

*In the late sixties, Tom Disch, along with John Sladek, was, in a sense, the U.S. Ambassador to the British New Wave movement. His novel Camp Concentration, written in that period, should be on every reading list of classic sf.*

*Over the years Disch has been, besides a great novelist in and out of sf, a poet, playwright, critic, children's author (his Brave Little Toaster was even Disney-ized), teacher, and, of course, short-story writer.*

*I've considered him a mentor for more than twenty-five years and am proud to present his latest fiction, which recalls a bit his New Wave days.*

## *In Xanadu*

**thomas M. disch**

In memory of John Sladek, who died March 10, 2000

*And all should cry, Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice, And close your eyes with holy dread,  
For he on honey-dew hath fed, And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

### **PART ONE**

#### **x a n a d u**

# **H**

is awareness was quite limited during the first so-long. A popup screen said WELCOME TO XANADU, [Cook, Fran]. YOUR AFTERLIFE BEGINS NOW BROUGHT TO YOU BY DISNEY-MISUBSHIRODUCTIONS of quebec! a votre sante toujours! Then there was a choice of buttons to click on, **Okay** or **Cancel**. He didn't have an actual physical mouse, but there was an equivalent in his mind, in much the way that amputees have ghostly limbs, but when he clicked on **Okay** with his mental mouse there was a dull *Dong!* and nothing happened. When he clicked on **Cancel** there was a trembling and the smallest flicker of darkness and then the pop-up screen greeted him with the original message.

This went on for an unknowable amount of time, there being no means by which elapsed time could be measured. After he'd *Dongled* on **Okay** enough times, he stopped bothering. The part of him that would have been motivated, back when, to express impatience or to feel resentment or to worry just wasn't connected. He felt an almost supernatural

passivity. Maybe this is what people were after when they took up meditation. Or maybe it *was* supernatural, though it seemed more likely, from the few clues he'd been given, that it was cybernetic in some way. He had become lodged (he theorized) in a faulty software program, like a monad in a game of JezzBall banging around inside its little square cage, ricocheting off the same four points on the same four walls forever. Or as they say in Quebec, *toujours*.

And oddly enough that was Okay. If he were just a molecule bouncing about, a lifer rattling his bars, there was a kind of comfort in doing so, each bounce a proof of the mass and motion of the molecule, each rattle an SOS dispatched to someone who might think, Ah-ha, there's someone there!

### **state pleasure-dome 1**

And then—or, as it might be, once upon a time—Cancel produced a different result than it had on countless earlier trials, and he found himself back in some kind of real world. There was theme music ("Wichita Lineman") and scudding clouds high overhead and the smell of leaf mold, as though he'd been doing push-ups out behind the garage, with his nose grazing the dirt. *He* had his old body back,

and it seemed reasonably trim. Better than he'd left it, certainly.

"Welcome," said his new neighbor, a blond woman in a blouse of blue polka dots on a silvery rayonlike ground. "My name is Debora. You must be Fran Cook. We've been expecting you."

He suspected that Debora was a construct of some sort, and it occurred to him that he might be another. But whatever she was, she seemed to expect a response from him beyond his stare of mild surmise. "You'll have to fill me in a little more, Debora. I don't really know where we are."

"This is Xanadu," she said with a smile that literally flashed, like the light on top of a police car, with distinct, pointed sparkles.

"But does Xanadu exist anywhere except in the poem?"

This yielded a blank look but then another dazzling smile. "You could ask the same of us."

"Okay. To be blunt: Am I dead? Are you?"

Her smile diminished, as though connected to a rheostat. "I think that might be the case, but I don't know for sure. There's a sign at the entrance to the pleasure-dome that says 'Welcome to Eternity.' But there's no one to ask, there or anywhere else. No one who knows anything. Different people have different ideas. I don't have any recollection of dying, myself. Do you?"

"I have no recollections, period," he admitted. "Or none that occur to me at this moment. Maybe if I tried to remember something in particular ..."

