teller, only coconut milk added.

* * * *

There was this white man—well, two white men if you include Herbert—this white man Monsoon knew as a boy, before he was Monsoon. This white man—well, he and Herbert—arrived at this port in Borneo where Boy Monsoon lived in a thatched hut with Balbindor.

Like many whites, Frederic Sigmoid was crazed by the mere notion of jungle. He believed jungles were somewhere you went for revelation. In his vain way, he placed the same faith in jungles that earlier whites had put in cathedrals or steam ships. But Frederic Sigmoid—Dr Sigmoid—was rich. He could afford to be crazy.

Back in Europe, Sigmoid had cured people by his own process, following the teaching of a mystic called Ouspensky and adding a series of physical pressures called reflexology. Now here he was in Simanggang with his mosquito nets, journals, chronometers, compasses, barometer,

medicine cabinet, guns and one offspring, out to cure himself or discover a New Way of Thought, whichever would cause most trouble in a world already tormented by too much belief. Seek and ye shall find. Find and ye shall probably regret.

With Sigmoid was his pale son, Herbert. Monsoon and his adoptive father, Balbindor, were hired to escort the two Sigmoids into the interior of Borneo. Into the largely unexplored Hose Range, and an area called the Bukit Tengah, where lived a number of rare and uncollected species, including the ratbird, happy until this juncture in their uncollected state. Animal and insect: all

congratulated themselves on failing to make some Cambridge encyclopaedia.

Balbindor was a coastal Malay of the Iban tribe. However, he had been into the interior once before, in the service of two Dutch explorers who, in the manner of all Dutch explorers, had died strange deaths: though not before they had communicated to civilization a mysterious message, 'Wallace and Darwin did not know it, but there are alternatives.' Balbindor, four foot six high, brought the word hot-foot back to the coast.

Sigmoid was keener on alternatives than his son Herbert. Confidence men always have an eye for extra exits. Thirteen days

into rainforest, led by Balbindor and sonlet, and the doctor remained more determined than his offspring. The night before they reached the tributary of the Baleh river they sought, Balbindor overheard a significant exchange between father and son.

Herbert complained of heat and hardship, declaring that what he longed for most in the world was a marble bathroom with warm scented water and soft towels. To which his father rejoined that Herbert was a gross materialist. Going further, Sigmoid retreated into one of his annoying fits of purity, declaring, 'To achieve godliness, my boy, you must give up all possessions .

..
'
Herbert replied bitterly, 'I'm your one possession you'll never give up.'

Had this been a scene in a movie, it would have been followed by pistol shots and, no doubt, the entry of a deadly snake into the Sigmoid tent. However, the story is now Balbindor's. He shall tell it in his own excruciating words. And Balbindor, never having seen any movie, with the solitary exception of *The Sound of Music* (to which he gave three stars), lacked a sense of drama. Father and son, he reported, kissed each other as usual and went to sleep in their separate bivouacs.

* * * *

If my story, then I tell. Not some other guy. Many error in all story belong other guy. I Iban man, real name no Balbindor. I no see *Sound Music* ever. Only see trailer one time, maybe two. Julie Andrews good lady, I marry. My kid I take on no call Monsoon. Monsoon late name. Kid, he come from India. I take on. I no call Monsoon, I call Krishna. My son they die logging camp all same place three time. Too much drink. I very sad, adopt Krishna. He my son, good boy. Special golden eye. I like, OK.

This Dr Sigmoid and he son Herbert very trouble on journey. We go on Baleh river, boat swim good. All time, Herbert

he complain. White men no sweat pure,
too many clothe. No take off clothe.
Then boat swim up tributary Puteh, no
swim good. Water he go way under boat.
Mud he come, stop boat.

We hide boat, go on feet in jungle. Very
much complain Herbert and father he
both. They no understand jungle. They no
eat insect. Insect eat them.

