

The Discharge

[by Christopher Priest](#)

Comme tous les songe-creux, je confondis le désenchantement avec la vérité.

Jean-Paul Sartre

I emerge into my memories of life at the age of twenty. I was a soldier, recently released from boot camp, being marched by an escouade of black-cap military policemen to the naval compound in Jethra harbor. The war was approaching the end of its three thousandth year and I was serving in a conscript army.

I marched mechanically, staring at the back of the man's head in front of me. The sky was dark grey with cloud and a stiff cold wind streamed in from the sea. My awareness of life leapt into being around me. I knew my name, I knew where we had been ordered to march, I knew or could guess where we would be going after that. I could function as a soldier. This was my moment of birth into consciousness.

Marching uses no mental energy—the mind is free to wander, if you have a mind. I record these words some years later, looking back, trying to make sense of what happened. At the time, the moment of awareness, I could only react, stay in step.

Of my childhood, the years leading up to this moment of mental birth, little remains. I can piece together the fragments of a likely story: I was probably born in Jethra, university town and capital city on the southern coast of our country. Of my parents, brothers or sisters, my education, any history of childhood illnesses, friends, experiences, travels, I remember nothing. I grew to the age of twenty; only that is certain.

And one other thing, useless to a soldier. I knew I was an artist.

How could I be sure of that, trudging along with the other men, in a phalanx of dark uniforms, kitbags, clanking mess-tins, steel helmets, boots, stamping down a puddled road with a chill wind in our faces?

I knew that in the area of blankness behind me was a love of paintings, of beauty, of shape and form and color. How had I gained this passion? What had I done with it? Aesthetics were my obsession and fervor. What was I doing in the army? Somehow this totally unsuitable candidate must have passed medical and psychological tests. I had been drafted, sent to boot camp; somehow a drill sergeant had trained me to become a soldier.

Here I was, marching to war.

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We boarded a troopship for passage to the southern continent, the world's largest unclaimed territory. It was there that the fighting was taking place. All battles had been fought in the south for nearly three thousand years. It was a vast, uncharted land of tundra and permafrost, buried in ice at the pole. Apart from a few outposts along the coast, it was uninhabited except by battalions.

I was assigned to a mess-deck below the waterline, already hot and stinking when we boarded, soon crowded and noisy as well.

I withdrew into myself, while sensations of life coursed maddeningly through me. Who was I? How had I come to this place? Why could I not remember what I had been doing even the previous day?

But I was able to function, equipped with knowledge of the world, with working ability to use my equipment, I knew the other men in my escadron and I understood some of the aims and history of the war. It was only myself I could not remember. For the first day, as we waited in our deck for other detachments to board the ship, I listened in to the talk of the other men, hoping mainly for insights about myself, but when none of those was revealed I settled instead for finding out what concerned them. Their concerns would be mine.

Like all soldiers they were complaining, but in their case the complaints were tinged with real apprehension. It was the prospect of the three thousandth anniversary of the outbreak of war that was the problem. They were all convinced that they were going to be caught up in some major new offensive, an assault intended to resolve the dispute one way or another. Some of them thought that because there were still more than three years to go until the anniversary the war would be ended before then. Others pointed out cynically that our four-year term of conscription was due to end a few weeks after the millennium. If a big offensive was in progress we would never be allowed out until it was over.

Like them, I was too young for fatalism. The seed of wanting to escape from the army, to find some way to discharge myself, had been sown.

I barely slept that night, wondering about my past, worrying about my future.

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When the ship started its voyage it headed south, passing the islands closest to the mainland. Off the coast of Jethra itself was Seevl, a long grey island of steep cliffs and bare windswept hills that blocked the view of the sea from most parts of the city. Beyond Seevl a wide strait led to a group of islands known as the Serques—these were greener, lower, with many attractive small towns nestling in coves and bays around their coastlines.

Our ship passed them all, weaving a way between the clustering islands. I watched from the rail, enchanted by the view.

As the long shipboard days passed slowly I found myself drawn again and again to the upper deck, where I would find a place to stand and stare, usually alone. So close to home but beyond the blocking mass of Seevl, the islands slipped past, out of reach, this endless islandscape of vivid colors and glimpses of other places, distant and shrouded in haze. The ship ploughed on steadily through the calm water, the massed soldiery crammed noisily within, few of the men so much as even glancing away to see where we were.

The days went by and the weather grew noticeably warmer. The beaches I could see now were white and fringed with tall trees, tiny houses visible in the shade beyond. The reefs that protected many of the islands were brilliantly multicolored, jagged and encrusted with shells, breaking the sea-swell into spumes of white spray. We passed ingenious harbors and large coastal towns clinging to spectacular hillsides, saw pluming volcanoes and rambling, rock-strewn mountain pastures, skirted islands large and small,

lagoons and bays and river estuaries.

It was common knowledge that it was the people of the Dream Archipelago who had caused the war, though as you passed through the Midway Sea the peaceful, even dreamy aspect of the islands undermined this certainty. The calm was only an impression, an illusion borne of the distance between ship and shore. To keep us alert on our long southerly voyage the army mounted many compulsory shipboard lectures. Some of these recounted the history of the struggle to achieve armed neutrality in which the islands had been engaged for most of the three millennia of the war.

Now they were by consent of all parties neutral, but their geographical location—the Midway Sea girdled the world, separating the warring countries of the northern continent from their chosen battlefields in the uninhabited southern polar land—ensured that military presence in the islands was perpetual.

I cared little for any of that. Whenever I was able to get away to the upper deck I would stare in rapt silence at the passing diorama of islands. I tracked the course of the ship with the help of a torn and probably out-dated map I had found in a ship's locker and the names of the islands chimed in my consciousness like a peal of bells: Paneron, Salay, Temmil, Mesterline, Prachous, Muriseay, Demmer, Piqay, the Aubracs, the Torquils, the Serques, the Reeve Fast Shoals, and the Coast of Helvard's Passion.

Each of these names was evocative to me. Reading the names off the map, identifying the exotic coastlines from fragments of clues—a sudden rise of sheer cliffs, a distinctive headland, a particular bay—made me think that everywhere in the Dream Archipelago was already embedded in my consciousness, that somehow I derived from the islands, belonged in them, had dreamed of them all my life. In short, while I stared at the islands from the ship I felt my artistic sensibilities reviving. I was startled by the emotional impact on me of the names, so delicate and suggestive of unspecified sensual pleasures, out of key with the rest of the coarse and manly existence on the ship. As I stared out across the narrow stretches of water that lay between our passing ship and the beaches and reefs I would quietly recite the names to myself, as if trying to summon a spirit that would lift me up, raise me above the sea and carry me to those tide-swept strands.

Some of the islands were so large that the ship sailed along parallel with their coastlines for most of the day, while others were so small they were barely more than half-submerged reefs which threatened to rip at the hull of our elderly ship.

Small or large, all the islands had names. As we passed one I could identify on my map I circled the name, then later added it to an ever-growing list in my notebook. I wanted to record them, count them, note them down as an itinerary so that one day I might go back and explore them all. The view from the sea tempted me.

There was only one island stop for our ship during that long southward voyage.

My first awareness of the break in our journey was when I noticed that the ship was heading towards a large industrialized port, the installations closest to the sea seemingly bleached white by the cement dust spilling from an immense smoking factory that overlooked the bay. Beyond this industrial area was a long tract of undeveloped shoreline, the tangle of rainforest briefly blocking any further sight of civilization. Then, after rounding a hilly promontory and passing a high jetty wall, a large town built on a range of low hills came suddenly into sight, stretching away in all directions, my view of it distorted by the shimmering heat that spread out from the land across the busy waters of the harbor. We were of course forbidden from knowing the identity of our stop, but I had my map and I already knew the name.

The island was Muriseay, the largest of the islands in the Archipelago and one of the most important.

It would be hard to underestimate the impact this discovery had on me. Muriseay's name came swimming up out of the blank pool that was my memory.

At first it was just an identifying word on the map: a name printed in letters larger than the ones used for other islands. It puzzled me. Why should this word, this foreign name, mean something to me? I had been stirred by the sight of the other islands, but although the resonances were subtle I had felt no close identification with any of them.

Then we approached the island and the ship started to follow the long coastline. I had watched the distant land slip by, affected more and more, wondering why.

When we came to the bay, to the entrance to the harbor, and I felt the heat from the town drifting across the quiet water towards us, something at last became clear to me.

I knew about Muriseay. The knowledge came to me as a memory from the place where I had no memory.

Muriseay was something or somewhere I had known, or it represented something I had done, or experienced, as a child. It was a whole memory, discrete, telling me nothing about the rest. It involved a painter who had lived on Muriseay and his name was Rascar Acizzone.

Rascar Acizzone? Who was that? Why did I suddenly remember the name of a Muriseayan painter when otherwise I was a hollow shell of amnesia?

