

Here is another fascinating glimpse into the inner space of Ballard-land—the psychological urge of an ex-H-bomber pilot to return to the island scene of bomb experiments in which he participated; but for what reason?

# the terminal beach

by j. g. ballard

At night, as he lay half-asleep on the floor of the ruined bunker. Traven heard the waves breaking along the shore of the lagoon, reminding him of the long Atlantic rollers on the beach at Dakar, where he had been born, and of listening in the evenings for his parents to drive home along the corniche road from the airport. Overcome by this forgotten memory, he woke uncertainly from the bed of old magazines on which he slept and hurried towards the dunes that screened the lagoon.

Through the cold night air he could see the abandoned Superfortresses lying among the palms beyond the perimeter of the emergency landing field three hundred yards away. Traven walked through the dark sand, already forgetting where the shore lay, although the atoll was little more than half a mile in width. Above him, along the crests of the dunes, the tall palms leaned into the dim air like the symbols of a cryptic alphabet. The landscape of the island was covered by strange ciphers.

Giving up the attempt to find the beach, Traven stumbled into a set of tracks left years earlier by a large caterpillar vehicle. The heat released by one of the weapons tests had fused the sand, and the double line of fossil imprints, un-

covered by the evening air, wound its serpentine way among the hollows like the footfalls of an ancient saurian.

Too weak to walk any further, Traven sat down between the tracks. Hoping that they might lead him to the beach, he began to excavate the wedge-shaped grooves from a drift into which they disappeared. He returned to the bunker shortly before dawn, and slept through the hot silences of the following noon.

## The Blocks

As usual on these enervating afternoons, when not even a breath of on-shore breeze disturbed the dust, Traven sat in the shadow of one of the blocks, lost somewhere within the centre of the maze. His back resting against the rough concrete surface, he gazed with a phlegmatic eye down the surrounding aisles and at the line of doors facing him. Each afternoon he left his cell in the abandoned camera bunker among the dunes and walked down into the blocks. For the first half an hour he restricted himself to the perimeter aisle, now and then trying one of the doors with the rusty key in his pocket—he had found it among the litter of smashed bottles and cans in the isthmus of sand separating the testing ground from the air-strip—and then inevitably, with a sort of drugged stride, he set off into the centre of the blocks, breaking into a run and darting in and out of the corridors, as if trying to flush some invisible opponent from his hiding place. Soon he would be completely lost. Whatever his efforts to return to the perimeter, he always found himself once more in the centre.

Eventually he would abandon the task, and sit down in the dust, watching the shadows emerge from their crevices at the foot of the blocks. For some reason he invariably arranged to be trapped when the sun was at zenith—on Eniwetok, the thermonuclear noon.

One question in particular intrigued him: "What sort of people would inhabit this minimal concrete city?"

## The Synthetic Landscape

"This island is a state of mind," Osborne, one of the scientists working in the old submarine pens, was later to remark to Traven. The truth of this became obvious to Traven within two or three weeks of his arrival. Despite the sand and the few anaemic palms, the entire landscape of

the island was synthetic, a man-made artifact with all the associations of a vast system of derelict concrete motorways. Since the moratorium on atomic tests, the island had been abandoned by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the wilderness of weapons aisles, towers and blockhouses ruled out any attempt to return it to its natural state. (There were also stronger unconscious motives. Traven reflected: if primitive man felt the need to assimilate events in the external world to his own psyche, 20th century man had reversed this process; by this Cartesian yardstick, the island at least existed, in a sense true of few other places).

But apart from a few scientific workers, no-one yet felt any wish to visit the former testing ground, and the naval patrol boat anchored in the lagoon had been withdrawn three years before Traven's arrival. Its ruined appearance, and the associations of the island with the period of the Cold War—what Traven had christened 'The Pre-Third'—were profoundly depressing, an Auschwitz of the soul whose mausoleums contained the mass-graves of the still undead. With the Russo-American *décennie* this nightmarish chapter of history had been gladly forgotten.

### The Pre-Third

*The actual and potential destructiveness of the atomic bomb plays straight into the hands of the Unconscious. The most cursory study of the dream-life and fantasies of the insane shows that ideas of world-destruction are latent in the unconscious mind . . . . Nagasaki destroyed by the magic of science is the nearest man has yet approached to the realisation of dreams that even during the safe immobility of sleep are accustomed to develop into nightmares of anxiety.*

Glover: 'War, Sadism and Pacifism.'

The Pre-Third: the period was characterised in Traven's mind above all by its moral and psychological inversions, by its sense of the whole of history, and in particular of the immediate future—the two decades, 1945-65—suspended from the quivering volcano's lip of World War III. Even the death of his wife and six-year-old son in a motor accident seemed only part of this immense synthesis of the historical and psychic zero, the frantic highways where each morning of his life they met their deaths on the advance causeways to the global armageddon.