Jungle many tree, many many tree. Some
tree good, some tree bad, some tree
never mind. I tell number tree. Tamarind
tree, he fruit bitter, quench throat thirst.
Help every day. Sigmoid no like, fear
poison. I no speak him. All same jungle
olive, good tree. We drink pitcher plant,

all same like monkey.

Monkey they good guide. Krishna and me we do like monkey. I understand jungle. Wake early, when first light in jungle. Deer trail fresh, maybe catch deer along blowpipe. Monkey wake early, eat, sing, along branches. Sigmoids no like wake early. Day cool. I like wake early, make Sigmoids rise up. Go quiet. Creep along, maybe catch kill snake for pot.

Many ant in Hose Range, big, little, many colour. All go different way. I speak ant, ant speak me. Go this way, go that. Every leaf he fall, he mean a something. I understand. I plenty savvy in jungle.

One week, two week, three week, we walk in jungle, sometime up, sometime down. For Sigmoids, very hard to go. Both smell bad. Too much breath. No control. Dutch men control of breath good. Herbert he very scare. No like jungle, all same long time. No good man, swear me. I understand. Herbert he no think I understand.

Three week, get very near area Bukit Tengah. Now all path go up, need more care. Many cliff, many rock. One fall, maybe finish. Waterfall, he pour bad water. I know smell bad water nose belong me. Krishna and two bearer and I, we no drink bad water. Come from

Other Side. I tell Sigmoids no drink water come *Other Side*. They no care, no understand, they drink bad waterfall water plenty. Take on bad spirit. Understand. I shout much, Krishna he cry all same long time. Herbert he shout me, try hit little Krishna.

I tell Herbert, ‘You drink water belong *Other Side*. Now you got bad spirit. You no get back Europe. You finish man.’

Herbert no savvy. He plenty sick. I see him bad spirit. It suck him soul. Now I plenty scare.

Every day more slow. *Other Side* he come near. Bearer man they two, they no like go more far. I hear what they speak

together. I savvy what Orang Asli speak, I tell Dr Sigmoid. He swear. No please me. Both Sigmoids have fever. Black in face, very strange. Smell bad more.

Big storm come over from *Other Side*, maybe hope drive us away. Thunder he flatten ears, lightning he blind eyes, rain he lash flesh, wind he freeze skin. We hide away under raintree, very fear. Night it come, big wizard, I no understand. Too black. In night bearer they go, I no hear. Two bearer they run off. Steal supply. I very sad I no hear. In morning dawnlight I say to doctor sorry. Bearer they scare, go back wife. Doctor he swear again. I say, no good swear. Who hear swear with good nature? Best

leave alone, keep silent. He no like.
Make bad face.

Day after storm, we come *Other Side*. I see how monkey they no go *Other Side*. Different monkey on *Other Side*, speak different language. Different tree, grow other different leaf. Fruit they different, no wise eat. Insect different.

Also one more bad thing. I see men belong *Other Side* in jungle. They move like ghost but I see. Krishna he see, he point. Plenty eye in jungle belong *Other Side*. No like. *Other Side* men they much difference. How they think different, no good.

I see, I understand, Krishna he

understand. I no make Sigmoids understand.

‘Geology,’ I explain Sigmoids. I speak they language good. ‘He change. Different earth begin now since many many old time. All thing different, different time. Different inside time. Womb bring forth different thing. Bad go there, no go. Only look one day.’

‘Balls,’ he say.

I sick with him doctor. I make speak, ‘I keep my ball belong me. You go, and Herbert. I no go one more pace. Krishna, he no go one more pace.’

Herbert he bring out gun. I very fear. I

know him mad with bad spirit. I say him, 'Two piece Dutch man they come here. Pretty soon they finish. Why you no sense? Come back home along me, Krishna.'

He get more mad.