I was able to explore this memory no further: without warning all troops were mustered to billets and with the other men who had drifted to the upper decks I was forced to return to the mess-decks. I descended to the bowels of the ship resentfully. We were kept below for the rest of the day and night, as well as for much of the day that followed.

Although I suffered in the airless, sweltering hold with all the others, it gave me time to think. I closed myself off, ignored the noise of the other men and silently explored this one memory that had returned.

When the larger memory is blank, anything that suddenly seems clear becomes sharp, evocative, heavy with meaning. I gradually remembered my interest in Muriseay without learning anything else about myself.

I was a boy, a teenager. Not long ago, in my short life. I learned somehow of a colony of artists who had gathered in Muriseay Town the previous century. I saw reproductions of their work somewhere, perhaps in books. I investigated further and found that several of the originals were kept in the city's art gallery. I went there to see them for myself. The leading painter, the eminence within the group, was the artist called Rascar Acizzone.

It was Acizzone's work which inspired me.

Details continued to clarify themselves. A coherent exactness emerged from the gloom of my forgotten past. Rascar Acizzone developed a painting technique he called tactilism. A tactilist work used a kind of pigment that had been developed some years before, not by artists but by researchers into ultrasound microcircuitry. A range of dazzling colors became available to artists when certain patents expired and for a brief period there had been a vogue for paintings that used the garish but exciting ultrasound primaries.

Most of these early works were little more than pure sensationalism: colors were blended synaesthetically with ultrasonics to shock, alarm or provoke the viewer. Acizzone's work began as the others lost interest, consigning themselves to the minor artistic school that soon became known as the Pre-Tactilists.

Acizzone used the pigments to more disturbing effect than anyone before him. His glowing abstracts—large canvases or boards painted in one or two primary colors, with few shapes or images to be seen—appeared at a casual first look, or from a distance, or when seen as reproductions in books, to be little more than arrangements of colors. Closer up or, better still, if you made physical contact with the ultrasonic pigments used in the originals, it became apparent that the concealed images were of most profoundly and shockingly erotic nature. Detailed and astonishingly explicit scenes were mysteriously evoked in the mind of the viewer, inducing an intense charge of sexual excitement. I discovered a set of long-forgotten Acizzone abstracts in the vaults of the museum in Jethra and by the laying on of the palms of my hands I entered the world of vicarious carnal passion. The women depicted by Acizzone were the most beautiful and sensual I had ever seen, or known, or imagined. Each painting created its own vision in the mind of the viewer. The images were always exact and repeatable, but they were unique, being partially created as an individual response to the sensual longing of the observer.

Not much critical literature about Acizzone remained, but what little I could find seemed to suggest that everyone experienced each painting differently.

I discovered that Acizzone's career had ended in failure and ignominy: soon after his work was noticed he was rejected by the art establishment figures, the public notables, the moral guardians, of his time. He was hounded and execrated, forced to end his days in exile on the closed island of Cheoner. With most of his originals hidden, and a few more dispersed away from Muriseay to the archives of mainland galleries, Acizzone never worked again and sank into obscurity.

As a teenage aesthete I cared nothing about his scandalous reputation. All I understood was that the few paintings of his that were hidden away in the cellars of the Jethran gallery evoked such lustful images in my mind that I was left weak with unfocused desire and dizzy with amorous longings.

That was the whole bright clarity of my unlocated memory. Muriseay, Acizzone, tactilist masterpieces, concealed paintings of secret sex.

Who was I who had learned of this? The boy was gone, grown into a soldier. Where was I when it happened? There must have been a wider life I once lived, but none of those memories had survived.

Once I had been an aesthete; now I was a foot-soldier. What kind of life was that?

Now we were moored in Muriseay Town, just outside the harbor wall. We fretted and strained, wanting to escape from our sweltering holds. Then:

Shore leave.

The news circulated around us faster than the speed of sound. The ship was soon to leave its mooring outside the harbor and dock against the quay. We would have thirty-six hours ashore. I cheered with the others. I yearned to find my past and lose my innocence in Muriseay.

Four thousand men were released and we hurried ashore. Most of them rushed into Muriseay Town in search of whores.

I rushed along with them, in quest of Acizzone.

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Instead, I too found only whores.

There in the dock area, after a fruitless quest that sent me dashing through the streets to find Acizzone's beautiful Muriseayan women, I finished up in a dancing club. I was unready for Muriseay, had no idea of how to find what I was seeking. I roamed about the remoter quarters of the town, lost in narrow streets, shunned by the people who lived there. They saw only my uniform. I was soon footsore and disillusioned by the foreignness of the town, so I felt relieved when I discovered that my wanderings had brought me back to the harbor.

Our troopship, floodlit in the night, loomed over the concrete aprons and wharves.

I noticed the dancing club when I came across the dozens of troops thronging around the entrance. Wondering what was attracting them, I pushed through the crowd and went inside.

The large interior was dark and hot, crammed to the walls with human bodies, filled with the endless throbbing beat of synthesized rock. My eyes were dazzled by the colored lasers and spotlights flashing intensely from positions close to the ceiling. No one was dancing. At points around the walls, young women stood on glinting metal platforms head-height above the crowds, their naked, oil-glossed bodies picked out by glaring white spotlights. Each of them held a microphone against her lips and was speaking unexcitedly into it, pointing down at certain of the men on the dance floor.

As I pushed my way into the central area I was spotted by them. At first, in my inexperience, I thought they were waving to me or greeting me in some other way. I was tired and disappointed after my long walk around the town and I raised a hand in weary response. The young woman on the platform closest to me had a voluptuous body: she stood with her feet wide apart and her pelvis thrust forward, glorying in the revelation of her nakedness by the intrusive light. When I waved she moved suddenly, leaning forward on the metal rail around her platform so that her huge breasts dangled temptingly towards the men below. The spotlight source instantly shifted—a new beam flashed up from behind and below her, garishly illuminating her large buttocks and casting her shadow brightly on the ceiling. She spoke more urgently into her microphone, jabbing her hand in my direction.

Alarmed by being paid special attention, I moved deeper into the press of uniformed male bodies, hoping to lose myself in the crowd. Within a few seconds, though, a number of women had converged on me from different sides, reaching out through the jam of bodies to take me by the arms. Each of them was wearing a radio headset, with a pin-mike suspended close in front of her lips. Soon I was surrounded by them. They led me irresistibly across to one side.

While they continued to press around me, one of them flicked her fingers in front of my face, her thumb rubbing acquisitively across her fingertips.

I shook my head, embarrassed and frightened.

"Money!" the woman said loudly.

"How much?"

I hoped that money would let me escape from them.

"Your leave pay." She rubbed her fingers again.

I found the thin fold of military banknotes the black-cap marshals had given me as I disembarked. As soon as I pulled them from my hip pocket she snatched them. With a swift motion she passed the money

to one of the women I suddenly saw were sitting behind a long table in the shadowy recess by the edge of the dance floor. Each of them was noting down the amounts taken from every man in a kind of ledger, then slipping the banknotes out of sight.

It had all happened so quickly that I had barely taken in what they wanted. By now, though, because of the close and suggestive way the women were standing against me, there was little doubt what they were offering, even demanding. None of them was young, none of them was attractive to me. My thoughts for the last few hours had been with Acizzone's sirens. To be confronted by these aggressive and disagreeable women now was a shock to me.

"You want this?" one of them said, pulling at the loose front of her dress to reveal, fleetingly, a small sagging breast.

"You want this too?" The woman who had taken my money from my hand snatched at the front of her skirt, lifting it to show me what was beneath. In the harsh shadows created by the aggravating lights I could see nothing of her.

They were laughing at me.

"You've taken my money," I said. "Now leave me."

"Do you know where you are and what men do in here?"

"Of course."

I managed to struggle away from them and headed back immediately towards the entrance. I was feeling angry and humiliated. I had spent the last few hours dreaming of meeting, or even of simply seeing, Acizzone's wanton beauties. Instead, these hags tormented me with their withered, experienced bodies.

A group of four black-caps had entered the building while this had been going on. I could see them standing in pairs on each side of the entrance. They had withdrawn their synaptic batons and were holding them in the strike position. While aboard the ship I had already seen what happened to the victim if one of those evil sticks was used in anger. I faltered in my step, not wanting to have to push past the men to leave.

As I did so, another whore forced her way through the crowd and took my arm. I glanced at her in a distracted way, fearing the black-caps more than anything.

I was surprised to see her: this one was much younger than the others. She was wearing hardly any clothes to speak of: a tiny pair of shorts and a T-shirt with a torn neckline that hung low across one shoulder, revealing the upper curve of a breast. Her arms were thin. She was not wearing a radio headset. She was smiling towards me and as soon as I looked at her she spoke.

"Don't leave without discovering what we can do," she said, tilting her face to speak against my ear.

"I don't need to know," I shouted.

"This place is the cathedral of your dreams."

"What did you say?"

"Your dreams. Whatever you seek, they are here."

"No, I've had enough."

