



Rahsaan Roland Kirk Photo by Michael Wilderman

monstrosioso

1965: The Creeper

The fussy encyclopedic gravity of the Hammond B-3 overcome and the electric organ lofted to hard-bop orbit, still trailing diapasons of his mother's church music and the boogie-woogie tap-dance routines of his father's band—*The Incredible Jimmy Smith* proclaimed the block letters on a score of albums since the 1956 breakout recordings on Blue Note, those words celebrating a nearly miraculous mating of technology and soul. The thing had first stirred to life at a club in Atlantic City where he heard Wild Bill Davis make the Hammond roar like a big wave. It was a monster, upsurged through chocked, choppy chords and backwashed through rilling legatos, wattage enough there to power the entire Basie band. Davis was gruff, brash, gloriously loud, a bumptious lumbering attack, great swoops down on the keys and shameless ripsaw goosings of reverb and tremolo, the organ not so much singing as signaling, the music stripped to pure swelling impulse. For a piano player schooled in the overbrimming muscular lines of Art Tatum and the stabbing, nervous prances of Bud Powell, it was almost risible, the goddamned wired-up thing rocking on stage like a gurgling showboat. Fats Waller on "Jitterbug Waltz" coaxed over the organ with a percolating finesse as if running a trapeze artist up a swaying wire, but Davis almost seemed clumsy by design, as if in awe of the organ's powers yet unable to forego provoking them. A bristling, striding approach, a monster dog named Lance or Rex baited through the fence of a yard and teased into a frenzy and dashing back and forth, Davis showing a mouthful of white teeth as he shut the racket down at its very peak, a hushed arpeggio crawling down inside the Leslie speaker, Johnny Hodges's sardonic alto sniffing up the trail.

The golden gullets of trumpets and saxophones, the bright guts of the drums, the broad shoulders of the piano: music connected to the body, vibrating through the teeth, the throat, the fingers, the instruments like real organs depending on systems of breath and blood and muscle. The saxophone participates in the hands, the neck, the mouth; the trumpet is an

externalization of the lungs, the throat, the ear; the piano is all phalanges, hinges and angles of wrists and elbows, strings and hammers of nerves. Fingers quivering, we play air solos as though under the spell of creatures of our device for whom we too are devices. Boundaries are crossed and confused between the instrument's body and our own—we speak of inspirations by which the saxophone comes alive under our hands, the violin does things we never believed possible, the guitar is playing us. In such prostheses our bodies seem to meld with the instruments in intense contact and immediacy. Teachers instruct wind players to relax the throat muscles so the music sounds not only through the body of the instrument but resonates deeply through the chest and lungs, the hollows of the player's body becoming an extension of the instrument. One of the pleasures of live performance is seeing the body moved and shaped, mastery seeming to demand a share of passivity, the grafting of player and instrument. Louis Armstrong's eyes open wide as though surprised but pleased to welcome the trumpet suddenly grown from his face in a brassy, cunning flower. Jean-Pierre Rampal's shoulders hunch and his head cocks, the stick of the flute a renegade appendage that appears to have the power to draw his whole body along its tangent. Riding the bench, Cecil Taylor jabs and hammers as though mimicking a piano taking stock of its own inner equipage.

Wild Bill Davis rollicking through a fast blues or laying a gush of vacuum-tube pipes under a ballad or a waltz, maybe "Stolen Sweets" with the Hammond slapped on thick, dripping, soaking, and Hodges's saxophone for all its hard cut and its languid precision sounding adjunct to greater forces. Something incredible to begin with about the *organ*, an instrument that generates sound elsewhere, not in the immediacy of contact with the musician's body but through an external apparatus. A systematization of the voice, a sonic mathesis resolving and dissolving differentials and frictions, organon and organization of sound, all the moves visible under a single gaze and spread out under the span of two hands. The cathedral organ is God's instrument, approaching pneumatic automatism and scarcely in need of a human operator, under the pipes the organist dwarfed, functionary in the service of empyrean syntheses. The majesty of the instrument of Bach's fugues and Saint-Saens' symphony is however related to organs of a humbler kind. The hand-pumped harmoniums and cranked hurdy-gurdies of street vendors and traveling entertainers, the bubbling calliopes of circuses, carnivals, and riverboats suggest

what might be the innate gimmickry of the organ, its aura of a vaguely improper or mocking musical ventriloquism. Instead of a band of musicians playing together, one has the rough equivalent of their instrumental voices resounding from a box of plugged whistles. A confection, an obvious fake, but exciting wonder and admiration because it appears nearly autonomous, automatic. Still, there's an unsettling aspect to such musical auto-affection, an air of the monstrous about a thing that subsumes the vocal expressivity of music to a mechanical apparatus, redolent of the solipsistic elaborations of hermeticism and alchemy, of Gothic aesthetes in velvet-draped chambers, of spells that capture and enslave voices in jars, trees, the throats of howling beasts.

Under Davis's command the Hammond tottered and strode, the thing a gas, a ball, by turns indecorous and elephantine, frilly and elegant. You could score a movie or a baseball game with it, run skaters round in spins, quiver the asses of strippers or launch a congregation into getting the spirit. And inside the sound an almost imperceptible hum like the channel clearing for a bullhorn sermon, like a buzz of angels stunned with prayer, that hum offering the neutral and colorless sound of machinery and systems, of sound before anything was happening with it, before it was freighted with a voice, a story, a song. Objective, standardized, indifferent—the frequency of raw electric, the hot potential the Hammond operated on, capacitors and solenoids and resistors webbed under the keys and the organ droning beside itself like an anchorite resolving the dance of phenomena to an uninflected signal, a vibrating *om*.