"It's the same with me. I can remember the plots of a few movies. And the odd quotation. 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' "

"Eisenhower?" he hazarded.

"I guess. It's all pretty fuzzy. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention back then. Or it gets erased when you come here. I think there's a myth to that effect. Or maybe it's so blurry because it never happened in the first place. Which makes me wonder, are we really people here, or what? And where is here? This isn't anyone's idea of heaven that *I* ever heard of. It's kind of like Disney World, only there's no food, no rides, no movies. Nothing to do, really. You can meet people, talk to them, like with us, but that's about it. Don't think I'm complaining. They don't call it a pleasure-dome for nothing. That part's okay, though it's not any big deal. More like those Magic Finger beds in old motels."

He knew just what she meant, though he couldn't remember ever having been to an old motel or lain down on a Magic Fingers bed. When he tried to reach for a memory of his earlier life, any detail he could use as an ID tag, it was like drawing a blank to a clue in a crossword. Some very simple word that just wouldn't come into focus.

Then there was a fade to black and a final, abject *Dong!* that didn't leave time for a single further thought.

## a l p h

"I'm sorry," Debora said, with a silvery shimmer of rayon, "that was my fault for having doubted. Doubt's the last thing either of us needs right now. I *love* the little dimple in your chin."

"I'm not aware that I *had* a dimple in my chin."

"Well, you do now, and it's right—" She traced a line up the center of his chin with her finger, digging into the flesh with the enameled tip as it reached. "—here."

"Was I conked out long?"

She flipped her hair as though to rid herself of a fly, and smiled in a forgiving way, and placed her hand atop his. At that touch he felt a strange lassitude steal over him, a deep calm tinged somehow with mirth, as though he'd remembered some sweet, dumb joke from his vanished childhood. Not the joke itself but the laughter that had greeted it, the laughter of children captured on a home video, silvery and chill.

"If we suppose," she said thoughtfully, tracing the line of a vein on the back of his hand with her red fingertip, "that our senses *can* deceive

us, then what is there that *can't*?" She raised her eyebrows italic-wise. "I mean," she insisted, "my body might be an illusion, and the world I *think* surrounds me might be another. But what of that 'I think'? The very act of doubting is a proof of existence, right? I think therefore I am."

"Descartes," he footnoted.

She nodded. "And who would ever have supposed that that old doorstep would be relevant to

real life, so-called? Except I think it would be just as true with any other verb: I *love* therefore I am."  
"Why not?" he *agreed*.

She squirmed closer to him until she could let the weight of her upper body rest on his as he lay there sprawled on the lawn, or the illusion of a lawn. The theme music had segued, unnoticed, to a sinuous trill of clarinets and viola that might have served for the orchestration of a Strauss opera, and the landscape was its visual correlative, a perfect *Pu-vis de Chavannes*—the same chalky pastels in thick impasto blocks and splotches, but never with too painterly panache. There were no visible brush strokes. The only tactile element was the light pressure of her fingers across his skin, making each least hair in its follicle an antenna to register pleasure.

A pleasure that need never, could never cloy, a temperate pleasure suited to its pastoral source, a woodwind pleasure, a fruity wine. Lavender, canary yellow. The green of distant mountains. The ripple of the river.

### **caverns measureless to man**

The water that buoyed the little skiff was luminescent, and so their progress through the cave was not a matter of mere conjecture or kinesi-thesia. They could see where they were going. Even so, their speed could only be guessed at, for the water's inward light was not enough to illumine either the ice high overhead or either shore of the river. They were borne along into some more unfathomable darkness far ahead as though across an ideal frictionless plane, and it made him think of spaceships doing the same thing, or of his favorite screen saver, which simulated the white swirl-by of snowflakes when driving through a blizzard. One is reduced at such moments (he was now) to an elemental condition, as near to being a particle in physics as a clumsy, complex mammal will ever come.

