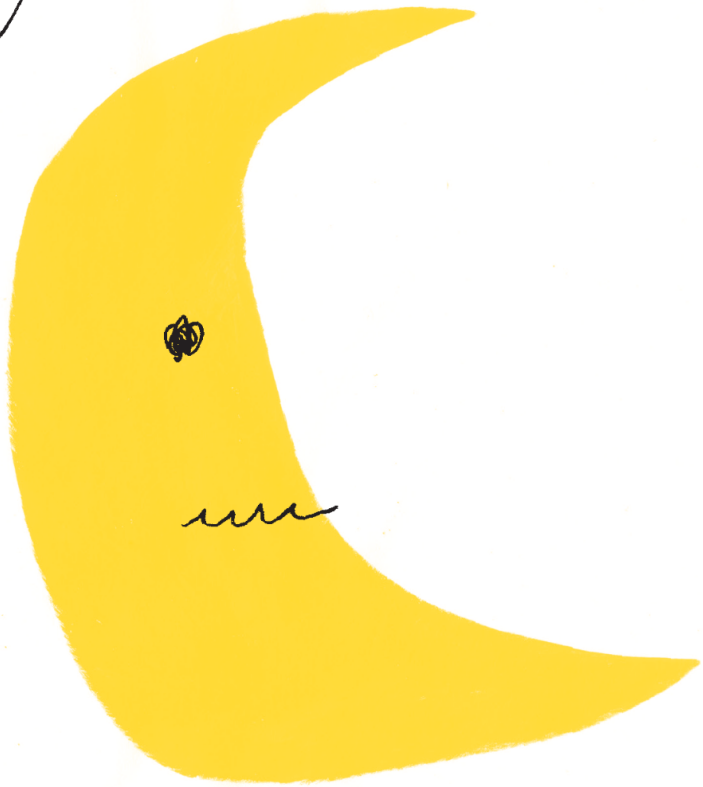
Calvino



the Complete Cosmicomics

ITALO CALVINO

The Complete Cosmicomics

Translated by Martin McLaughlin, Tim Parks, and William Weaver

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Contents

Introduction

Italo Calvino (1923–85) is best known in the English-speaking world for two kinds of fiction: his historical fantasy works of the 1950s, collected in the trilogy *Our Ancestors* (1960), and the semiotic and metafictional experiments of the 1970s, particularly the highly successful *Invisible Cities* (1972) and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979). He chose these genres as radical alternatives to the realist narratives that he had embarked on as a young writer and which he regarded as the norm for Western fiction. But the 'cosmicomic' stories that Calvino began to write in 1963–4, although less well known in the Anglo-American world, were if anything even more original than any of the other kinds of narrative he produced. For a start, he invented this new genre himself: each 'cosmicomic' tale begins with a statement of a (genuine or apocryphal) scientific hypothesis, usually regarding the cosmos, and this is then followed by a first-person narrative, recounted by the unpronounceable but irrepressible protagonist, Qfwfq. Qfwfq has been described as a 'cosmic know-all', since he was present at all the key moments in the history of the universe from the Big Bang onwards, and his comic colloquialism undercuts the potential seriousness of the scientific themes. The neologism invented by Calvino encapsulated two ways in which traditional realism could be expanded: by a cosmic content and by a comic mode of

writing. The cosmicomic stories are also significant because this new vein of writing initiated the second half of Calvino's career: in the twenty years from 1943 to 1963, he had alternated between the realism (initially neorealism) of his first fictions – including his debut novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests* (1947) – and the historical fantasy of *Our Ancestors*; but his first 'cosmicomic' volume, *Cosmicomics* (1965), inaugurated the second two decades of more experimental writing.

Despite the fact that these stories are less well known than others, Calvino clearly considered this genre a significant and fertile space for literary experiment, as he continued to use the form for the next two decades, publishing a total of thirty-four tales in all. The first volume to be published – *Cosmicomiche* (1965; 'Cosmicomics'), which later won the Asti d'Appello Prize – contained twelve fictions; the second collection – *Ti con zero* (1967; 'T zero', translated as *Time and the Hunter*) – contained eleven new stories, and both books were translated into English by William Weaver in the late 1960s. A little-known third collection – *La memoria del mondo e altre storie cosmicomiche* (1968; 'World Memory and Other Cosmicomic Stories'), a volume not available commercially – offered twenty fictions in all, twelve from the previous two collections and eight new pieces (seven of these new items are translated here for the first time into English; the other new 1968 tale, the title story, was translated by Tim Parks as 'World Memory' in the 1995 collection *Numbers in the Dark and Other Stories*). By 1968, then, Calvino had written thirty-one cosmicomic stories. Just before his untimely death, aged sixty-one, he put together an almost complete collection, entitled *Cosmicomiche vecchie e nuove* (1984; 'Cosmicomics Old and New') and containing thirty-one tales; but for this volume he deselected two stories ('World Memory' and 'Shells and Time') and in their place inserted two new pieces specially

written for the 1984 edition: 'Nothing and Not Much' and 'Implosion'. In 1980 he published a variant of one of the 1968 tales, 'The Stone Sky', giving it an alternative title, 'The Other Eurydice' (although in fact the story must have been written about ten years earlier since it had appeared first in English translation in 1971). This rewrite and the last two tales written in 1984 brought the total of cosmicomic tales to thirty-four (all three of these later stories can be found translated by Tim Parks in *Numbers in the Dark*). A posthumous Italian volume containing the complete thirty-four stories appeared in an authoritative Mondadori edition as *Tutte le cosmicomiche* (1997; 'The Complete Cosmicomics'), edited by the Italian expert on these tales, Claudio Milanini. This English volume corresponds to Milanini's comprehensive edition: it contains the two volumes translated by William Weaver, the four stories translated by Tim Parks, plus seven newly translated tales, offering the English-speaking reader the chance to savour Calvino's entire output in a genre he cultivated for two decades.

Genesis

Why did Calvino write the cosmicomic stories? The main reason was that he felt that realist fiction was exhausted and that the writer had to turn elsewhere for inspiration. For Calvino in the early 1960s this place was science, initially books on the origins of the universe which created images in his head, including the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and Raymond Queneau's *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*. His ambition in inventing this new genre was that literature should keep pace with the enormous progress being made in scientific research. The fact that he wrote the vast majority of them in the five years

between 1963 and 1968 and that these were the years when the 'space race' between the USA and the Soviet Union was at its peak explains the prominence of space and planetary science in the tales. Another probable source of inspiration was the volume of science fiction tales that Primo Levi was putting together in the early 1960s: Calvino, Levi's editor at the publishing house Einaudi at the time, had commented enthusiastically on these stories, which would be published in 1966 as *Storie naturali* ('Natural Histories', translated into English in 1990 in *The Sixth Day and Other Stories*). However, although some critics have talked of the cosmicomic tales in terms of science fiction, Calvino was keen to point out that his stories were very different, indeed the opposite of the traditional form of the genre: whereas the latter usually dealt with a dystopian future, with human protagonists pitted against other forces and creatures, his cosmicomic tales were set mostly in the remote past, at the dawn of the universe, with a protagonist, Qfwfq, who was clearly not always human. This was a typical example of Calvinian reversal of the reader's expectations of a genre.