"Just try what we offer," she said, pressing her face so close to me that her curly hair lightly teased my cheek. "We are here for you, eager to please you. One day you will need what whores provide."

"Never."

The black-caps had moved to block the doorway. I could see that beyond them, in the wide passageway that led back to the street, more of their escouade were arriving. I wondered why they had suddenly appeared at the club, what they were doing. Our leave was not officially over for many more hours. Was there some emergency for which we had to return to the ship? Was this club, so prominently close to where the ship had berthed, off-limits for some perverse reason? Nothing was clear. I was suddenly frightened of the situation in which I had found myself.

Yet around me the hundreds of other men, all presumably from the same troopship as mine, appeared to show no concern. The racket of the over-amplified music went on, drilling into the mind.

"You can leave this way," the girl said, touching my arm. She pointed towards a dark doorway placed low, beneath a stage area, away from the main entrance.

The black-caps were now moving into the crowd of men, pushing people aside with rough movements of their arms. The synaptic batons wavered threateningly. The young whore had already run down the short flight of steps to the door and was holding it open for me. She beckoned urgently to me. I went quickly to her and through the door. She closed it behind me.

I was in humid semi-darkness and I stumbled on an uneven floor. The air was thick with powerful scents and although I could still hear the pulsating throb of the bass notes of the music there were many other sounds around me. Notably I could hear the voices of other men: shouting, laughing, complaining. Every voice was raised: in anger, excitement, urgency. At odd moments something on the other side of the corridor wall would bash heavily against it.

I gained a sense of chaos, of events being out of control.

We came to a door a short distance along the corridor—she opened it and led me through. I expected to find a bed of some sort, but there was nothing remotely of the boudoir about the room. There was not even a couch, or cushions on the floor. Three wooden chairs stood in a demure line against one wall, but that was all.

She said, "You wait now."

"Wait? What for? And for how long?"

"How long you want for your dreams?"

"Nothing! No time."

"You are so impatient. One minute more, then follow me!"

She indicated yet another door which until that moment I had not noticed, because it had been painted in the same dull-red color as the walls. The weak light from the room's only bulb had helped disguise it further. She went across to it and walked through. As she did so I saw her reach backwards over her head with both arms and remove the torn T-shirt.

I glimpsed her bare, curving back, the small knobs of her vertebrae, then she was gone.

Alone, I paced to and fro. By telling me to wait for one minute had she meant it literally? That I should

check my wristwatch or count to sixty? She had thrown me into a state of nervous tension. What more had she to do in that further sanctum beyond, other than remove those shorts and prepare herself for me?

I opened the door impatiently, pushing against the pressure of a spring. It was dark beyond. The dim glow from the room behind me was not strong enough to help me see. I gained the impression of something large in the room but I could not make out its shape. I felt around with my hands, nervous in the darkness, trying to extend my senses against the cloying perfumes and the endlessly throbbing music, muffled but loud. As far as I could tell I had come into a room, not another corridor.

I went further in, groping forward. Behind me, the door swung closed on its spring. Immediately, bright spotlights came on from the corners of the ceiling.

I was in a boudoir. An ornate bed—with a large, carved wooden headboard, immense bulging pillows and a profusion of shining satin sheets—filled most of the room. A woman, not the young whore who had led me here, but another, lay on the bed in a pose of sexual abandonment and availability.

She was naked, lying on her back with one arm raised to curl behind her head. Her face was turned to the side and her mouth was open. Her eyes were closed, her lips were moist. Her large breasts bulged across her chest, the nipples lying flatly and pointing outwards. She had raised one knee, holding it at a slight angle, exposing herself. Her fingers rested on her sex, the tips curving down to bury themselves shallowly in the cleft. The spotlights radiated her and the bed in a brilliant focus of glaring white light.

The sight of her froze me. What I was seeing was impossible. I stared at her in disbelief.

She had arranged herself in a tableau-vivant that was identical, not close but *identical*, to one I had seen in my mind's eye before.

It was there in that sole fragment of my past: I remembered the first day I was in the cool semi-darkness of the vault of the gallery in Jethra. I had pressed my trembling teenage fingers, my palms, my perspiring forehead, many times to one of Acizzone's most notorious tactilist works: *Ste-Augustinia Abandonai*.

(I remembered the title! How?)

This woman *was* Ste-Augustinia. The reproduction she was fashioning was perfect. Not only was she an exact replica but also the arrangement she had made of the sheets and pillows—there were folds of satin glinting in the harsh light that exactly matched those in the painting. The long gleam of perspiration running between her exposed breasts was one my lustful imaginings had drooled over a dozen times before.

I was so astonished by this discovery that for a moment I forgot why I was there. Much was immediately and trivially clear to me: that she was not, for instance, the young woman I had seen removing the torn T-shirt; nor was she any of the gaunt women in headsets who had seized me on the dance floor. She was more maturely developed than the skinny girl in the T-shirt and to my eyes many times more beautiful than any of the others. Also, but most confusingly, the deliberate way she had spread herself on the smooth sheets of the bed was a conscious reference to an imagining only I had ever experienced. Or that I remembered in isolation! This was a connection I could not explain or escape from. Was her pose just a coincidence? Had they somehow read my mind?

A cathedral of dreams, the girl had said. That was impossible!

Surely it was impossible?

It was madness to think that this had been contrived. But the resemblance to the painting, whose details

were clear in my mind, was remarkable. Even so, the woman's real purpose was plain. She was yet a whore.

I gazed at her in silence, trying to find out what I should think.

Then, without opening her eyes, the whore said, "If you only stand there to look, you must leave."

"I—I was searching for someone." She said nothing, so I added, "A young woman, like you."

"Take me now, or leave. I am not to be watched, not to be stared at. I am here to be ravished by you."

As far as I could tell she had not shifted position when she spoke to me. Even her lips had hardly moved.

I gazed at her for a few more seconds, thinking that this was the time and this was the place where my fantasies and my real life could meet, but finally I moved back from her. I was, in truth, frightened of her. I was hardly more than an adolescent, almost completely inexperienced in sex. Not only that, though: in a single unexpected instant I had been confronted in the flesh by one of Acizzone's temptresses.

Lamely, I did as she had told me and left.

There was little choice about where I should go. Two doors led into and out of the room: the one I had entered by and another in the wall opposite. I stepped round the end of the huge bed and went to the second door. "Ste-Augustinia" did not stir to watch me leave. As far as I could tell she had not so much as glanced at me while I was there. I kept my face lowered, not wanting her to look at me, even as I was leaving.

I passed through into a second narrow corridor, unlit at my end but with a low-power light bulb glimmering at the other. The encounter had produced a familiar physical effect on me—in spite of my apprehension I was tingling with sexual intrigue. Lustfulness was rising. I walked towards the light, the door of the room I had just left swinging closed behind me. At the far end, just beyond the light bulb, a kind of archway had been formed, with a small alcove behind it.

I came across no doors anywhere along the corridor so I assumed I would find some kind of exit in the alcove. As I lowered my head to pass through the archway I stumbled, tripping over the entangled legs of a man and woman apparently making love on the floor. In the gloom I had not seen them there. I staggered as I tried to keep my balance, uttering an apology, steadying myself by pressing a hand against the wall.

I moved on, away from the couple, but the alcove was a dead end. I felt around in the dim light, trying to find some sign of a door, but the only way in or out was through the archway.

The couple on the floor continued what they were doing, their naked bodies pumping rhythmically and energetically against each other.

I tried to step over them but I was unbalanced by the lack of room in which to stand and I kicked against them again. I murmured another embarrassed apology, but to my surprise the woman extricated herself quickly from beneath the man and stood up in an agile, untroubled movement. Her long hair was falling across her face and she tossed her head to sweep it back from her eyes. Perspiration rolled from her face, dripping down on her chest. The man rolled briefly over. Because of his nakedness I was able to see, with surprise, that he was not at all sexually aroused. Their act of physical love had been a simulation.

The woman said to me, "Wait! I'll come with you instead."

She laid a warm hand on mine and smiled invitingly. She was breathing excitedly. A sheen of sweat lay over her breasts; her nipples pointed erectly. I felt a new erotic charge from the light touch of her fingers, but also a surge of guilt. The man lay there passively at my feet, staring up at me. I was confused by everything I was seeing.

I backed away from them, through the archway, back to the long, unlit corridor. The naked whore followed quickly behind me, seizing hold of my upper arm as I blundered along. At the far end of this corridor, past the door which I knew led back into Ste-Augustinia's boudoir, I had noticed yet another door, leading somewhere. I reached it, put my weight against it and forced it open. It moved stiffly. Inside the room that was beyond, the endless throbbing beat of the synthesized music was louder but it appeared to be empty of all people. The musky perfume was intense. I felt sensual, aroused, eager to do the bidding of the young woman who had attached herself to me—but even so I was frightened, disorientated, overcome by the rush of sensations and thoughts coursing through me.