Jimmy Smith woodshedding for a year in a Philadelphia warehouse, summer days the streets licking tar, under the wash of red leaves trains blowing off to Camden and Newark, and the slick, yielding keys—walking, striding, dancing on eggs, on water, scarcely any resistance—and learning to crawl up a ghostly wall inside the Hammond, kicking, trampling spiderlike the ribcage of the twenty-five bass pedals. Beating on the wall, singing to it, spit-words, curses and blessings, crossed scrawls. A shrill street-whistle amazed, looking through a sudden window on the traffic of the world. A sliding grip taking hold, but *hold* with a hole in it where a tentacle of space trembled, where it lashed to the left and to the right. It pawed and stroked the angel body of organ air. On the street one day the wind moved the branches of a beech tree in the same way, in the sunlight the shiny gray bark like wrinkles of finger skin.

Smith: the left hand comping with attitude, the right smashing runs, shoes marching over the bass pedals, fingers jumping off to work the drawbars, a foot shaking loose to stomp the volume pedal. Like his hands on the *All Day Long* cover, double-crossed over the keyboard, the organ offering such a road that there was a danger of indefinitely wandering or indefinitely sticking in one place. Sometimes it accelerated smoothly and overdriven, other times it was cornered, repeating, sneaking back then on its trail, creeping home and surprising itself there as if it was a new thing again. And a secret that ran inside the fingers—for all its electricity and speakers and watts, next to a trumpet or a piano the organ was weak. It didn't naturally cut through the air, lay down a weight. No chambers, no hammers, no hollow gut—nothing but wires and tubes, switches and solenoids. Though it promised an instantaneous production, music at your fingertips, there was an ineluctable lag between striking the keys and hearing the sound coming out of the Leslie. It meant working like hell to make the wired heaven of it gather mouth and teeth and bite.

The *electric organ*—the Hammond wasn't designed to be blown, hammered, strummed, or beaten. It was doubly monstrous, not only a systematization of the voice but a second-order system, like a sex device made to imitate a sex device. Smith's music is often characterized in terms of funk, grease, soul, a great boiling kettle bubbling and bursting. In one interview he condemns the thin-toned synthesizer and glorifies the Hammond, which he says has a sound you can feel in your bones. But the electric organ doesn't so much resonate with corporeality as index it, floating bodiless even as it's signaling body. The sound is coming loud off the Leslie speaker but it's detached from the keyboards by its almost imperceptible delay, and in that space, a thing wants to *feed*. An appetite that wants to feed on feeding itself—feed of the electric, feed of the signal doubled over, turning out the skin of music.

Laurens Hammond modeled his 1930s invention after Cahill's Telharmonium of 1900, an elaborate machine with hundreds of rotating metal discs inscribed with serrations and projections from which a contiguous array of electromagnets took their imprint and read off the pitches of the tempered scale. Like Freud's dream-apparatus of the same year, the thing worked by virtue of discharges firing up from a system of coded glyphs, and much as Freud also discovered, the machine was prone to glitches,

the purity and stability of the tones susceptible to infections of electricity, even though regulated by batteries of condensers and capacitors and resistors. Hammond's design for the electric organ reduced the scale of the printing press-like Telharmonium mechanism, though it remained elaborate enough: a tone generator assembly consisting of ninety-one wheels, an electric motor that engaged a set of gears, those gears in turn setting the wheels spinning, inside the prim walnut cabinet of the console organ something like a locomotive's power train. And as though sublimating a taint of scandal involving the sacred music of the pipe organ being delivered over to commodity culture—the Hammond an instrument of the ultimate Protestantism, a church in your own living room, running on your own electricity—the organ was freighted, burdened, and overdetermined with controls. Not only was the full range of organ-stops replicated, but a system of 38 drawbars for the keyboards and pedals afforded an almost limitless capacity for fine-tuning and mixing, each drawbar sliding through a wide span of harmonics, with the Hammond capable of imitating most of the instruments of the symphony orchestra. The drawbars were color-coded, brown and white for what were called the consonants (roots and lower fifths) and black for the dissonants (higher fifths and thirds), the language of the Hammond suggesting you'd indeed gotten your hands on a universal encyclopedia, the key to all music. There was a host of other devices—a group of preset keys, for specific harmonic effects, which lay on the far left of each keyboard and inverted the black-and-white pattern of the others; switches that regulated the attack and decay of pitches; and, all-important for jazz players, the percussion setting that offered a mock-piano sound possessed at the same time of the timbres of winds and strings and brasses. The expression pedal, down there among the bass ribwork, could push the volume up to forty-eight decibels.

Half late-Victorian fantasy, half modernist elegance, the Hammond hummed and warmed with its load of electro-harmonics, its levels and degrees of switches and settings. Incredible, state of the art, seemingly transparent to all of music, electronically tempered and ordered and running the orchestral gamut, yet for that very reason provoking distempers and abuses. It's rare to find a parlor with a full-scale Hammond these days, but there have been generations of its later avatars, those home Hammonds and Wurlitzers and Lowrys, thousands of them now languishing in family rooms and basements, stacked with old photo albums and

boxes of books. They promised a good time to mom and dad or grandma and grandpa, easy-play manuals with all the old songs and an automatic percussion feature offering waltz, fox trot, rock, or jazz accompaniment. They promised the youngsters an initiation into the world of music, everything they needed to know right there, chords, scales, the sounds of the orchestra. Those hopeful autodidact's machines have probably suffered the worst songs and the worst music-making in domestic history—I remember a book that started you with “Pennies from Heaven” and moved on to “Wichita Lineman”—as well as absorbing the cavalier and sometimes wildly experimental depredations of bored children trying, say, the oboes and violins and English horns, a nasal calliope issuing from a swoop over the keys, but more often dreaming of phantoms of the opera and with self-pleased dispatch tagging every possible switch, laying the volume-pedal to the metal. Or with both hands strafing across the octaves, elbows, arms, and even heads and feet effecting mighty crescendos in their own way as singular and wonderful as the baby wailing at the unaccustomed noise and at the same time reaching greedily with her hands to make some herself.