Calvino was a notoriously eclectic writer, however, and one should not look for just one source of inspiration for any of his tales. Indeed his own semi-serious list of literary and visual influences on the cosmicomic stories is lengthy but probably not exhaustive: '*Cosmicomics* are indebted particularly to Leopardi, the Popeye comics, Samuel Beckett, Giordano Bruno, Lewis Carroll, the paintings of Matta and in some cases the works of Landolfi, Immanuel Kant, Borges, and Grandville's engravings' (Calvino's blurb from the publication of the first four cosmicomic tales, in *Il Caffè*, November 1964). One other source for these fictions, according to Calvino, was the work of the philosopher Giorgio de Santillana (1902–74), whose lecture 'Ancient and Modern

Ideas of Fate', given in Turin in 1963, struck Calvino mainly for its idea that the great cosmological myths were both the predecessors and the equivalent of modern science. Calvino wanted ancient cosmogonic myths to combine with the latest theories, the concrete images of the one counterbalancing the abstraction of the other.

The subject matter of the stories can be divided into four main strands:

1. The Moon, which appears in the first story in each collection ('The Distance of the Moon', 'The Soft Moon') but also elsewhere ('The Mushroom Moon', 'The Daughters of the Moon').
2. The Sun, stars and galaxies ('At Daybreak', 'A Sign in Space', 'All at One Point', 'Games Without End', 'The Form of Space', 'The Light-Years', 'As Long as the Sun Lasts', 'Solar Storm', 'Nothing and Not Much', 'Implosion').
3. The Earth ('Without Colours', 'Crystals', 'The Meteorites', 'The Stone Sky', 'The Other Eurydice').
4. Evolution and time ('The Aquatic Uncle', 'How Much Shall We Bet?', 'The Dinosaurs', 'The Spiral', 'The Origin of the Birds', 'Blood, Sea', the 'Priscilla' trilogy, 't zero', 'The Chase', 'The Night Driver', 'The Count of Monte Cristo', 'Shells and Time', 'World Memory').

Cosmicomics

The first volume begins with a tale of landing on the Moon, 'The Distance of the Moon', partly reflecting the major scientific obsession of the time, but also paying homage to the fact that early Italian literature is full of descriptions of the Earth's satellite, from Dante to Ariosto, Galileo and

Leopardi, all dear to the author's heart. Calvino himself was fascinated by the Moon and had offered a highly evocative description of its effects in 'Moon and Gnac', from another collection, *Marcovaldo*, published in 1963. This literary dimension, which cross-fertilizes the scientific content, is also present in a story such as 'Without Colours', which tells how the Earth's atmosphere allowed colours to be perceived, but is also a telluric version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth: Qfwfq plays Orpheus, while his beloved Ayl refuses to follow him up to the Earth's now colourful surface, preferring instead the grey darkness inside the Earth. Calvino was so haunted by the myth that he subsequently rewrote this tale twice. First he reversed it in 'The Stone Sky' (1968) and then he produced a variant of this story, 'The Other Eurydice' (1971). In 'The Stone Sky' Qfwfq plays not Orpheus but Pluto, the god of the underworld, who is desolate when he loses his beloved Rdix (her name both suggests 'radix' or 'root' and 'Eurydice') to the Greek minstrel. In this tale the author defamiliarizes our notions of 'extraterrestrial' and 'superficial', for Qfwfq/Pluto uses both adjectives to describe us miserable creatures who merely inhabit the Earth's surface not its core. In 'The Other Eurydice' the main difference is Pluto's even more embittered attack on what men have done to the Earth, and a bravura central passage describing the plutonic cities that the god of the underworld planned to build in the Earth's core, each one a 'living-body-city-machine' (p. 396), a world of silence and Earth music, which would accomplish in a second what it has taken centuries of sweat for man to achieve. The reader can enjoy comparing Calvino's variations on this theme, and can observe in that evocation of the cities in the centre of the Earth the germs of the major work that was to follow the cosmicomic stories, *Invisible Cities* (1972).

Literary themes surface more briefly elsewhere in *Cosmicomics*, such as the allusion to Balzac's *Les Illusions perdues* in 'How Much Shall We Bet?', the character Lieutenant Fenimore, whom Qfwfq tries to shoot at the end of 'The Form of Space' (reflecting the subject matter of James Fenimore Cooper's most famous work, *The Last of the Mohicans*), and the appropriate mention of Herodotus, the 'father of history', in 'The Spiral', which has as its central theme the emergence of time and history. Apart from these literary tales, the first collection also contains some stories in which Calvino reflects on literature itself. One of the most significant is 'A Sign in Space', where, apart from the comedy of Qfwfq leaving his naïve first sign in the universe in order to recognize it the next time he passes by, there is also the serious reflection on how signs are still the system we use to communicate, especially the written word: it is no accident that the date of composition of the story (1963–4) coincides with the beginnings of the new science of semiotics. But the tale also refers to something more personal: that first sign, which Qfwfq leaves in space and which causes him such embarrassment when he comes back millions of years later to find it utterly simplistic and out of date, reflects also Calvino's attitude to his own first novel, *The Path to the Spiders' Nests*. Written in 1947, the novel was actually in the forefront of the author's mind at this time since in the same months he was writing 'A Sign in Space' he was also composing his lengthy 1964 preface to *The Path*, in which his own embarrassment and remorse regarding this earlier work are apparent. Similar metaliterary allusions are to be found in 'The Dinosaurs', where the outmoded creatures are equated with the old writers who have failed to move ahead with the times and are still writing in the old, realist way.

Along with the more serious literary reflections, there is

also plenty of comedy in the stories: perhaps the most 'comic' cosmic tale here is 'The Aquatic Uncle', in which Qfwfq's old uncle, N'ba N'ga, refuses to leave his pond to follow the other fish in developing into land mammals, insisting that this evolutionary thing will never catch on. Similar comic deflations of potentially portentous themes are in evidence elsewhere; for instance, in 'All at One Point', where the Big Bang and the creation of space are attributed to the wonderfully named Mrs Ph(i)Nk_o, who is seized by a generous urge to make tagliatelle for everyone. The basic technique throughout is to let Qfwfq's colloquial tone as a narrator offset the great cosmic events he describes to his family as if he were an elderly relative reminiscing about the good old days. The names of all the characters are meant to suggest scientific formulae but with a comic twist.

Another constant ingredient mingling with science in the stories is desire – indeed one of the desired females, Ursula H'x in 'The Form of Space', is partly a cosmicomic version of Ursula Andress, star of the 1965 film *She* – and many of the tales, starting with the first one, are love stories. In a number of these stories the female embodies the elusive, yearned-for opposite of the male protagonist and the structure of the tale is often a love triangle with two males competing for a female other ('The Distance of the Moon', 'Without Colours', 'The Aquatic Uncle', 'The Form of Space'). Calvino was well aware of the major role played by desire in the evolution of Western fiction, and combined this basic narrative structure with the new 'scientific' content in most of the tales in *Cosmicomics*. Even in the last tale, 'The Spiral', Qfwfq is the first mollusc to construct a spiral shell and is driven to do so by his desire to mate with a female mollusc. The collection is thus framed by desire as the key motive force of the universe, and is not simply a univocal work about science and evolution.

This last story is not placed where it is by accident: it is the most ambitious tale of this first collection both in terms of its tripartite form and in its content, for Qfwfq notes that by forming the shell this tiny creature also invents our very notion of time. The series of twelve stories thus moves from the Moon to molluscs, and this evolutionary theme provides a fitting end to the collection (the last words are 'without shores, without boundaries', p. 151) and points towards the thematics of the second collection of cosmicomic stories.

