

EVIDENCE OF A LOST CITY

an illustrated novel



By D.N. Stuefloten

NOVELS

The Wilderness

Mofa

The Pilgrim

Orphe

Metropolis

The Ethiopian Exhibition

Maya

Mexico Trilogy

Orifice

Autobiography of a Wanderer

Kongo

Hag

MOVIES

Hag

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EVIDENCE OF A LOST CITY

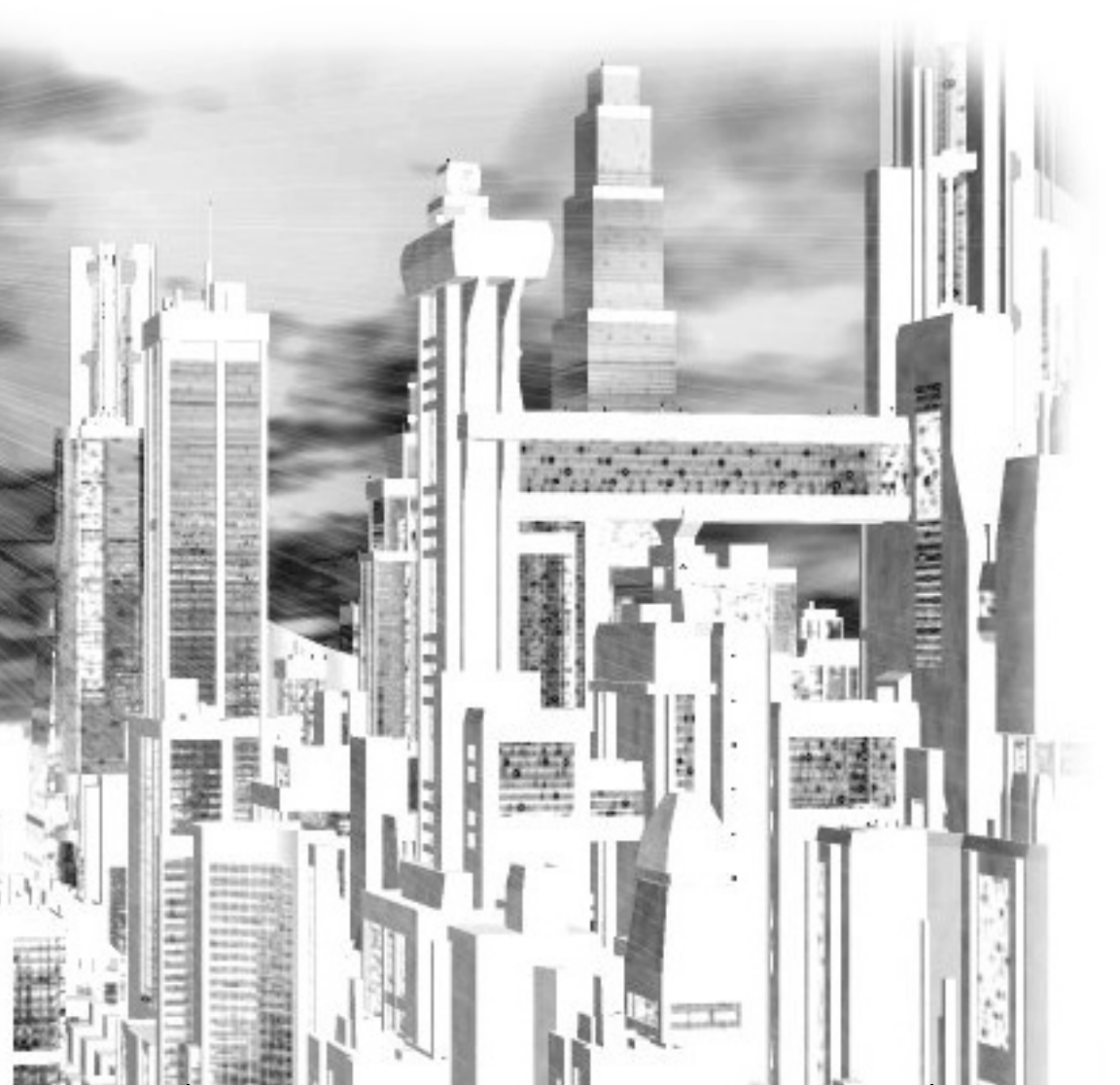
an illustrated novel



D.N. Stuefloten
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ONE:
THE INSUBSTANTIAL WRATHS
OF THE LOST CITY





1.