The young woman had followed me in, still holding my arm. The door closed firmly behind us, causing a decompression sensation in one of my ears. I swallowed to clear it. I turned to speak to this whore but as I did so two other young women appeared as if from nowhere, stepping out of the deeper shadows on the side of the room away from the door.

I was alone with them. All three were naked. They were looking at me with what I took to be great eagerness. I was in a state of acute sexual readiness.

Even so, I stepped back from them, still nervous because of my inexperience, but by this time in such a state of excitement that I wondered how much longer I might contain it. I felt the edge of something soft pressing against the back of my lower leg. When I glanced behind me I saw in the pale light that a large bed was there, a bare mattress of some kind, an expanse of yielding material ready for use.

The three naked women were beside me now, their lustful scents rising around me. With gentle pressure of their hands they indicated I should lower myself to the bed. I sat down, but then one of them pushed lightly on my shoulders and I leaned back compliantly. The mattress, the palliasse, whatever was there, was soft beneath my weight. One of the women bent down and lifted my legs around so that I might lie flat.

When I was prone they began to unbutton and remove my uniform, working deftly and quickly, letting me feel the light tattoo of their fingertips. Nothing happened by accident: they were deliberately provoking and teasing my physical response. I was straining with the effort of controlling myself, so close was I to letting go. The girl closest to my head was staring down into my eyes as her fingers worked to slide my shirt from my chest and down my arms. Whenever she leaned across me, or stretched to free my hand from the cuff of a sleeve, she did so in such a way that she lowered one of her bare breasts towards me and brushed the hard little nipple lightly against my lips.

I was naked in a few seconds, in a state of full and agonizing arousal, yearning for release. The women slid my clothes out from underneath me, piled them up on the further side of the mattress. The one beside my face rested her soft fingertips on my chest. She leaned closer to me.

"You choose?" she said, whispering into my ear.

"Choose what?"

"You like me? You like my friends?"

"All of you!" I said without thinking. "I want you all!"

Nothing more was said or, as far as I could see, signalled between them. They moved into position smoothly and as if in a formation they had rehearsed many times.

I was made to remain lying on my back but one of them lifted my knee that was closest to the edge of the mattress, making a small triangular aperture. She lay down on her back across the mattress so that her shoulders rested on my horizontal leg, while her head went beneath my raised knee. She turned her face towards the space between my legs. I could feel her breath on my naked buttocks. She took hold of my erect penis with her hand, holding it perpendicular to my body.

In the same moment the second woman was astride me with a knee on each side of my chest, her legs wide apart, lowering herself so that her sex touched lightly against, but did not enfold, the tip of my member, which was being held in position by the other woman.

The third one also straddled me but placed herself above my face, lowering herself towards, but not actually against, my eager lips.

Breathing the woman's delicious bodily scents, I remembered Acizzone.

I thought about the most explicit of his paintings hidden away in the gallery cellar. It was called (another title, remembered how?): *The Swain of Lethen in Godly Pleasures*. This one was painted in bold pigment on a stiff wooden board.

All that could be seen of *The Swain* in reproduction, or from a distance, was what appeared to be a smooth field of uniform crimson paint, intriguingly plain and minimalist. One touch of a hand or a finger, though, or even (as I knew I had tried) the light press of a forehead, would induce a vivid mental image of sexual activity. For everyone it was supposed to be different. I myself saw, felt, experienced, a scene of multiple sexual activity, a young man naked on a bed, three beautiful naked women pleasuring him, one straddling his face, one his penis, the third reaching beneath his body to press her face against his buttocks. All was bathed, in this intense imagining, in a lubricious crimson light.

Now I had become the swain himself, in godly pleasures.

I was surrendering to the imminent passions the women aroused in me. A lust for physical release was rushing through me even as the extent of the enigma about Acizzone surrounded me. I felt myself hastening to the moment of completion.

Then it ended. As swiftly and deftly as they had taken up their position, the women lifted themselves away from me, deserted me. I tried to call out to them, but my labored breathing emitted only a series of excited gasps. They stepped quickly down from the bed, slipped away—the door opened and closed, leaving me alone.

I discharged my excitement at last, miserable and abandoned. I could still in one sense feel them, could detect the traces they had left behind of their exquisite and exciting perfumes, but I was alone in that dim-lit, sound-throbbing cell and I expelled my passion as a man alone.

I lay still to try to calm myself, all my senses tingling, my muscles twitching and straining. I sat up slowly, lowered my feet to the floor. My legs were trembling.

When I could I dressed quickly and carefully, attempting to make myself look as if nothing had just happened so that I could depart with at least an appearance of calmness.

As I tucked in my shirt I felt the residue of my discharge, cold and sticky on the skin of my belly.

I found my way out of the room, along the corridor, into a large sub-floor area, filled with music and the

sound of overhead footsteps. I saw a glint of bright-red neon lighting, limned against ill-fitting doors. I struggled with iron handles, pulled the doors open, found a cobbled alley between two massive buildings under the tropical night, sensed the smells of cooking, perspiration, spices, grease, gasoline, night-scented flowers. Finally I emerged into the clamorous street by the waterfront. I saw none of the black-caps, none of the whores, none of my shipmates.

I was thankful the club was so close to the quay. I was soon able to reboard the troopship, check myself in with the marshals, then plunge into the lower decks and lose myself in the anonymous press of the other men who were there. I sought no one's company during my first hours back in the crowded decks. I lay on my bunk and pretended to sleep.

The next morning the ship sailed from Muriseay Town and once again we headed south towards the war.

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After Muriseay, my view of the islands was different. The superficial allure of them had diminished. From my short visit ashore in that crowded town I felt myself to have become island-experienced, had briefly breathed the air and the scents, heard the sounds and seen some of the muddle. At the same time, though, the experience had deepened the intrigue of the islands. They still had me in their thrall, but I was careful now not to dwell on it. I felt I had grown up a little.

The whole pace of life on the ship was changing, with the army's demands on us increasing every day. For several more days we continued to cruise our zigzag course between the tropical islands, but as we moved further south the weather grew gradually more temperate and for three long and uncomfortable days the ship was buffeted by stiff southerly gales and rocked by mountainous waves. When the storm finally receded we were in more barren latitudes. Many of the islands here, in the southern part of the Midway Sea, were craggy and treeless, some of them only barely rising above the level of the sea. They stood further apart from each other than they had done near the equator.

I still yearned for the islands, but not for these. I craved the insane heat of the tropics. With every day that the islands of the warmer climes slipped further behind me I knew that I had to put them out of my thoughts. I stayed away from the exposed upper decks, with their silent, distant views of fragmented land.

Towards the end of the voyage we were evacuated without warning from our mess-decks and while we crowded together on the assembly deck every recruit's kit was searched. The map I had been using was discovered where I had left it in my duffel bag. For two more days nothing happened. Then I was summoned to the adjutant's cabin where I was told the map had been confiscated and destroyed. I was docked seven days' pay as punishment and my record was marked. I was officially warned that the black-cap escouades would be alerted to my breach of the rules.

However, it turned out that not all was lost. Either the search party did not find my notebook or they had not recognized the long list of island names it contained.

The loss of the map obstinately reminded me of the islands we had passed. In the final days on the troopship, I sat alone with those pages from my notebook, committing the names to memory and trying to recall how each of the islands had looked. Mentally, I compiled a favored itinerary that I would follow when at last I was discharged from the army and could return home, moving slowly, as I planned, from one island to the next, perhaps spending many years in the process.

That could not begin until I had finished with the war, but the ship had not yet even arrived in sight of our destination. I waited on my hammock.

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On disembarkation I was assigned to an infantry unit who were armed with a certain type of grenade launcher. I was held up near the port for another month while I underwent training. By the time this was complete, my comrades from the ship had dispersed. I was sent on a long journey across the bleak landscape to join up with my new unit.

I was at last moving across the notorious southern continent, the theatre of the land war, but throughout the three days of my cold and exhausting journey by train and truck I saw signs of neither battles nor their aftermath. The terrain I passed through had clearly never been lived in—I saw a seemingly endless prospect of treeless plains, rocky hills, frozen rivers. I received orders every day: my torment was a lonely one but my route was known and monitored, arrangements had been made. Other troops travelled with me, none of them for long. We all had different destinations, different orders. Whenever the train halted it was met by trucks that either were standing by the side of the rails where we stopped, or which appeared from somewhere after we had waited an hour or two. Fuel and food was taken on at these stops and my brief companions came and went. Eventually it was my own turn to leave the train at one of these halts.

I travelled under a tarpaulin in the back of the truck for another day, cold and hungry, bruised by the constant lurching of the vehicle and at last terrified by the closeness of the landscape around me. I was now so much a part of it. The winds that scoured the bleak grasses and thorny, leafless bushes also scoured me, the rocks and boulders that littered the ground were the immediate cause of the truck's violent movements, the cold that seeped everywhere sapped my strength and will. I passed the journey in a state of mental and physical suspension, waiting for the interminable journey to end.

