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CHAPTER ONE

Heavy Water And Other Stories

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career move

When Alistair finished his new screenplay, *Offensive from Quasar 13*, he submitted it to the *LM*, and waited. Over the past year, he had had more than a dozen screenplays rejected by the *Little Magazine*. On the other hand, his most recent submission, a batch of five, had been returned not with the standard rejection slip but with a handwritten note from the screenplay editor, Hugh Sixsmith. The note said:

I was really rather taken with two or three of these, and seriously tempted by *Hotwire*, which I thought close to being fully achieved. Do please go on sending me your stuff.

Hugh Sixsmith was himself a screenplay writer of considerable, though uncertain, reputation. His note of encouragement was encouraging. It made Alistair brave.

Boldly he prepared *Offensive from Quasar 13* for submission. He justified the pages of the typescript with fondly lingering fingertips. Alistair did not address the envelope to the Screenplay Editor. No. He addressed it to Mr. Hugh Sixsmith. Nor, for once, did he enclose his curriculum vitae, which he now contemplated with some discomfort. It told, in a pitiless staccato, of the screenplays he had published in various laptop broadsheets and comically obscure pamphlets; it even told of screenplays published in his university magazine. The truly disgraceful bit came at the end, where it said "Rights Offered: First British Serial only."

Alistair spent a long time on the covering note to Sixsmith--almost as long as he had spent on *Offensive from Quasar 13*. The note got shorter and shorter the more

he worked on it. At last he was satisfied. There in the dawn he grasped the envelope and ran his tongue across its darkly luminous cuff.

That Friday, on his way to work, and suddenly feeling completely hopeless, Alistair surrendered his parcel to the sub post office in Calchalk Street, off the Euston Road. Deliberately--very deliberately--he had enclosed no stamped, addressed envelope. The accompanying letter, in its entirety, read as follows: "Any use? If not--w.p.b."

"W.p.b." stood, of course, for "wastepaper basket"--a receptacle that loomed forbiddingly large in the life of a practicing screenplay writer. With a hand on his brow, Alistair sidled his way out of there--past the birthday cards, the tensed pensioners, the envelopes, and the balls of string.

When Luke finished the new poem--entitled, simply, "Sonnet"--he photocopied the printout and faxed it to his agent. Ninety minutes later he returned from the gym downstairs and prepared his special fruit juice while the answering machine told him, among many other things, to get back to Mike. Reaching for an extra lime, Luke touched the preselect for Talent International.

"Ah. Luke," said Mike. "It's moving. We've already had a response."

"Yeah, how come? It's four in the morning where he is."

"No, it's eight in the evening where he is. He's in Australia. Developing a poem with Peter Barry."

Luke didn't want to hear about Peter Barry. He bent and tugged off his tank top. Walls and windows maintained a respectful distance--the room was a broad seam of sun haze and river light. Luke sipped his juice: its extreme astringency caused him to lift both elbows and give a single, embittered nod. He said, "What did he think?"

"Joe? He did backflips. It's `Tell Luke I'm blown away by the new poem. I just know that "Sonnet" is really going to happen.'"

Luke took this coolly. He wasn't at all old but he had been in poetry long enough to take these things coolly. He turned. Suki, who had been shopping, was now letting herself into the apartment, not without difficulty. She was indeed cruelly encumbered. Luke said, "You haven't talked numbers yet. I mean like a ballpark figure."

Mike said, "We understand each other. Joe knows about Monad's interest. And Tim at TCT."

"Good," said Luke. Suki was wandering slenderly toward him, shedding various purchases as she approached--creels and caskets, shining satchels.

"They'll want you to go out there at least twice," said Mike. "Initially to discuss ... They can't get over it that you don't live there."

Luke could tell that Suki had spent much more than she intended. He could tell by

the quality of patience in her sigh as she began to lick the sweat from his shoulderblades. He said, "Come on, Mike. They know I hate all that L.A. crap."

On his way to work that Monday Alistair sat slumped in his bus seat, limp with ambition and neglect. One fantasy was proving especially obdurate: as he entered his office, the telephone on his desk would actually be *bouncing* on its console--Hugh Sixsmith, from the *Little Magazine*, his voice urgent but grave, with the news that he was going to rush Alistair's screenplay into the very next issue. (To be frank, Alistair had had the same fantasy the previous Friday, at which time, presumably, *Offensive from Quasar 13* was still being booted round the floor of the sub post office.) His girlfriend, Hazel, had come down from Leeds for the weekend. They were so small, he and Hazel, that they could share his single bed quite comfortably--could sprawl and stretch without constraint. On the Saturday evening, they attended a screenplay reading at a bookshop on Camden High Street. Alistair hoped to impress Hazel with his growing ease in this milieu (and managed to exchange wary leers with a few shambling, half-familiar figures--fellow screenplay writers, seekers, knowers). But these days Hazel seemed sufficiently impressed by him anyway, whatever he did. Alistair lay there the next morning (her turn to make tea), wondering about this business of being impressed. Hazel had impressed him mightily, seven years ago, in bed: by not getting out of it when he got into it. The office telephone rang many times that Monday, but none of the callers had anything to say about *Offensive from Quasar 13*. Alistair sold advertising space for an agricultural newsletter, so his callers wanted to talk about creosote admixes and offal reprocessors.