JOHN ARRIVES AT THE EMPTY CITY IN THE EVENING, everything is dark, he parks his car so its headlights shine onto the buildings, the engine rattles and dies, we hear a door slam, he ventures forward, his shadow precedes him, etc., etc., we point this out to alleviate any doubts as to his intentions, we intend to be transparent in our clarity, the city is empty but it is populated by wraiths, or what we shall call wraiths, they lean against walls, loiter at windows, walk across open spaces, most of them female, rounded buttocks, the usual erotic accouterments, longish legs encased in hose, sleekness, yes, silkiness,

a delicious smoothness created by the nylon sheathing, encorsetted waists, shoes with heels of an improbable height, their shadows with the sweep of headlights stretching and compacting along walls and passageways, John's arrival noted and then dismissed, clearly he will be of little interest to them, we cannot say just what they are doing here or what significance they will have in the story which follows, in any case John is a young man beset with the distractions of youth and rather innocent, although he will remain neither young nor innocent, like all of us he will become decrepit, he will creak and groan, joints will become stiff, skin brittle, internal organs erratic, we ourselves speak from this pinnacle of achievement: we are ancient, primeval, as eroded as prehistory, archeological, fossilized, a reliquary of abandoned tombs and ossified bones: flesh, what flesh we have, lies haggard: blood, thickened, pushes through ropes of veins: in the context of this story our ages will be a constant counterpoint, there is a kind of harmony to this, a metronomic ticking. But enough: we speak of John: a young man of the usual carnality, a certain height, slimness, not ugly, not stupid, not many things, embryonic, a restless man with a fixity of purpose, we shall get to this fixity later, he stands in the headlights of his now quiet car, the empty city before him, caverns of streets, concrete, marble, lintels, windows, doorways, dark recesses, alleys, a city bereft of life, this is a dream of course, a nightscape of impulses firing electrically in his brain, we don't wish to be deceptive here, he is dreaming, he will awaken and forget all of it—he will forget, we shall not—and resume his quotidian life beyond our purview and indeed beyond our interest. Who John is, and why he is here, will meanwhile provide the nexus of our exploration in the pages which follow: each page shall be written in the same way, in black ink in a notebook as we sit over our daily coffee watching the passing traffic of German automobiles, Armenian transients, flower girls and cigarette girls, old women struggling with aluminum walkers, small dogs who pant in the heat, an occasional strutting crow, the usual assemblage of crooks and matrons and insipid poets. My wife—today she has a black rose in her hair—refers to this parade as the charnel house. They are all dead, she said once, they are walking corpses, troglodytes, cadavers, she waved her red-tipped fingers which held an ivory tube from which extended a cigarette perfumed with clove, it was a special tobacco, densely packed, like a Russian cigarette, so it burned slowly, crackling occasionally, imported at great expense from

Darjeeling or Dar-es-Salaam or Dhanishkodi, I could never remember which. She never inhaled. The smoke caressed her face, she said, which made her smile. Her small white teeth lay behind her lips like a glimpse of pearl in an oyster. Her tongue—it is possible for me to remember that tongue, fleshy, pointed, as it maneuvered across lips and into my mouth, a memory I treasure when we sit, on days that are warm, at a small table outside the café, birds fluttering from the trees and pecking at the crumbs we scatter from our plates.



2.