Time and the Hunter

Calvino's second collection won the prestigious Viareggio Prize in 1968, but in the context of the social upheaval of the times the author refused to accept the award. The eleven pieces in *Time and the Hunter* form a symmetrical volume, consisting as it does of four more stories about Qfwfq, then a trilogy of tales about a single cell, entitled 'Priscilla', and a concluding section of four tales of deductive logic. 'The Soft Moon' is the first of the four Qfwfq tales. Although the title reminds us of the title of the opening Moon story in the first collection, the story itself is quite different – about a past that is also a present and a future, with its setting a futuristic New York (Calvino's favourite city would also form the backdrop of 'Crystals' and 'The Daughters of the Moon'). Here too science is mingled with literature, in that the notion of the Moon falling to Earth owes much to a famous poetic fragment by Giacomo Leopardi, in which the Moon lands on a field and turns black like spent coals, a motif also taken up in 'The Daughters of the Moon', from the third collection, *World Memory and Other Cosmicomic Stories*. But other media are evident in a story such as 'The Origin of the Birds', in which Qfwfq recounts his meeting with the Queen of the

Birds in verbal summaries of a series of cartoon strips. Calvino's visual imagination had always been stimulated by the economy and immediacy of cartoons and some of his early stories were indebted to this medium (as indeed was 'The Mushroom Moon', from *World Memory*, clearly inspired by the Popeye cartoons). At one point when Qfwfq jumps on to the planet of the birds, he sees fishes with spiders' legs, worms with feathers, all the potential but discarded forms that the animal kingdom could have developed, but did not: here the visual stimulus comes not from cartoons but from Hieronymus Bosch's nightmarish paintings. This interest in an alternative visual medium for narrative would eventually lead to Calvino's highly experimental *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1973), where the Tarot cards are actually produced in the margin alongside the narrative text. The last story in this first section, 'Blood, Sea', is about cells rather than about more complex beings, and thus effects a transition to the tales of the second section, which are all about cellular organisms. In 'Blood, Sea' Qfwfq is a cell inside a passenger of a car on an Italian motorway: the final description of the car crash that ends the tale is given in a virtuoso sentence, which constitutes a verbal homage to yet another visual medium, the contemporary Jean-Luc Godard film *Weekend* (1967).

The second section, entitled 'Priscilla', consists of three tales, 'Mitosis', 'Meiosis' and 'Death', the first term referring to the division of cells within asexual reproduction, the second to cell division within sexual reproduction. 'Death' amounts almost to a history of the world in five pages, beginning with the first drops of life on Earth and ending with the links that extend from DNA to man's technological achievements in machines and computers. All three tales of this second section are in a sense one tale, since they have one overall title, 'Priscilla', and instead of having three individual

epigraphs, the whole section begins with four pages of quotations from embryologists, computer experts, philosophers and Galileo. This structural ambivalence between the one story and the three reflects the thematics of the tales themselves, which deal with the development from monocellular to pluricellular beings.

The four stories that constitute the last section in *Time and the Hunter* are not really cosmicomic tales, but rather fictions inspired by mathematics and deductive logic. The narrator of the first of these, the title story 't zero', is called simply Q, who thus represents a transition from the earlier Qfwfq tales to the last three stories in which the narrator is not named at all. The formula t_0 expresses the point of time which marks the beginning of Q's speculations about whether his arrow, *A*, will hit the lion, *L*, leaping on him before t_0 becomes t_1, t_2, t_3, etc. The idea derives from one of Zeno's famous paradoxes, that an arrow in flight is actually stationary, since if space is infinitely divisible, then the arrow is always above just one piece of ground. While 't zero' was largely concerned with time, the second tale in the series, 'The Chase', concentrates more on space, and if that first deductive tale alluded to the elementary nature of all narrative, a man facing a challenge, this one is written in the vein of a sophisticated thriller, as the first-person narrator tries to escape from his would-be killer by driving into the gridlocked city centre. The penultimate story, 'The Night Driver', is one of Calvino's most revolutionary narratives, eliminating as it does characters, landscape (the action takes place by night) and plot. Again mathematics informs this story: the first-person protagonist, though not named, is presumably called X, since he tells us he is driving from A to B, where he hopes to meet his lover, Y, but is afraid that his rival, Z, will get to Y before him. Here Calvino tries to reach a degree zero of writing

where everything anthropomorphic has been erased from the tale apart from the love triangle. The story is innovative in its attempt to integrate the clarity of mathematics with the ambiguity of literature (one of the ideals of the Parisian group OULIPO, Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, or Workshop of Potential Literature, of which Calvino was a member), and in its allusions to information theory and semiotics. The concluding tale, 'The Count of Monte Cristo', owes its position to its embracing of the many other themes in the rest of the collection as well as to its greater length and complexity. It is in effect a brief rewriting of Alexandre Dumas's famous novel, but centring on the contrast between the Abbé Faria's empirical attempts to escape from the Château d'If and Edmond Dantès's preference for theory and deductive logic: Dantès concludes that the only way to escape the condition of prisoner is to understand mentally how the perfect prison is structured and then compare it with the one where he is currently detained in order to find the loophole. The thematics of the prison-labyrinth are indebted to similar ideas in Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges, but the notion of the loophole reflected Calvino's own notion that all the great totalizing systems of our time (those of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud) still contain gaps. The final sentence suggests but does not guarantee an exit from the labyrinth, but it was a conclusion that Calvino found optimistic and regarded as his gnoseological testament.

World Memory and Other Cosmicomic Stories

The third volume of cosmicomic tales was never translated in a single volume in English. The twenty pieces (twelve from the previous two collections and eight new ones) are divided into five sections of four stories each, the title of each

section articulating the ambitious, global scope of the work: 'Four Stories on the Moon' ('The Distance of the Moon', 'The Mushroom Moon', 'The Soft Moon', 'The Daughters of the Moon'); 'Four Stories on the Earth' ('Without Colours', 'The Meteorites', 'Crystals', 'The Stone Sky'); 'Four Stories on the Sun, the Stars, the Galaxies' ('At Daybreak', 'As Long as the Sun Lasts', 'Solar Storm', 'Games without End'); 'Four Stories on Evolution' ('The Aquatic Uncle', 'The Dinosaurs', 'The Origin of the Birds', 'Shells and Time'); 'Four Stories on Time and Space' ('World Memory', 'The Chase', 'The Night Driver', 'The Count of Monte Cristo').

Calvino claimed that this was the cosmicomic volume that he had wanted to write from the start, since it was a more 'organic' work than the previous two, the titles of the five sections suggesting comprehensive coverage. The first two stories, 'The Mushroom Moon' and 'The Daughters of the Moon', are linked in inspiration to previous tales such as 'The Soft Moon', while, as we have seen, 'The Stone Sky' is a rewrite of 'Without Colours' from the first collection. 'The Meteorites' contains one of the first mentions of the theme of order, disorder and rubbish, an obsession that looks forward to *Invisible Cities*, while 'As Long as the Sun Lasts' is the most humorous tale in this series. But perhaps the most interesting story here is 'Solar Storm', a fiction that mixes scientific theory with allusions to some of Joseph Conrad's most famous novels. Conrad had been a favourite author of Calvino ever since his university thesis on the Anglo-Polish writer in 1946.