I stared in dismay at the terrain. I found the dark landscape oppressive, the gradual contours discouraging. I loathed the sight of the grey, flinty soil, the waterless plains, the neutral sky, the broken ground with its scattered rocks and shards of quartz, the complete absence of signs of human occupation or of agriculture or animals or buildings—above all I hated the endless blast of freezing winds and the shrouds of sleet, the blizzard gales. I could only huddle in my freezing, exposed corner of the truck's compartment, waiting for this deadly journey to end.

Finally we arrived somewhere, at a unit which was occupying a strategic position at the base of a steep, broken rockface. As soon as I arrived I noticed the grenade launcher positions, each constructed exactly as I had myself been trained to construct them, each concealed position manned to the right strength. After the torment and discomforts of the long journey I felt a sudden sense of completeness, an unexpected satisfaction that at last the disagreeable job I had been forced to take on was about to start.

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However, fighting the war itself was not yet my destiny. After I joined the grenade unit and shared duties

with the other soldiers for a day or two, the first frightening reality of the army was borne in on me. Grenade launchers we had, but as yet no grenades. This did not appear to alarm the others so I did not allow it to alarm me. I had been in the army long enough to have developed the foot-soldier's unquestioning frame of mind when it came to direct orders about fighting, or preparation for fighting.

We were told that we were going to retreat from this position, re-equip ourselves with materiel, then occupy a new position from which we could confront the enemy directly.

We dismantled our weapons, we abandoned our position in the dead of night, we travelled a long distance to the east. Here we finally rendezvoused with a column of trucks. We were driven in convoy for two nights and a day to a large stores depot. Here we learned that the grenade launchers with which we were armed were now obsolescent. We were to be issued with the latest version, but the entire escadron would need to be re-trained.

So we marched cross-country to another camp. So we re-trained. So, finally, we were issued with the latest armament and the ammunition for it and now at last fully prepared we marched off once again to fight the war.

We never reached our reallocated position, where the enemy was to be confronted. We were diverted instead to relieve another column of troops, five days away across some of the harshest countryside I had yet encountered: it was a broken, frozen landscape of flints and glinting pebbles, devoid of plants, of color, even of shape.

It didn't sink in straight away, but already the pattern had become established in those first few days and weeks of aimless activity. This purposeless and constant movement was to be my experience of war.

I never lost count of the days or the years. The three thousandth anniversary loomed ahead of me like an unstated threat. We marched at intervals from one place to the next; we slept rough; we marched again or were transported by trucks; we were billeted in wooden huts that were uninsulated and infested with rats and which leaked under the incessant rains. At intervals we were withdrawn to be re-trained. An issue of new or upgraded weapons invariably followed, making more training essential. We were always in transit, making camp, taking up new positions, digging trenches, heading south or north or east or anywhere to reinforce our allies—we were put on trains, removed from trains, flown here and there, sometimes without food or water, often without warning, always without explanation. Once when we were hiding in trenches close to the snowline a dozen fighter planes screamed overhead and we stood and cheered unheard after them; at another time there were other aircraft, from which we were ordered to take cover. No one attacked us, then or ever, but we were always on our guard. In some of the northerly areas of the continent, to which we were sent from time to time, and depending on the season, I was in turn baked by the heat of the sun, immobilized by thigh-deep mud, bitten by thousands of flying insects, swept away by flooding snow-melt—I suffered sores, sunburn, bruises, boredom, ulcerated legs, exhaustion, constipation, frostbite and unceasing humiliation. Sometimes we were told to stand our ground with our grenade launchers loaded and primed, waiting for action.

We never went into action.

This then was the war, of which it had always been said there would never be an end.

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I lost all sense of contextual time, past and future. All I knew was the daily marking off of the calendar, sensing the fourth millennium of the war approach ineluctably. As I marched, dug, waited, trained, froze, I dreamed only of freedom, of putting this behind me, of heading back to the islands.

At some forgotten moment during one of our route marches, one of our training camps, one of our attempts to dig trenches in the permafrost, I lost the notebook containing all the island names I had written down. When I first discovered the loss it seemed like an unparalleled disaster, worse than anything the army had inflicted on me. But later I found that my memory of the islands' names was intact. When I concentrated I realized I could still recite the romantic litany of islands, still place them against imagined shapes on a mental map.

At first bereft, I came to realize that the loss of first the map, then the notebook, had liberated me. My present was meaningless and my past was forgotten. Only the islands represented my future. They existed in my mind, modified endlessly as I dwelt on them, matching them up to my expectations.

As the gruelling experience of war ground on, I came to depend increasingly on my haunting mental images of the tropic archipelago.

But I could not ignore the army and I still had to endure its endless demands. In the ice mountains further away in the south, the enemy troops were dug into impregnable defensive positions, lines they were known to have held for centuries. They were so firmly entrenched that it was conventional wisdom amongst our men that they could never be dislodged. It was thought that hundreds of thousands of men on our side, perhaps millions of us, would have to die in the assault against their lines. It rapidly became clear that my escadron was not only going to be part of the first assault, but that after the first attack we would continue to be in the heart of the fray.

This was the precursor to the celebrations of the dawning fourth millennium.

Many other divisions were already in place, preparing to attack. We would be moving to reinforce them shortly.

Two nights later, sure enough, we were put once more into trucks and transported to the south, towards the freezing southern uplands. We took up position, dug ourselves as deep as possible into the permafrost, concealed and ranged our grenade launchers. By now uncaring of what happened to me, made wretched by the physical circumstances and rootless by the lack of mental cohesion, I waited with the others in a mixture of fear and boredom. As I froze, I dreamed of hot islands.

On clear days we could glimpse the peaks of the ice mountains close to the horizon, but there was no sign of enemy activity.

Twenty days after we had taken up our positions in the frozen tundra we were ordered to retreat once more. It was now less than ten days to the millennium.

We moved away, rushing to reinforce major skirmishes then said to be taking place by the coast. Reports of dead and wounded were horrifying but all was quiet by the time we arrived. We took up defensive lines along the cliffs. It was so familiar, this senseless repositioning, manoeuvring. I turned my back against the sea, not wanting to look northwards to where the unattainable islands lay.

Only eight days remained until the dreaded anniversary of the war's beginning and already we were taking delivery of more supplies of armor, ammunition and grenades than I had ever seen before. The tension in our ranks was insupportable. I was convinced that this time our generals were not bluffing, that real action was only days, perhaps hours, away.

I sensed the closeness of the sea. If I was to discharge myself, the moment had arrived.

That night I left my tent and skidded down the loose shale and gravel of the sloping cliff to the beach. My back pocket was stuffed with all the unspent army pay I had accumulated. In the ranks we always joked that the paper was worthless, but now I thought it might at last be useful. I walked until dawn, hid all day in the tough undergrowth that spread across the high ground behind the littoral, resting when I could. My unsleeping mind recited island names.

During the following night I managed to find a track worn by the tyres of trucks. I guessed it was used by the army so I followed it with immense care, taking cover at the first sign of any approaching traffic. I continued to travel by night, sleeping as I could by day.

I was in poor physical condition by the time I reached one of the military ports. Although I had been able to find water I had eaten no food for four days. I was in every way exhausted and ready to turn myself in.

Close to the harbor, in a narrow, unlit street, not at the first attempt but after several hours of risky searching, I found the building I was seeking. I reached the brothel not long before dawn, when business was slow and most of the whores were sleeping. They took me in, they immediately understood the gravity of my situation. They relieved me of all my army money.

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I remained hidden in the whorehouse for three days, regaining my strength. They gave me civilian clothes to wear—rather raffish, I thought, but I had no experience of the civilian world. I did not wonder how the women had come by them, or who else's clothes they might once have been. In the long hours I was alone in my tiny borrowed room I would repeatedly try on my new clothes and hold a mirror at arm's-length, admiring what I could see of myself in the limited compass of the glass. To be rid of the army fatigues at last, the thick, coarse fabric, the heavy webbing and the cumbersome patches of body armor, was like freedom in itself.

Whores visited me nightly, taking turns.

Early in the fourth night, the war's millennial night, four of the whores, together with their male minder, took me down to the harbor. They rowed me a distance out to sea, where a motor-launch was waiting in the darkly heaving waters beyond the headland. There were no lights on the boat, but in the glow from the town I could see that there were already several other men aboard the launch. They too were rakishly dressed, with frilled shirts, slouching hats, golden bracelets, velveteen jackets. They rested their elbows on the rail and stared down towards the water with waiting eyes. None of them looked at me, or at each other. There were no greetings, no recognitions. Money changed hands, from the whores in my boat to two agile young men in dark clothes in the other. I was allowed to board.

I squeezed into a position on the deck between other men, grateful for the warmth of the pressure against me. The rowing boat slipped away into the dark. I stared after it, regretting I could not remain with those young harlots. I was reminiscing already about their lithe, overworked bodies, their careless, eager skills.