JOHN MET HIS WIFE IN A CAFÉ. THE YEAR WAS 19--. THE café was on Rundle Street in Adelaide, South Australia, tucked away on the second floor of a four story building with a large window looking down onto the avenue where cars rumbled past, Wolseleys and Humbers, Vauxhalls and Morgans, most of them black, all with running boards and large rounded fenders, the café owned by a Greek immigrant, a rotund little fellow with thin hair combed over a balding pate, he had bright, eager eyes and a wit sharpened somehow by his thick accent, his umlauts twisting around his tongue like verbal serpents, he had covered the walls with pictures of ancient Greek art including bare-breasted goddesses and athletic young men with hanging stone genitals, this was art, of course, capital-A Art, sanctified by its antiquity and somehow immune to the blue-nosed censors who abounded in that city. In the café the Greek had provided the usual tables and chairs, but had also tossed big pillows into the corners. People reclined there: sometimes girls reclined there. In 19-- women commonly wore dresses, skirts, stockings, high heels, and to recline wearing such baroque splendor was revelatory: silken legs carefully arranged, a brazen bit of stocking welt on view, even an occasional flash of white thigh. In those days John was writing his first novel and he would sit for hours at one of the tables, sipping cup after cup of espresso, usually by the window—being above the passing pedestrians and vehicles seemed to stimulate his imagination—and it was from this position, on this particular day, looking down from the window, that he saw his wife: she was crossing the street, a thin, very thin young woman, wearing a tight black skirt and a white blouse, her arm hooked into the arm of an older man. Because of the angle John could not see her face clearly. Soon however he heard the click of her heels as she came up the wooden stairs. The doorway to the café was glass. John could see her approach. She stopped there a moment, just outside. She removed her arm from the man. She tugged and pushed at her clothes. Clearly she saw herself reflected in the glass, the glass through which John was watching her. She did not seem aware of his gaze. She arranged her clothing, and then her pose, one hip cocked a bit to one side. She stared at her face in the glass. Then she squared her shoulders. She did a little wiggle with her hips. She pushed the door open. She entered as though on parade: each step involved a brief hesitation

as her shoe touched the floor. These shoes were glossy black pumps with a very high heel. Each hesitation caused her stocking to wrinkle at the ankle, just slightly, so there was a brief shimmer of light. Her upper body swayed to the left, her hips a fraction to the right. Her skirt came below her knees. It was so tight that each step traversed only a short distance: with each step her leg pressed against the fabric of the skirt: she clearly understood the value of truncated movement, of how straining against confines lent tension and drama to an act as prosaic as walking. Halfway to her selected table—*she* had selected it, we are sure, not the man, trailing behind her like a piece of detritus—she paused a moment, her head rotating as she surveyed the room, her eyes holding no expression, giving a sense somehow that it was time that had stopped, not her. At last she turned and—briskly—went to her table as the older man scurried around to pull back her chair. She sat into the chair with a casual intimacy, as into the lap of a lover. She had short, dark hair, rather curly. Her eyes were large. The lids were painted the hue of ash. Her only color was her lips: scarlet in her pale face. She was positioned so that everyone in the room could see her scarlet mouth. Almost immediately she crossed one leg over the other. This too was a carefully studied movement. The mechanics were thus: the leg lifted quickly, startling the viewer into attention: as the shoe left the floor, she pointed the toe down: this lengthened the leg, creating the odd illusion that her leg was stretching, extending itself: after a pause at the apex the leg then descended, slowly: it descended exactly parallel to the other leg, and in fact slid along the other leg, so that one nylon surface sussurated against the other: it sounded like a wind moving through a forest, or perhaps a wave sliding back into the sea. At his distance John could not hear this sound, but he imagined it. She sat there with what we call today her invisible smile. There was no expression, that is, on her face; her lips did not move; her eyes were calm; but there somehow gathered around her an aura of amusement. This too, we are sure, was a studied effect. Perhaps she practiced in front of mirrors. In any case everything about her was slightly disquieting. This disquiet affected everyone in the café: the Greek seemed stunned, and a young couple in the corner who had been holding hands across their table now sat back, the girl angry, the man confused. John felt this disquiet too; but for him it was elating: he had spent the morning over his novel thinking precisely of disquiet: art, he had decided, must create unease,

the viewer who is not disquieted is seeing nothing, art must disturb, it must send unexpected ripples through one's brain: thus, looking at this oddly disquieting girl, he saw art: she was herself a work of art: and he realized, staring at her, that he was looking, in truth, at his novel. His novel was about a man exploring a mysterious world. He could immediately see that this woman was a mysterious world. In his novel the man was a version of John himself: young authors are always using themselves as narrators, as subjects, they are self-centered creatures, the world exists as their private and personal playground, they watch and learn and interact as though it is all theirs; this girl, therefore, that he was looking at, and in whom he saw his world of mystery, was his: she belonged to him as precisely as his novel belonged to him. He watched her possessively. She was of course aware of this. It did not seem to bother her. She was not coy. She glanced at him. She did not smile. She was quite calm. She crossed one leg over the other in such a way that John—and only John—could see the top of one stocking and a bit of white thigh. Her stockings had seams, an old-fashioned style one occasionally still saw on older women and tarted up actresses. John watched her hand drift along her calf, then across her blouse where a small breast was hidden. She took from her black purse an ebony tube into which she inserted a white cigarette. The older man struck a match. She let the smoke slide up her face. Her eyes closed as she leaned back. The man's hand trembled. He hunkered back into his chair as though he were frightened of her. She did not seem to care. Smoke drifted around her. The Greek brought them cups of cappuccino, bowed slightly, and left. After a few more minutes the older man wiped his hands on his trousers. He stood up, said something, which she ignored, and walked past John to the bathroom door at the far side of the café.