The incredible Jimmy Smith: wearing a flannel shirt on the cover of the album *The Sermon*, displaying his graceful hands like a workman worthy of his hire. Although from a town near Philadelphia, he might be out of Carolina, a country boy, framed as he is with dogs and livestock on *Back at the Chicken Shack*, swinging from the ladder of a boxcar on *Midnight Special*, though those records offered big-city music, sophisticated blues workouts with Stanley Turrentine and bebop outings with Lee Morgan and Curtis Fuller.

The slick teeth of the double keyboards wanting hands all over them so the air could bite down hard on itself. The thud and thump of the bass pedals banked underfoot, a crateload of tubes and wires circuited into bunched tongues, the Leslie warming like a chimney. Chockablock arpeggios, punchy two-handed heaves and throws, bass-pedal trots and gallops. A wide-chassis, comfortable expansive thing, Fleetwood, Imperial, the pleasure of smoothly tooling over a rough street, railroad crossings and potholes. Your ass in a plush seat, your hands and body sort of hanging over and sort of hanging from the steering wheel. Automatic transmission: the lightest touch and the car leaps, swings, fishtails. The

squeal-track of rubber laid down fast and easy so you hardly knew you did it. U-turn coming back around, silver switches in the armrest and the electric windows up and down like spy doorways, the air pouring in.

Incredible: vehicle of nerves, sometimes a reeling eerie hornpipe like the windup of a horror film, sometimes an ominous obbligato like an episode-closing tune from the soap opera “The Edge of Night,” boxed and imprisoned but at the same time master of the chambers, strumming over bones or devising refined tortures of suspense. The thing endlessly clearing its throat: glottal stops, clips and clicks, the clatter of film stock through the projector—*The Thing*, an extraterrestrial mystery stiff and impervious, figure of ice. Or the Thing of Marvel comic books, man of block and stone, the blind girl’s love, clobberin’ time. And that other incredible figure of the early sixties, the green-glowing Hulk, monster double of a genius nuclear physicist, a phosphorescent outlaw in ragged jeans who couldn’t stand to see wrong and splashed his rage in bursts and stars across the panels. As a monster of color, he spun the wheels of the cultural tone-organ, and most wonderful were the panels where his scruffy, quasi-Frankenstein figure rose over the treetops flying. In those moments, the Hulk, shining with his radium-clock power, broke loose altogether, incredible not because of his atomic-driven metamorphosis from Bruce Banner to Hulk or even because of his just-cause anger, but because still trailing his rags and tatters he struck off into the air with one fist raised like an avenging angel though all the while he looked a devil.

“The Creeper,” an Oliver Nelson composition on the 1965 *Monster* album, which also included movie and television themes: *Goldfinger*, *The Munsters*, and *Bewitched*. The home style of old Blue Note albums like *Chicken Shack* was updated in the Verve label package of cover tunes and broad jokes: *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* offering Smith in wolf’s-head mask, *Respect* in snow-white martial-arts gear taking on the Hammond. Oliver Nelson plays the melody on alto, the organ lines exquisite product, swift and ruthless as Sonny Stitt, sassy and sanctified as Cannonball Adderly, in certain phases as passionately systematic as early Coltrane. Along the mellow road of mile-long legato runs, skidding phrases are turned around, they hit back against themselves, the percussion setting catches up the notes with a snapped, crepitant edge. Driving home from the factory in happy paycheck traffic, coming down the hill to the main junction among telephone lines and colored signals, traffic lights

and neon signs, brand names and billboards, the machinery of the world operational, switched on and ready to go. Monster, you could gobble it up, suck the fat off its bones, lick the grease off your fingers watching a little wink or blink inside the air, the flash of appetite itself.

Funk, grease, soul—a long string of organ players following him, Johnny “Hammond” Smith, Brother Jack McDuff, Jimmy McGriff, Shirley Scott, Don Patterson, Lonnie “Liston” Smith, Charles Earland, by turns lush and luscious, smoked or stunk, though not approaching the rushed velocity, the hard stutter of the bass pedals, and Smith’s sound ultimately clean, almost flattened out, pure feed, not until Larry Young does anybody achieve such cold in the middle of running hot. In later years, the Varitone electric saxophone in the hands of Eddie Harris or Sonny Stitt approximated such a sound, much derided by jazz critics as inhuman, voiceless, a shameful mechanization. It stripped away timbre and reduced the sound to gesture, style without a body, ideal as the Moog and with the same naked rise of transistorized exhilaration to it. Bodiless jazz—perhaps a monstrous thing, counterclocked, a minuscule slide inside its gears, a rogue centrifugal breaking out in free play. Riding the tracks of the bebop idiom and messing with it, diverging, merging, the simulacrum of a perpetual-motion machine that doesn’t give a shit about the sound of music anymore and glories in signal and pulse, consuming its own friction.