"I shall call you Dynamo," she confided in a throaty whisper. "Would you like that as a nickname? The Dynamo of Xanadu."

"You're too kind," he said unthinkingly. He had become careless in

their conversations. Not a conjugal carelessness: he had not talked with her so very often that all her riffs and vamps were second nature to him. This was the plain unadorned carelessness of not caring.

"I used to think," she said, "that we were all heading for hell in a handbasket. Is that how the saying goes?"

"Meaning, hastening to extinction?"

"Yes, meaning that. It wasn't my *original* idea. I guess everyone has their own vision of the end. Some people take it straight from the Bible, which is sweet and pastoral, but maybe a little dumb, though one oughtn't to say so, not where they are likely to overhear you. Because is that really so different from worrying about the hole in the ozone layer? That was my apocalypse of choice, how we'd all get terrible sunburns and cancer, and then the sea level would rise, and everyone in Calcutta would drown."

"You think this is Calcutta?"

"Can't you ever be serious?"

"So, what's your point, Debora?" When he wanted to be nice, he would use her name, but she never used his. She would invent nicknames for him, and then forget them and have to invent others.

It was thanks to such idiosyncrasies that he'd come to believe in her objective existence as something other than his mental mirror. If she were no more than the forest pool in which Narcissus gazed adoringly, their minds would malfunction in similar ways. Were they mere mirror constructs, he would have known by now.

"It's not," she went on, "that I worry that the end is near. I suppose the end is always near. Relative to Eternity. And it's not that I'm terribly curious *how* it will end. I suppose we'll hurtle over the edge of some immense waterfall, like Columbus and his crew."

"Listen!" he said, breaking in. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"The music. It's the score for *Koyaanisqatsi*. God, I used to watch the tape of that over and over."

She gave a sigh of polite disapproval. "I can't bear Philip Glass. It's just as you say, the same thing over and over."

"There was this one incredible pan. It must have been taken by a helicopter flying above this endless

high-rise apartment complex. But it had been abandoned."

"And?" she insisted. "What is your point?"

"Well, it was no simulation. The movie was made before computers could turn any single image into some endless quilt. We were really see-ing this vast deserted housing project, high-rise after high-rise with the windows boarded up. The abandoned ruins of some ultra-modern city.

it existed, but until that movie nobody *knew* about it. It makes you think."

"It doesn't make *me* think."

There was no way, at this moment, they were going to have sex. Anyhow, it probably wouldn't have been safe. The boat would capsize and they would drown.

## A sunless sea

It was as though the whole beach received its light from a few candles. A dim, dim light evenly diffused, and a breeze wafting up from the water with an unrelenting coolness, as at some theater where the air-conditioning cannot be turned off. They huddled within the cocoon of a single beach towel, thighs pressed together, arms crisscrossed behind their backs in a chaste hug, trying to keep warm. The chill in the air was the first less than agreeable physical sensation he'd known in Xanadu, but it did not impart that zip of challenge that comes with October weather. Rather, it suggested his own mortal diminishment. A plug had been pulled somewhere, and all forms of radiant energy were dwindling synchronously, light, warmth, intelligence, desire.

There were tears on Debora's cheek, and little sculptures of sea foam in the shingle about them. And very faint, the scent of nutmeg, the last lingering trace of some long-ago lotion or deodorant. The ocean gray as aluminum.

## the wailing

Here were the high-rises from the movie, but in twilight now, and without musical accompaniment, though no less portentous for that. He glided past empty benches and leaf-strewn flower beds like a cameraman on roller skates, until he entered one of the buildings, passing immaterially through its plate-glass door. Then there was, in a slower pan than the helicopter's but rhyming to it, a smooth iambic progression past the doors along the first-floor corridor.

He came to a stop before the tenth door, which stood ajar. Within he could hear a stifled sobbing—a wailing, rather. He knew he was expected to go inside, to discover the source of this sorrow. But he could not summon the will to do so. Wasn't his own sorrow sufficient? Wasn't the loss of a world enough?