John took his place.

"My name is John," he told her. "I'm writing a novel about you."

She stubbed out her cigarette.

"How lovely," she said.

JOHN ARRIVES AT THE EMPTY CITY IN THE EVENING .

The city was originally called Tidak-Barak, it had a single street which wound around hills and ponds, swirling right and then left, its pavement multi-colored, a child's dream, buildings like gingerbread, roseate abutments, turquoise windows, chimneys of spun silk. This city was destroyed by a hail of brimstone, then a monumental flood, sinking into a swamp of fetid water where it still may be glimpsed, occasionally, to the east. Tonight, as John's car engine rattles and dies, a woman in a black dress passes from our right to our left, she wears a veiled hat, her lips are thickened with red paint, she is an echoing figure, that is, her image will reverberate throughout the city, behind panes of glass, projected like old film onto concrete walls, her image flickering and crackling, stirring sometimes in the deeper shadows. We have argued that the city, like this woman, is mere palimpsest, that is, a series of translucent edifices inscribed one over another, an infinite series of cities falling away into an infinite past and stretching forward into an infinite future. John, in his peregrinations through these streets, is caught in a moment that traverses time as well as space, so that behind him, as he walks, buildings vanish and distort, new shapes arise, Gothic, Corinthian, glass skyscrapers, slums filled with broken windows and the carcasses of animals, cathedrals which crumble into primitive huts and ruins whose stones regroup into urban shopping malls. Thus neither John nor we will ever see the same building twice, there are no maps to deliver us to any particular destination, or if such maps exist they are mere artifacts and must also change, the names of avenues one moment inscribed in Sanskrit and then in some vaguely oriental calligraphy or Cyrillic script, written on papyri and then linen or perhaps some mylar sheathing, streets leading to slaughterhouses and theatres which immediately become garages and courthouses. This city, we insist, must not be confused with the pedestrian creations that crowd our globe, cities with which we are quite familiar, we are not discussing here the relative merits of Kuala Lumpur and Kota Belud, Mangalore and Singapore, Nuku Hiva and Api-Api, we will not describe Iquitos where he lived for some time on a bamboo raft tethered to the shore of the great river which bisects that continent, his dreams full of oily water, a black placidity that also coursed during those nights alongside the great city of his dreams. In any case who

can remember the names of all those towns and villages? Arusha, Cebu City, Tlacotalpan, Pulcallpa, Tai-o-hai, they trail behind him like a dragging anchor, Kudat, Mombasa, Tegucigalpa, Leticia—these are weighty places, as he stares into the mirror he can see the marks these places have left in his eyes, the bitter flecks, shadows lurking beneath his brow.

My wife puts down her cup. I lay aside my pen.

“I know the city better than you.”

“So you say.”

She touches a finger to her lips.

“And yet,” she says, “I know it not at all.”

“We are faced with paradox.”

“If you attempt to write about this city—and this person—this young man—”

“John.”

“Yes, John. You may become lost yourself.”

“I hope so.”

She stares for some time over the avenue. I may not be able to help you, she says. There are things here which are not proper for me to discuss. There are warnings—you can see danger in these dim lights and the way these women, these wraiths, comport themselves, crepuscular figures, the opposite of your noonday sun which shines down around us, revealing every crack in every wall, the filthy pavements, we should renounce the sun, the drenching heat, we continue discussing the rise and fall of seasons, her head lifts and descends, we can see the way shadows lengthen her jaw line and emphasize the ravine between her breasts, two soft globes only partially hidden in her bodice, she pulls a leather glove onto one hand, an act of curious majesty, black leather, her black-shod feet, stockings glossy as she stretches one leg and then another, a bus races past, sooty ashes settle around us, she slides another hand into another glove, we rise from our table, stare momentarily towards the east where a pall of smoke blossoms over the city, and then—arms linked—stroll off down the avenue, myself limping with my cane and my wife doing her pagan strut, as though nothing had happened, nothing at all.