### Third Beach

He had come ashore at midnight, after a hazardous search for an opening in the reef. The small motor-boat he had hired from an Australian pearl-diver at Charlotte Island subsided into the shallows, its hull torn by the sharp coral. Exhausted, Traven walked through the darkness among the dunes, where the dim outlines of bunkers and concrete towers loomed between the palms.

He woke the next morning into bright sunlight and found himself lying half-way down the slope of a wide concrete beach. This ringed an empty reservoir or target basin some two hundred feet in diameter, part of a system of artificial lakes built down the centre of the atoll. Leaves and dust choked the exit grilles, and a pool of warm water two feet deep lay below him, reflecting a distant line of palms.

Traven sat up and took stock of himself. This brief inventory, which merely confirmed his physical identity, was limited to little more than his thin body in its frayed cotton garments. In the context of the surrounding terrain, however, even this collection of tatters seemed to possess a unique vitality. The desolation and emptiness of the island, and the absence of any local fauna, were emphasised by the huge sculptural forms of the target basins let into its surface. Separated from each other by narrow isthmuses, the lakes stretched away along the curve of the atoll.

On either side, sometimes shaded by the few palms that had gained a precarious purchase in the cracked cement, were roadways, camera towers and isolated blockhouses, together forming a continuous concrete cap upon the island, a functional megalithic architecture as grey and minatory (and apparently as ancient, in its projection into and from time future) as any of Assyria and Babylon.

The series of weapons tests had fused the sand in layers, and the pseudo-geological strata condensed the brief epochs, microseconds in duration, of thermonuclear time. Typically the island inverted the geologist's maxim, 'The key to the past lies in the present.' Here, the key to the present lay in the future. This island was a fossil of time future, its bunkers and blockhouses illustrating the principle that the fossil record of life was one of armour and the exoskeleton.

Traven knelt in the warm pool, and splashed his shirt and trousers. The reflection revealed the watery image of gaunt

shoulders and bearded face. He had come to the island with no supplies other than a small bar of chocolate, assuming that in some way the island would provide its own sustenance. Perhaps, too, he had identified the need for food with a forward motion in time, and that with his return to the past, or at most into a zone of non-time, this need would be eliminated. The privations of the previous six months, during his journey across the Pacific, had already reduced his always thin body to that of a migrant beggar, held together by little more than the preoccupied gaze in his eye. Yet this emaciation, by stripping away the superfluities of the flesh, revealed an inner sinewy toughness, an economy and directness of movement.

For several hours Traven wandered about, inspecting one bunker after another for a convenient place to sleep. He crossed the remains of a small landing field, next to a dump where a dozen B-29s lay across one another like reptile birds.

### The Corpses

Once he entered a small street of metal shacks, containing a cafeteria, recreation rooms and shower stalls. A wrecked juke-box lay half-buried in the sand behind the cafeteria, its selection of records still in their rack.

Further along, flung into a small target lake fifty yards from the shacks, were the bodies of what at first he thought were the former inhabitants of this ghost town—a dozen plastic models. Their half-melted faces, contorted into bleary grimaces, gazed up at him from the jumble of legs and torsos.

On either side of him, muffled by the dunes, came the sounds of waves, the great rollers on the seaward side breaking over the reefs, and on to the beaches within the lagoon. However, he avoided the sea, hesitating before any rise or dune that might take him within its sight. Everywhere the camera towers offered him a convenient aerial view of the confused topography of the island, but he ignored their rusting ladders.

He soon realised that however random the blockhouses and towers might seem, their common focus dominated the landscape and gave to it a unique perspective. As Traven noticed when he sat down to rest in the window slit of one of the bunkers, all these observation posts occupied positions on a series of concentric perimeters, moving in tightening

arcs towards the inmost sanctuary. This ultimate circle, below ground zero, remained hidden beyond a line of dunes a quarter of a mile to the west.

### The Terminal Bunker

After sleeping for a few nights in the open, Traven returned to the concrete beach where he had woken on his first morning on the island, and made his home—if the term could be applied to that damp crumbling hovel—in a camera bunker fifty yards from the target lakes. The dark chamber between the thick canted walls, tomb-like though it might seem, gave him a sense of physical reassurance. Outside, the sand drifted against the sides, half-burying the narrow doorway, as if crystallising the immense epoch of time that had elapsed since the bunker's construction. The narrow rectangles of the five camera slits, their shapes and positions determined by the instruments, studded the west wall like cryptic ideograms. Variations on these runic ciphers decorated the walls of the other bunkers, the unique signature of the island. In the mornings, if Traven was awake, he would find the sun divided into its five emblematic beacons.