He heard nothing for four months. This would normally have been a fairly good sign. It meant, or it might mean, that your screenplay was receiving serious, even agonized, consideration. It was better than having your screenplay flopping back on the mat by return post. On the other hand, Hugh Sixsmith might have responded to the spirit and the letter of Alistair's accompanying note and dropped *Offensive from Quasar 13* into his wastepaper basket within minutes of its arrival: four months ago. Rereading his fading carbon of the screenplay, Alistair now cursed his own (highly calibrated) insouciance. He shouldn't have said, "Any use? If not--w.p.b." He should have said, "Any use? If not--s.a.e.!" Every morning he went down the three flights of stairs--the mail was there to be shuffled and dealt. And every fourth Friday, or thereabouts, he still wrenched open his *LM*, in case Sixsmith had run the screenplay without letting him know. As a surprise.

"Dear Mr. Sixsmith," thought Alistair as he rode the train to Leeds. "I am thinking of placing the screenplay I sent you elsewhere. I trust that ... I thought it only fair to ..." Alistair retracted his feet to accommodate another passenger. "My dear Mr. Sixsmith: In response to an inquiry from ... In response to a most generous inquiry, I am putting together a selection of my screenplays for ..." Alistair tipped his head back and stared at the smeared window. "For Mudlark Books. It seems that the Ostler Press is also interested. This involves me in some paperwork, which, however tedious ... For the record ... Matters would be considerably eased ... Of course if you ..."

Luke sat on a Bauhaus love seat in Club World at Heathrow, drinking Evian and

availing himself of a complimentary fax machine--clearing up the initial paperwork on the poem with Mike.

Everyone in Club World looked hushed and grateful to be there, but not Luke, who looked exhaustively displeased. He was flying first class to LAX, where he would be met by a uniformed chauffeur who would convey him by limousine or courtesy car to the Pinnacle Trumont on the Avenue of the Stars. First class was no big thing. In poetry, first class was something you didn't need to think about. It wasn't discussed. It was statutory. First class was just business as usual.

Luke was tense: under pressure. A lot--maybe too much--was riding on "Sonnet." If "Sonnet" didn't happen, he would soon be able to afford neither his apartment nor his girlfriend. He would recover from Suki before very long. But he would never recover from not being able to afford her, or his apartment. If you wanted the truth, his deal on "Sonnet" was not that great. Luke was furious with Mike except about the new merchandizing clause (potential accessories on the poem--like toys or T-shirts) and the improved cut he got on tertiaries and sequels. Then there was Joe.

Joe calls, and he's like, "We really think `Sonnet's going to work, Luke. Jeff thinks so, too. Jeff's just come in. Jeff? It's Luke. Do you want to say something to him? Luke. Luke, Jeff's coming over. He wants to say something about `Sonnet.'" "

"Luke?" said Jeff. "Jeff. Luke? You're a very talented writer. It's great to be working on `Sonnet' with you. Here's Joe."

"That was Jeff," said Joe. "He's crazy about `Sonnet.'" "

"So what are we going to be talking about?" said Luke. "Roughly."

"On `Sonnet'? Well, the only thing we have a problem on `Sonnet' with, Luke, so far as I can see, anyway, and I know Jeff agrees with me on this--right, Jeff?--and so does Jim, incidentally, Luke," said Joe, "is the form."

Luke hesitated. Then he said, "You mean the form `Sonnet's written in.'" "

"Yes, that's right, Luke. The sonnet form."

Luke waited for the last last call and was then guided, with much unreturned civility, into the plane's nose.

"Dear Mr. Sixsmith," wrote Alistair,

Going through my files the other day, I vaguely remembered sending you a little effort called *Offensive from Quasar 13*--just over seven months ago, it must have been. Am I right in assuming that you have no use for it? I might bother you with another one (or two!) that I have completed since then. I hope you are well. Thank you so much for your encouragement in the past.

Need I say how much I admire your own work? The austerity, the depth. When, may I ask, can we expect another "slim vol."?

He sadly posted this letter on a wet Sunday afternoon in Leeds. He hoped that the postmark might testify to his mobility and grit.