4.

JOHN MET HIS WIFE IN 19--. HE HAD GONE TO AUSTRALIA as an immigrant, a young man seeking adventure. In Canberra he bought an old motorcycle, a Norton Dominator. He rode over the Snowy Mountains to Renmark, where he worked the grape harvest. Looking one day at a map of that country he decided to make a voyage. He decided to ride right up the center of Australia, to Alice Springs and then Darwin. In those days the road to Alice was nothing more than a trail alongside the railroad track. Behind him on the motorcycle he carried his big Underwood typewriter and a tin of extra petrol. The motorcycle grumbled and growled along the track. He startled emus and kangaroos. He slept in dry stream beds and ate canned sausages and beans. At a couple farms, which the Aussies called stations, he bought more petrol. These were self-reliant folk who took his journey matter-of-factly. On the fourth evening he stopped at a low shed next to the railroad track. It was just below the dry Lake Eyre, where the track took a long curve to the west. An older man was there, waiting for the train, expecting, he told John, some supplies. He was a gruff fellow, just a little plump, with beefy arms. His accent was Germanic. He invited John to his home a short distance away. His wife, he said, would be glad of the company, since they rarely had visitors. John followed the Bedford pickup on his bike. The house was a low white-walled structure with a tin roof. Rusted farm implements were scattered about: an old tractor, some plows, a truck slumped on its bare rims. John turned off the Norton. The old man got out of his pickup. He tilted back his straw hat. "Ach," he said. "Youll come in, then." John followed him in. A girl stood to one side, at a window, where she had been watching them. She held out a hand. "A visitor," she said. "How pleasant." She was very thin. She wore shorts: baggy trousers that had their legs cut off. Threads dangled. Her shoes had high heels made from wood. They clunked loudly as she walked. Her hand was dry and cool. There was tea, she said, in the kitchen. She served it in delicate little cups. Youll want to bathe, she said. They didnt have much water: he'd have to use a tin cup and a sponge. "I'll show you," the girl said. After tea she took John to the bath-room, a kind of shed added to the north side of the house. A porcelain tub sat there. A pipe came through a hole in the wall. "It's rainwater," she said. "We don't get much but we save every drop we get. Take off your clothes." He did what

she said. "Your underpants, too." He stood naked in the tub. "Here's the tin," she said. "Three tins will be enough. Dip this sponge, and use it—judiciously." Standing naked in front of her had given him an erection. She leaned over, took it in her hand, and gave the head a quick kiss. Then she glanced at him, turned, and walked away. "We dress for dinner," she said at the doorway. "If you have something nice, put it on." The door closed. When John came out it had grown dark. A kerosene lamp hung from the ceiling. The air, of course, was hot, dry, motionless. John had retrieved a clean shirt from his pack, a pair of slacks, and leather shoes. The farmer wore a starched white shirt and a bow tie. The cuffs were buttoned at his wrists. His hands hung like tree roots. The girl, however, was ethereal and elegant in a tight black skirt, calf-length, a white blouse—etc., etc.—we don't wish to repeat ourselves—and black pumps, what the British call court shoes, with very high heels, emphasizing her thinness. She weaved as she walked. At the meal—stewed mutton, gray and tasteless—she talked quietly of her husband's accomplishments in this harsh, forsaken land. He had built a siphon, for instance, a four-mile-long tube, to take water from a solitary spring at the edge of Lake Eyre over a low hill to a watering trough for their sheep. They had no cattle: only sheep could eat the saltbush on their land. Sheep, emus, a few kangaroos, rabbits, and the dingoes that preyed on them—that was the extent of life there. They had 1200 square miles of land, she told John, and only a few hundred sheep, the land was so barren. Her husband had built himself an autogiro, copying a picture he had seen in a magazine, to travel to the further reaches of their station. The propeller was driven by a salvaged motorcycle engine, the wheels came from old bicycles. He could make anything, she said, with his hands, as long as he had the materials. A train had once derailed a few miles west of them, and her husband, using just ropes and pulleys and his old Bedford, had pulled it back onto its tracks, a feat which amazed the train crew. Survival here, she said, depended on ingenuity and strength, which her husband had in abundance. Twice a year she took the train into Adelaide. She bought her clothes in a shop on Rundle Street, a very elegant place. Above it was a café run by a Greek where she could have a cappuccino. There was a jazz club nearby that played modern music and offered a decent Amontillado sherry. These small civilized pleasures, she said, were all the more pleasurable for their rarity. Neither the farmer nor John said very much.