Most of the time the chamber was filled only by a damp gloomy light. In the control tower at the landing field Traven found a collection of discarded magazines, and used these as a bed. One day, lying in the bunker shortly after the first attack of beri-beri, he pulled out a magazine pressing into his back and found inside a full-page photograph of a six-year-old girl. This blonde-haired child, with her composed expression and self-immersed eyes, filled him with a thousand memories of his son. He pinned the page to the wall and for days gazed at it through his reveries.

For the first few weeks Traven made little attempt to leave the bunker, and postponed any further exploration of the island. The symbolic journey through its inner circles set its own times of arrival and departure. He evolved no routine for himself. All sense of time soon vanished, and his life became completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantum events. Too weak to forage for food, he lived on the old ration packs he found in the wrecked Superfortresses. Without any implement, it took him all day to open the cans. His physical decline continued, but he watched his spindling

legs and arms with indifference. This lack of loyalty depressed him.

By now he had forgotten the existence of the sea and vaguely assumed the atoll to be part of some continuous continental table. A hundred yards to the north and south of the bunker a line of dunes, topped by the palisade of enigmatic palms, screened the lagoon and sea, and the faint muffled drumming of the waves at night had fused with his memories of war and childhood. To the east was the emergency landing strip and the abandoned aircraft. In the afternoon light their shifting rectilinear shadows made them appear to writhe and pivot. In front of the bunker, where he would sit, was the system of target lakes, the shallow basins extending across the atoll.

Above him, the five camera apertures looked out upon this scene like the tutelary symbols of a futuristic myth.

### The Lakes and the Spectres

The lakes had been designed to reveal any radiobiological changes in a selected range of fauna, but the specimens had long since bloomed into grotesque parodies of themselves and been destroyed.

Sometimes in the evenings, when a sepulchral light lay over the concrete bunkers and causeways, and the basins seemed like ornamental lakes in a city of deserted mausoleums, abandoned even by the dead, he would see the spectres of his wife and son standing on the opposite bank. Their solitary figures appeared to have been watching him for hours. Although they never moved, Traven was sure they were beckoning to him. Roused from his reverie, he would stumble forward across the dark sand to the edge of the lake and wade through the water, shouting soundlessly at the two figures as they moved away hand in hand among the lakes and disappeared across the distant causeways.

Shivering with cold, Traven returned to the bunker and laid on the bed of old magazines, waiting for their return. The image of their faces, the pale lantern of his wife's cheeks, floated on that river of memory, lost among the dark archipelagoes of his dreams.

### The Blocks (II)

It was not until he discovered the blocks that Traven realised he would never leave the island.

At this stage, some two months after his arrival, Traven had exhausted his small cache of food, and the symptoms of beri-beri had become more acute. The numbness in his hands and feet, and the gradual loss of strength, continued. Only by an immense effort, and the knowledge that the inner sanctum of the island still lay unexplored, did he manage to leave the palliase of magazines and make his way from the bunker.

As he sat in the drift of sand by the doorway that evening, he noticed a light shining through the palms far into the distance around the atoll. Confusing this with the image of his wife and son, and visualising them waiting for him at some warm hearth among the dunes, Traven set off towards the light. Within a hundred yards he lost his sense of direction. He blundered about for several hours on the edges of the landing strip, and succeeded only in cutting his foot on a broken coca-cola bottle in the sand.

After postponing his search for the night, he set out again in earnest the next morning. As he moved past the towers and blockhouses the heat and silence lay over the island in an unbroken mantle. He had entered a zone devoid of time. Only the narrowing perimeters warned him that he was crossing the inner field of the fire-table.

He climbed the ridge which marked the furthest point in his previous exploration of the island. From the plain beyond the recording towers rose into the air like obelisks. Traven walked down towards them. On their grey walls were the faint outlines of human forms in stylised poses, the flash-shadows of the target community burnt into the cement. Here and there, where the concrete apron had cracked, a line of palms hung in the motionless air. The target lakes were smaller, filled with the broken bodies of plastic dummies. Most of them lay in the inoffensive domestic postures into which they had been placed before the tests.

Beyond the furthest line of dunes, where the camera towers began to turn and face him, were the tops of what seemed to be a herd of square-backed elephants. They were drawn up in precise ranks in a hollow that formed a shallow corral, the sunlight reflected off their backs.

Traven stepped towards them, limping on his cut foot. On either side of him the loosening sand had excavated the dunes, and several of the blockhouses tilted on their sides.

This plain of bunkers stretched for some quarter of a mile, the half-submerged hulks, bombed out onto the surface in some earlier test, like the abandoned worms that had given birth to this herd of megaliths.