* * * *

I was really disgusted with this idiot native Balbindor or whatever his name was. Here we were. At great expense to ourselves, Father and I had finally arrived on the very threshold of Bukit Tengah, the Middle Mountain, and this difficult little man and his black kid were refusing to proceed.

It just was not rational. But you don't expect rationality from such people. These natives are riddled with superstition.

Also, I blamed him for the way the bearers had deserted us. We had quite an argument. I was trembling violently from head to foot. Most unpleasant.

I want to say this, too, about the whole incident. Balbindor treated Father and me all along as complete fools. We could grasp that he was trying to tell us we had arrived at some sort of geological shift, much like the Wallace Discontinuity east of Bali, where two tectonic plates meet and flora and fauna are different on the two opposed sides.

We knew that better than he did, having researched the matter in books before the expedition, but saw no reason to be superstitious about it.

We had also observed that there were those on the other side of the divide who were watching us. Father and I were going to go in there whether or not Balbindor and his son accompanied us. We saw the necessity to make an immediate impression on the new tribe, since we would be dealing with them soon enough.

That was why I shot Balbindor on the spot. It was mainly to make a good impression on the new tribe.

Little Krishna ran off into the jungle. Perhaps the little idiot thought I was going to shoot him as well. I suppose I might have done. I was pretty steamed up.

‘Put your revolver away, you fool,’ Father said. That was all the thanks I got from him. When has he ever been grateful?

We had no idea what to do with Balbindor’s corpse. Eventually we dragged it to the waterfall and flung it in. We slept by the waterfall that night and next morning at our leisure crossed the divide into the *Other Side* (the silly name had stuck).

For two days we travelled through dense alien jungle. We were aware that there were men among the thickets following us, but it was the monkeys who caused us most trouble. They were no bigger than leaf monkeys, but had black caps and a line of black fur about the eyes, giving them an oddly human look. Father trapped one with the old Malayan gourd trick, and discovered it to have only four toes on each foot and four fingers on each hand. We came at last to a clearing brought about by a massive outcrop of rock. Here we rested, both of us being overcome by fevers. We could see the barbaric scenery about us, the tumbled mass of vegetation, with every tree weighted down by chains of epiphytes

and climbers. Above them loomed densely clad peaks of mountains, often as not shrouded by swift-moving cloud.

These clouds took on startling devilish shapes, progressing towards us. It may have been the fever which caused this uncomfortable illusion.

Days must have passed in illness. I cannot say how strange it was, how peculiarly dead I felt, when I awoke to find myself at a distance from my father. Dreadful sensations of isolation overcame me. Moreover, I was walking about. My feet seemed not to touch the ground.

I discovered that I could not get near my

father. Whenever I seemed to advance towards him, my steps deviated in some way. It was as if I suffered from an optical illusion so strong that it consumed my other senses. I could do no more than prowl about him.

Father was sitting cross-legged by the remains of a fire on which he had roasted the leg of a small deer. Its remains lay by him. He was talking to a small wizened man with long hair and a curved bone through his cheeks which made him appear tusked. The face of this man was painted white. For some reason, I felt terrified of him, yet what chiefly seemed to scare me was a minor eccentricity of garb: the man wore

nothing but an elaborate scarf or band or belt of fabric about his middle. No attempt had been made to cover his genitals, which were painted white like his face.

Prowling in a circular fashion seemed all I was capable of, so I continuously circled the spot. Although I called to my father, he took no notice, appearing totally absorbed in his conversation with the white-faced man. I now noted that the latter had on each hand only three fingers and a thumb, and only four toes on each foot, in the manner of the monkeys we had come across in another existence.

I was filled with such great uneasiness and hatred that I chattered and jibbered

and made myself horrible.

Again and again I attempted to advance towards my father. Only now did I realize that I loved this man to whose power I had been subject all my life. Yet he would not — or perhaps could not— take the slightest notice of me. I set up a great screaming to attract his attention. Still he would not hear.