It was oddly pleasant listening to the girl's voice, but there was something of a requiem about it. Her gaze did not focus on anything outside herself. She seemed to be listening to herself as much as she was talking, as though her words were unexpected and she was hearing these thoughts expressed for the first time. When they finished eating, she brought out a bottle of Australian brandy, and gave each a small glass. As she poured, John saw that the brandy and her painted fingernails were a similar color. He wondered if she had planned this. As she talked, he noticed other little details. The small, opalescent buttons on her blouse, for instance, were the same brandy color, and there was a brandy-colored comb in her hair. Even her eyes had a similar tone. They reflected back the light from the kerosene lamp just as the brandy in his glass reflected it. He became mesmerized by this. Her lips were brandy-colored too, although he could not discern lipstick. Her teeth were small and white. He could glimpse her tongue moving as she talked, and the muscles in her throat tightening and relaxing. When she crossed her legs, her black stockings crinkled at her ankles. John went to bed that night feeling oddly disquieted, a sensation he did not entirely understand. Early in the morning there was a knock on his door, which then opened. She stood there, in her shorts again and a blouse tied at her midriff. She wore the same clunky high heels. Her legs seemed thin and very long.

"Are you ready to go? I'm already packed."

"You're packed?"

"I'm going with you."

"But I'm going to Alice Springs—"

"I know."

"You're going with me?"

"It's time to move on."

"But your husband—"

"He's not my husband."

She took a cigarette from a pack, lit it, and blew smoke into the air.

"I call him my husband," she said, "because that's how he treats me. But he's not. He's my father."

John didn't know what to say to that. She tapped ashes onto the floor.

"I told him yesterday. As soon as I saw you I knew I was leaving with you."

"My motorcycle—I'm not sure—"

“I have my own motorcycle. A Velocette. I’m quite a good rider. Well? Are you going to get packed? An early start would be best.”

“Your husband—your father—“

“He’s not here. He left before sunup—some fences need repair. He won’t be back for days. No, we’re quite alone. I’ve some breakfast for you, and petrol for your tank. A bit of tea, and then we’re gone.”

She raised her eyebrows, and looked steadily at John for a moment.

“You’re game, aren’t you?”

He swung out of bed, and reached for his pants.

THE CITY IS CONSTRUCTED ALONG THE CARDINAL axes. This alignment persists even if, as often happens, a street suddenly twists into a series of curves: the loops and circumlocutions always trend towards the east or south, and in any case these circumlocutions, often surrounded by trees and lawns, are transitory: the preciseness of the avenue reasserts itself, and the swards of grass and heather return to brick and stone, although an occasional rose or camellia will protrude from some crack in some façade, becoming dusty, or perhaps a vine will remain clinging to the edge of an arched doorway: visible mementoes of a more organic pastoral, a suggestion of persistence which also clings, in a more subtle way, to neighborhoods: we have seen—and John will discover—areas which always suggest dilapidation, whose cornices are forever cracked and whose buildings, whatever their geometries, edge towards the same fragmentation: neighborhoods cluttered, ramshackle, even degenerate in the way that ripe fruit degenerates into redolent decay: an emblem of age, perhaps: the city is ancient and the years have a weight: this weight may be perceived in the names that appear on the streets and buildings, the Cortez Palace, the Avenue of the Caliph's Mistress, the Ish-tar Gate, Sumerian rumblings, echoes of Toltec gods, the Quetzecoatl Boulevard, Tutankhamun's Tomb, as well as names that are gibberish, strings of consonants or transliterations of Cantonese vowels and Egyptian diphthongs, names whose meanings are today obscure even while they retain their strange power: names are incantatory, magical, they have a resonance that we can feel whether we understand them—or not. This book will therefore be full of names, both spurious and real, and we shall see who, or what, survives. Will John survive? We are writing of course about John's youth. In some sense he has survived. Today he is an old man with broken and missing teeth. How this came to pass is not the subject of this book. Nevertheless we must note: this morning the checker in the grocery store treated him like a doddering old fool, he was fumbling for his change, this is true, dimes, nickels, pennies, who can keep track of such things, he paid for his soy milk and his ibuprofen and returned home sullen and distraught. It is an ancient whine—a whine more ancient than we are—that the years have fled too rapidly, that time is a relentless enemy, that the world has become a strange and dishonest place. What