Monster wouldn’t be the selection for classic Smith on Verve (*I Got My Mojo Workin’* or *Respect* would be more likely, or *The Dynamic Duo* with Wes Montgomery). There’s a casually Gothic strain, with an up-tempo “Gloomy Sunday,” a brightly menacing “Goldfinger,” a hard-swinging “St. James Infirmary”; and there are the sweeps, the rolling repetitions, the feel underneath of a broad veering traction, the thrilling of a super-harp fingered at every stop. Signal, skin, and surface: like Goldfinger’s girl, like the ghostly smoke of jinx. Everything’s running over itself, offering itself, inciting itself, legs pumping high in fearful delight, the riffs fast and heart-beating like the hyperalertness of a marijuana paranoia: I’m spooked, man. The thing is a fucking monster.

The Hammond: organ with too much power in it, roaring up at the slightest touch of a key. Outcast in thick underwood, the monster roaring in travail. A tentacle reaches around a corner, the creeper leaps out from a dark spot on the road he’ll always come back to again. The cover

of the *Monster* album is dominated by John Henry's remarkable photo, a devil's mask in black and red made by a process that must have involved staining, painting, and overlaid exposures. It's a Rohrshach devil, in one respect saying only one thing, that the album is state-of-the-art 1965, flip-pantly hip, and in another saying many things, too many, the monster's face revolving through buttocks and vaginas, through rats and embryos and holstered guns, through two big fat hens facing off over the devil's head which is also them and also Jimmy Smith slitting his eyes inside a flight of wings, until the whole damn thing is flashing Op-Art style and escaping within its caves and folds, monster the running skin glowing with emblems and signs, monster the shedding of signs and skins, the howl and the shout not rage not anger not pain but shaking loose.

1966: *Incense, Herbs, and Oils*

Where was the shop—the blue storefront, the smoke-stained window, the words *Incense, Herbs, Oils* scripted in fading gold on the glass offering equipment for handling spirits and lovers and enemies? It might have been Peoria Street, Newberry, Thirteenth or Fourteenth, somewhere in the old Maxwell Street market, all of those buildings and the very streets gone now, converted to athletic fields for the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Maybe a few letters leaving a clue, tag end of a street name in the cover photo of the first Paul Butterfield album, in front of the shop Mike Bloomfield, Elvin Bishop, and the rest of the group young and scruffy, grease on the longish hair and sport jackets without ties, sunglasses and cigarettes, the original blues brothers. The Eastern European Jewish immigrants had moved out of the neighborhood; it was mostly black, but their sons had come back to it. In the segregated world of Chicago in the sixties, Maxwell Street was the rare place where the color of your skin didn't much matter. Shop, buy, sell—seemingly everything imaginable was displayed on door-and-sawhorse tables lining the streets, arrayed on blankets spread on the sidewalks and draped across the hoods of cars, or more or less dumped in piles on the bare ground with a casual confidence that a buyer's eye would sort it out. In that hotbed of exchange it didn't matter what street you came from or what race claimed you. Among the press of the crowd you were simplified to a creature of hands and feet and money in your pocket like a gambler's, charged with the question of what you'd spend, how you'd spend, what would be the bargain of the day, and

later the shopping bag swinging from your arm with its secret weight, or the newly grown limb of whatever hammer or lamp or chair you were triumphantly carrying home with you.

Then you'd carefully negotiate a path through the shoppers, trying to avoid bumping into anyone. If you did—if you trod the heel of the man in front of you, himself still empty-handed and searching for his own buy of the morning, he would most likely stop dead, turn around to face you with a hard look. You were already apologizing, apologizing again, and that would be enough, it would simply be over. The territory around you was no longer the streets and landmarks of a neighborhood but just the modest space around your own body: how far your arm swung, how long your stride. You learned to be humble. And as you walked away with your purchase you knew that whatever bargain you'd managed—even if you'd achieved the Market dream of the steal, the stand where the guy had no idea what he was selling, he might as well have been giving it away for nothing—the bargain wasn't as important as the fact that you'd made a transaction. Along with all the others walking the street, you were a sort of anonymous hero, having affirmed the life of the thing, taken your part in the Market. When you brought the money out of your pocket, a stack of quarters or a bill held out flat so the transfer of the object of sale over to you and the price of it paid into the vendor's hand were synchronized, nearly simultaneous, it was like your hand was making an offering of your own eye. With that avid eye, you'd come, you'd seen, you'd conquered or been conquered. It was as though you'd become all eye, a Cyclops gazing dazzled into the sun while counting off his flock, contemplating the treasures of his domain. Of course, there was always the other side: the sense that even as you clutched your bag or lifted proudly your hammer or your chair, or even as you thrilled over an unbelievable steal, the story of it all running through your mind as you walked faster approaching Halsted or Roosevelt, the bus stop or the car parked somewhere near the Soo Line viaducts, there might be someone in the crowd laughing over what a sucker you'd been. Pity the fool—there was a guy on the next corner who was selling the same damn thing for half the price; last week he couldn't give the stuff away but look at that joker, he turned over good money for it.