Yet, really, he felt much steadier now. There had been a recent period of about five weeks during which, Alistair came to realize, he had gone clinically insane. That letter to Sixsmith was but one of the many dozens he had penned. He had also taken to haunting the Holborn offices of the *Little Magazine*: for hours he sat crouched in the coffee bars and sandwich nooks opposite, with the unsettled intention of springing out at Sixsmith--if he ever saw him, which he never did. Alistair began to wonder whether Sixsmith actually existed. Was he, perhaps, an actor, a ghost, a shrewd fiction? Alistair telephoned the *LM* from selected phone booths. Various people answered, and no one knew where anyone was, and only three or four times was Alistair successfully connected to the apparently permanent coughing fit that crackled away at the other end of Sixsmith's extension. Then he hung up. He couldn't sleep, or he thought he couldn't, for Hazel said that all night long he whimpered and gnashed.

Alistair waited for nearly two months. Then he sent in three more screenplays. One was about a Machine hit man who emerges from early retirement when his wife is slain by a serial murderer. Another dealt with the infiltration by the three Gorgons of an escort agency in present-day New York. The third was a heavy-metal musical set on the Isle of Skye. He enclosed a stamped, addressed envelope the size of a small knapsack.

Winter was unusually mild.

"May I get you something to drink before your meal? A cappuccino? A mineral water? A glass of sauvignon blanc?"

"Double decaf espresso" said Luke. "Thanks"

"You're more than welcome."

"Hey," said Luke when everyone had ordered. "I'm not just welcome anymore. I'm more than welcome."

The others smiled patiently. Such remarks were the downside of the classy fact that Luke, despite his appearance and his accent, was English. There they all sat on the terrace at Bubo's: Joe, Jeff, Jim.

Luke said, "How did 'Edogue by a Five-Barred Gate' do?"

Joe said, "Domestically?" He looked at Jim, at Jeff. "Like--*fifteen*?"

Luke said, "And worldwide?"

"It isn't *going* worldwide."

"How about 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'?" asked Luke.

Joe shook his head. "It didn't even do what 'Sheep in Fog' did."

"It's all remakes," said Jim. "Period shit."

"How about 'Bog Oak'?"

"'Bog Oak'? Ooh, maybe twenty-five?"

Luke said sourly, "I hear nice things about 'The Old Botanical Gardens.'"

They talked about other Christmas flops and bombs, delaying for as long as they could any mention of TCT's "'Tis he whose yesterevening's high disdain," which had cost practically nothing to make and had already done a hundred and twenty million in its first three weeks.

"What happened?" Luke eventually asked. "Jesus, what was the publicity budget?"

"On 'Tis'?" said Joe. "Nothing. Two, three."

They all shook their heads. Jim was philosophical. "That's poetry," he said.

"There aren't any other sonnets being made, are there?" said Luke.

Jeff said, "Binary is in post-production with a sonnet. 'Composed at -- Castle.'
More period shit."

Their soups and salads arrived. Luke thought that it was probably a mistake, at this stage, to go on about sonnets. After a while he said, "How did 'For Sophonisba Anguisciola' do?"

Joe said, "'For Sophonisba Anguisciola'? Don't talk to me about 'For Sophonisba Anguisciola.'"

It was late at night and Alistair was in his room working on a screenplay about a high-IQ homeless black man who is transformed into a white female junk-bond dealer by a South Moluccan terrorist witch doctor. Suddenly he shoved this aside with a groan, snatched up a clean sheet of paper, and wrote:

Dear Mr. Sixsmith,

It is now well over a year since I sent you *Offensive from Quasar 13*. Not content with that dereliction, you have allowed five months to pass without responding to three more recent submissions. A prompt reply I would have deemed common decency, you being a fellow screenplay writer, though I must say I have never cared for your work, finding it, at

once, both florid and superficial. (I read Matthew Sura's piece last month and I thought he got you *bang to rights*.) Please return the more recent screenplays, namely *Decimator*, *Medusa Takes Manhattan* and *Valley of the Stratocasters*, immediately.

He signed it and sealed it. He stalked out and posted it. On his return he haughtily threw off his drenched clothes. The single bed felt enormous, like an orgiast's fourposter. He curled up tight and slept better than he had done all year.

So it was a quietly defiant Alistair who the next morning came plodding down the stairs and glanced at the splayed mail on the shelf as he headed for the door. He recognized the envelope as a lover would. He bent low as he opened it.

Do please forgive this very tardy reply. Profound apologies. But allow me to move straight on to a verdict on your work. I won't bore you with all my personal and professional distractions.

Bore me? thought Alistair, as his hand sought his heart.

I think I can at once give the assurance that your screenplays are unusually promising. No: that promise has already been honored. They have both feeling and burnish.

I will content myself, for now, by taking *Offensive from Quasar 13*. (Allow me to muse a little longer on *Decimator*.) I have one or two very minor emendations to suggest. Why not telephone me here to arrange a chat?