### The Blocks (III)

To grasp something of the vast number and oppressive size of the blocks, and their impact upon Traven, one must try to visualise sitting in the shade of one of these concrete monsters, or walking about in the centre of this enormous labyrinth that extended across the central table of the island. There were some two thousand of them, each a perfect cube 15 feet in height, regularly spaced at ten-yard intervals. They were arranged in a series of tracts, each composed of two hundred blocks, inclined to one another and to the direction of the blast. They had weathered only slightly in the years since they were first built, and their gaunt profiles were like the cutting faces of some gigantic die-plate, devised to stamp out rectilinear volumes of air the size of a house. Three of the sides were smooth and unbroken, but the fourth, facing away from the blast, contained a narrow inspection door.

It was this feature of the blocks that Traven found particularly disturbing. Despite the considerable number of doors, by some freak of perspective only those in a single aisle were visible at any point within the maze. As he walked from the perimeter line into the centre of the massif, line upon line of the small metal doors appeared and receded, a world of closed exits concealed behind endless corners.

Approximately twenty of the blocks, those immediately below ground zero, were solid; the walls of the remainder were of varying thickness. From the outside, however, they appeared to be of uniform solidity.

As he entered the first of the long aisles, Traven felt the sense of fatigue that had dogged him begin to lift. His step lightened. With their geometric regularity and finish, the blocks seemed to occupy more than their own volumes of space, imposing on him their calm and order. He walked on into the centre of the maze, eager to shut out the rest of the island. After a few random turns to left and right, he found himself alone, the vistas to the sea, lagoon and island closed.

Here he sat down with his back to one of the blocks, the quest for his wife and son forgotten. The sense of dissocia-

tion set off by the derelict landscape of the island began to recede.

One development he did not expect. With dusk, and the need to leave the blocks and find food, he realised that he had lost himself. However, he retraced his steps, struck out left or right at an oblique course, oriented himself around the setting sun and pressed on resolutely north or south, and found himself back again at his starting point. Only when darkness came did he manage to make his escape.

Abandoning his former home near the aircraft dump, Traven collected together what canned food he could find in the waist turret and cockpit lockers of the Superfortresses. He pulled them across the atoll on a crude sledge. Fifty yards from the perimeter of the blocks he took over a tilting bunker, and pinned the fading photograph of the blonde-haired child to the wall beside the door. The page was falling to pieces, like the fragmenting image of himself. Since the discovery of the blocks he had become a creature of reflexes, kindled from levels above those of his existing nervous system (if the autonomic system was dominated by the past, Traven sensed, the cerebro-spinal reached towards the future). Each evening when he awoke, he would eat without appetite and then wander away among the blocks. Sometimes he took a canteen of water with him and remained there for two or three days on end.

### The Submarine Pens

This precarious existence continued for the following weeks. As he walked out to the blocks one evening, he again saw his wife and son, standing among the dunes below a camera tower, their faces watching him expressionlessly. He realised that they had followed him across the island from their former haunt among the dried-up lakes. At about this time he once again saw the distant light beckoning, and decided to continue his exploration of the island.

Half a mile further along the atoll, he found a group of four submarine pens, built over an inlet, now drained, which wound through the dunes from the sea. The pens still contained several feet of water, filled with small luminescent fish and algae. The warning light winked at intervals from the apex of a metal scaffold. The remains of a substantial camp, only recently vacated, stood on the pier outside. Greedily,

Traven heaped his sledge with the provisions inside one of the metal sbacks.

With this change of diet, the beri-beri receded, and during the next days he returned often to the camp. Evidently it was the site of a biological expedition. In the field office he came across a series of large charts of mutated chromosomes. He rolled them up and took them back to his bunker. The abstract patterns were meaningless, but during his recovery he amused himself by devising suitable titles for them (later, passing the aircraft dump on one of his forays, he found the half-buried juke-box, and tore the list of records from the selection panel. Thus embroidered, the charts took on many layers of cryptic associations).

#### Traven : In Parenthesis

Elements in a quantal world:  
The terminal beach  
The terminal bunker  
the blocks

\* \* \*

The landscape is coded.  
Entry points into the future = Levels in a spinal land-  
scape = zones of significant time.

\* \* \*

August 5. Found the man Traven. A strange derelict figure, hiding in a bunker in the deserted interior of the island. He is suffering from severe exposure and malnutrition, but is unaware of this or, for that matter, of any other events in the world around him . . .

He maintains that he came to the island to carry out some scientific project—unstated—but I suspect that he understands his real motives and the unique role of the island . . . . . In some way its landscape seems to be involved with certain unconscious notions of time, and in particular with those that may be a repressed premonition of our own deaths. The attractions and dangers of such an architecture, as the past has shown, need no stressing . . . . .