In the story Qfwfq is the captain of the steamer *Halley*, returning towards Liverpool, when it is caught in a magnetic storm occasioned by Rah, daughter of the Sun and the captain's aerial lover, who wraps herself round the foremast, invisible to the rest of the crew. Although the ship's name

obviously alludes to Halley's comet, it also comes from the protagonist of Conrad's 1902 story 'The End of the Tether', Captain Whalley, whose wife used to live on board with him, and who makes one last voyage on a Liverpool-built ship, trying to conceal his increasing blindness from the crew. In addition to this text, there are also clear echoes of two other Conrad tales. The opening movement from calm sea to electric storm owes something to a similar shift in the crucial third chapter of *Lord Jim* (1900), a novel Calvino knew well since he translated the first ten chapters of it into Italian. The other Conrad text lurking beneath this tale is *Heart of Darkness* (1899): the description of Rah gripping the foremast, with her hair flying in the wind, and the folds of her drapery blending with the sky, is a clear echo of Conrad's description of the African woman who appears at the climax of the novel, a passage quoted in its entirety and commented upon more than once by Calvino in his thesis. Apart from these textual echoes, the main themes of the story are also Conradian: ships, compasses, radios and maps all epitomize rationality and control, while Qfwfq's statement that he never departed from the line of conduct he had set himself is not just the articulation of a quintessentially Conradian ethic, but the phrase 'with Rah on my back' (p. 358) is in Italian (*'con Rah addosso'*) a pun on the Anglo-Polish author's name. The reader can also enjoy in the second half of the tale counting the allusions to other classics of English literature (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen) in cameo form. 'Solar Storm', one of the last tales to be written in the five years between 1963 and 1968, is not just another cosmicomic fiction but a minimalist rewriting of fundamental Conrad narratives and a mini-pastiche of nineteenth-century English classics. Once again, it is clear that the cosmicomic stories are inspired as much by literature as by science.

One of the last two tales, 'Shells and Time', is an extension of 'The Spiral', but taking the discourse about time further: shells may have in a sense created time, but they too are superseded by the sand which eventually settles on them, since sand-time deposits layers of other shells on them. The final lesson is that man's history is like the mollusc's: archaeological findings show that what has been lost to man is the hand of the potter who made the vase, the pronunciation of the scribe who wrote the manuscript, the flesh of the mollusc that secreted the shell. The other story, 'World Memory', stands apart from all the other cosmicomic tales, notably in its lack of scientific epigraph, the absence of Qfwfq from the story, and in its cosmic but not comic tone. Set in an unspecified future, the tale is narrated by the outgoing director of an institute which is cataloguing for posterity information about every human, plant and animal in the world; but for the information to be manageable it has to be reduced to a meaningful minimum. The phrase in the centre of the tale used to define humanity at the moment of its extinction shows the much broader perspective that these tales have: 'What will the human race be at the moment of its extinction? A certain quantity of information about itself and the world . . .' (p. 368).

Cosmicomics Old and New

In 1984 Calvino collected almost all of his cosmicomic stories in an anthology which, like *World Memory and Other Cosmicomic Stories*, was never translated into English as a separate volume. The work is divided into four parts: first, fourteen tales on evolution, the Earth, the Moon and the Sun, entitled 'The Memory of Worlds', and consisting of most of the stories from the first four sections of *World Memory*; then

eight pieces on the universe, in a section called 'Chasing Galaxies', containing six stories from *Cosmicomics* plus the two new tales written for this collection, 'Nothing and Not Much' and 'Implosion'; a third part entitled 'Biocomics', consisting of five tales ('The Spiral', 'Blood, Sea' and the 'Priscilla' trilogy); and a fourth section, 'Deductive Stories', comprising the final four narratives from *Time and the Hunter*. The two new tales, 'Nothing and Not Much' and 'Implosion', naturally show some differences from the stories of the 1960s. The first one opens with a cutting from the *Washington Post* declaring that the universe came into existence in an infinitesimal fraction of a second. Qfwfq of course remembers both the nothing that preceded the Big Bang and all that emerged from it (the universe, time, space, memory); he describes the 'sense of invincibility, of power, of pride' accompanying this 'vertiginous expansion' (pp. 377–8), but in the end he comes round to the point of view of his female antagonist, Nugkta, and sees the universe as flawed and fundamentally unstable, a system in collapse, therefore gravely inferior to the perfection of nothing. That description of the universe as a bungled construction, crumbling away on all sides, and the final sentence on the slaughter that takes place daily on our planet reflects Calvino's own more pessimistic outlook on the world at the start of the 1980s. 'Implosion' was one of the last fictions that Calvino wrote, though it was developed from an earlier piece on black holes that he had written but excluded from the volume *Palomar* (1983). Exploiting his favourite poetics of contrast, Qfwfq initiates his musings on black holes by parodying Hamlet's great soliloquy: 'To explode or to implode . . . that is the question' (p. 384). The conclusion of the whole tale – 'Any way time runs it leads to disaster . . .' (p. 388) – also reflects Calvino's dystopian vision in what were to be his last years.

However, although readers of *Cosmicomics Old and New* will notice the gradual darkening of Calvino's outlook from the 1960s to the early 1980s, they will also appreciate the way Calvino expanded the frontiers of fiction by making his own literary discourse embrace science (physics, embryology, DNA, computing theory), mathematics, philosophy and the visual arts (paintings, cartoons, cinema, architecture). The main thrust of his poetics was constantly to raise the target which literature sets itself: he challenges literature to describe the indescribable, from macrocosm to microcosm, from the Big Bang to the division of cells.

The cosmicomic tales are in one sense a product of their time, the 1960s, but in their cosmic content and ambition they try to move beyond such temporal limitations: it is significant that starting with *Cosmicomics* Calvino breaks his habit of placing the date of composition at the end of his books, as though to confirm the irrelevance of contemporary history to a narrative that occupies itself with larger and more significant swathes of time. Nor was it an accident that some critics compared these stories with the abstract, geometric narrations of *nouveau-roman* writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008). But although these fictions may be less well known than others, they represent a crucial phase in Calvino's own development as a writer, as we see in them the seeds of later works such as *Invisible Cities* and *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*. Drawing from different media, his works have also had considerable influence on other art forms. If *Invisible Cities* inspired architects and visual artists, the cosmicomic fictions have been taken up by musical artists. Two important musical works have so far emerged: Giovanni Renzo's operatic version of 'The Distance of the Moon' (1996), inspired by the Moon music in the first cosmicomic

story, and Jonathan Dove's of 'The Other Eurydice' (2001), which provides the Earth music mentioned in that tale. These operatic spin-offs are a tribute to the creative force of these stories; indeed the latter work is highly appropriate in that one of the very first operas, Monteverdi's L'*Orefo* (1607), was based on the myth of Orpheus. The continuing validity of the cosmicomic project for the author himself is also demonstrated by the fact that during the course of his last summer, in 1985, Calvino made a little note of the topics of three book projects he wanted to give priority to in the future: 'The Senses', 'Objects' and 'Cosmicomics'. There is still, in fact, in Calvino's archive a drawer full of newspaper cuttings concerning scientific discoveries. As I write this introduction, a news item today talks about the fact that thanks to recent technological developments we can now hear the sounds the planets make as they revolve. Had Calvino still been alive today we could almost imagine his next story beginning: 'Sounds! – *exclaimed Qfwfq* – Of course we heard the sounds of the planets! Deafening they were, but not without a certain variety . . .'

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Martin McLaughlin
Oxford, November 2008

A Note on the Translations

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ly translated tales from *La memoria del mondo e altre sto*
nicomiche (1968; 'World Memory and Other Cosmicom
ries'). The two volumes translated by William Weav
e originally published in America; for this edition, m
changes have been made to standardize presentatio
ether with minor emendations to a sentence in certa
ies ('At Daybreak', 'All at One Point', 'How Much Sh
Bet?', 'The Dinosaurs', 'The Form of Space', 'The Lig
rs', 'The Soft Moon', 'Blood, Sea', 'Mitosis', 'Meiosi
e Night Driver' and 'The Count of Monte Cristo') to r
t the original Italian.