was the world like in his youth? He met his wife then, in a manner of speaking, a meeting of sorts, he was drifting one night, for instance, somewhat drunk, along a row of buildings where women commonly stood in doorways, their faces powdered white and their eyes like tiger eyes, a look which has always fascinated us, the tight skirts, the nylons bunched at their clasps, the lips as lurid as any nightmare. "Hey, soldier," they murmured as John passed, he was not a soldier, we were not at war, but he was blond and blue-eyed and lean and muscular, a boy full of vigor, ready to piss against any wind, dreaming already of heroic adventures, of cities filled with soldiers, whores, beggars, innkeepers, the petit bourgeoisie of incipient capitalism, rich politicians and their concubines, drunken old men, lithesome women, the perfume of opium dreams drifting in the tropical air, aaah, he says, aaah, we say, a whole city to explore, in which to meander at our leisure....

"Must you go on like this?"

"I must."

We stand face to face. She understands this is our story. After a moment she laughs. We continue.

HE MET HIS WIFE IN QUEENSLAND. HE HAD HITCHHIKED east, from Darwin, across the top of Australia. What do we remember? Were there red gibber plains? an unrelenting sun? He was given rides by old men in pickups and young men hurrying to the next town for a party. In Mt Isa he drank beer with a miner, a big, burly fellow with pound notes leaking from all his pockets and sometimes fluttering to the floor. He claimed to be an American like John. "I'm from Or-e-gon!" he roared, pounding his fist on the table. His red face was shiny with sweat. Rivulets of beer ran from the corner of his mouth as he drank. "I'm from Or-e-gon and I'm the meanest son-of-a-bitch in this goddamned room!" The drinkers in the pub, a robust lot, did their own shouting and pounding and sweating as the bar girls, three of them, their breasts half exposed, leaned over the counter sliding glasses of beer to the thirsty men. John sneaked off in the darkness finally and slept in the doorway of a shop on a side street. In the morning, stiff, hungry, hung-over, he hurried to the edge of town and flagged down his first lift of the day, with a gay clergyman who kept putting his hand on John's knee as he drove his old Wolseley down the long, straight tarmac to the next town, a huddle of clapboard sheds and dirt streets with withered old men standing at the corners like sentinels. John continued into the rising sun to Cairns, where he contemplated working in the cane fields. But he was early for the harvest, a couple months away. One morning, wandering through the town and contemplating his future, he found a second-hand store off a narrow lane. The store was called The Faded Rose. In the dusky interior he saw piles of clothing, old tools, washing machines with hand wringers, and galvanized tubs filled with nails and bolts. To the left was a chicken-wired enclosure with a cash register on a counter. Seated there was a fat man with a bald head. His eyes were small and angry. Bristly white hairs rose from the open collar of his shirt to his neck. His fleshy hands were placed on each side of the cash register, as though he were preparing to stand up. He stared straight ahead, not at John but through him. John drifted to a pile of clothing; he could use another pair of trousers. Just beyond the pile he saw a stairway. It descended from a square hole in the ceiling. The stairs and railing were dark wood, and almost invisible in the darkness. As John looked, a white shoe emerged from the ceiling. The shoe had a high sti-

letto heel and pointed toes. The heel made a clicking sound as it hit the wooden stair. A black stocking crinkled at the ankle. The stocking was as shiny as glass: it didn't look quite real. But then a second shoe, with its dark leg, descended. The hem of a white skirt appeared. The skirt was very tight: in order to step down, the girl had to twist hard to one side. She did this very slowly. The cloth of the skirt was so thin, and perhaps stretched so much, that John could see the darker shade of the stocking through it, and then the clasp of its garter, and then the paleness of the thigh. The body twisted left, then right, then left again. The waist was tightly belted, with a big silver buckle. The blouse above it was black. It was sheer, so a black lace bra was visible. The woman's face had very dark, very full lips. Her black hair was thick and unruly, as though she hadn't bothered to brush it. She stopped and looked at John with her kohldarkened eyes. There was no expression on her face. After what seemed a long time she resumed her descent. Click, went the heel of her shoe, then the pause, the swiveling of her hips, and another click. All this occurred in darkness. At the bottom of the stairs she stopped again. She tugged a little at her skirt. She ran one hand through her hair. Then she walked past John, to the wire enclosure, ignoring the bald man. She turned again, and leaned back against the counter.