August 6. He has the eyes of the possessed. I would guess that he is neither the first, nor the last, to visit the island.  
— from Dr. C. Osborne, 'Eniwetok Diary' . . .

#### Traven lost within the Blocks

With the exhaustion of his supplies, Traven remained within the perimeter of the blocks almost continuously, conserving what strength remained to him to walk slowly down their empty corridors. The infection in his right foot made it difficult for him to replenish his supplies from the stores left by the biologists, and as his strength ebbed he found less incentive to make his way out of the blocks. The system of megaliths now provided a complete substitute for those functions of his mind which gave to it its sense of the sustained rational order of time and space. Without them, Traven felt his awareness of reality shrinking to little more than the few square inches of sand beneath his feet.

On one of his last ventures into the maze, he spent all night and much of the following morning in a futile attempt to escape. Dragging himself from one rectangle of shadow to another, his leg as heavy as a club and apparently inflamed to the knee, he realised that he must soon find an equivalent for the blocks or he would end his life within them, trapped inside this self-constructed mausoleum as surely as the retinue of Pharaoh.

He was sitting helplessly somewhere in the centre of the system, the faceless lines of tomb-booths receding from him, when the sky was slowly divided by the drone of a light aircraft. This passed overhead, and then, five minutes later, returned. Seizing his opportunity, Traven struggled to his feet and made his exit from the blocks, his head raised to follow the faintly glistening beacon of the exhaust trail. . .

As he lay in the bunker he dimly heard the aircraft return and carry out an inspection of the site.

#### A Belated Rescue

"Who are you? A small sandy-haired man peered down at him, an expression of sharp disapproval on his face. He packed a syringe away in his valise. "Do you realise you're on your last legs?"

"Traven . . . I've had some sort of accident. I'm glad you flew over."

"I'm sure you are. But why didn't you use our radio-telephone? Anyway, we'll call the Navy and have you picked up."

"No . . ." Traven sat up on one elbow and felt weakly in his hip pocket. "I have a pass somewhere. I'm carrying out

research."

"Into what?" The question assumed a complete understanding of Traven's motives. He lay in the shade under the lee of the bunker, and drank weakly from a canteen as Dr. Osborne dressed his foot. "You've also been stealing our stores."

Traven shook his head. Fifty yards away the blue and white Cessna stood on the concrete apron like a brilliant dragonfly. "I didn't realise you were coming back."

"You must be in a trance."

The young woman sitting at the controls of the aircraft climbed out and walked over to them. She glanced at the grey bunkers and towers, and seemed unaware or uninterested in the decrepit figure of Traven. Osborne spoke to her and after a downward glance at Traven she went back to the aircraft. As she turned Traven rose involuntarily, recognising the child in the photograph he had pinned to the wall of the bunker. Then he remembered that the magazine could not have been more than four or five years old. Nonetheless, the conviction—indeed, almost a last desperate hope—that the child and the young woman were the same person remained.

The engine of the aircraft started. As Traven watched, it turned on to one of the roadways and took off into the wind.

Later that afternoon she drove over by jeep to the blocks and unloaded a small camp-bed for Traven and a canvas awning. During the intervening hours Traven had slept. He woke refreshed when Osborne returned from his scrutiny of the surrounding dunes.

"What are you doing here?" the young woman asked as she secured the guy-ropes to the roof of the bunker.

Traven watched her move about. "I'm . . . searching for my wife and son."

"They're on this island?" Surprised, but taking the reply at face value, she looked around her.

"In a manner of speaking."

After inspecting the bunker, Osborne joined them. "The child in the photograph—is she your daughter?"

Traven hesitated. "Yes—or rather, she's adopted me."

Unable to make any sense of his replies, but accepting his assurances that he would leave the island, Osborne and the young woman drove back to their camp. Each day Osborne returned to change the dressing, driven by the young woman.

who seemed now to understand the role cast for her by Traven and his private island mythology. Osborne, when he learned of Traven's previous career as a military pilot, appeared to suspect that he might be a latter-day martyr left high and dry by the moratorium on thermonuclear tests.

"A guilt complex isn't an indiscriminate supply of moral sanctions. I think you may be over-stretching yours." When he mentioned the name Eatherly, Traven shook his head.

Undeterred, Osborne pressed: "Are you sure you're not making similar use of the image of Eniwetok—waiting for your Pentecostal wind?"

"Believe me, Doctor, no," Traven replied firmly. "For me the Hydrogen Bomb was a symbol of absolute freedom. Unlike Eatherly, I feel it's given me the right—the obligation, even—to do anything I choose."

