

Reactor

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Out of the sound of dawn comes an image of fire . . . blowing in the dust A man warms his hands to the sound of his own heartbeat. A sound, like a drum, reverberates through his dawn eyes muffled by ash and dust . . . blowing through the windy streets, a fire. Fire, brilliant, like an angel or a star, descends to the ground from its sphere among the broken granite and the clear. And sonnet raging into ether, crackling in October sky. What you cannot control moves you.

The man, a tall man and gray, lifts a cigarette among ashen wind, inhaling thundercloud particles dropped to the atmosphere when he was thirteen and alive, but now he is dead along the streets, not himself, blowing in the ash—an ashcan with hands. Hearing the thoughts grow in his mind like the cancer in his cigarette, it falls to the dust . . . dry in the ionic wind. He thinks: "What you cannot control moves you."

A single star in the east before the blinding blast of sun. Mercury seething in the sky along the trails of the chariot, trails of the sun. An explosion of light within the mind that is nowhere. An explosion of light within the mind that is now here. Lizard blind in the choking fire. What you can not control moves you.

Fire among the hills to fill the air and blacken stars, morning with particles of color—particles he breathed as a Yaqui Indian three centuries ago—rebreathed into him as filaments of violet light a thousand feet away in a sky breathing through his eyes. The sound of a drum as an atom pierces his inner eyes, becoming his world, his thought, his hands. A dream he has seen of how he is headless, a light between his ears with no filament, no observable power source. What is this light that shines a star within his mind? What you cannot control moves you.

The hum of his engine orders chaos. His car is an olive green Carmen Ghia, and he lives in it. He has a home, but he has been living in his car. Inside is shelter from the wind. He begins to think clearly now about the fire burning in the hills. He is no longer the world because the engine has separated him into only himself. His name is Rosenfelder, a scientist working into only himself. His name is Rosenfelder, a scientist working at the Bakunin nuclear reactor. He, himself, *is* a reactor.

Rosenfelder is troubled, something has been happening to him he can't understand. Something is overtaking him—he has no control. Visions of superheated water flooding from the reactor core, sweeping away children. People see him with contempt for his work—they taunt him at the gate of the reactor site with picket signs: “Question Authority,” and “It’s better to be active today, than radioactive tomorrow.” They are young. He wants to tell them that he has been responsible for most of the security systems in the plant, against the wishes of nameless government agencies irresponsible for profit.

He wants to make it safe. He wants to tell them that he *took the job* to question authority—to *be* active and not radioactive—but he can't. He can't put the words together. He's a failure; he hasn't accomplished anything worthwhile in his entire life. He's becoming simple with age, and those moments when his head becomes a silver light and his face disappears, *God*, he's getting senile. Should he quit his job and go back to teaching astrophysics, instead of figuring ways of controlling a split atom?

That's the point: How can he control bombarded uranium, when he can't control himself? What is this star blazing in the middle of his mind, radiating there, showing him pictures of history three hundred years old, like frames cut out of celluloid, pictures so real he can feel himself there? The star, like an atom, gives him feelings of what is about to happen, too, and then it does.

He has been living in his car because his English Sheepdog, Harvey, growls and bites him at the front door. Harvey is eighteen years old and doesn't remember his master; people are vague blurs of light to his eyes. Harvey can't distinguish Rosenfelder, and

Rosenfelder is beginning to be unable to distinguish himself. Harvey has arthritis and glaucoma; he bumps into doors and tables. Rosenfelder bumps into instances of non-ordinary reality; he forgets who he is and thinks he's the universe.

Harvey is sprawled upside down now in the back seat of the Carmen Ghia, and Rosenfelder is scratching his furry chest singing: "The big dog, relax, enjoy a snack, and scratch the big dog." (*The Late Show* theme is Harvey's favorite song.) But Rosenfelder is fighting sadness, putting on an air to trick the dog. They're on their way to the veterinarian's, where a doctor waits with a single syringe. They're pulling up now to the smoky-glass window. Rosenfelder gets out and the wind catches his graying hair. Ashes lodge in his eyes. He can't do it—even looking close at his bitten hand.

Click of the car door. Driving on this windy day is nearly impossible for him. Something happens to people in a strong wind. They are irritable, they cut him off, making left turns from the right lane. The wind affects him, too. The taillights cutting in front of him make him feel that something strange is about to happen . . .

A raga plays on the radio, resonating with the sound of four symphonic cylinders. A transmission of radio sound into the synchromesh transmission. Rosenfelder is just beginning to feel peaceful on the way to the think tank. The engine suddenly sputters and dies when he sees a couple on the sidewalk. He knows instantly this is the *something strange* happening. Happening now. Happening now. The car, though dead, rolls onto a dirt lot at twenty miles an hour, as the scientist jumps from the open door.

He flies into the wind and across the street, as his Volkswagen slows and stops under its own weight in the middle of the vast dirt lot. His bod tumbles through the thick soft dust. But he's conscious of being unconscious. A stardescends into his body as something of him flies across the street, through the ashen wind, to the couple on the sidewalk.

He sees the man first and then the woman. He knows it is all wrong. The man is six-five, long blond hair, and tattooed muscle, with his hands around her neck. His boots are black, and his mind is on fire. The woman, sixty, is losing air, gasping for God to come, as Rosenfelder runs across the street. The young blond man feels him near and releases his grip on her reddened neck with a force

that bangs her against the backdrop—rough adobe wall. Her back bleeds.

Rosenfelder's body meets his mind at the point of sidewalk. The blond man runs wild across the street through traffic. Rosenfelder catches the falling woman, falling from the wall. An energy pours from his hands into the woman's body. She is screaming "Oh my God," and gasping "My dear God." The wounds on her back close now, like zippers, bonding atomic beneath her drying blood, as her neck turns from red to pink. The sky turns from red to pink above the blond man running through the dust.