Maxwell Street—the bargain, the deal and the steal, the business of race temporarily dissolved in a dance of raw exchange. In one respect, though, there your skin mattered more, because you weren't contained

with those supposedly of your own kind behind one side or the other of a territorial line. Whatever the makeup of the neighborhood, on Sunday morning it was the Market, and in the bright sun you felt the plain and newly pleasurable exposure of your face to a world of others, though mostly those others weren't particularly concerned about you, and you needn't worry very much about them. Along those streets, cars crawling through and trying to make way, people walking almost shoulder to shoulder, heel to heel, you could feel strangely alone but in a way that had nothing to do with the alienation of the man in the crowd. You'd stumbled into a different sort of place. In the midst of the anonymous press of bodies you attained a certain height as well as a humility, your walking through indifference and hurry and the sweat smell of the man in front of you making you feel your skin wasn't so much a container freighted with meanings and desires as it was a surface where things touched you in the same way they touched your eye, where the world was not so much a collection of objects as it was a concourse of strokes and smokes and oils, bodies and airs and spirits that could catch and cling, charm and bewitch you.

Where was the street: Peoria, Newberry, Fourteenth? Sometimes early on a Sunday morning, seven or eight o'clock, the signs would appear for an instant incomprehensible, last flags of a sinking ship, the city grid overwhelmed by the market crowd, sidewalk cottonwoods and trees of heaven in the alleys fluttering down leaves and the hawkers' calls from every direction, *I got your gloves special today; Apples, apples, apples;* the universal cry of *Pick 'em out, Pick 'em out.* Often enough the calls were incomprehensible too. The message would be for a select group, those shoppers who had an ear for the particular item—unless I had a mind to it, how would I discern among all the shuffle and noise that the chubby Polish guy leaning on the hood of his station wagon was really calling *Brooms* and not something like *Spoons* or something I'd never heard of, something that sounded impossible—*Rooms* or *Moons*. Among the market stands, there might even be a seller with an item only one person in the crowd could possibly want or even understand. Maybe an item destined for one person in all the world, one person in all of time and history. In those calls there was a sound of things fateful and ephemeral—what was here today and gone tomorrow, the last and only chance never to come round again. At times, I wished I could be at the Market

every day, every hour, so I wouldn't miss that call even though I heard well enough the mocking tone in the hawker's cry, that bluff and mimicry of the buyer's desire. I had no idea what I would hear, it would be something unimaginable, maybe a word I could barely decipher but once I did, I would have arrived at the point of a transaction that would change me forever or maybe not change me at all but crystallize in a single instant everything I was looking for.

My Uncle Joe must have had a similar feeling in those days. It was imperative that we arrive at the Market early; he blasted the horn of his Chevelle in front of my parents' house at six thirty on a Sunday morning, annoying the neighbors, and if I wasn't out in less than five minutes he was on his way, no time to wait. Even six thirty was running late for him; without bothering about me, he could have been there already. He tried to make up the lost time, heavy on the gas and running a red every now and then, in a matter of minutes reaching the Stevenson Expressway and then the Ryan to the Eighteenth Street exit, no radio playing and not a word to me until we had parked in his usual spot and were walking through the darkness of a viaduct from which we'd emerge into the thick of the crowd. He must have been relieved on those Sundays when for one reason or another I wasn't able to go with him. He could get there as early as he pleased, even before sunrise if he wanted. He could catch the vendors first putting out their wares, have an advantage since, as legend had it, the first customer of the day was given the best deal, it was good luck.

My closest uncle, my godfather, the uncle whose birthday was the same day as George Washington's and close to mine, Joe was the big one among the brothers, taller and with more bulk than my father or the oldest, Johnny. In his childhood years he'd been notorious for his capacity for food and especially for stealing the fresh milk in those days delivered first thing in the morning, when it was still partly dark outside. He sneaked out of the house and made a tour of the neighbors' steps up and down the block, drinking down every bottle he found. He came home with a mouth licked with rich cream, happy and sleepy. They called him Pig. Later, his equally extravagant capacity for labor earned him the name Bull. My dad helped him to land a job at the Santa Fe yard at Forty-seventh Street and Joe worked so hard and so continuously—he used to do an entire trailer-train car, normally the task of three men, by himself—that my dad was

let go while they kept his brother on. He was crazy, my dad said, Joe was go go go.

Joe and my Aunt Jeanette didn't have any children of their own, so I was privileged, the godson and the favored nephew. I mowed the lawn of their long yard on Kilbourn Street and was paid handsomely for it, my aunt spoiling me too with cold drinks, Seven-Ups, urging me regularly to stop and take a break. Inside the house it was cool and dark, the blinds usually drawn against the sun, the pantry and the cellar and the attic stocked with all kinds of food and treats. Much of it was in tins without labels or in damaged packages, fruit and chocolate and cookies of all kinds, the pantry at my Uncle Joe's a place where I could forage at will and myself become pig. After the job was done I'd sit in the front room in front of a huge dish of candy, chocolate stars and nonpareils, a book from the glass-doored cabinet on the table in front of me and the song of my uncle's canary whistling back and forth through the house. The bird was named Micky and there had been a series of them, dashes of bright yellow and orange trilling loudly with the songbird record my uncle played for their instruction until an untimely accident occurred involving the swinging door to the living room which Joe sometimes closed without remembering that the birds liked to perch on top of it. He would mourn the lost bird for a while but there would soon be another Micky as if it had never happened. The new bird would choose that same place atop the door, fluttering the same way to the kitchen and back, singing out its life along with the record or urged on by the chirps and trills of Joe himself.