The launch waited in its silent position for the rest of the night, the crew taking on board more men at intervals, making them find somewhere to squeeze themselves, handling the money. We remained silent, staring at the deck, waiting to leave. I dozed for a while, but every time more people came aboard we

had to shift around to make room.

They lifted the anchor before dawn and turned the boat out to sea. We were heavily loaded and running low in the water. Once we were away from the shelter of the headland we made heavy weather in the running swell, the bow of the launch crashing cumbersomely into the walls of the waves, taking on water with every lurching recovery. I was soon soaked through, hungry, frightened, exhausted, and desperate to reach solid land.

We headed north, shaking the salt water from our eyes. The litany of island names ran on ceaselessly in my mind, urging me to return.

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I escaped from the launch at the earliest opportunity, which was when we reached the first inhabited island. No one seemed to know which one it was. I went ashore in my rakish clothes, feeling shabby and dishevelled in spite of their stylish fit. The constant soakings in the boat had bleached most of the color from the material, had stretched and shrunk the different kinds of the fabric. I had no money, no name, no past, no future.

"What is this island called?" I said to the first person I met, an elderly woman sweeping up refuse on the quayside. She looked at me as if I was mad.

"Steffe," she said.

I had never heard of it.

"Say the name again," I said.

"Steffe, Steffe. You a discharger?" I said nothing, so she grinned as if I had confirmed the information. "Steffe!"

"Is that what you think I am, or is that the name of this island?"

"Steffe!" she said again, turning away from me.

I muttered some thanks and stumbled away from her, into the town. I still had no idea where I was.

I slept rough for a while, stealing food, begging for money, then met a whore who told me there was a hostel for the homeless which helped people to find jobs. Within a day I too was sweeping up refuse in the streets. It turned out that the island was called Keeilen, a place where many steffers made their first landfall.

Winter came—I had not realized it was the autumn when I discharged myself. I managed to work my passage as a deckhand on a cargo ship sailing with supplies to the southern continent, but which, I heard, would be calling at some more northerly islands on the way. My information was true. I arrived on Fellenstel, a large island with a range of mountains that sheltered the inhabited northern side from the prevailing southern gales. I passed the winter in the mild airs of Fellenstel. I moved north again when spring came, stopping for different periods of time on Manlayl, Meequa, Emmeret, Sentier—none of these was in my litany, but I intoned them just the same.

Gradually, my life was improving. Rather than sleep rough wherever I went I was usually able to rent a room for as long as I intended to stay on each island. I had learned that the warehouses on the islands were a chain of contacts for dischargers, a place of resort, of help. I discovered how to find temporary jobs, how to live as cheaply as possible. I was learning the island patois, quickly adjusting my knowledge as I came across the different argots that were used from one island to the next.

No one would speak to me about the war except in the vaguest ways. I was often spotted as a steffer as soon as I landed somewhere, but the further north I moved and the warmer the weather became, the less this appeared to matter.

I was moving through the Dream Archipelago, dreaming of it as I went, imagining what island might come next, thinking it into an existence that held good so long as I required it.

By this time I had operated the islands' black market to obtain a map, which I had realized was perhaps the hardest kind of printed material to get hold of anywhere. My map was incomplete, many years old, faded and torn and the place and island names were written in a script I did not at first understand, but it was for all that a map of the part of the Archipelago where I was travelling.

On the edge of the map, close to a torn area, there was a small island whose name I was finally able to decipher. It was Mesterline, one of the islands my unreliable memory told me we had passed on the southward journey.

Salay, Temmil, Mesterline, Prachous ... it was part of the litany, part of the route that would lead me back to Muriseay.

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It took me another year of erratic travels to reach Mesterline. As soon as I landed I fell in love with the place: it was a warm island of low hills, broad valleys, wide meandering rivers and yellow beaches. Flowers grew everywhere in a riot of effulgent colors. The buildings were constructed of white-painted brick and terra cotta tiles and they clustered on hilltops or against the steep sides of the cliffs above the sea. It was a rainy island: midway through most afternoons a brisk storm would sweep in from the west, drenching the countryside and the towns, running noisy rivulets through the streets. The Mester people loved these intense showers and would stand out in the streets or the public squares, their faces upturned and their arms raised, the rain coursing sensually through their long hair and drenching their flimsy clothes. Afterwards, as the hot sun returned and the ruts in the muddy streets hardened again, normal life would go on again. Everyone was happier after the day's shower and began to get ready for the languid evenings that they passed in the open-air bars and restaurants.

For the first time in my life (as I thought of it with my erratic memory), or for the first time in many years (as I suspected was the reality), I felt the urge to paint what I saw. I was dazzled by light, by color, by the harmony of places and plants and people.

I spent the daylight hours wandering wherever I could, feasting my eyes on the brashly colored flowers and fields, the glinting rivers, the deep shade of the trees, the blue and yellow glare of the sunlit shores, the golden skins of the Mester people. Images leapt through my mind, making me crave for some artistic outlet by which I could capture them.

That was how I began sketching, knowing I was not yet ready for paint or pigments.

By this time I was able to earn enough money to afford to live in a small rented apartment. I supported myself by working in the kitchen of one of the harbor-side bars. I was eating well, sleeping regularly, coming to terms with the extra mental blankness with which the war had left me. I felt as if my four years under arms had merely been time lost, an ellipsis, another area of forgotten life. In Mesterline I began to sense a full life extending around me, an identity, a past regainable and a future that could be envisaged.

I bought paper and pencils, borrowed a tiny stool, began the habit of setting myself up in the shade of the harbor wall, quickly drawing a likeness of anyone who walked into sight. I soon discovered that the Mesters were natural exhibitionists—when they realized what I was doing most of them would laughingly pose for me, or offer to return when they had more time, or even suggest they could meet me privately so that I could draw them again and in more intimate detail. Most of these offers came from young women. Already I was finding Mester women irresistibly beautiful. The harmony between their loveliness and the drowsy contentment of the Mesterline life inspired vivid graphic images in my mind that I found endlessly alluring to try to draw. Life spread even more fully around me, happiness grew. I started dreaming in color.

Then a troopship arrived in Mesterline Town, breaking its voyage southwards to the war, its decks crammed with young conscripts.

It did not dock in the harbor of the town but moored a distance offshore. Lighters came ashore bringing hard currency to buy food and other materials and to replenish water supplies. While the transactions went on, an escouade of black-caps prowled the streets, staring intently at all men of military age, their synaptic batons at the ready. At first paralysed with fear at the sight of them, I managed to hide from them in the attic room of the town's only brothel, dreading what would happen if they found me.

After they had gone and the troopship had departed, I walked around Mesterline Town in a state of dread and disquiet.

My litany of names had a meaning after all. It was not simply an incantation of imagined names with a ghostly reality. It constituted a memory of my actual experience. The islands were connected but not in the way I had been trusting—a code of my own past, which when deciphered would restore me to myself. It was more prosaic than that: it was the route the troopships took to the south.

Yet it remained an unconscious message. I had made it mine, I had recited it when no one else could know it.

I had been planning to stay indefinitely in Mesterline, but the unexpected arrival of the troopship soured everything. When I tried next to draw beneath the harbor wall I felt myself exposed and nervous. My hand would no longer respond to my inner eye. I wasted paper, broke pencils, lost friends. I had reverted to being a steffer.

On the day I left Mesterline the youngest of the whores came to the quay. She gave me a list of names, not of islands but of her friends who were working in other parts of the Dream Archipelago. As we sailed I committed the names to memory, then threw the scrap of paper in the sea.

Fifteen days later I was on Piqay, an island I liked but which I found too similar to Mesterline, too full of memories that I was transplanting from the shallow soil of my memory. I moved on from Piqay to Paneron, a long journey that passed several other islands and the Coast of Helvard's Passion, a stupendous reef of towering rock, shadowing the coast of the island interior that lay beyond.

I had by this time travelled so far that I was off the edge of the map I had purchased, so I had only my memory of the names to guide me. I waited eagerly for each island to appear.

Paneron at first repelled me: much of its landscape was formed from volcanic rock, black and jagged and unwelcoming, but on the western side there was an enormous area of fertile land choked with rainforest that spread back from the shore as far as I could see. The coast was fringed with palms. I decided to rest in Paneron Town for a while.

Ahead lay the Swirl, beyond that vast chain of reefs and skerries were the Aubracs, beyond even those was the island I still yearned to find: Muriseay, home of my most vivid imaginings, birthplace of Rascar Acizzone.

The place, the artist—these were the only realities I knew, the only experience I thought I could call my own.

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Another year of travel. I was confounded by the thirty-five islands of the Aubrac Group: work and accommodation were difficult to find in these underpopulated islets and I lacked the funds simply to sail past or around them. I had to make my way slowly through the group, island by island, working for subsistence, sweltering under the tropical sun. Now that I was travelling again my interest in drawing returned. In some of the busier Aubrac ports I would again set up my easel, draw for hire, for centimes and sous.