Another man runs through Rosenfelder's mind—he wears a Superman T-shirt, a body builder. He asks Rosenfelder what has happened. Rosenfelder reacts "She was being strangled. The man ran that way. Please follow him, just keep him in sight. I'll call the police." The words are not his words. They have too much power. They are heard. They make the body builder run across the street, too, though he is afraid. Rosenfelder's antic mind can feel no fear, there is only *now*.

Now a woman calls to him from two stories above the adobe wall: "What in God's name . . ." Rosenfelder reacts again: "Call the police." She sees the woman on the sidewalk and grabs the phone.

Rosenfelder holds the old woman and a force greater than himself speaks through his harvest eyes directly into her mind. Her muscles relax and her fear begins to drain into the ashen water flowing in the gutter. Rosenfelder's mind recalls his own death, a murky recollection of murder on a windy day, but something about it has changed. And then a moment of love. No, a moment of intense compassion overtakes him. He feels waves of pain around his neck and back. He feels fear running through him, sloshing into watery ash down through the storm drain. The universe makes sense.

Something dormant in him has saved a woman's life, and his death is simultaneously changed. A police car slides by the curb and Rosenfelder points. The woman says she is all right. The car grows smaller in the distance with lights. The old woman tells Rosenfelder that she thinks she can stand up. She says, "Thank God you came along. No one else stopped . . . rush hour and no one stops."

Rosenfelder speaks to her in his mind; he is reacting silently. He feels no space, no time. There is a light where his head should be. His head becomes the observable universe Harvey barks and barks across the street for his master.

Three police cars swerve into the parking lane. In the first is the body builder and two officers. In the second, the blond man and a lieutenant. In the third, an officer and a woman Rosenfelder has not seen before. Lieutenant Abecromby asks the victim's name as the muscle man steps onto the curb from the first car. His Superman T-shirt attracts Rosenfelder's eye. The woman says her name is "Lois" and Rosenfelder laughs and laughs. They are infected by him—Lois and superman laugh, too. The policemen smile. They collect names for their reports, and short versions of what happened. They hardly speak to Rosenfelder at all.

He watches the blond-haired man in the second car. A beam of light shines into the back seat, and swirling particles of dust and ash sparkle in the light. Rosenfelder has seen the look in his eyes somewhere before, somewhere back in World War II before he was captured. He remembers now. It was the look of death in the eyes of a tranquilized rabid dog.

Lieutenant Abecromby tells the crowd that has begun to collect on the sidewalk that the long-haired man had just been released from a sanitarium the day before. He tells them that the man is a heroin addict, and that the lady in the third car was fixing breakfast when he came in and started eating food out of her icebox. Her husband came yelling into the room, and the man ran through their plate glass window, tore down a picket fence, and knocked over their propane barbecue. He says that was how the fire started. Rosenfelder takes the moment to slip away through the crowd.

He checks the engine of his Carmen Ghia when it doesn't start, and then the battery. He twists a loose battery cable tighter and starts the engine. Harvey plods toward the sound of the engine like a sore Clydesdale. It's difficult for him to see the ground, so he steps extra high. Rosenfelder leads him to the door and over the driver's seat. First gear into the west. For Rosenfelder, driving is automatic, like a spring.

He drives half an hour past barricaded streets that for a moment remind him of some imminent holocaust. Finally there are no

more fire engines, police, or ash in the sky. A concrete dome expands into his vision and Harvey barks. The security guard waves him in through the gate, as he rolls to his parking space. There are no protestors today. Flash of his name on the cement car-stop. It reads: *Morris Rosenfelder*. He wants to add: "than he thinks he is." He laughs. But something is happening to him that he needs to understand. He knows things without the process of thought. Shifting into reverse, he glides out the security gate toward home. Harvey stops barking.

Some force wells up from his feet to his head again. He's conscious of driving, but he feels like tires heating on warm asphalt. He feels he is the road itself, the sand along the shore, and the curved blue horizon. What is this energy surging through him? Where is the power source? He stops the car and sits in the sand as Harvey rolls nearby with his paws flailing to the sky. Thoughts fade into sounds of blue water curling into white, like thunder. A storm slowly approaches from the west, and the bottoms of the clouds curl like waves. The bottom drops from the curls and the sky-barrier is lost into streaks of rainbow gray, forming a veil between the clouds and sea. A ship on the horizon is disappearing behind the veil, and he wants to reach out and put it in his pocket.

He remembers a story his favorite teacher taught him in eighth grade. It is the story of ten wise men on a boat that sinks in the China Sea. When they all find themselves soaking wet onshore, each counts the others to find out if any were lost. But each wise man can only count nine. Each one forgets to count himself. There is no *self* to count. They conclude that one of them must have drowned.

The storm finally soaks Rosenfelder, and Harvey finds the car by himself. Rosenfelder's eyes are closed now and his mind is void. He remains unmoving for seven hours, until Harvey paws him to go home.

Rosenfelder walks all night on the wooden planks of his living room, which reverberates steps of his bare feet. He walks that way all night, not unlike the victim of a concentration camp, conjuring images of the dawn. At dawn he writes:

Out of the sound of dawn comes an image of fire . . .

He writes all day in the sun, between sips of strong coffee and cigarettes. At night he walks again in the still air of his room, a

flame of a single candle creating errant shadows among the grainy darkness. Across the room, Rosenfelder's right palm, open, faces the flame. Harvey, at the edge of the bed, watches a vague violet shroud radiate around his master's body, as the candle flickers and a wisp of white smoke rises from the extinguishing flame. Harvey's eyes begin to clear. As a light rain soaks the ceiling, Rosenfelder sleeps, dreaming of Superman and X-ray eyes.