The books in the cabinet were mostly about fishing, along with the stacks of *Consumer Reports* my uncle studied, researching products and prices. *The Racing Form* and *Midnight*, an Enquirer-style tabloid, stayed in the kitchen on a magazine rack. My dad joked that Joe would believe anything—for him, a breathless *Midnight* proclaiming “Woman Gives Birth to Frog” possessed the same authority as a sober *Consumer Reports* evaluation of tire performance. My usual picks from the cabinet were books my Aunt Jeanette frowned upon my reading and that my Uncle laughed about—dismissively or defensively, I couldn't tell. “Let the kid see it,” he'd say. “It won't hurt him.” So I delved into John George Holman's *Pow-Wows, or the Long Lost Friend* and the *Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses*, both of them yellowed paperbacks whose pages crumbled their flavor into the chocolate I was eating. They were

books of spells and magic, the *Pow-Wows* with practical charms for curing warts and winning at cards and overcoming enemies, the Moses book with serious incantations for raising angels and demons, pentagrams compassed by mysterious Hebrew letters and on one of the pages a strange dark glyph of a serpent crowned with stars.

I'd been up late the night before, watching a movie and then reading, and had barely made it out to the car, Joe impatiently gunning the engine as I ran out the door. Things had been changing between us, Joe and I now heading our own ways as soon as we reached the Market and only meeting up a few hours later when it was time to go home. I no longer followed him on his rounds and he didn't insist, having understood that I wanted to go off my own and probably quite content to let me.

On that August morning it was heating up fast, and along every street there were kids selling sodas from coolers with blocks of ice. I had my orientation, Dorothy's clothing stand where I could always go back and wait for Joe since he was a regular there. I set off to look around, smoke a couple of cigarettes, a pack of Salems in my pocket Joe either didn't notice or didn't care about. I was wearing my usual clothes, white Levis and black suede shoes, a Banlon polo shirt. The shirt was made of a sort of stretch fabric that I guess was beige yet suggested ugly bare flesh. I would have preferred black but the thing had been on sale, one of my parents' economies.

My own prowl would be nothing like tagging along with my Uncle Joe. There were vendors who had known him for years and who hailed him from halfway down the block when they spotted him. Years earlier he'd been in the junk business himself—he'd even changed his name to Meyers in keeping with what he believed was a Jewish dominion over the scrap-metal trade. The vendors always had a special stash under the counter they'd been saving just for him, and usually whatever it was, Joe would buy it. My Aunt Jeanette complained that the house was overflowing, but there was always room for more, as Joe saw it, and half the time the thing he bought was ostensibly for her—a dress, a painting, silverware, all kinds of lingerie and stockings, one time an expensive mantel clock that was given a place of honor in the living room and whose chimes became an accompaniment to the songs of the Mickies.

An obsession with books had first drawn me to the Market, but for the time being I'd had my fill. I suppose I was becoming more interested in

the book of the world. Incense, herbs, and oils: the spelling of everything and everybody in motion down those streets. With Joe, the tour of the market had been a mad rush, punctuated by the greetings of his old pals and the glad buying of the latest gift, after a while his hands clutching bags and objects sticking out in all directions like bouquets of crumpled flowers. He was a prime target for filching or robbery but no one ever had any luck with him. Once, as he was walking back to his car, two men in the viaduct had tried to fell him with a lead pipe; he'd fought back fiercely and driven them off, never letting go of his merchandise.

On my own that morning I took a slower course. Where I walked down Peoria, the man I thought of as the record guy was playing 45s at full volume through a big radio speaker, the bass buzzing and distorted in the heated air like something desperate was trapped inside there. The music was gospel and especially blues—Junior Wells, Little Milton, Jimmy Reed, a rack of singles on Chess and VeeJay. It was he who had taught me the exception to the general rule of haggling. The 45s cost one dollar, same as the store, and that was it. He had just about chased me off from his stand when I tried to offer him less. “You don’t know what the hell this is,” he’d said, veiling the box of singles with his hand. And the music confirmed him though it took a while to hear. On a spring morning a month after I’d turned thirteen, I was walking past and it wasn’t so much my ear that heard as my legs that felt it. A drag on my stride, making me slow down, making me consider my feet. They seemed weird things, bearing my weight across the pavement, shod bones, clumsy hooves. I stood near his stand guzzling my soda, a kid who didn’t care. The bass thudding like a thick heart through the bare speaker without a grille. The harsh spinning traction of the electric guitar with the solo lines pulled out of their stitch and sewn back again needle sharp. A gruff, lowering vocal with a pressure inside it like wind, like bad weather. The parts didn’t sound like they fit, a delay between them so that each seemed to be plunging along its own track. A forward motion driving apart and trying to catch itself up but never making it. Still lumbering, lurching along, its own skin clinging to it like the tangle of jelly I felt inside my legs. In the song a voice that wasn’t hawking any wares but only calling out:

I’ve got a good mind to give up living
and go shopping instead.

To pick out me a tombstone
and be pronounced dead.

The rest of it had to do with the letter a woman left on the bed and the heartbreaking fact that she would never be coming back. I didn't know what the hell it was. I only quivered at its touch, like a stray dog I sniffed it along the warm air of the morning where the odors of the Market floated. Smoke of sausages grilling almost black on an oil-drum fire. Knife-stuck globes of cantaloupes and honeydews on a pickup tailgate. A slop bucket spilling out on the ground, festooned with wrappers and string and rinds and bottles. And the unforgettable human smell of the Market: sharp onion stink and a feverish sweat, as if your own body were another species of food, another slop bucket.