Father, Father, I called to you all my life! Perhaps you never ever heard, so wrapped up were you in your own dreams and ambitions. Now for this last time, I beg you to attend to your poor Herbert.

I know you have your own story. Allow

me mine, for pity's sake!

* * * *

It would be true to say without exaggeration that throughout my mature life, in my quest to transform humanity, I had been in search of Mr White Face, as I thought of him. (He refused to tell his name. That would have given me power over him.) I have a firm belief in transcendental power, unlike poor Herbert.

White Face materialized out of thin air when I was drinking at a pool. There on my hands and knees, by gosh! I looked up—he was standing nearby, large as life. Naked except for the band round his

belly; yet something about him marked him immediately as a singular character. (A flair for judging character is one of my more useful talents.)

A remarkable feature of White Face's physiognomy was a pair of small tusks (six inches long) piercing the cheeks. My knowledge of anatomy suggested they were rooted in the maxilla. They gave my new acquaintance a somewhat belligerent aspect, you may be sure!

Already he has told me much. We have spent two whole days from sun-up till sun-down in rapt conversation. His thought processes are entirely different from mine. Yet we have much in common. He is the wise man of his

people as I, in Europe, am of mine. Grubby little man he may be — he shits in my presence without embarrassment — yet in his thought I perceive he is fastidious. I can probably adapt some of his ideas.

Much that he says about divisions in the human psyche is reflected in pale form in the Hindu sacred books of the Upanishads (which is hardly surprising, since White Face claims that all the world's knowledge of itself emanated from the *Other Side* during the ice age before last, when Other Siders went out like missionaries over the globe, reaching as far as Hindustan).

What I do find difficult to swallow — we argued long about this — is some strange belief of his that the world is immaterial and that humanity (if I have it correctly) is no more than a kind of metaphysical construct projected by nature and relying on *words* rather than *flesh* for its continued existence. Perhaps I've misunderstood the old boy. I'm still slightly feverish. Or he's mad as a hatter.

Only knowledge is precious, he says. And knowledge is perpetually being lost. The world from which I come is in crisis. It is losing its instinctual knowledge. Instinctual knowledge is leaking away under the impact of

continual urbanization. That I believe. It is not in conflict with my own doctrines. He thinks our world will shortly die.

Then the *Other Side* will recolonize the world with new plants and animals—and understanding. (His kind of understanding, of course.) He wants to convince me to become his disciple, to go forth and encourage the world-death to come swiftly. By the third day of our discussion, I begin more and more to comprehend how desirable it is that the civilization to which I belong should be utterly destroyed. Yet still I hesitate. We drink some of his potent *boka* and rest from intellectual debate.

I ask, How are things so different here?

For answer, he shows me a ratbird.

Some distance from the rock on which we sat in conference—conferring about the future of the world, if that doesn't sound too pompous — an angšana stood, a large tropical tree, its branches full of birds to which I paid no attention. Birds have never been one of my major interests, I need hardly say.

Mr White Face began a kind of twittering whistle, a finger planted in each corner of his lips. Almost immediately, the birds in the angšana responded by flying out in a flock, showing what I took to be anxiety by sinking to the ground and then rapidly

rising again. Each time they sank down, they clustered closely, finally expelling one of their number, who fluttered to the ground and began — as if under compulsion — to walk, or rather scuttle, towards us; whereupon the other birds fled into the shelter of their tree.

As the bird came nearer, White Face changed his tune. The bird crawled between us and lay down at our feet in an unbirdlike manner.

I saw that its anatomy was unbirdlike. Its two pink legs ended in four toes, all pointing forward with only a suggestion of balancing heel. Wings and body were covered in grey fur. And the face was that of a rodent. In some ways it

resembled a flying fox, common throughout Malaysia; in some ways it resembled a rat, but its easy flight and way of walking proclaimed it a bird.