A man appeared at the end of the corridor in the brown uniform of United Parcel Service. His footsteps were inaudible as he approached.

"I have a delivery for Cook, Fran," the UPS man announced, holding out a white envelope.

At the same time he was offered, once again, the familiar, forlorn choice between Okay and Cancel.

He clicked on Cancel. There was a trembling, and the smallest flicker of darkness, but then the corridor reasserted itself, and the wailing behind the door. The UPS man was gone, but the envelope remained in his hand. It bore the return address in Quebec of Disney-Mitsubishi.

There was no longer a Cancel to click on. He had to read the letter.

*Dear [Name]:*

*The staff and management of Xanadu International regret to inform you that as of [date] all services in connection with your contract [Number] will be canceled due to new restrictions in the creation and maintenance of posthumous intelligence. We hope that we will be able to resolve all outstanding differences with the government of Quebec and restore the services contracted for by the heirs of your estate, but in the absence of other communications you must expect the imminent closure of your account. It has been a pleasure to serve you. We hope you have enjoyed your time in Xanadu.*

*The law of the sovereign state of Quebec requires us to advise you that in terminating this contract we*

*are not implying any alteration in the spiritual condition of [Name] or of his immortal soul. The services of Xanadu International are to be considered an esthetic product offered for entertainment purposes only.*

When he had read it, the words of the letter slowly faded from the page, like the smile of the Cheshire cat.

The wailing behind the door had stopped, but he still stood in the empty corridor, scarce daring to breathe. Any moment, he thought, might be his last. In an eyeblink the world might cease.

But it didn't. If anything the world seemed solidier than heretofore. People who have had a brush with death often report the same sensation.

He reversed his path along the corridor, wondering if anyone lived behind any of them, or if they were just a facade, a Potemkin corridor in a high-rise in the realm of faerie.

As though to answer his question Debora was waiting for him when he went outside. She was wearing a stylishly tailored suit in a kind of brown tweed, and her hair was swept up in a way that made her look like a French movie star of the 1940s.

As they kissed, the orchestra reintroduced their love theme. The music swelled. The world came to an end.

## PART TWO

### x a n a d u

But then, just the way that the movie will start all over again after *The End*, if you just stay in your seat, or even if you go out to the lobby for more popcorn, he found himself back at the beginning, with the same pop-up screen welcoming him to Xanadu and then a choice of *Okay* or *Cancel*. But there was also, this time, a further choice: a blue banner that pulsed at the upper edge of consciousness and asked him if he wanted expanded memory and quicker responses. He most definitely did, so with his mental mouse he accepted the terms being offered without bothering to scroll through them.

He checked off a series of **Yeses** and **Continues**, and so, without his knowing it, he had become, by the time he was off the greased slide, a citizen of the sovereign state of Quebec, an employee of Disney-Mitsubishi Temps E-Gal, and—cruellest of his new disadvantages—a girl.

A face glimmered before him in the blue gloaming. At first he thought it might be Debora, for it had the same tentative reality that she did, like a character at the beginning of some old French movie about railroads and murderers, who may be the star or only an extra on hand to show that this is a world with people in it. It was still too early in the movie to tell. Only as he turned sideways did he realize (the sound track made a samisen-like *Twang!* of recognition) that he had been looking in a mirror, and that the face that had been coalescing before him—the rouged cheeks, the plump lips, the fake lashes, the mournful gaze—had been his own! Or rather, now, her own.

As so many other women had realized at a similar point in their lives, it was already too late and nothing could be done to correct the mistake that Fate, and Disney-Mitsubishi, had made. Maybe he'd always been a woman. [Cook, Fran] was a sexually ambiguous name. Perhaps his earlier assumption that he was male was simply a function of thinking in English, where *one* may be mistaken about *his* own identity (but not about hers). I think; therefore I am a guy.