Cosmicomics

The Distance of the Moon

At one time, according to Sir George H. Darwin, the Moon was very close to the Earth. Then the tides gradually pushed her far away: the tides that the Moon herself causes in the Earth's waters, where the Earth slowly loses energy.

How well I know! – *old Qfwfq cried* – the rest of you can't remember, but I can. We had her on top of us all the time, that enormous Moon: when she was full – nights as bright as day, but with a butter-coloured light – it looked as if she were going to crush us; when she was new, she rolled around the sky like a black umbrella blown by the wind; and when she was waxing, she came forward with her horns so low she seemed about to stick into the peak of a promontory and get caught there. But the whole business of the Moon's phases worked in a different way then: because the distances from the Sun were different, and the orbits, and the angle of something or other, I forget what; as for eclipses, with Earth and Moon stuck together the way they were, why, we had eclipses every minute: naturally, those two big monsters managed to put each other in the shade constantly, first one, then the other.

Orbit? Oh, elliptical, of course: for a while it would huddle against us and then it would take flight for a while. The tides, when the Moon swung closer, rose so high nobody could

hold them back. There were nights when the Moon was full and very, very low, and the tide was so high that the Moon missed a ducking in the sea by a hair's-breadth; well, let's say a few yards anyway. Climb up on the Moon? Of course we did. All you had to do was row out to it in a boat and, when you were underneath, prop a ladder against her and scramble up.

The spot where the Moon was lowest, as she went by, was off the Zinc Cliffs. We used to go out with those little rowing boats they had in those days, round and flat, made of cork. They held quite a few of us: me, Captain Vhd Vhd, his wife, my deaf cousin, and sometimes little Xlthlx – she was twelve or so at that time. On those nights the water was very calm, so silvery it looked like mercury, and the fish in it, violet-coloured, unable to resist the Moon's attraction, rose to the surface, all of them, and so did the octopuses and the saffron medusas. There was always a flight of tiny creatures – little crabs, squid, and even some weeds, light and filmy, and coral plants – that broke from the sea and ended up on the Moon, hanging down from that lime-white ceiling, or else they stayed in midair, a phosphorescent swarm we had to drive off, waving banana leaves at them.

This is how we did the job: in the boat we had a ladder: one of us held it, another climbed to the top, and a third, at the oars, rowed until we were right under the Moon; that's why there had to be so many of us (I only mentioned the main ones). The man at the top of the ladder, as the boat approached the Moon, would become scared and start shouting: 'Stop! Stop! I'm going to bang my head!' That was the impression you had, seeing her on top of you, immense, and all rough with sharp spikes and jagged, saw-tooth edges. It may be different now, but then the Moon, or rather the bottom, the underbelly of the Moon, the part that passed

closest to the Earth and almost scraped it, was covered with a crust of sharp scales. It had come to resemble the belly of a fish, and the smell too, as I recall, if not downright fishy, was faintly similar, like smoked salmon.

In reality, from the top of the ladder, standing erect on the last rung, you could just touch the Moon if you held your arms up. We had taken the measurements carefully (we didn't yet suspect that she was moving away from us); the only thing you had to be very careful about was where you put your hands. I always chose a scale that seemed fast (we climbed up in groups of five or six at a time), then I would cling first with one hand, then with both, and immediately I would feel ladder and boat drifting away from below me, and the motion of the Moon would tear me from the Earth's attraction. Yes, the Moon was so strong that she pulled you up; you realized this the moment you passed from one to the other: you had to swing up abruptly, with a kind of somersault, grabbing the scales, throwing your legs over your head, until your feet were on the Moon's surface. Seen from the Earth, you looked as if you were hanging there with your head down, but for you, it was the normal position, and the only odd thing was that when you raised your eyes you saw the sea above you, glistening, with the boat and the others upside down, hanging like a bunch of grapes from the vine.

My cousin, the Deaf One, showed a special talent for making those leaps. His clumsy hands, as soon as they touched the lunar surface (he was always the first to jump up from the ladder), suddenly became deft and sensitive. They found immediately the spot where he could hoist himself up; in fact just the pressure of his palms seemed enough to make him stick to the satellite's crust. Once I even thought I saw the Moon come towards him, as he held out his hands.

He was just as dextrous in coming back down to Earth, an operation still more difficult. For us, it consisted in jumping, as high as we could, our arms upraised (seen from the Moon, that is, because seen from the Earth it looked more like a dive, or like swimming downwards, arms at our sides), like jumping up from the Earth in other words, only now we were without the ladder, because there was nothing to prop it against on the Moon. But instead of jumping with his arms out, my cousin bent towards the Moon's surface, his head down as if for a somersault, then made a leap, pushing with his hands. From the boat we watched him, erect in the air as if he were supporting the Moon's enormous ball and were tossing it, striking it with his palms; then, when his legs came within reach, we managed to grab his ankles and pull him down on board.

Now, you will ask me what in the world we went up on the Moon for; I'll explain it to you. We went to collect the milk, with a big spoon and a bucket. Moon-milk was very thick, like a kind of cream cheese. It formed in the crevices between one scale and the next, through the fermentation of various bodies and substances of terrestrial origin which had flown up from the prairies and forests and lakes, as the Moon sailed over them. It was composed chiefly of vegetal juices, tadpoles, bitumen, lentils, honey, starch crystals, sturgeon eggs, moulds, pollens, gelatinous matter, worms, resins, pepper, mineral salts, combustion residue. You had only to dip the spoon under the scales that covered the Moon's scabby terrain, and you brought it out filled with that precious muck. Not in the pure state, obviously; there was a lot of refuse. In the fermentation (which took place as the Moon passed over the expanses of hot air above the deserts) not all the bodies melted; some remained stuck in it: fingernails and cartilage, bolts, sea horses, nuts and peduncles, shards of

crockery, fish-hooks, at times even a comb. So this paste, after it was collected, had to be refined, filtered. But that wasn't the difficulty: the hard part was transporting it down to the Earth. This is how we did it: we hurled each spoonful into the air with both hands, using the spoon as a catapult. The cheese flew, and if we had thrown it hard enough, it stuck to the ceiling, I mean the surface of the sea. Once there, it floated, and it was easy enough to pull it into the boat. In this operation, too, my deaf cousin displayed a special gift; he had strength and a good aim; with a single, sharp throw, he could send the cheese straight into a bucket we held up to him from the boat. As for me, I occasionally misfired; the contents of the spoon would fail to overcome the Moon's attraction and they would fall back into my eye.

I still haven't told you everything about the things my cousin was good at. That job of extracting lunar milk from the Moon's scales was child's play to him: instead of the spoon, at times he had only to thrust his bare hand under the scales, or even one finger. He didn't proceed in any orderly way, but went to isolated places, jumping from one to the other, as if he were playing tricks on the Moon, surprising her, or perhaps tickling her. And wherever he put his hand, the milk spurted out as if from a nanny goat's teats. So the rest of us had only to follow him and collect with our spoons the substance that he was pressing out, first here, then there, but always as if by chance, since the Deaf One's movements seemed to have no clear, practical sense. There were places, for example, that he touched merely for the fun of touching them: gaps between two scales, naked and tender folds of lunar flesh. At times my cousin pressed not only his fingers but – in a carefully gauged leap – his big toe (he climbed on to the Moon barefoot) and this seemed to be the height of amusement for him, if we could judge by the

chirping sounds that came from his throat as he went on leaping.