Thank you for your generous remarks about my own work. Increasingly I find that this kind of exchange--this candor, this reciprocity--is one of the things that keep me trundling along. Your words helped sustain my defenses in the aftermath of Matthew Sura's vicious and slovenly attack, from which, I fear, I am still rather reeling. Take excellent care.

"Go with the lyric," said Jim.

"Or how about a ballad?" said Jeff.

Jack was swayed. "Ballads are big," he allowed.

It seemed to Luke, toward the end of the second day, that he was winning the sonnet battle. The clue lay in the flavor of Joe's taciturnity: torpid but unmorose.

"Let's face it," said Jeff. "Sonnets are essentially hieratic. They're strictly period. They answer to a formalized consciousness. Today, we're talking consciousnesses that are in *search* of form."

"Plus," said Jack, "the lyric has always been the natural medium for the untrammelled expression of feeling."

"Yeah," said Jeff. "With the sonnet you're stuck in this thesis-antithesis-synthesis routine."

Joan said, "I mean what are we doing here? Reflecting the world or illuminating it?"

It was time for Joe to speak. "Please," he said. "Are we forgetting that 'Tis' was a sonnet, before the rewrites? Were we on coke when we said, in the summer, that we were going to go for the *sonnet*?"

The answer to Joe's last question, incidentally, was yes; but Luke looked carefully round the room. The Chinese lunch they'd had the secretary phone out for lay on the coffee table like a child's experiments with putty and paint and designer ooze. It was four o'clock and Luke wanted to get away soon. To swim and lie in the sun. To make himself especially lean and bronzed for his meeting with the young actress Henna Mickiewicz. He faked a yawn.

"Luke's lagged," said Joe. "Tomorrow we'll talk some more, but I'm pretty sure I'm recommitted to the sonnet."

"Sorry," said Alistair. "Me yet again. Sorry."

"Oh yes," said the woman's voice. "He was here a minute ago.... No, he's there. He's there. Just a second."

Alistair jerked the receiver away from his ear and stared at it. He started listening again. It seemed as if the phone itself were in paroxysm, all squawk and splat like a cabby's radio. Then the fit passed, or paused, and a voice said tightly but proudly, "Hugh Sixsmith?"

It took Alistair a little while to explain who he was. Sixsmith sounded surprised but, on the whole, rather intrigued to hear from him. They moved on smoothly enough to arrange a meeting (after work, the following Monday), before Alistair contrived to put in: "Mr. Sixsmith, there's just one thing. This is very embarrassing, but last night I got into a bit of a state about not hearing from you for so long and I'm afraid I sent you a completely mad letter which I ..." Alistair waited. "Oh, you know how it is. For these screenplays, you know, you reach into yourself, and then time goes by and ..."

"My dear boy, don't say another word. I'll ignore it. I'll throw it away. After a line or two I shall simply avert my unpaired eye," said Sixsmith, and started coughing again.

Hazel did not come down to London for the weekend. Alistair did not go up to Leeds for the weekend. He spent the time thinking about that place in Earls Court Square where screenplay writers read from their screenplays and drank biting Spanish red wine and got stared at by tousled girls who wore thick overcoats and no makeup and blinked incessantly or not at all.

Luke parked his Chevrolet Celebrity on the fifth floor of the studio car park and rode down in the elevator with two minor executives in track-suits who were discussing the latest records broken by "'Tis he whose yester-evening's high disdain." He put on his dark glasses as he crossed the other car park, the one reserved for major executives. Each bay had a name on it. It reassured Luke to see Joe's name there, partly obscured by his Range Rover. Poets, of course, seldom had that kind of clout. Or any clout at all. He was glad that Henna Mickiewicz didn't seem to realize this.

Joe's office: Jim, Jack, Joan, but no Jeff. Two new guys were there. Luke was introduced to the two new guys. Ron said he spoke for Don when he told Luke that he was a great admirer of his material. Huddled over the coffee percolator with Joe, Luke asked after Jeff, and Joe said, "Jeff's off the poem," and Luke just nodded.

They settled in their low armchairs.

Luke said, "What's 'A Welshman to Any Tourist' doing?"

Don said, "It's doing good but not great."

Ron said, "It won't do what 'The Gap in the Hedge' did."

Jim said, "What did 'Hedge' do?"

They talked about what "Hedge" did. Then Joe said, "Okay. We're going with the sonnet. Now. Don has a problem with the octet's first quatrain, Ron has a problem with the second quatrain, Jack and Jim have a problem with the first quatrain of the sestet, and I think we *all* have a problem with the final couplet."

Alistair presented himself at the offices of the *LM* in an unblinking trance of punctuality. He had been in the area for hours, and had spent about fifteen quid on teas and coffees. There wasn't much welcome to overstay in the various snack bars where he lingered (and where he moreover imagined himself unfavorably recollected from his previous *LM* vigils), holding with both hands the creaky foam container, and watching the light pour past the office windows.