He searched through his expanded memory for some convincing evidence of his gender history. Correction: *her* gender history. Her-story, as feminists would have it. Oh, dear—would he be one of *them* now, always thinking in italics, a grievance committee of one in perpetual session?

But look on the bright side (she told herself). There might be advantages in such a change of address. Multiple orgasms. Nicer clothes (though she couldn't remember ever wanting to dress like a woman when she was a man). Someone else paying for dinner, assuming that the protocols of hospitality still worked the same way here in Xanadu as they had back in reality. This was supposed to be heaven and already she was feeling nostalgic for a life she couldn't remember, an identity she had shed.

Then the loudspeaker above her head emitted a dull *Dong!*, and she woke up in the Women's Dormitory of State Pleasure-Dome 2. "All right, girls!" said the amplified voice of the matron. "Time to rise and ~~shine~~. *Le temps s'en va, mesdames! le temps s'en va!*"

"*La vie*," philosophized Chantal, "*est une maladie dont le sommeil nous soulageons toutes les seize heures. C'est un palliative. La morte est un remede.*" She flicked the drooping ash from the end of her cigarette and made a moue of chic despair. Fran could understand what she'd said quite as well as if she'd been speaking English: Life is a disease from which sleep offers relief every sixteen hours. Sleep is a palliative—death a remedy.

They were sitting before big empty cups of cafe au lait in the employee lounge, dressed in their black E-Gal minis, crisp white aprons, and fishnet hose. Fran felt a positive fever of chagrin to be seen in such a costume, but she felt nothing otherwise, really, about her entire female body, especially the breasts bulging out of their casings, breasts that quivered visibly at her least motion. It was like wearing a T-shirt with some dumb innuendo on it, or a blatant sexual invitation. Did every girl have to go through the same torment of shame at puberty? Was there any way to get over it except to get into it?

"*Mon bonheur*," declared Chantal earnestly, "*est d'augmenter celle des autres.*" Her happiness lay in increasing that of others. A doubtful proposition in most circumstances, but not perhaps for Chantal, who, as an E-Gal was part geisha, part rock star, and part a working theorem in moral calculus, an embodiment of Francis Hutcheson's notion that that action is best which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers. There were times—Thursdays, in the early evening—when Chantal's bedside/Website was frequented by as many as two thousand admirers, their orgasms all blissfully synchronized with the reels and ditties she performed on her dulcimer, sometimes assisted by Fran (an apprentice in the art) but usually all on her own. At such times (she'd confided to Fran) she felt as she imagined a great conductor must feel conducting some choral extravaganza, the *Missa Solemnis* or the Ninth Symphony.

Except that the dulcimer gave the whole thing a tinge and twang of hillbilly, as of Tammy Wynette singing "I'm just a geisha from the bayou." Of course, the actual Tammy Wynette had died ages ago and could sing that song only in simulation, but still it was hard to imagine it engineered with any other voice-print: habit makes the things we love seem inevitable as arithmetic.

"*Encore?*" Chantal asked, lifting her empty cup, and then, when Fran had nodded, signaling to the waiter.

Coffee, cigarettes, a song on the jukebox. Simple pleasures, but doubled and quadrupled and raised to some astronomical power, the stuff that industries and gross national products are made of. Fran imagined a long reverse zoom away from their table at the cafe, away from the swarming hive of the city, to where each soul and automobile was a mere pixel on the vast monitor of eternity.

The coffees came, and Chantal began to sing, "*Le bonheur de la femme n'est pas dans la liberte, mais dans l'acceptation d'un devoir.*"

A woman's happiness lies not in liberty, but in the acceptance of a duty.