The soil of the Moon was not uniformly scaly, but revealed irregular bare patches of pale, slippery clay. These soft areas inspired the Deaf One to turn somersaults or to fly almost like a bird, as if he wanted to impress his whole body into the Moon's pulp. As he ventured further in this way, we lost sight of him at one point. On the Moon there were vast areas we had never had any reason or curiosity to explore, and that was where my cousin vanished; I had suspected that all those somersaults and nudges he indulged in before our eyes were only a preparation, a prelude to something secret meant to take place in the hidden zones.

We fell into a special mood on those nights off the Zinc Cliffs: gay, but with a touch of suspense, as if inside our skulls, instead of the brain, we felt a fish, floating, attracted by the Moon. And so we navigated, playing and singing. The Captain's wife played the harp; she had very long arms, silvery as eels on those nights, and armpits as dark and mysterious as sea urchins; and the sound of the harp was sweet and piercing, so sweet and piercing it was almost unbearable, and we were forced to let out long cries, not so much to accompany the music as to protect our hearing from it.

Transparent medusas rose to the sea's surface, throbbed there a moment, then flew off, swaying towards the Moon. Little Xlthlx amused herself by catching them in midair, though it wasn't easy. Once, as she stretched her little arms out to catch one, she jumped up slightly and was also set free. Thin as she was, she was an ounce or two short of the weight necessary for the Earth's gravity to overcome the Moon's attraction and bring her back: so she flew up among the medusas, suspended over the sea. She took fright, cried, then laughed and started playing, catching shellfish and

minnows as they flew, sticking some into her mouth and chewing them. We rowed hard, to keep up with the child: the Moon ran off in her ellipse, dragging that swarm of marine fauna through the sky, and a train of long, entwined seaweeds, and Xlthlx hanging there in the midst. Her two wispy braids seemed to be flying on their own, outstretched towards the Moon; but all the while she kept wriggling and kicking at the air, as if she wanted to fight that influence, and her socks – she had lost her shoes in the fight – slipped off her feet and swayed, attracted by the Earth's force. On the ladder, we tried to grab them.

The idea of eating the little animals in the air had been a good one; the more weight Xlthlx gained, the more she sank towards the Earth; in fact, since among those hovering bodies hers was the largest, molluscs and seaweeds and plankton began to gravitate about her, and soon the child was covered with siliceous little shells, chitinous carapaces and fibres of sea plants. And the further she vanished into that tangle, the more she was freed of the Moon's influence, until she grazed the surface of the water and sank into the sea.

We rowed quickly, to pull her out and save her: her body had remained magnetized, and we had to work hard to scrape off all the things encrusted on her. Tender corals were wound about her head, and every time we ran the comb through her hair there was a shower of crayfish and sardines; her eyes were sealed shut by limpets clinging to the lids with their suckers; squids' tentacles were coiled around her arms and her neck; and her little dress now seemed woven only of weeds and sponges. We got the worst of it off her, but for weeks afterwards she went on pulling out fins and shells, and her skin, dotted with little diatoms, remained affected for ever, looking – to someone who didn't observe her carefully – as if it were faintly dusted with freckles.

This should give you an idea of how the influences of Earth and Moon, practically equal, fought over the space between them. I'll tell you something else: a body that descended to the Earth from the satellite was still charged for a while with lunar force and rejected the attraction of our world. Even I, big and heavy as I was: every time I had been up there, I took a while to get used to the Earth's up and its down, and the others would have to grab my arms and hold me, clinging in a bunch in the swaying boat while I still had my head hanging and my legs stretching up towards the sky.

'Hold on! Hold on to us!' they shouted at me, and in all that groping, sometimes I ended up by seizing one of Mrs Vhd Vhd's breasts, which were round and firm and the contact was good and secure and had an attraction as strong as the Moon's or even stronger, especially if I managed, as I plunged down, to put my other arm around her hips, and with this I passed back into our world and fell with a thud into the bottom of the boat, where Captain Vhd Vhd brought me around, throwing a bucket of water in my face.

This is how the story of my love for the Captain's wife began, and my suffering. Because it didn't take me long to realize whom the lady kept looking at insistently: when my cousin's hands clasped the satellite, I watched Mrs Vhd Vhd, and in her eyes I could read the thoughts that the deaf man's familiarity with the Moon were arousing in her; and when he disappeared in his mysterious lunar explorations, I saw her become restless, as if on pins and needles, and then it was all clear to me, how Mrs Vhd Vhd was becoming jealous of the Moon and I was jealous of my cousin. Her eyes were made of diamonds, Mrs Vhd Vhd's; they flared when she looked at the Moon, almost challengingly, as if she were saying: 'You shan't have him!' And I felt like an outsider.

The one who least understood all of this was my deaf

cousin. When we helped him down, pulling him – as I explained to you – by his legs, Mrs Vhd Vhd lost all her self-control, doing everything she could to take his weight against her own body, folding her long silvery arms around him; I felt a pang in my heart (the times I clung to her, her body was soft and kind, but not thrust forward, the way it was with my cousin), while he was indifferent, still lost in his lunar bliss.

I looked at the Captain, wondering if he also noticed his wife's behaviour; but there was never a trace of any expression on that face of his, eaten by brine, marked with tarry wrinkles. Since the Deaf One was always the last to break away from the Moon, his return was the signal for the boats to move off. Then, with an unusually polite gesture, Vhd Vhd picked up the harp from the bottom of the boat and handed it to his wife. She was obliged to take it and play a few notes. Nothing could separate her more from the Deaf One than the sound of the harp. I took to singing in a low voice that sad song that goes: 'Every shiny fish is floating, floating; and every dark fish is at the bottom, at the bottom of the sea . . .' and all the others, except my cousin, echoed my words.

Every month, once the satellite had moved on, the Deaf One returned to his solitary detachment from the things of the world; only the approach of the full moon aroused him again. That time I had arranged things so it wasn't my turn to go up, I could stay in the boat with the Captain's wife. But then, as soon as my cousin had climbed the ladder, Mrs Vhd Vhd said: 'This time I want to go up there, too!'

This had never happened before; the Captain's wife had never gone up on the Moon. But Vhd Vhd made no objection, in fact he almost pushed her up the ladder bodily, exclaiming: 'Go ahead then!' and we all started helping her, and I held

her from behind, felt her round and soft on my arms, and to hold her up I began to press my face and the palms of my hands against her, and when I felt her rising into the Moon's sphere I was heartsick at that lost contact, so I started to rush after her, saying: 'I'm going to go up for a while, too, to help out!'

I was held back as if in a vice. 'You stay here; you have work to do later,' the Captain commanded, without raising his voice.

At that moment each one's intentions were already clear. And yet I couldn't figure things out; even now I'm not sure I've interpreted it all correctly. Certainly the Captain's wife had for a long time been cherishing the desire to go off privately with my cousin up there (or at least to prevent him from going off alone with the Moon), but probably she had a still more ambitious plan, one that would have to be carried out in agreement with the Deaf One: she wanted the two of them to hide up there together and stay on the Moon for a month. But perhaps my cousin, deaf as he was, hadn't understood anything of what she had tried to explain to him, or perhaps he hadn't even realized that he was the object of the lady's desires. And the Captain? He wanted nothing better than to be rid of his wife; in fact, as soon as she was confined up there, we saw him give free rein to his inclinations and plunge into vice, and then we understood why he had done nothing to hold her back. But had he known from the beginning that the Moon's orbit was widening?