As Big Ben struck two, Alistair mounted the stairs. He took a breath so deep that he almost fell over backwards--and then knocked. An elderly office boy wordlessly showed him into a narrow, rubbish-heaped office that contained, with difficulty, seven people. At first Alistair took them for other screenplay writers and wedged himself behind the door, at the back of the queue. But they didn't look like screenplay writers. Not much was said over the next four hours, and the identities of Sixsmith's supplicants emerged only partially and piecemeal. One or two, like his solicitor and his second wife's psychiatrist, took their leave after no more than ninety minutes. Others, like the VAT man and the probation officer, stayed almost as long as Alistair. But by six forty-five he was alone.

He approached the impossible haystack of Sixsmith's desk. Very hurriedly he started searching through the unopened mail. It was in Alistair's mind that he might locate and intercept his own letter. But all the envelopes, of which there were a great many, proved to be brown, windowed, and registered. Turning to leave, he saw a

Jiffy bag of formidable bulk addressed to himself in Sixsmith's tremulous hand. There seemed no reason not to take it. The old office boy, Alistair soon saw, was curled up in a sleeping bag under a worktable in the outer room.

On the street he unseamed his package in a ferment of gray fluff. It contained two of his screenplays, *Valley of the Stratocasters* and, confusingly, *Decimator*. There was also a note:

I have been called away, as they say. Personal ups and downs. I shall ring you this week and we'll have--what? Lunch?

Enclosed, too, was Alistair's aggrieved letter--unopened. He moved on. The traffic, human and mechanical, lurched past his quickened face. He felt his eyes widen to an obvious and solving truth: Hugh Sixsmith was a screenplay writer. He understood.

After an inconclusive day spent discussing the caesura of "Sonnet"'s opening line, Luke and his colleagues went for cocktails at Strabismus. They were given the big round table near the piano.

Jane said, "TCT is doing a sequel to "Tis."

Joan said, "Actually it's a prequel."

"Title?" said Joe.

"Undecided. At TCT they're calling it "Twas."

"My son," said Joe thoughtfully, after the waiter had delivered their drinks, "called me an asshole this morning. For the first time."

"That's incredible," said Bo. "My son called me an asshole this morning. For the first time."

"So?" said Mo.

Joe said, "He's six years old, for Christ's sake."

Phil said, "My son called me an asshole when he was five."

"My son hasn't called me an asshole yet," said Jim. "And he's nine."

Luke sipped his Bloody Mary. Its hue and texture made him wonder whether he could risk blowing his nose without making yet another visit to the bathroom. He hadn't called Suki for three days. Things were getting compellingly out of hand with Henna Mickiewicz. He hadn't actually promised her a part in the poem, not on paper. Henna was great, except you kept thinking she was going to suddenly sue you anyway.

Mo was saying that each child progresses at his own rate, and that later lulls regularly offset the apparent advances of the early years.

Jim said, "Still, it's a cause of concern."

Mo said, "My son's three. And he calls me an asshole all the time."

Everybody looked suitably impressed.

The trees were in leaf, and the rumps of the tourist buses were thick and fat in the traffic, and all the farmers wanted fertilizer admixes rather than storehouse insulation when Sixsmith finally made his call. In the interim, Alistair had convinced himself of the following: before returning his aggrieved letter, Sixsmith *had steamed it open and then resealed it*. During this period, also, Alistair had grimly got engaged to Hazel. But the call came.

He was pretty sure he had come to the right restaurant. Except that it wasn't a restaurant, not quite. The place took no bookings, and knew of no Mr. Sixsmith, and was serving many midday breakfasts to swearing persons whose eyes bulged over mugs of flesh-colored tea. On the other hand, there was alcohol. All kinds of people were drinking it. Fine, thought Alistair. Fine. What better place, really, for a couple of screenplay writers to ...

"Alistair?"

Confidently Sixsmith bent his long body into the booth. As he settled, he looked well pleased with the maneuver. He contemplated Alistair with peculiar neutrality, but there was then something boyish, something consciously remiss, in the face he turned to the waiter. As Sixsmith ordered a gin and tonic, and as he amusingly expatiated on his weakness for prawn cocktails, Alistair found himself wryly but powerfully drawn to this man, to this rumpled screenplay writer with his dreamy gaze, the curious elisions of his somewhat slurred voice, and the great dents and bone shadows of his face, all the faulty fontanels of vocational care. He knew how old Sixsmith was. But maybe time moved strangely for screenplay writers, whose flames burnt so bright ...

"And as for my fellow artisan in the scrivener's trade: Alistair. What will *you* have?"