And now that I looked again at Mr White Face, I saw that beneath his paint his face had some of the configurations of a rat, with sharp little jaws and pointed nose, not at all like the inhabitants of Sarawak, a blunt-faced company, with which I was acquainted.

Obedying his instruction, I proffered my hand, open palm upwards, towards the animal. The ratbird climbed on and began to preen its fur unconcernedly.

Nobody will blame me if I say that in the

circumstances I became very uneasy. It seemed to me that in Mr White Face I had stumbled upon an evolutionary path paralleling — rivalling — our accepted one; that this path sprang from a small ground mammal (possibly tusked) very different from the arboreal tarsier-like creature from which *Homo sapiens* has developed. I was face to face with ... *Homo rodens* ... Over millions of years, its physical and mental processes had continued in its own course, parallel to but alien from ours. Indeed, perhaps inimical to ours, in view of the hostility of such long standing between man and rat.

Rising to my feet, I flicked the ratbird

into the air. Instead of flying off, it settled at my feet.

I found I was unable to walk about. My legs would not move. Some magic had trapped me. At this unhappy moment, I recalled that mysterious sentence,

‘Wallace and Darwin did not know it, but there are alternatives.’ The alternative had been revealed to me; with magnificent hardihood, I had ventured into the *Other Side*; was I to suffer the fate of the two Dutch explorers?

Mr White Face continued to sit cross-legged, gazing up at me, his tusked countenance quite inscrutable. I saw the

world through glass. It was unmoving. I felt extremely provoked. Perhaps the argumentative Balbindor had been correct in saying I should not have drunk from the waterfall springing from the *Other Side*. It had left me in White Face's power.

And I was uncomfortably aware of the spirit of Herbert. After the foolish lad had died of his fevers—unable to pull through illness like me with my superior physique—his spirit had been powerless to escape. It circled me now, yowling and screaming in a noxious way. I tried to ignore it. But how to escape my predicament?

I stared down at the white face of the

ratman. Then, from my days as a chemist, I remembered a formula for bleach. Perhaps the magic of science would overcome this detestable witchcraft (or whatever it was that held me in thrall).

As loudly as I could, I recited the formula by which bleach is produced when chlorine reacts with sodium hydroxide solution: ‘Cl₂ (g) + 2NaOH(aq) → NaCl(aq)

+ NaClO(aq) + H₂O(l)’.

Even as I chanted, I felt power return to my muscles. The great tumbled world about me began to stir with life again. I was free. Thanks to bleach and a

Western education — and of course an excellent memory.

I kicked at the ratbird, which fluttered off.

‘I don’t care for your kind of hospitality,’ I told White Face.

‘Well, you have passed my test,’ he said. ‘You are no weakling and your words are strong. To each of us there are two compartments which form our inner workings. One part is blind, one part sees. Most of our ordinary lives are governed by the part that sees, which is capable of performing ordinary tasks. That part is like a living thing which emerges from an egg. But there is the

other part, which is blind and never emerges from the egg. It knows only what is unknown. It acts in time of trouble. You understand?’

‘You perhaps speak in parable form of two divisions of the brain. If so, then I believe I understand you.’ (I did not think it politic to express my reservations.)

He gave a short dry laugh, exposing sharp teeth. ‘Oh, we like to believe we understand! Suppose we have never understood one single thing of the world about us and inside us? Suppose we have lived in utter darkness and only believed that darkness was light?’

‘All things may be supposed. So what then?’

He said, ‘Then on the day that light dawns, it will be to you as if a sudden incomprehensible darkness descends.’

After this horrifying statement he made a beckoning gesture and began running.

Since he made swiftly towards the forest, I had not much option but to follow. But his words had chilled me. Suppose indeed that we were hedged in by limitations of comprehension we could not comprehend? The ratbird had already shaken many of my convictions regarding life on earth and how it had evolved.