None of us could have suspected it. The Deaf One perhaps, but only he: in the shadowy way he knew things, he may have had a presentiment that he would be forced to bid the Moon farewell that night. This is why he hid in his secret places and reappeared only when it was time to come back down on board. It was no use for the Captain's wife to

try to follow him: we saw her cross the scaly zone various times, length and breadth, then suddenly she stopped, looking at us in the boat, as if about to ask us whether we had seen him.

Surely there was something strange about that night. The sea's surface, instead of being taut as it was during the full moon, or even arched a bit towards the sky, now seemed limp, sagging, as if the lunar magnet no longer exercised its full power. And the light, too, wasn't the same as the light of other full moons; the night's shadows seemed somehow to have thickened. Our friends up there must have realized what was happening; in fact, they looked up at us with frightened eyes. And from their mouths and ours, at the same moment, came a cry: 'The Moon's going away!'

The cry hadn't died out when my cousin appeared on the Moon, running. He didn't seem frightened, or even amazed: he placed his hands on the terrain, flinging himself into his usual somersault, but this time after he had hurled himself into the air he remained suspended, as little Xlthlx had. He hovered a moment between Moon and Earth, upside down, then laboriously moving his arms, like someone swimming against a current, he headed with unusual slowness towards our planet.

From the Moon the other sailors hastened to follow his example. Nobody gave a thought to getting the Moon-milk that had been collected into the boats, nor did the Captain scold them for this. They had already waited too long, the distance was difficult to cross by now; when they tried to imitate my cousin's leap or his swimming, they remained there groping, suspended in midair. 'Cling together! Idiots! Cling together!' the Captain yelled. At this command, the sailors tried to form a group, a mass, to push all together until they reached the zone of the Earth's attraction: all of a

sudden a cascade of bodies plunged into the sea with a loud splash.

The boats were now rowing to pick them up. 'Wait! The Captain's wife is missing!' I shouted. The Captain's wife had also tried to jump, but she was still floating only a few yards from the Moon, slowly moving her long, silvery arms in the air. I climbed up the ladder, and in a vain attempt to give her something to grasp I held the harp out towards her. 'I can't reach her! We have to go after her!' and I started to jump up, brandishing the harp. Above me the enormous lunar disc no longer seemed the same as before: it had become much smaller, it kept contracting, as if my gaze were driving it away, and the emptied sky gaped like an abyss where, at the bottom, the stars had begun multiplying, and the night poured a river of emptiness over me, drowned me in dizziness and alarm.

'I'm afraid,' I thought. 'I'm too afraid to jump. I'm a coward!' and at that moment I jumped. I swam furiously through the sky, and held the harp out to her, and instead of coming towards me she rolled over and over, showing me first her impassive face and then her backside.

'Hold tight to me!' I shouted, and I was already overtaking her, entwining my limbs with hers. 'If we cling together we can go down!' and I was concentrating all my strength on uniting myself more closely with her, and I concentrated my sensations as I enjoyed the fullness of that embrace. I was so absorbed I didn't realize at first that I was, indeed, tearing her from her weightless condition, but was making her fall back on the Moon. Didn't I realize it? Or had that been my intention from the very beginning? Before I could think properly, a cry was already bursting from my throat. 'I'll be the one to stay with you for a month!' Or rather, 'On you!' I shouted, in my excitement: 'On you for a month!' and at that moment our embrace was broken by our fall to the Moon's

surface, where we rolled away from each other among those cold scales.

I raised my eyes as I did every time I touched the Moon's crust, sure that I would see above me the native sea like an endless ceiling, and I saw it, yes, I saw it this time, too, but much higher, and much more narrow, bound by its borders of coasts and cliffs and promontories, and how small the boats seemed, and how unfamiliar my friends' faces and how weak their cries! A sound reached me from nearby: Mrs Vhd Vhd had discovered her harp and was caressing it, sketching out a chord as sad as weeping.

A long month began. The Moon turned slowly around the Earth. On the suspended globe we no longer saw our familiar shore, but the passage of oceans as deep as abysses and deserts of glowing lapilli, and continents of ice, and forests writhing with reptiles, and the rocky walls of mountain chains gashed by swift rivers, and swampy cities, and stone graveyards, and empires of clay and mud. The distance spread a uniform colour over everything: the alien perspectives made every image alien; herds of elephants and swarms of locusts ran over the plains, so evenly vast and dense and thickly grown that there was no difference among them.

I should have been happy: as I had dreamed, I was alone with her, that intimacy with the Moon I had so often envied my cousin and with Mrs Vhd Vhd was now my exclusive prerogative, a month of days and lunar nights stretched uninterrupted before us, the crust of the satellite nourished us with its milk, whose tart flavour was familiar to us, we raised our eyes up, up to the world where we had been born, finally traversed in all its various expanse, explored landscapes no Earth-being had ever seen, or else we contemplated the stars beyond the Moon, big as pieces of fruit, made of light, ripened on the curved branches of the sky, and everything

exceeded my most luminous hopes, and yet, and yet, it was, instead, exile.

I thought only of the Earth. It was the Earth that caused each of us to be that someone he was rather than someone else; up there, wrested from the Earth, it was as if I were no longer that I, nor she that She, for me. I was eager to return to the Earth, and I trembled at the fear of having lost it. The fulfilment of my dream of love had lasted only that instant when we had been united, spinning between Earth and Moon; torn from its earthly soil, my love now knew only the heart-rending nostalgia for what it lacked: a where, a surrounding, a before, an after.

This is what I was feeling. But she? As I asked myself, I was torn by my fears. Because if she also thought only of the Earth, this could be a good sign, a sign that she had finally come to understand me, but it could also mean that everything had been useless, that her longings were directed still and only towards my deaf cousin. Instead, she felt nothing. She never raised her eyes to the old planet, she went off, pale, among those wastelands, mumbling dirges and stroking her harp, as if completely identified with her temporary (as I thought) lunar state. Did this mean I had won out over my rival? No; I had lost: a hopeless defeat. Because she had finally realized that my cousin loved only the Moon, and the only thing she wanted now was to become the Moon, to be assimilated into the object of that extrahuman love.

When the Moon had completed its circling of the planet, there we were again over the Zinc Cliffs. I recognized them with dismay: not even in my darkest previsions had I thought the distance would have made them so tiny. In that mud puddle of the sea, my friends had set forth again, without the now useless ladders; but from the boats rose a kind of forest of long poles; everybody was brandishing one, with a

harpoon or a grappling hook at the end, perhaps in the hope of scraping off a last bit of Moon-milk or of lending some kind of help to us wretches up there. But it was soon clear that no pole was long enough to reach the Moon; and they dropped back, ridiculously short, humbled, floating on the sea; and in that confusion some of the boats were thrown off balance and overturned. But just then, from another vessel a longer pole, which till then they had dragged along on the water's surface, began to rise: it must have been made of bamboo, of many, many bamboo poles stuck one into the other, and to raise it they had to go slowly because – thin as it was – if they let it sway too much it might break. Therefore, they had to use it with great strength and skill, so that the wholly vertical weight wouldn't rock the boat.

Suddenly it was clear that the tip of that pole would touch the Moon, and we saw it graze, then press against the scaly terrain, rest there a moment, give a kind of little push, or rather a strong push that made it bounce off again, then come back and strike that same spot as if on the rebound, then move away once more. And I recognized, we both – the Captain's wife and I – recognized my cousin: it couldn't have been anyone else, he was playing his last game with the Moon, one of his tricks, with the Moon on the tip of his pole as if he were juggling with her. And we realized that his virtuosity had no purpose, aimed at no practical result, indeed you would have said he was driving the Moon away, that he was helping her departure, that he wanted to show her to her more distant orbit. And this, too, was just like him: he was unable to conceive desires that went against the Moon's nature, the Moon's course and destiny, and if the Moon now tended to go away from him, then he would take delight in this separation just as, till now, he had delighted in the Moon's nearness.