At once Sixsmith showed himself to be a person of some candor. Or it might have been that he saw in the younger screenplay writer someone before whom all false reticence could be cast aside. Sixsmith's estranged second wife, it emerged, herself the daughter of two alcoholics, was an alcoholic. Her current lover (ah, how these lovers came and went!) was an alcoholic. To complicate matters, Sixsmith explained as he rattled his glass at the waiter, his daughter, the product of his first marriage, was an alcoholic. How did Sixsmith keep going? Despite his years, he had, thank God, found love, in the arms of a woman young enough (and, by the sound of it, alcoholic enough) to be his daughter. Their prawn cocktails arrived, together with a carafe of hearty red wine. Sixsmith lit a cigarette and held up his palm toward Alistair for the duration of a coughing fit that turned every head in the room. Then, for a moment, understandably disoriented, he stared at Alistair as if uncertain of his intentions, or even his identity. But their bond quickly re-established itself. Soon they were talking away like hardened equals--of Trumbo, of Chayevsky, of Towne, of

Eszterhas.

Around two thirty, when, after several attempts, the waiter succeeded in removing Sixsmith's untouched prawn cocktail, and now prepared to serve them their braised chops with a third carafe, the two men were arguing loudly about early Puzo.

Joe yawned and shrugged and said languidly, "You know something? I was never that crazy about the Petrarchan rhyme scheme anyway."

Jan said, "'Composed at -- Castle' is ABBA ABBA."

Jen said, "So was 'Tis.' Right up until the final polish."

Jon said, "Here's some news. They say 'Composed at -- Castle' is in turnaround."

"You're not serious," said Bo. "It's released this month. I heard they were getting great preview reaction."

Joe looked doubtful. "'Tis' has made the suits kind of antsy about sonnets. They figure lightning can't strike twice."

"ABBA ABBA," said Bo with distaste.

"Or," said Joe. "*Or ... or* we go unrhymed."

"Unrhymed?" said Phil.

"We go blank," said Joe.

There was a silence. Bill looked at Gil, who looked at Will.

"What do you think, Luke?" said Jim. "You're the poet."

Luke had never felt very protective about "Sonnet." Even its original version he had regarded as little more than a bargaining chip. Nowadays he rewrote "Sonnet" every night at the Pinnacle Trumont before Henna arrived and they started torturing room service. "Blank," said Luke. "Blank. I don't know, Joe. I could go ABAB ABAB or even ABAB CDCD. Christ, I'd go AABB if I didn't think it'd tank the final couplet. But blank. I never thought I'd go *blank*."

"Well, it needs something" said Joe.

"Maybe it's the pentameter," said Luke. "Maybe it's the iamb. Hey, here's one from left field. How about syllabics?"

At five forty-five Hugh Sixsmith ordered a gin and tonic and said, "We've talked. We've broken bread. Wine. Truth. Screenplay-writing. I want to talk about your work, Alistair. Yes, I do. I want to talk about *Offensive from Quasar 13*."

Alistair blushed.

"It's not often that ... But one always knows. That sense of pregnant arrest. Of felt life in its full ... Thank you, Alistair. Thank you, I have to say that it rather reminded me of my own early work."

Alistair nodded.

Having talked for quite some time about his own maturation as a screenplay writer, Sixsmith said, "Now. Just tell me to shut up any time you like. And I'm going to print it anyway. But I want to make one *tiny* suggestion about *Offensive from Quasar 13*."

Alistair waved a hand in the air.

"Now," said Sixsmith. He broke off and ordered a prawn cocktail. The waiter looked at him defeatedly. "Now," said Sixsmith. "When Brad escapes from the Nebulan experiment lab and sets off with Cord and Tara to immobilize the directed-energy scythe on the Xerxian attack ship--where's Chelsi?"

Alistair frowned.

"Where's Chelsi? She's still in the lab with the Nebulans. On the point of being injected with a Phobian viper venom, moreover. What of the happy ending? What of Brad's heroic centrality? What of his avowed love for Chelsi? Or am I just being a bore?"

The secretary, Victoria, stuck her head into the room and said, "He's coming down."

Luke listened to the sound of twenty-three pairs of legs uncrossing and recrossing. Meanwhile he readied himself for a sixteen-tooth smile. He glanced at Joe, who said, "He's fine. He's just coming down to say hi."

And down he came: Jake Endo, exquisitely Westernized and gorgeously tricked out and perhaps thirty-five. Of the luxury items that pargeted his slender form, none was as breathtaking as his hair, with its layers of pampered light.

Jake Endo shook Luke's hand and said, "It's a great pleasure to meet you. I haven't read the basic material on the poem, but I'm familiar with the background."

Luke surmised that Jake Endo had had his voice fixed. He could do the bits of the words that Japanese people were supposed to find difficult.