And what was that duty? Fran wondered. What could it be but love? ***in a vision***

**o n c e I s a w**

There were no mirrors in Xanadu, and yet every vista seemed to be framed as by those tinted looking glasses of the eighteenth century that turned everything into a Claude Lorrain. Look too long or too closely into someone else's face, and it became your own. Chantal would tilt her head back, a flower bending to the breeze, and she would morph into Fran's friend of his earlier afterlife, Debora. Debora, whose hand had caressed his vanished sex, whose wit had entertained him with Cartesian doubts.

They were the captives (it was explained, when Fran summoned **Help**) of pirates, and must yield to the desires of their captors in all things. That they were in the thrall of copyright pirates, not authentic old-fashioned buccaneers, was an epistemological quibble. Subjectively their captors could exercise the same cruel authority as any Captain Kidd or Hannibal Lecter. Toes and nipples don't know the difference between a knife and an algorithm. Pirates of whatever sort are in charge of pain and its delivery, and that reduces all history, all consciousness, to a simple system of pluses and minuses, do's and don'ts. Suck my dick or walk the plank. That (the terrible simplicity) was the downside of living in a pleasure-dome.

"Though, if you think about it," said Debora, with her hand resting atop the strings of her dulcimer, as though it might otherwise interrupt what she had to say, "every polity is ultimately based upon some calculus of pleasure, of apportioning rapture and meting out pain. The jukebox and the slot machine, what are they but emblems of the Pavlovian bargain we all must make with that great dealer high in the sky?" She lifted a little silver hammer and bonked her dulcimer a triple bonk of do-sol-do.

"The uncanny thing is how easily we can be programmed to regard mere symbols—" Another do-sol-do. "—as rewards. A bell is rung somewhere, and something within us resonates. And music

becomes one of the necessities of life. Even such a life as this, an ersatz afterlife."

"Is there some way to escape?" Fran asked.

Debora gave an almost imperceptible shrug, which her dulcimer responded to as though she were a breeze and it a wind chime hanging from the kitchen ceiling. "There are rumors of escapees—E-Men, as they're called. But no one *I've* ever known has escaped, or at least they've never spoken of it. Perhaps they do, and get caught, and then the memory of having done so is blotted out. Our memories are not exactly ours to command, are they?"

The dulcimer hyperventilated.

Debora silenced it with a glance and continued: "Some days I'll flash on some long-ago golden oldie, and a whole bygone existence will come flooding back. A whole one-pound box of madeleines, and I will be absolutely convinced by it that I *did* have a life once upon a time, where there were coffee breaks with doughnuts bought at actual bakeries and rain that made the pavements speckled and a whole immense sensorium, always in flux, which I can remember now only in involuntary blips of recall. And maybe it really was like that once, how can we know, but whether we could get back to it, that I somehow can't believe."

"I've tried to think what it would be like to be back there, where we got started." Fran gazed into the misty distance, as though her earlier life might be seen there, as in an old home video. "But it's like trying to imagine what it would be like in the thirteenth century, when people all believed in miracles and stuff. It's beyond me."

"Don't you believe in miracles, then?" The dulcimer twanged a twang of simple faith. "I do. I just don't suppose they're for us. Miracles are for people who pay full price. For us there's just Basic Tier programming— eternal time and infinite space."

"And those may be no more than special effects."

Debora nodded. "But even so ..." "Even so?" Fran prompted.

"Even so," said Debora, with the saddest of smiles, a virtual flag of surrender, "if I were you, I would try to escape."

## those caves of ice!

Ebay was a lonely place, as holy and enchanted as some underwater cathedral in the poem of a French symbolist, or a German forest late at night. If you have worked at night as a security guard for the Mall of America, or if you've seen Simone Simon in *Cat People* as she walks beside the pool (only her footsteps audible, her footsteps and the water's splash), only then can you imagine its darkling beauty, the change that comes over the objects of our desire when they are flensed of their purveyors and consumers and stand in mute array, aisle after aisle. Then you might sweep the beam of your flashlight across the waters of the re-circulating fountain as they perpetually spill over the granite brim. No silence is so large as that where Muzak played, but plays no more.