Mr White Face's mode of progression through the forest was at odds with my previous guide, Balbindor, and his method of procedure; but then, the trees, the very trees we passed through, were different. Their bark, if bark it was, possessed a highly reflective surface, so that to move forward was to be accompanied by a multitudinous army of distortions of oneself. (In this hallucinatory company, it was impossible not to feel ill at ease. Jumpy, in a word.)

I did not understand how it was possible to find one's way in such a jungle. White Face was presumably trusting to his second compartment, 'the part that never

hatched', to see him along his course.

In which case, the blind thing was unexpectedly reliable. After two days of arduous travel, we came to a dark-flowing river. On the far side of it stood a village of longhouses, much like the ones we had left back on the coast, except that these were entered by round doors instead of the normal rectangular ones.

Uncomfortable as I was in White Face's company, there was comfort in the sense of arrival. I was possessed of a lively curiosity to investigate this kampong of the *Other Side*— that lively curiosity which has carried me so successfully through life.

One factor still contributed to my unease. The ghost of my son pursued me yet, his translucent image being reflected from the trunk of every tree, so that it sometimes appeared ahead of me as well as on every side. Herbert waved and screamed in the dreariest manner imaginable (uncanny, yet nevertheless lightly reminiscent of his behaviour throughout his life).

‘We shall cross the river,’ White Face announced, putting two skinny fingers into the corners of his mouth and whistling to announce our presence.

‘Will Herbert cross with us?’ I asked, I trust without revealing my nervousness.

He dismissed the very idea. ‘Ghosts cannot cross moving water. Only if they are ghosts of men with wooden legs.’

After White Face had signalled to some men on the opposite bank, a narrow dugout canoe was paddled across to collect us. By the time we landed at a rickety jetty, a number of inhabitants had gathered, standing cautiously back to observe us with their heads thrust forward as if they were short-sighted.

All of them had tusks. Some tusks were large and curled, or adorned with leaves. I could not fail to see that all, men, women and children, wore nothing in the tropical heat but a band — in the case of the women this was quite ornate

-around their middles, leaving everything else uncovered. The breasts of the women were small, and no more developed than those of the men. (The women also had tusks, so that I wondered if they were used for offence or defence. Presumably the missionary position in coitus would have its dangers. One might be stabbed *in medias res.*)

They were in general a strange lot, with sharp beaky faces quite unlike the Malays to whom I was accustomed. In their movements was something restless. A kind of rictus was common. I saw that here was opportunity for anthropological

study which, when reported abroad, could but add to my fame. I wanted to look in a mouth to see where those tusks were anchored.

White Face addressed some of the men in a fast-flowing and high-pitched language. They made respectful way for him as he led me through the village to a longhouse standing apart from the others.

‘This is my home and you are welcome,’ he said. ‘Here you may rest and recover from your fever. The spirit of your son will not harm you.’

To my dismay, I found that the bleach formula had left my mind and would not be recalled. Did this mean I was still

under his spell? So it was with reluctance that I climbed the ramp leading into the longhouse with its two great tusks over the circular entrance.

Inside, I was barely able to stand upright at the highest point, for I was head and shoulders taller than my sinister host; and it did not escape my notice that the roof at its highest point was infested with cobwebs, in the corners of which sat large square spiders. Also, when he gestured to me to sit down on the mats which covered the floor, I could not but observe two fairly fresh (tuskless) skulls above the door by which we had entered. Catching my glance, Mr White Face asked, 'Do you speak Dutch?'

‘Do they — now?’ I asked, with sarcasm.

But he had a response. ‘On the night of the full moon they do speak. I cannot silence them. You shall hear them by and by, and become familiar with the eloquence of death.’

We then engaged in philosophical discourse, while a servant woman, cringing as she served us, brought a dark drink like tea in earthenware bowls which fitted neatly between Mr White Face’s tusks.

After two hours of conversation, during which he questioned me closely concerning Ouspensky, he apologized

that his wife (he used a different word) was not present. It appeared that she was about to deliver a son.