"I understand it's a love poem," he continued. "Addressed to your girlfriend. Is she here with you in L.A.?"

"No. She's in London." Luke found he was staring at Jake Endo's sandals, wondering how much they could possibly have cost.

A silence began its crescendo. This silence had long been intolerable when Jim broke it, saying to Jake Endo, "Oh, how did 'Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree,

Which Stands Near the Lake of Eastwaite, on a Desolate Part of the Shore, Commanding a Beautiful Prospect' do?"

"Lines?" said Jake Endo. "Rather well."

"I was thinking about 'Composed at -- Castle,'" said Jim weakly.

The silence began again. As it neared its climax, Joe was suddenly reminded of all this energy he was supposed to have. He got to his feet saying, "Jake? I guess we're nearing our tiredness peak. You've caught us at kind of a low point. We can't agree on the first line. First line? We can't see our way to the end of the first *foot*."

Jake Endo was undismayed. "There always are these low points. I'm sure you'll get there, with so much talent in the room. Upstairs we're very confident. We think it's going to be a big summer poem."

"No, we're very confident, too," said Joe. "There's a lot of belief here. A lot of belief. We're behind 'Sonnet' all the way."

"Sonnet?" said Jake Endo.

"Yeah, sonnet. 'Sonnet.'"

"Sonnet?" said Jake Endo.

"It's a sonnet. It's called 'Sonnet.'"

In waves the West fell away from Jake Endo's face. After a few seconds he looked like a dark-age warlord in mid-campaign, taking a glazed breather before moving on to the women and the children.

"Nobody told me," he said as he went toward the telephone, "about any *sonnet*."

The place was dosing. Its tea trade and its after-office trade had come and gone. Outside, the streets glimmered morbidly. Members of the staff were donning macs and overcoats. An important light went out. A fridge door slammed.

"Hardly the most resounding felicity, is it?" said Sixsmith.

Absent or unavailable for over an hour, the gift of speech had been restored to Alistair--speech, that prince of all the faculties. "Or what if..." he said. "What if Chelsi just leaves the experiment lab earlier?"

"Not hugely dramatic," said Sixsmith. He ordered a carafe of wine and inquired as to the whereabouts of his braised chop.

"Or what if she just gets wounded? During the escape. In the leg."

"So long as one could avoid the wretched cliché: girl impeded, hero dangerously tarrying. Also, she's supernumerary to the raid on the Xerxian attack ship. We really want her out of the way for that."

Alistair said, "Then let's kill her."

"Very well. Slight pall over the happy ending. No, no."

A waiter stood over them, sadly staring at the bill in its saucer.

"All right," said Sixsmith. "Chelsi gets wounded. Quite badly. In the arm. *Now* what does Brad do with her?"

"Drops her off at the hospital."

"Mm. Rather hollow modulation."

The waiter was joined by another waiter, equally stoic; their faces were grained by evening shadow. Now Sixsmith was gently frisking himself with a deepening frown.

"What if," said Alistair, "what if there's somebody passing who can *take* her to the hospital?"

"Possibly," said Sixsmith, who was half standing, with one hand awkwardly dipped into his inside pocket.

"Or what if," said Alistair, "or what if Brad just gives her *directions* to the hospital?"

Back in London the next day, Luke met with Mike to straighten this shit out. Actually it looked okay. Mike called Mal at Monad, who had a thing about Tim at TCT. As a potential finesse on Mal, Mike also called Bob at Binary with a view to repossessing the option on "Sonnet," plus development money at rolling compound, and redeveloping it somewhere else entirely--say, at Red Giant, where Rodge was known to be very interested. "They'll want you to go out there" said Mike. "To kick it around."

"I can't believe Joe," said Luke. "I can't believe I knocked myself out for that flake."

"Happens. Joe forgot about Jake Endo and sonnets. Endo's first big poem was a sonnet. Before your time. 'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art.' It opened for like one day. It practically bankrupted Japan."

"I feel used, Mike. My sense of trust. I've got to get wised up around here."

"A lot will depend on how 'Composed at -- Castle' does and what the feeling is on the 'Tis' prequel."

"I'm going to go away with Suki for a while. Do you know anywhere where there aren't any shops? Jesus, I need a holiday. Mike, this is all bullshit. You know what I *really* want to do, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

Luke looked at Mike until he said, "You want to direct."

When Alistair had convalesced from the lunch, he revised *Offensive from Quasar 13* in rough accordance with Sixsmith's suggestions. He solved the Chelsi problem by having her noisily eaten by a Stygian panther in the lab menagerie. The charge of gratuitousness was, in Alistair's view, safely anticipated by Brad's valediction to her remains, in which sanguinary revenge on the Nebulans was both prefigured and legitimized. He also took out the bit where Brad declared his love for Chelsi, and put in a bit where Brad declared his love for Tara.