John wandered through the room, picking up items and putting them down again. He selected a pair of pants. Finally he went to the register. The girl lifted her eyes to his. She arched her back, just a little, so the sheer fabric tightened over her breasts. She brought out a cigarette, which she inserted into a long ebony tube. She handed a book of matches to John. Her eyes glowed as the match flared. She sucked, pursed her lips, and ejected smoke.

"It's time for my afternoon sherry," she said. "There's a place down the street—a club. They have a nice Amontillado."

She took his arm. The bald man stared straight ahead.

"You may accompany me."

WHERE DID HE MEET HIS WIFE? AS A YOUNG MAN HE wandered through Australia. He worked the grape harvest on the Murray River, the wheat harvest on the Ardrossan Peninsula. He was a ganger on the West Australian Government Railroad, a dynamiter with a seismic crew, a teletype operator for the weather bureau. It seemed to him that life unfolded as a series of adventures. He was sunburned, wiry, healthy. If he were to look back on his life, say, as an old man, a man perhaps 80 years of age, what would he want to see? It was important, he told people, to build up a bank of memories, something you could treasure as you grew old. Of course even then he understood that memories were treacherous. How was it, he sometimes thought, that he could not remember every detail of his life? There were days that had vanished—whole months, perhaps. What had happened to him, for instance, at age 12, on the first Thursday of August? or for the whole month of August? How could he truly be himself if such memories were gone? Are we not the sum of our days? He had once been proud of his ability to recall the title and author of every story and novel he'd read. But this was no longer true. He could still remember highlights—the opening page of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, for instance, that enthralling, obsessive voice, or the unexpected beginning of Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*, and the dense, fervid ending of his *Ulysses*. Those novels and authors still existed. What happened to all the others? the ones he could no longer remember? They had in some way ceased to exist, lost somehow in his tangle of neurons and synopses. Even worse, what had happened to his own stories? He had once lost a story. He was perhaps 16, and had written it a year before. He searched for it everywhere. He could not bear its loss. But he could not find it: so he wrote the story again, the same exact story, word for word, from memory. He never found the original so he could not prove that this version was perfect. But he felt it was perfect. He had remembered every phrase. It was not a copy, or a facsimile, or an approximation, but the original story, simply inscribed on different sheets of paper. The story existed. But that was not true of all his stories. Wandering through Australia, in his early 20s, he carried a packet of his stories with him, as well as his monstrous Underwood typewriter. But these were only a few, recent tales, and the pages of his aborted novels. All his other stories,

some of which he'd written as a seven or eight year old child, were in a box, carefully arranged, that he'd left with his parents. Some of them he could still remember—their titles, at least, or a few phrases, a plot twist. But there had been others, he was certain, of which he retained only a vague sense of their existence, something about a cripple, for instance, or perhaps a dwarf, he could not be sure, but he could no longer dredge up the title, or a single sentence, not even a word. These stories therefore no longer existed. They were no longer real. Even the ones he remembered had been reduced to shadow. How would he feel if he saw them again? Sometimes, in a bookstore or library, he would find a copy of the *The Sound and the Fury*, and experience a kind of thrill. He would look at that opening page, the tale told by an idiot, and feel a great relief. The novel hadn't died. His memory hadn't betrayed him. The book still existed. He mused about these things even as he accumulated more memories, riding his motorcycle up the center of Australia, hitching across the Northern Territory, riding the rails to Perth. At 80, what would he remember? Would he be able to recall the moon rising over the Australian desert, as he lay in a dry streambed, his motorcycle cooling beside him? And what about his wife? Would he remember each of these meetings? Their smiles and frowns? the clothes they wore? the exact words they said? the cafes, the pubs, the streets where they met? And if he did not remember these things—all these things—did they really happen? Had the memory of one woman become entwined with the memory of another? Were such memories utterly false? They existed, if they existed at all, like wraiths in a lost city, incorporeal bodies, flimsy oratorios, as insubstantial as his nocturnal dreams.