I congratulated him.

‘I have twelve sons already,’ he said. ‘Though this one is special, as you may see. A miraculous son who will further our most powerful ambitions, a wizard of words. So it is written ... Now let us discuss how the end, closure and abridgement of your world may be brought about, since we are in agreement that such an objective is desirable.’

Although I was less ready than before to agree that such an objective was desirable, I nevertheless found myself

entering into his plans. (The dark drink had its effect.) The plans were — to me at least — elaborate and confusing. But the horrifying gist of his argument was that *Homo sapiens* might be extinguished by *pantun*. I understood that *pantun* was a form of Malayan poetry, and could not grasp how this might annihilate anything; but, as he continued, I began to see —

or I thought in that dazed state I saw — that he believed all human perceptions to be governed by words and, indeed, distorted and ultimately betrayed by words. Betrayed was the word he used. This, he said, was the weakness of *Homo sapiens*: words had weakened the contract with nature that guaranteed

mankind's existence. (All our spiritual ills were evidence of this deteriorating state of affairs.)

There were ways by which all *Homo sapiens* could be reduced —

abridged—into a story, a kind of poem. Those who live by the word die by the word. So he said. We could end as a line of *pantun*.

I cannot reduce this plan of his into clear words. It was not delivered to me in clear words, but in some sort of squeaky *Other Side* music with which he aided my understanding. All I can say is that there in that creepy hut, I came to believe it was perfectly easy to turn the

whole story of the world I knew into a world of story.

As we were getting into the how of it—and drinking more of that dark liquid—the servant hurried in with an apology and squeaked something. White Face rose.

‘Come with me,’ he said. ‘My wife [he used the different word] is about to bring forth the thirteenth son.’

‘Will she mind my presence?’

‘Not at all. Indeed, your presence is essential. Without your presence, you can have no absence, isn’t that so?’ (Whatever that meant. If that is truly

what he said.)

In we went, into curtained-off quarters at the far end of the longhouse. All misty with scented things burning and jangling instruments being played by two long-tusked men.

His wife lay on the floor on a mat, attended by the servant girl. Her stomach did not appear extended. She was entirely naked, no embroidered band round her middle. For the first time, I saw—with what sense of shock I cannot explain - *that she had no navel*. Nor was this some kind of unique aberration. The servant girl —

perhaps in honour of the occasion—was

also nude and without the customary middle band. She also had no navel. I was struck as by an obscenity, and unprepared for what followed. (Tusks I could take; lack of navel implied a different universe of being.)

‘Now the birth begins,’ said Mr White Face, as his wife lifted one leg, ‘and you will find all will go according to plan. The story of your species will become a kind of Mobius strip, but at least you will have had a role in it, Dr Sigmoid.’

He had never used my name previously. I knew myself in his power; as never before I felt myself powerless, a thin be-navelled creature without understanding. I had believed these strange people of

the *Other Side* to be distant descendants of a kind of rodent ancestor. But that was a scientific illusion built on evolutionary terminology. The truth was different, more difficult, less palatable. As the woman lifted her leg, an egg emerged from her womb.

An egg not of shell like a bird's: leathery rather, like a turtle's. An egg! A veritable egg, ostrich-sized.

A terrible rushing noise beset me. The longhouse flew away. I was surrounded by bright sunlight, yet in total darkness, as foretold. Even worse — far worse — I was not I. The terror of wonderment, real understanding, had changed all.

Only the egg remained.

With a sense of destiny, I leaned forward and tapped upon it with an invisible finger. It split.

* * * *

At the miracle of my birth, I came forth when my father summoned me. A star was set upon my forehead. I am unique. The gods that make their careless journeys across the world, playing with science or magic as they will, create thousands of everything, of sea almonds, of waves, of days — of words. Yet there is only one Dishayloo. No navel, and a star in the middle of his forehead.

Born to shine in a world of story.