What could Mrs Vhd Vhd do, in the face of this? It was only at this moment that she proved her passion for the deaf man hadn't been a frivolous whim but an irrevocable vow. If what my cousin now loved was the distant Moon, then she too would remain distant, on the Moon. I sensed this, seeing that she didn't take a step towards the bamboo pole, but simply turned her harp towards the Earth, high in the sky, and plucked the strings. I say I saw her, but to tell the truth I only caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye, because the minute the pole had touched the lunar crust, I had sprung and grasped it, and now, fast as a snake, I was climbing up the bamboo knots, pushing myself along with jerks of my arms and knees, light in the rarefied space, driven by a natural power that ordered me to return to the Earth, oblivious of the motive that had brought me here, or perhaps more aware of it than ever and of its unfortunate outcome; and already my climb up the swaying pole had reached the point where I no longer had to make any effort but could just allow myself to slide, head first, attracted by the Earth, until in my haste the pole broke into a thousand pieces and I fell into the sea, among the boats.

My return was sweet, my home refound, but my thoughts were filled only with grief at having lost her, and my eyes gazed at the Moon, for ever beyond my reach, as I sought her. And I saw her. She was there where I had left her, lying on a beach directly over our heads, and she said nothing. She was the colour of the Moon; she held the harp at her side and moved one hand now and then in slow arpeggios. I could distinguish the shape of her bosom, her arms, her thighs, just as I remember them now, just as now, when the Moon has become that flat, remote circle, I still look for her as soon as the first sliver appears in the sky, and the more it waxes, the more clearly I imagine I can see her, her or something of her,

but only her, in a hundred, a thousand different vistas, she who makes the Moon the Moon and, whenever she is full, sets the dogs to howling all night long, and me with them.

At Daybreak

The planets of the solar system, G. P. Kuiper explains, began to solidify in the darkness, through the condensation of a fluid, shapeless nebula. All was cold and dark. Later the Sun began to become more concentrated until it was reduced almost to its present dimensions, and in this process the temperature rose and rose, to thousands of degrees, and the Sun started emitting radiations in space.

Pitch-dark it was – *old Qfwfq confirmed* – I was only a child, I can barely remember it. We were there, as usual, with Father and Mother, Granny Bb'b, some uncles and aunts who were visiting, Mr Hnw, the one who later became a horse, and us little ones. I think I've told you before the way we lived on the nebulae: it was like lying down, we were flat and very still, turning as they turned. Not that we were lying outside, you understand, on the nebula's surface; no, it was too cold out there. We were underneath, as if we had been tucked in under a layer of fluid, grainy matter. There was no way of telling time; whenever we started counting the nebula's turns there were disagreements, because we didn't have any reference points in the darkness, and we ended up arguing. So we preferred to let the centuries flow by as if they were minutes; there was nothing to do but wait, keep covered as best we could, doze, speak out now and then to make sure

we were all still there; and, naturally, scratch ourselves; because – they can say what they like – all those particles spinning around had only one effect, a troublesome itching.

What we were waiting for, nobody could have said; to be sure, Granny Bb'b remembered back to the times when matter was uniformly scattered in space, and there was heat and light; even allowing for all the exaggerations there must have been in those old folks' tales, those times had surely been better in some ways, or at least different; but as far as we were concerned, we just had to get through that enormous night.

My sister G'd(w)^{n} fared the best, thanks to her introverted nature: she was a shy girl and she loved the dark. For herself, G'd(w)^{n} always chose to stay in places that were a bit removed, at the edge of the nebula, and she would contemplate the blackness, and toy with the little grains of dust in tiny cascades, and talk to herself, with faint bursts of laughter that were like tiny cascades of dust, and – waking or sleeping – she abandoned herself to dreams. They weren't dreams like ours (in the midst of the darkness, we dreamed of more darkness, because nothing else came into our minds); no, she dreamed – from what we could understand of her ravings – of a darkness a hundred times deeper and more various and velvety.

My father was the first to notice something was changing. I had dozed off, when his shout wakened me: 'Watch out! We're hitting something!'

Beneath us, the nebula's matter, instead of fluid as it had always been, was beginning to condense.

To tell the truth, my mother had been tossing and turning for several hours, saying: 'Uff, I just can't seem to make myself comfortable here!' In other words, according to her, she had become aware of a change in the place where she

was lying: the dust wasn't the same as it had been before, soft, elastic, uniform, so you could wallow in it as much as you liked without leaving any print; instead, a kind of rut or furrow was being formed, especially where she was accustomed to resting all her weight. And she thought she could feel underneath her something like granules or blobs or bumps; which perhaps, after all, were buried hundreds of miles further down and were pressing through all those layers of soft dust. Not that we generally paid much attention to these premonitions of my mother's: poor thing, for a hypersensitive creature like herself, and already well along in years, our way of life then was hardly ideal for the nerves.

And then it was my brother Rwzfs, an infant at the time; at a certain point I felt him – who knows? – slamming or digging or writhing in some way, and I asked: 'What are you doing?' And he said: 'I'm playing.'

'Playing? With what?'

'With a thing,' he said.

You understand? It was the first time. There had never been things to play with before. And how could we have played? With that pap of gaseous matter? Some fun: that sort of stuff was all right perhaps for my sister G'd$(w)^n$. If Rwzfs was playing, it meant he had found something new: in fact, afterwards, exaggerating as usual, they said he had found a pebble. It wasn't a pebble, but it was surely a collection of more solid matter or – let's say – something less gaseous. He was never very clear on this point; that is, he told stories, as they occurred to him, and when the period came when nickel was formed and nobody talked of anything but nickel, he said: 'That's it: it was nickel. I was playing with some nickel!' So afterwards he was always called 'Nickel Rwzfs'. (It wasn't, as some say now, that he had turned into nickel, unable – retarded as he was – to go beyond the mineral phase; it was

a different thing altogether, and I only mention this out of love for truth, not because he was my brother: he had always been a bit backward, true enough, but not of the metallic type, if anything a bit colloidal; in fact, when he was still very young, he married an alga, one of the first, and we never heard from him again.)

In short, it seemed everyone had felt something: except me. Maybe it's because I'm absent-minded. I heard – I don't know whether awake or asleep – our father's cry: 'We're hitting something!', a meaningless expression (since before then nothing had ever hit anything, you can be sure), but one that took on meaning at the very moment it was uttered, that is, it meant the sensation we were beginning to experience, slightly nauseating, like a slab of mud passing under us, something flat, on which we felt we were bouncing. And I said, in a reproachful tone: 'Oh, Granny!'

Afterwards I often asked myself why my first reaction was to become angry with our grandmother. Granny Bb'b, who clung to her habits of the old days, often did embarrassing things: she continued to believe that matter was in uniform expansion and, for example, that it was enough to throw refuse anywhere and it would rarefy and disappear into the distance. The fact that the process of condensation had begun some while ago, that is, that dirt thickened on particles so we weren't able to get rid of it – she couldn't get this into her head. So in some obscure way I connected this new fact of 'hitting' with some mistake my grandmother might have made and I let out that cry.

Then Granny Bb'b answered: 'What is it? Have you found my cushion?'

This cushion was a little ellipsoid of galactic matter Granny had found somewhere or other during the first cataclysms of the universe; and she always carried it around with her, to