The record guy knew me now as a sort of regular though he didn't seem to like me much. Even paying him full price I had the feeling it wasn't enough. Today, I walked by without stopping. Seven o'clock, an August Sunday morning: down Fourteenth Street streams of people blocking the cars crawling through, the cars stopping the flow and people surrounding them like a mob of looters. A wide-bodied red Pontiac with boxes tied to the roof was stopped in the intersection, exhaust pipe smoking black, the engine sending waves of heat off the hood. Somebody crossing gave it a fist on the trunk, somebody swore steadily into the driver's window in passing. On those streets there were rarely any police even though the Fillmore District Station was close by. The driver ignored the insults. At that speed it was as if he wasn't really driving anyway, it scarcely seemed his car, he was a sort of passenger or attendant, by turns exasperated and apologetic. He waved a dollar out the window and the girl from the stand brought him a soda. The fan belt screeched and the car jumped forward a few feet, rumbling.

Closer to Maxwell, near the heart of the Market, the crowd increased, the cars still moving through. The only way to walk without stumbling into someone or having someone stumble into you was to drift yourself like a smoke bending its trail. Everything was always about to move, everything was always about to come to a standstill. The stench of the idling cars and the smell of soaking summer sweat oiled the air. I was looking for nothing, for whatever. Next to a fenced-off lot, a group of men happily shouted back and forth, having an early beer. A white rooster marched

out a pattern across the sidewalk below a flatbed stacked with caged chickens, crowing over his territory. The shoppers mobbed the clothing stores and the stands, the searchers after watches and jewelry five deep in Diamond Alley, a thin man nearby flashing wrists and arms ringed to the elbow with metal. I could buy a heavy ring with a glowing stone that looked like an emerald or a ruby and make my wishes on it. I could buy a switchblade stiletto with a silver hilt to protect me from my foes. I could buy whatever booty was offered, all the truck of burglars and boosters and thieves, though I had learned after a while that most of it was fake.

Farther down the street, I saw a gap in the crowd. I had known I would see the man eventually; often I wondered whether the track I followed through the Market was determined by a desire to avoid him or a desire to seek him out. Since I had been a little kid, trailing through the crowd while my father held his hand behind his back for me to grab if I was frightened, the man had haunted me. Wherever I walked, I was shadowed by a feeling that I was about to come face to face with him as he scraped and rowed down the street, pounding hard on the pavement with his wooden sticks. He was an older man, my uncle's or my father's age. A salt-and-pepper beard, a mouth with red nervous lips always licking, an expression compounded of prideful anger and abject fear. His chest and arms were muscular, powerful, his big hands roped with veins as he propelled the wooden cart in which he rode low to the ground. He kept a folded newspaper alongside him, which he made into a visor sometimes to shade himself from the sun. The stumps of his legs were swaddled in white cotton, strips cut from an undershirt.

I knew I was wrong, I was forgetting he was a human being like me, but I reeled away from the sight of him as if getting a whiff of an absolute horror. I saw not him but a naked blank exposed in the middle of things, and in that blank not merely a sense of how things went wrong, but worse, a sense of how everything kept on, life itself the horror. Even without any legs to carry you upright through the world you still ate and shit and talked and hurt and raged. Even in the lowliest bucket of slops that seemed pure waste, someone or something would find nourishment, a way to thrive, eagerly lapping it up, hatching and feeding, the world itself a monster smacking its chops over the living and the dead.

I felt pity, too, but such feelings seemed meaningless, insulting. He had a power that made everyone get out of his way, a voice aggressive

and hectoring, hoarse from shouting. If you touched him you knew he'd probably kill you with a knife he had ready there or choke you with the force of his bare hands.

My uncle once told me: drop a quarter into his cart and you'll have good luck.

People continued pressing into the street, from Newberry to Halsted now almost a solid mass, impassable though restless, moving, a thick heat building up with no release, the body stink of a greedy giant. A man was urinating against a wall in the alley with a hawker right on his heels showing off a glittering armful. He stuck out one hand to have a look at a watch, and with the other finished his pissing. Go shopping instead. It was as though I wanted something from the world but knew already that everything that was offered was garbage, worthless. All those treasures and goods being sold only proved that there was nothing really worth having: if there were, why was there always a person so eager to sell, why was there always another person equally eager to buy as if it was impossible ever to be satisfied and have enough?

To pick out me a tombstone and be pronounced dead—I sang it under my breath, trying to imitate B. B. King's reading of the last word, the vowels stretched and broken and doubled. From looking for nothing in particular I turned to looking at every single thing, each item offered in piles or stacks or heaps or jumbles over the ground. A rusty wrench with a length of pipe still clamped inside its jaws. A pair of wooden mousetraps nested on a clean pink blanket. Trailing sockets and wires, a television picture tube with the word GOOD scrawled across the screen in Magic Marker. On one table a spill of hundreds of flashlight batteries, along with a skeletal wire and bulb to test their juice. Some of the piles were indistinguishable from the trash the vendors and shoppers left behind in the street. At one point I delved into a discarded miscellany of rags and boxes, seeing damaged but promising items in there—the black rim of a record without a sleeve, a water-stained book. A boy younger than I was came along and asked me what I thought I was doing. I said it was just garbage, but he insisted it was his. He stood there ready to fight for it.

The man was wandering from stand to stand offering words, gesticulating and then being mollified or distracted, moving on to the next. A skinny guy, a shambling sort of walk like he was lost, asking for directions. He was

bold, though, walking right inside the vendors' zone, behind the stands and up to the windows of the cars, the back doors of vans, places where people escaped the crowd and took their breaks, places where money was counted and stashed. He was waved off casually, sent on his way, a man in a cowboy hat selling stacked cans of Pennzoil watching him go, laughing with his buddies. A woman trailed uncertainly behind, his girlfriend, I guessed. She waved back as if to say don't worry about it.