Imagine such a place, and then imagine discovering an exit that announces itself in the darkness by a dim red light and opening the door to discover a Piranesian vista of a further mall, no less immense, its tiers linked by purring escalators, the leaves of its potted trees shimmering several levels beneath where you are, and twinkling in the immensity, the signs of the stores—every franchise an entrepreneur might lease. Armani and Osh-Kosh, Hallmark, Kodak, Disney-Mitsubishi, American Motors, Schwab. A landscape all of names, and yet if you click on any name, you may enter its portal to discover its own little infinity of choices. Shirts of all sizes, colors, patterns, prices; shirts that were sold, yesterday, to someone in Iowa; other shirts that may be sold tomorrow or may never find a taker. Every atom and molecule in the financial continuum of purchases that might be made has here been numbered and cataloged. Here, surely, if anywhere, one might become if not invisible then scarcely noticed, as in some great metropolis swarming with illegal aliens, among whom a single further citizen can matter not a jot.

Fran became a mote in that vastness, a pip, an alga, unaware of his own frenetic motion as the flow of data took him from one possible purchase to the next. Here was a CD of Hugo Wolflieder sung by Elly Ameling. Here a pair of Lucchese cowboy boots only slightly worn with western heels. Here six interesting Japanese dinner plates and a hand-embroidered black kimono. This charming pig creamer has an adorable French hat and is only slightly chipped. These Viking sweatshirts still

have their tags from Wal-Mart, \$29.95. Sabatier knives, set of four. A 1948 first edition of *The Secret of the Old House*. Hawaiian Barbie with hula accessories. "Elly Ameling Sings Schumann!" Assorted rustic napkins from Amish country.

There is nothing that is not a thought away, nothing that cannot be summoned by a wink and a nod to any of a dozen search engines. But there is a price to pay for such accessibility. The price is sleep, and in that sleep we buy again those commodities we bought or failed to buy before. No price is too steep, and no desire too low. Cream will flow through the slightly chipped lips of the charming pig creamer in the adorable hat, and our feet will slip into the boots we had no use for earlier. And when we return from our night journeys, like refugees returning to the shells of

their burned homes, we find we are where we were, back at Square One. The matron was bellowing over the PA, "*Le temps s'en va, mesdames! Le temps s'en va!*" and Fran wanted to die.

## **grain beneath the thresher's flail**

She was growing old in the service of the Khan, but there was no advantage to be reaped from long service, thanks to the contract she'd signed back when. She had become as adept with the hammers of the dulcimer as ever Chantal had been (Chantal was gone now, no one knew whither), but in truth the dulcimer is not an instrument that requires great skill—and its rewards are proportional. She felt as though she'd devoted her life—her afterlife—to the game of Parcheesi, shaking the dice and moving her tokens round the board forever. Surely this was not what the prospectus promised those who signed on.

She knew, in theory (which she'd heard, in various forms, from other denizens), that the great desideratum here, the magnet that drew all its custom, was beauty, the rapture of beauty that poets find in writing poetry or composers in their music. It might not be the Beatific Vision that saints feel face-to-face with God, but it was, in theory, the next best thing, a bliss beyond compare. And perhaps it was all one could hope for. How could she be sure that this bliss or that, as it shivered through her, like a wind through Daphne's leaves, wasn't of the same intensity that had zapped the major romantic poets in their day?

In any case, there was no escaping it. She'd tried to find an exit that didn't, each day, become the entrance by which she returned to her contracted afterlife and her service as a damsel with a dulcimer. Twang! Twang! *O ciel! O belle nuit!* Not that she had any notion of some higher destiny for herself, or sweeter pleasures—except the one that all the poets

agreed on: Lethe, darkness, death, and by death to say we end the humdrum daily continuation of all our yesterdays into all our tomorrows.

The thought of it filled her with a holy dread, and she took up the silver hammers of her dulcimer and began, once again, to play such music as never mortal knew before.