On AntiAubracia, close to the heart of the group of islands, I bought some pigments, oils and brushes. The Aubracs were a place largely devoid of color: the flat, uninteresting islands lay under bleaching sunlight, the sand and pale gravel of the inland plains drifted into the towns on the constant winds, the pallid eggshell blue of the shallow lagoons could be glimpsed with every turn of the head. The absence of bright hues was a challenge to see and paint in color.

I saw no more troopships, although I was always on my guard for their passing or arrival. I was still following their route because when I asked the island people about the ships they knew at once what I meant and therefore what my background must be. But reliable information about the army was hard to glean. Sometimes I was told that the troopships had stopped travelling south; sometimes that they had switched to a different route; sometimes I was told they only passed in the night.

My fear of the black-caps kept me on the move.

Finally, I made a last sea-crossing and arrived one night on a coal-carrier in Muriseay Town. From the upper deck, as we moved slowly through the wide bay that led to the harbor mouth, I viewed the place with a feeling of anticipation. I could make a fresh start here—what had happened during the long-ago shore leave was insignificant. I leaned on the rail, watching the reflections of colored lights from the town darting on the dark water. I could hear the roar of engines, the hubbub of voices, the traces of distorted music. Heat rolled around me, as once before it had rolled from the town.

There were delays in docking the ship and by the time I was ashore it was after midnight. Finding somewhere to sleep for the night was a priority. Because of recent hardships I was unable to pay to stay anywhere. I had faced the same problem many times in the past, slept rough more often than not, but I was none the less tired.

I headed through the clamoring traffic to the back streets, looking for brothels. I was assaulted by a range of sensations: breathless equatorial heat, tropical perfumes of flowers and incense, the endless racket of

cars, motorbikes and pedicabs, the smell of spicy meat being cooked on smoking sidewalk stalls, the continuous flash and dazzle of neon advertising, the beat of pop music blaring out tinnily from radios on the food-stalls and from every window and open doorway. I stood for a while on one of the street corners, laden down with my baggage and my painting equipment. I turned a full circle, relishing the exciting racket, then put down my baggage and, like the Mester people savoring the rains, I raised my arms in exaltation and lifted my face to the glancing nighttime sky, orange-hued above me, reflecting the dancing lights of the city.

Exhilarated and refreshed I took up my load more willingly and went on with my search for brothels.

I came to one in a small building two blocks away from the main quay, attained by a darkened door in an alley at the side. I went in, moneyless, throwing myself on the charity of the working women, seeking sanctuary for the night from the only church I knew. The cathedral of my dreams.

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Because of its history, but more because of its marina, shops and sunbathing beaches, Muriseay Town was a tourist attraction for wealthy visitors from all over the Dream Archipelago. In my first months on the island I discovered I could make a lucrative income from painting harbor scenes and mountain landscapes, then displaying them on a section of wall next to one of the large cafés in Paramoundour Avenue, the street where all the fashion houses and smart nightclubs were situated.

In the off-seasons, or when I simply grew tired of painting for money, I would stay in my tenth-floor studio above the city centre and dedicate myself to my attempts to develop the work pioneered by Acizzone. Now that I was in the town where Acizzone had produced his finest paintings I was able at last to research his life and work in full, to understand the techniques he had employed.

Tactilism was by this time many years out of vogue, a fortunate state of affairs as it allowed me to experiment without interference, comment or critical interest. Ultrasound microcircuitry was no longer in use, except in the market for children's novelties, so the pigments I needed were plentiful and inexpensive, although at first difficult to track down in the quantities I needed them.

I set to work, building up the layers of pigments on a series of gesso-primed boards. The technique was intricate and hazardous—I ruined many boards by a single slip of the palette knife, some of them close to the moment of completion. I had much to learn.

Accepting this I made regular visits to the closed-case section of the Muriseayan Town Museum, where several of Acizzone's originals were stored in archive. The female curator was at first amused that I should take an interest in such an obscure, unfashionable and reputedly obscene artist, but she soon grew used to my repeated visits, the long silent sessions I spent inside the locked sanctums when I was alone, pressing my hands, my face, my limbs, my torso, to Acizzone's garish pictures. I was submerged in a kind of frenzy of artistic absorption, almost literally soaking up Acizzone's breathtaking imagery.

The ultrasonics produced by the tactile pigments operated directly on the hypothalamus, promoting sudden changes in serotonin concentrations and levels. The instantaneous result of this was to generate the images experienced by the viewer—the less obvious consequence was to cause depression and long-term loss of memory. When I left the museum after my first adult exposure to Acizzone's work I was shattered by the experience. While the erotic images created by the paintings still haunted me, I was

almost blind with pain, confusion and a sense of unspecified terror.

After my first visit, I returned unsteadily to my studio and slept for nearly two days. When I awoke I was chastened by what I had discovered about the paintings. Exposure to tactilist art had a traumatic effect on the viewer.

I felt a familiar sense of blankness behind me. Memory had failed. Somewhere in the recent past, when I was travelling through the islands, I had missed visiting some of them.

The litany was still there and I recited the names to myself. Amnesia is not a specific: I knew the names but in some cases I had no memory of the islands. Had I been to Winho? To Demmer? Nelquay? No recollections of any of them, but they had been on my route.

For two or three weeks I returned to my tourist painting, partly to gain some cash but also for a respite. I needed to think about what I had learned. My memories of childhood had been all but eradicated by something. Now I had a firm idea that it was my immersion in Acizzone's art.

I continued to work and gradually I found my vision.

The physical technique was fairly straightforward to master. The difficulty, I discovered, was the psychological process, transferring my own passions, cravings, compulsions to the artwork. When I had that, I could paint successfully. One by one my painted boards accumulated in my studio, leaning against the wall at the back of the long room.

Sometimes, I would stand at the window of my studio and stare down across the bustling, careless city below, my own shocking images concealed in the pigments behind me. I felt as if I were preparing an arsenal of potent imagic weapons. I had become an art terrorist, unseen and unsuspected by the world at large, my paintings no doubt destined to be misunderstood in their way as Acizzone's masterpieces had been. The tactilist paintings were the definitive expression of my life.

While Acizzone, who in life was a libertine and roué, had portrayed scenes of great erotic power, my own images were derived from a different source: I had lived a life of emotional repression, repetition, aimless wandering. My work was necessarily a reaction against Acizzone.

I painted to stay sane, to preserve my memory. After that first exposure to Acizzone I knew that only by putting myself into my work could I recapture what I had lost. To view tactilist art led to forgetting, but to create it, I found now, led to remembering.

I drew inspiration from Acizzone. I lost part of myself. I painted and recovered.

My art was entirely therapeutic. Every painting clarified a fresh area of confusion or amnesia. Each dab of the palette knife, each touch of the brush, was another detail of my past defined and placed in context. The paintings absorbed my traumas.

When I drew back from them, all that could be seen were bland areas of uniform color, much the same as Acizzone's work. Stepping up close, working with the pigments, or pressing my flesh against the stippled layers of dried paint, I entered a psychological realm of great calm and reassurance.

What someone else would experience of my tactilist therapy I did not care to think. My work was imagic weaponry. The potential was concealed until the moment of detonation, like a landmine waiting for the press of a limb.

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After the first year, when I was working to establish myself, I entered my most prolific phase. I became so productive that to make space for myself I arranged to move some of the more ambitious pieces to a vacant building I had come across near the waterfront. It was a former dancing club, long abandoned and empty, but physically intact.

Although there was an extensive basement, with a warren of corridors and small chambers, the main hall was an enormous open area, easily large enough to take any number of my paintings.

I kept a few of the smaller pieces in my studio, but the larger ones and those with the most potent and disturbing images of fracture and loss I stored in the town.

I stacked the biggest paintings in the main hall of the building, but some nervous dread of discovery made me conceal the smaller pieces in the basement. In that maze of corridors and rooms, ill-lit and haunted by the stale fragrances of past occupiers, I found a dozen different places to hide my pieces.

I was constantly rearranging my work. Sometimes I would spend a whole day and night, working without a break in the near-darkness, obsessively shifting my artwork from one room to another.

I found that the warren of interconnecting corridors and rooms, cheaply built of thin partition walls and lit only at intervals with low-power electric bulbs, presented what seemed to be an almost endless combination of random paths and routes. I stood my paintings like sentinels, at odd and hidden positions in the maze, behind doorways, beyond corners in the passageways, irrationally blocking the darkest places.

I would then leave the building and normal life returned for a while. I would start new paintings, or, just as often, walk down to the streets with my easel and stool and begin to work up a supply of commercially attractive landscapes. I was always in need of cash.

So my life continued like that, month after month, under the broiling Muriseayan sun. I knew that I had at last found a kind of fulfilment. Even the tourist art was not all drudgery, because I learnt that working with representational paintings required a discipline of line, subject and brushwork that only increased the intensity of the tactile art I went to afterwards and which no one saw. In the streets of Muriseay Town I built a small reputation as a journeyman landscape artist.