He sent in the new pages, which three months later Sixsmith acknowledged and applauded in a hand quite incompatible with that of his earlier communications. Nor did he reimburse Alistair for the lunch. His wallet, he had explained, had been emptied that morning--by which alcoholic, Sixsmith never established. Alistair kept the bill as a memento. This startling document showed that during the course of the meal Sixsmith had smoked, or at any rate bought, nearly a carton of cigarettes.

Three months later he was sent a proof of *Offensive from Quasar 13*. Three months after that, the screenplay appeared in the *Little Magazine*. Three months after that, Alistair received a check for 12.50 [pounds sterling], which bounced.

Curiously, although the proof had incorporated Alistair's corrections, the published version reverted to the typescript, in which Brad escaped from the Nebulan lab seemingly without concern for a Chelsi last glimpsed on an operating table with a syringe full of Phobian viper venom being eased into her neck. Later that month, Alistair went along to a reading at the Screenplay Society in Earls Court. There he got talking to a gaunt girl in an ash-stained black smock who claimed to have read his screenplay and who, over glasses of red wine and, later, in the terrible pub, told him he was a weakling and a hypocrite with no notion of the ways of men and women. Alistair had not been a published screenplay writer long enough to respond to, or even recognize, this graphic proposition (though he did keep the telephone number she threw at his feet). It is anyway doubtful whether he would have dared to take things further. He was marrying Hazel the following weekend.

In the new year he sent Sixsmith a series--one might almost say a sequence--of screenplays on group-jeopardy themes. His follow-up letter in the summer was answered by a brief note stating that Sixsmith was no longer employed by the *LM*. Alistair telephoned. He then discussed the matter with Hazel and decided to take the next day off work.

It was a September morning. The hospice in Cricklewood was of recent design and construction; from the road it resembled a clutch of igloos against the sheenless tundra of the sky. When he asked for Hugh Sixsmith at the desk, two men in suits climbed quickly from their chairs. One was a writ-server. One was a cost-adjuster. Alistair waved away their complex requests.

The warm room contained clogged, regretful murmurs, and defiance in the form of bottles and paper cups and cigarette smoke, and the many peeping eyes of female grief. A young woman faced him proudly. Alistair started explaining who he was, a

young screenplay writer come to ... On the bed in the corner the spavined figure of Sixsmith was gawkily arranged. Alistair moved toward it. At first he was sure the eyes were gone, like holes cut out of pumpkin or blood orange. But then the faint brows began to lift, and Alistair thought he saw the light of recognition.

As the tears began, he felt the shiver of approval, of consensus, on his back. He took the old screenplay writer's hand and said, "Goodbye. And thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Opening in four hundred and thirty-seven theaters, the Binary sonnet "Composed at -- Castle" did seventeen million in its first weekend. At this time Luke was living in a two-bedroom apartment on Yokum Drive. Suki was with him. He hoped it wouldn't take her too long to find out about Henna Mickiewicz. When the smoke cleared he would switch to the more mature Anita, who produced.

He had taken his sonnet to Rodge at Red Giant and turned it into an ode. When that didn't work out he went to Mal at Monad, where they'd gone for the villanelle. The villanelle had become a triolet, briefly, with Tim at TCT, before Bob at Binary had him rethink it as a rondeau. When the rondeau didn't take, Luke lyricized it and got Mike to send it to Joe. Everyone, including Jake Endo, thought that now was surely the time to turn it back into a sonnet.

Luke had dinner at Rales with Joe and Mike.

"I always thought of 'Sonnet' as an art poem," said Joe. "But sonnets are so hot now I've started thinking more commercially."

Mike said, "TCT is doing a sequel *and* a prequel to 'Tis' and bringing them out at the same time."

"A sequel?" said Joe.

"Yeah. They're calling it 'Twill.'"

Mike was a little fucked up. So was Joe. Luke was a little fucked up too. They'd done some lines at the office. Then drinks here at the bar. They'd meant to get a little fucked up. It was okay. It was good, once in a while, to get a little fucked up. The thing was not to get fucked up too often. The thing was not to get fucked up to *excess*.

"I mean it, Luke," said Joe. He glittered potently. "I think 'Sonnet' could be as big as '--.'"

"You think?" said Luke.

"I mean it. I think 'Sonnet' could be another '--.'"

Luke thought for a moment, taking this in. "'--!'" he repeated wonderingly.

New Yorker, 1992

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A horizontal banner with a light blue background. On the left, the text "THE BEST OF EUROPE" is displayed in blue and orange. In the center is a small image of a stone archway. To the right of the image, the text "The New York Times Correspondents' Guide to Europe" is written in blue. Further right, the text "The New York Times Travel" is written in blue, with "nytimes.com/travel" in a smaller font below it.

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