"That seems strange logic," Osborne commented. "Aren't we at least responsible for our physical selves, if for nothing else?"

"Not now, I think," Traven replied. "In effect, aren't we men raised from the dead?"

Often, however, he thought of Eatherly.

\* \* \*

Eatherly: the prototypal Pre-Third Man—dating the Pre-Third from August 6, 1945—carrying a full load of cosmic guilt.

\* \* \*

Shortly after Traven was strong enough to walk he had to be rescued from the blocks for a second time. Osborne became less conciliatory.

"Our work is almost complete," he said warningly. "You'll die here, Traven. What *are* you looking for among those blocks?"

To himself, Traven murmured: The tomb of the unknown civilian, *Homo hydrogenensis*, Eniwetok Man. "Doctor," he said thoughtfully, "your laboratory is at the wrong end of this island."

Tartly, Osborne replied: "I'm aware of that, Traven. There are rarer fish swimming in your head than in any submarine pen."

On the day before they left, the young woman drove Traven over to the lakes where he had first arrived. As a final present, an ironic gesture unexpected from the elderly biologist, she had brought from Osborne the correct list of

legends for the chromosome charts. They stopped by the derelict juke-box and she pasted them on to the selection panel.

They wandered among the supine wrecks of the Super-fortresses. Traven lost sight of her, and for the next ten minutes searched in and out of the dunes. He found her standing in a small amphitheatre formed by the sloping mirrors of a solar energy device built by one of the visiting expeditions. She smiled to Traven as he stepped through the scaffolding, waiting for him motionlessly with her bland eyes. But the dozen fragmented images of themselves reflected in the broken panes—in some she was sans head, in others a dozen multiples of her arms circled about her like the serpent limbs of a Hindu goddess—filled Traven with a sense of exhaustion. Turning swiftly, he walked back to the jeep.

As they drove away he recovered himself. He described his glimpses of his wife and son. "Their faces are always calm," he said. "My son's particularly, though he was never really like that. I remember him always laughing. The only time his face wore a grave expression was when he was being born—then he seemed millions of years old."

The young woman nodded. "I hope you find them." As an afterthought she added: "Dr. Osborne is going to tell the Navy that you're here. Hide somewhere."

Traven thanked her.

From the centre of the blocks he waved to her the following day when she flew away for the last time.

### The Naval Party

When the search party came for him, Traven hid in the only logical place. Fortunately the search was perfunctory, and was called off after a few hours. The sailors had brought a supply of beer with them and the search soon turned into a drunken excursion.

On the walls of the recording towers Traven later found balloons of obscene dialogue chalked into the mouths of the shadow figures, giving their postures the priapic gaiety of the dancers in cave drawings.

The climax of the party was the ignition of a store of gasoline in an underground tank near the air-strip. As he listened, first to the megaphones shouting his name, the echoes receding among the dunes like the forelorn calls of

dying birds, then to the boom of the explosion and the laughter as the landing craft left, Traven felt a premonition that these were the last sounds he would hear.

He had hidden in one of the target basins, lying among the broken bodies of the plastic models. In the hot sunlight the dozens of deformed faces gaped at him sightlessly from the tangle of limbs, their blurred smiles like those of the laughing dead.

Their faces filled his mind as he climbed over the bodies and returned to his bunker. As he walked towards the blocks he saw the figures of his wife and son standing in his path. They were less than ten yards from him, their white faces watching him with a look of almost overwhelming expectancy. Never had Traven seen them so close to the blocks. His wife's pale features seemed illuminated from within, her lips parted as if in greeting, one hand raised to take his own. His son's grave face, with its curiously fixed expression, regarded him with the same enigmatic smile of the child in the photograph.

"Judith! David!" Startled, Traven ran towards them. Then, in a sudden movement of the light, their clothes turned into shrouds, and he saw the wounds that disfigured their necks and chests. Appalled, he cried out. As they vanished he fled into the safety of the blocks.

### The Catechism of Goodbye

This time he found himself, as Osborne had predicted, unable to leave the blocks.

Somewhere in the centre of the maze, he sat with his back against one of the concrete flanks, his eyes raised to the sun. Around him the lines of cubes formed the horizons of his world. At times they would appear to advance towards him, looming over him like cliffs, the intervals between them narrowing so that they were little more than an arm's breadth apart, a labyrinth of corridors running between them. Then they would recede from him, separating from each other like points in an expanding universe, until the nearest line formed an intermittent palisade along the horizon.

Time had become quantal. For hours it would be noon, the shadows contained within the blocks, the heat reverberating off the concrete floor. Abruptly, he would find that it was early afternoon, or mid-morning, everywhere the pointing fingers of the shadows. Only the declining gradient of his



own exhaustion gave him any indication of the days that passed. Sometimes he would make a futile attempt to escape from the labyrinth, and wander among the corridors, finally taking up his seat against one of the blocks, uncertain whether this was a new one or that which he had left.