Five years went by. Life was as good to me as it ever had been.

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Five years was not long enough to ensure that life could always be good. One night the black-caps came for me.

I was, as ever, alone. My life was solitary, my mood introspective. I had no friends other than whores. I lived for my art, working through its mysterious agenda, post-Acizzzone, unique, perhaps ultimately futile.

I was in my storage depot, obsessively rearranging my boards again, placing and replacing the sentinels in

the corridors. Earlier that day I had hired a carter to bring down my five most recent works and since the man left I had been slowly moving them into place, touching them, holding them, arranging them.

The black-caps entered the building without my being aware of them. I was absorbed in a painting I had completed the week before. I was holding it so that my fingers were wrapped around the back of the board but my palms were pressing lightly against the paint at the edges.

The painting dealt obliquely with an incident that had occurred while I was in the army in the south. Night had fallen while I was on patrol alone and I had had difficulty getting back to our lines. For an hour I wandered in the dark and cold, slowly freezing. In the end someone had found me and led me back to our trenches, but until then I had been in terror of death.

Post-Acizzone, I had depicted the extreme fright I experienced: total darkness, a bitter wind, a chill that struck through to the bone, ground so broken that you could not walk without stumbling, a constant threat from unseen enemies, loneliness, silence enforced by panic, distant explosions.

The painting was a comfort to me.

I surfaced from my comfort to find four black-caps standing back from me, watching me. They were carrying their batons in holsters. Terror struck me, as if with a physical blow.

I made a sound, an inarticulate throat-noise, involuntary, like a trapped animal. I wanted to speak to them, shout at them, but all I was capable of was a bestial sound. I drew breath, tried again. This time the noise I made was halting, as if fear had added a stammer to the moan.

Hearing this, registering my fright, the black-caps drew their batons. They moved casually, in no hurry to start. I backed away, brushing against my painting, causing it to fall.

The men had no faces I could see: their capped helmets covered their heads, placed a smoked visor across their eyes, had a raised lip to protect their mouth and jaw.

Four clicks as the synaptic batons were armed—they were raised to the strike position.

"You've been discharged, trooper!" one of the men said and contemptuously threw a scrap of paper in my direction. It fluttered at once, fell close to his boots. "Discharge for a coward!"

I said ... but I could only breathe in, shuddering, and say nothing.

There was another way out of the building that only I could know, through the under-floor warren. One of the men was between me and the short flight of steps that led down. I fainted, moving towards the scrap of paper, as if to pick it up. Then I spun around, dashed, collided with the man's leg. He swung the baton viciously at me. I took an intense bolt of electricity that dropped me. I skidded across the floor.

My leg was paralysed. I scrambled to get up, rolled on my side, tried again.

Seeing I was immobilized, one of the black-caps moved across to the painting I had been absorbed in when they arrived. He leaned over it, prodded at its surface with the end of his baton.

I managed to raise myself on my good leg, half-crouching.

Where the end of his baton touched the tactilist pigment, a spout of fierce white flame suddenly appeared, with a sharp crackling sound. Smoke rose copiously as the flame died. The man made a sardonic laughing sound and did it again.

The others went over to see what he was doing. They too pressed the live ends of their batons against the board, producing spurts of bright flame and much more smoke. They guffawed.

One of them crouched, leaned forward to see what it was that was burning. He brushed his bare fingertips across an undamaged portion of the pigment.

My terror and trauma reached out to him through the paint. The ultrasonics bonded him to the board.

He became still, four of his fingers resting on the pigment. For a moment he stayed in position, looking almost reflective as he squatted there with his hand extended. Then he tipped slowly forward. He tried to balance himself with his other hand, but that too landed on the pigments. As he fell across the painting, his body started jerking in spasms. Both his hands were bonded to the board. His baton had rolled away. Smoke still poured from the smouldering scars.

His three companions moved across to find out what was wrong with him. They kept an eye on me as they did so. I was trying to lever myself upright, putting all my weight on the leg that still had feeling, letting the other dangle lightly against the floor. Sensation was returning quickly, but the pain was unspeakable.

I watched the three black-caps, dreading the menace they exuded. It could only be a matter of time before they did to me whatever it was they had come to do. They were grappling with the man who had fallen, trying to pull him away from the pigments. My breath was making a light screeching noise as I struggled for balance. I thought I had known fear before, but there was nothing in my remembered experience that equalled this.

I managed a step. They ignored me. They were still trying to lift the man away from my painting. The smoke swirled from the damage they had caused with their batons.

One of them shouted at me to help them.

"What is this stuff? What's holding him against that board?"

The man started screaming as the smouldering pigments reached his hands, but still he could not release himself. His pain, my agonies, contorted his body.

"His dreams!" I cried boldly. "He is captive of his own vile dreams!"

I made a second step, then a third. Each was easier than the one before, although the pain was terrible. I hobbled towards the shallow stairs by the stage, took the top one, then another, nearly overbalanced, took the third and fourth.

They saw me as I reached the door beneath the old stage. I scarcely dared to look back, but I saw them abandoning the man who had fallen across the pigments and hoist their batons to the strike position. With athletic strength they were moving quickly across the short distance towards me. I dived through the door, dragging my hurt leg.

Breath rasped in my throat. I made a sobbing sound. There was one door, a passage, a chamber and another door. I passed through all of them. Behind me the black-caps were shouting, ordering me to halt. Someone blundered against one of the thin partition walls. I heard the wood creaking as he thudded against it.

I hurried on. The curving passage where I stored some of my smaller paintings was next, then a series of three small cubicles, all with doors wide open. I had placed one of my paintings inside each of these cubicles, standing guard within.

I passed along the corridor, slamming closed the doors at each end. My leg was working almost normally again, but the pain continued. I was in another corridor with an alcove at the end, where I had stood a painting. I doubled back, pushed the door of one of the larger chambers and propped open the spring-loaded door with the edge of one of my boards. I passed through. Another corridor was beyond, wider than the others. Here were a dozen of my paintings, stacked against the wall. I hooked my good foot beneath them, causing them to clatter down at an angle and partly block the way. I passed them. The men were yelling at me again, threatening me, ordering me to stop.

I heard a crash behind me, and another. One of the men shouted a curse.

I went through into the next short corridor, where four more chambers opened out. Some of my most intense paintings were hidden in each of these. I pulled them so that they extended into the corridor at knee height. I balanced a tall one against them, so that any disturbance of it would make it fall.

There was another crash, followed by shouting. The voices now were only a short distance away from me, on the other side of the decrepit dividing wall. There was a heavy sound, as if someone had fallen. Then I heard swearing—a man screamed. One of his companions began shouting. The thin wall bulged towards me as he fell against it. I heard paintings fall around them, heard the crackle of sudden fire as synaptic batons made contact with the pigments.

I smelt smoke.

I was regaining my strength, although the naked fear of being caught by the black-caps still had a grip on me. I came into another corridor, one that was wider and better lit than the others and not enclosed by walls that reached to the ceiling. Smoke drifted here.

I halted at the end, trying to control my breath. The warren of corridors behind me was silent. I went out of the corridor into the large sub-floor area beyond. The silence followed and wisps of smoke swirled around me. I stood and listened, tense and frightened, paralysed by the terror of what would happen if even one of the men had managed to push past the paintings without touching any of them.

The silence remained. Sound, thought, movement, life, absorbed by the paintings of trauma and loss.

They had surrendered to my fears. Fire licked around them.

I could see none of the flames myself, but gradually the smoke was thickening. It heaped along the ceiling, a dark grey cloud, heavy with the vapors of scorched pigments.

I realized at last that I had to leave before I became trapped by the spreading fire. I went quickly across the sub-floor area, struggled with the old iron-handled doors, fell out into the darkness. I walked stiffly up the cobbled alley that ran behind the building, turned a corner, then another, walked into one of Muriseay's market streets where the hot night was filled with people, lights, music and the raucous, thrilling sound of traffic.

For the rest of the night I stumbled through the backstreets and alleys of the town, trailing my fingertips along the rough texture of the stuccoed walls, obsessed with thoughts of the paintings that were being lost while the building burned. My agonies were being consumed but I was released from my past.

I went through the port area again in the hour before dawn. The paintings must have smouldered for a time before properly igniting the shabby wooden walls of the warren, but now the whole of my building was consumed with flames. The doorways and windows I had sealed up for privacy had become apertures once more, square portals into the inferno within, white and yellow fire roaring in the gales of sucked air. Black smoke belched out through vents and gaps in the roof. Fire crews were ineffectually

jetting cascades of water against the crumbling brick walls. I watched their efforts as I stood on the quay, a small bag with my belongings by my side. In the east the sky was lightening.

By the time the fire crews had brought the flames under control I was aboard the first ferry of the day, heading for other islands.

Their names chimed in my mind, urging me on.

The End