"Goodbye, *Eniwetok*," he murmured.

Somewhere there was a flicker of light, as if one of the blocks, like a counter on an abacus, had been plucked away.

Goodbye, *Los Alamos*. Again, a block seemed to vanish. The corridors around him remained intact, but somewhere in his mind had appeared a small neutral interval.

Goodbye, *Hiroshima*

Goodbye, *Alamagordo*

Goodbye, *Moscow*

Goodbye, *London*

Goodbye, *Paris*

Goodbye, *New York*

Shuttles flickered, a ripple of lost integers.

Goodbye, —

He stopped, realising the futility of this megathlon farewell. Such a leave-taking required him to inscribe his signature upon every one of the particles in the universe.

### Total Noon: *Eniwetok*

The blocks now occupied positions on an endlessly revolving circus wheel. Around and around they moved, carrying him upwards to heights from which he could see the whole island and the sea, and then down again through the disc of the concrete floor. From here he looked up at the under-surface of this concrete cap, an inverted landscape of rectilinear hollows, the dome-shaped mounds of the lake-system, the thousands of empty cubic pits of the blocks.

### "Goodbye, Traven"

Near the end, he found to his disappointment that this ultimate rejection gained him nothing.

In an interval of lucidity, he looked down at his emaciated arms and legs, decorated with a lace-work of ulcers, propped loosely in front of him, the brittle wrists and hands like parcels of bones. To his right was a trail of disturbed dust, the wavering trail of slack heels.

To his left lay a long corridor between the blocks, joining an oblique series a hundred yards away. Among these, where

a narrow interval revealed the open space beyond, was a crescent-shaped shadow, poised in the air above the ground.

During the next half an hour it moved slowly, turning as the sun swung, the profile of a dune.

### The Crevice

Seizing on this cipher, which hung before him like a symbol on a shield, Traven pushed himself through the dust. He climbed precariously to his feet, and shielded his eyes from all sight of the blocks. He moved forward a few paces at a time, following the scimitar of shadow as it came nearer.

Ten minutes later he emerged from the western perimeter of the blocks, like some tottering mendicant leaving behind a silent desert city. The dune whose shadow had guided him lay fifty yards from him. Beyond it, bearing its shadow like a screen, was a ridge of limestone that ran among the hillocks of a wasteland beyond this point of the atoll. The remains of an old bulldozer, bales of barbed wire and fifty-gallon drums lay half-buried in the sand. Traven approached the dune, reluctant now to leave this anonymous swell of sand. He shuffled around its edges, and sat down in the mouth of a shallow crevice below the brow of the ridge.

After dusting his clothes, he gazed out patiently at the great circle of blocks.

Ten minutes later he noticed that someone was watching him.

### The Marooned Japanese

This corpse, whose eyes stared up at Traven, lay to his left at the bottom of the crevice. That of a man of middle age and strong build, it rested on its back with its head on a pillow of stone, hands outstretched at its sides, as if surveying the window of the sky. The fabric of the clothes had rotted to a bleached grey vestment, but in the absence of any small animal predators on the island the skin and musculature of the corpse had been preserved. Here and there, at the angle of knee or wrist, a bony point glistened through the leathery integument of the yellow skin, but the facial mask was still intact, and revealed a male Japanese of the professional classes. Looking down at the strong nose, high forehead and broad mouth and chin, Traven guessed that the Japanese had been a doctor or lawyer.

Puzzled as to how the corpse had found itself here. Traven slid a few feet down the slope. There were no radiation burns on the skin, which indicated that the Japanese had been there for five years or less. Nor did he appear to be wearing a uniform, so had not been some unfortunate member of a military or scientific party—besides, the slope of the crevice was little more than a few degrees from the horizontal.

To the left of the corpse, within reach of his hand, was a frayed leather case, the remains of a map wallet. To the right was the bleached husk of a haversack, open to reveal a canteen of water and a small mess-tin.

Greedily, the reflex of starvation making him for the moment ignore this discovery that the Japanese had deliberately chosen to die in the crevice. Traven slid down the slope until his feet touched the splitting soles of the corpse's shoes. He reached out and seized the canteen, then prised off the lid. A cupful of flat water swilled weakly around the rusting bottom. Traven gulped down the water, the dissolved metal salts cloaking his tongue with a bitter film. The mess-tin was empty but for a tacky coating of condensed syrup. Traven scraped at this with the lid. He chewed at the tarry flakes, letting them dissolve in his mouth with a dark intoxicating sweetness. After a few moments he felt light-headed, and sat back beside the corpse in a delirium of exhaustion.

Its sightless eyes regarded him with unmoving compassion.

### The Fly

*(A small fly, which Traven presumes has followed him into the fissure, now buzzes about the corpse's face. Guiltily, Traven leans forward to kill it, then reflects that perhaps this minuscule sentry has been the corpse's faithful companion, in return fed on the rich liqueurs and distillations of its pores. Carefully, to avoid injuring the fly, he encourages it to alight on his wrist).*

DR. YASUDA: Thank you, Traven. *(The voice is rough, as if unused to conversation).* In my position, you understand . . .

TRAVEN: Of course, Doctor. I'm sorry I tried to kill it—these ingrained habits, you know, they're not easy to shrug off. Your sister's children in Osaka in '44, the exigencies of war, I hate to plead them, most known motives are so despicable, one searches the unknown in the hope that . . .

YASUDA: Please, Traven, do not be embarrassed. The fly is lucky to retain its identity for so long. The son you mourn, not to mention my own two nieces and nephew, did they not die for us each day? Every parent in the world grieves for the lost sons and daughters of their earlier childhoods.

TRAVEN: You're very tolerant, Doctor. I wouldn't dare—

YASUDA: Not at all, Traven. I make no apologies for you. After all, each of us is little more than the residue of the infinite unrealised possibilities of our lives. But your son, and my nephew, are now fixed in our minds forever, their identities as certain as the stars.

TRAVEN: *(not entirely convinced)* That may be so, Doctor, but it leads to a dangerous conclusion in the case of this island. For instance, the blocks.

YASUDA: They are precisely to what I refer, Traven. Here among the blocks you at last find an image of yourself free of the doubtful attractions of time and space. This . . . island is an ontological Garden of Eden, why seek to expel yourself into a world of quantal flux?

TRAVEN: Excuse me. *(The fly has flown back to the corpse's face and sits in one of the dried-up orbits, giving the good doctor an expression of quizzical beadiness. Reaching forward, Traven entices it on to his palm. He examines it carefully).* Well, yes, these bunkers of course are ontological objects, but whether this is the ontological fly seems doubtful. It's true that on this island it's the only fly, which is the next best thing . . .

YASUDA: You can't accept the plurality of the universe—ask yourself why. Why should this obsess you? It seems to me, Traven, that you are hunting for the white leviathan, zero. The beach is a dangerous zone. Avoid it. Have a proper humility, pursue a philosophy of acceptance.

TRAVEN: Then may I ask why you came here, Doctor?

YASUDA: To feed this fly. 'What greater love — ?'

TRAVEN: *(still puzzling)* It doesn't really solve my problem. The blocks, you see . . .

YASUDA: Very well, if you must have it that way . . .

TRAVEN: But, Doctor —

YASUDA: *(peremptorily)* Kill that fly.

TRAVEN: That's not an end, or a beginning.

*(Hopelessly, he kills the fly. Exhausted, he falls asleep beside the corpse).*

### The Terminal Beach

Searching for a piece of rope in the refuse dump behind the dunes, Traven found a bale of rusty wire. After unwinding this he secured a harness around the corpse's chest and dragged it from the crevice. The lid of a wooden crate served as a sledge. Traven fastened the corpse to it in a sitting position, and set off along the perimeter of the blocks. Around him the island remained silent. The lines of palms hung in the sunlight, only his own motion varying the shifting ciphers of their criss-crossing trunks. The square turrets of the camera towers jutted from the dunes like forgotten obelisks.

An hour later, when Traven reached the awning by his bunker, he untied the wire cord he had fastened around his waist. He took the chair left for him by Dr. Osborne and carried it to a point midway between the bunker and the blocks. Then he tied the body of the Japanese to the chair, arranging the hands so that they rested on the wooden arms. This gave the moribund figure a posture of calm repose.

This done to his satisfaction, Traven returned to the bunker and squatted under the awning.

As the next days passed into weeks, the dignified figure of the Japanese sat in his chair fifty yards from him, guarding Traven from the blocks. Their magic still filled Traven's reveries, but he now had sufficient strength to rouse himself at intervals and forage for food. In the hot sunlight the skin of the Japanese became more and more bleached, and sometimes Traven would wake at night and find the white figure sitting there, arms resting at its sides, in the shadows that crossed the concrete floor. At these moments he would see his wife and son watching him from the dunes. As time passed they came closer, and he would sometimes find them only a few yards behind him.

Patiently Traven waited for them to speak to him, thinking of the great blocks whose entrance was guarded by the seated figure of the dead archangel, as the waves broke on the distant shore and the burning bombers fell through his dreams.

j. g. ballard.