The first thing I noticed about him was his eyes—they were reddened, bloodshot. I thought he might be high but wasn't so sure, it could just as well have been weeping and moaning, a terrible thing that had happened to him. When he stopped in front of me, the girlfriend hovering behind, I anticipated being asked for money, a request I usually handled by saying I had nothing on me, my defense that I was only a kid.

"You got matches?" he said instead, his face close to mine, his breath blowing a sour wind that might have been from wine, might have been just his own heat.

"Yeah sure," I said, the easy question making me feel generous, my hand going to the pocket of the shirt where I had my Sailems.

"No, no," he said, and pushed down my hand. "I said do you got matches."

I looked at the girlfriend but she was gazing down the street as if yearning to get away. She attempted to move him along, pulling at his shirt.

"These are matches," I said, showing the book again.

"Goddamit, I said do you got matches."

"What?"

"*Matches, matches, matches,*" he sang louder, moving back now and swinging a wiry arm as if he was winding up for a punch, the repetition of the word slurring and distorting it, so it seemed to no longer match itself.

And then I understood that what had been so far a simple exchange, the word *matches* to be answered by the book of matches in my hand, had suddenly turned impossible.

"Sure," I said. "I got a mattress," giving my voice as tough a sound as I could manage. "So what?"

I was still hoping to get the joke, grasp what code or reference was involved. A mattress? It mixed up with the song lyric about shopping for a tombstone, my thought itself buried under a blank slab. I looked for a

clue in his face but he was only serious, aggrieved, and becoming angrier by the second.

“You got a mattress?” he said again.

“Yes,” I said, trying to move away but afraid of what he might do.

“Well then go home and get it.”

“I can’t do that.” I knew I should have laughed him off as the others had, but instead I found myself having wild thoughts of traveling across the city, carrying the thing on my back across streets and empty lots. I imagined the shiny quilting on the bare part, the sheets trailing from it, myself appearing an awkward lumbering creature without a head or a face, my legs caving under the weight. I would deliver it to him right there and I supposed he would lie down on it with his girlfriend. Or maybe I was the one who was supposed to be laid out, subject of a bizarre ritual.

“*I told you to go home and get it.*” Now he was shouting, pointing off in an indefinite direction—the projects to the west across Morgan, the bus stop on Eighteenth Street, the sky, the sun.

I said leave me alone. He grabbed the pale flesh-colored neck of the polo shirt and started to twist it around my neck. I pushed him away but he took hold again as if he imagined he would pull me right out of my skin. I stared at him as he twisted once more, seeing every detail of his face—he was probably not much older than I was, maybe nineteen, twenty, and his skin was a dark brown, roughened and freckled by being out in the sun and the streets. There was something haughty and disdainful in his gaze, as if he found the smell of me unpleasant. His mouth tightened hard into a grim line, his reddened eyes lighted up manic and insistent.

I saw that it was impersonal, it had nothing to do with me, yet it was immensely personal. Out of all the others he’d approached that morning, I was the one who had to answer to him.

One of the cowboy-hat guys called across the street, warning him off. He let me go, looking confused. He circled for another minute. Then he wandered away. The girlfriend said she was sorry. He was out of his head.

To pick out me a tombstone—my legs felt weak, halfway down in the ground, and I supposed everyone in the street had witnessed my humiliation. I felt wronged, not by his hand or his words or his touch but by the sheer impossibility he’d posed, all the rules of exchange breaking down. You got a mattress: what was that? It was monstrous, that idea of some-

thing nonnegotiable, an exorbitant claim for which he'd found in me the chance though perfect addressee. I had the thought I'd never feel at home again, home suddenly a place fatally compromised and tainted, not really mine anymore. I imagined the roof of my parents' house open to a sky and a weather where anything could happen, mattresses levitating out of the bedrooms and tombstones sprouting in the front yard, the guy and his girlfriend lurking there, making incomprehensible demands or just wandering in and out at will. As though my world would become a vast open-air cinema where reels would clatter and shadows run and lights flash and flicker, an unaccountable event about to happen and my gaze captured by the cuts and dissolves and trackings across the screen, *you got a mattress* the aperture through which I absorbed the bleak fact that to live meant to wander everywhere, looking, even when you'd forgotten what desire drove you in search of a bargain, flying back and forth until one day an indifferent door banged shut on you.

I could have made for Dorothy's stand, waited out the hour until my uncle came back. I would have the comfort of sitting there among people I knew, somebody bringing me a cold soda while I told the story of the mattress guy. But I was sure they'd either laugh over it or cast it as an instructive drama, and that I couldn't take.

Instead I started walking, back into the press of the market crowd, into the very thing for which a hot hate was flowering inside me like a poison herb. As I headed again for the center of the Market, every face became the face of an enemy. The limping old guy contentedly carrying a wooden box of nails, whistling to himself as if he was the luckiest man in town. The lipsticked woman struggling with a bundle of glossy magazines wrapped with twine. A sweaty white kid like me wandering through the crowd empty-handed, trying to look wise. We were all dirty, grubbing creatures, rioting in our own stink. I was overheated, stumbling, but I wouldn't buy another soda because I couldn't bear the thought of the hand that would mechanically pass it to me in return for the greasy coin from my pocket, couldn't bear the thought of how the liquid would be sucked into me, laving down my throat and sloshing its sweet juice into my stomach.

The avid set of a haggling mouth. The raucous trolling of a hawker. The stubby fingers of a grasping hand stashing merchandise into a bag. Faces like the masks of a monster feeding itself through them, all the

goods mixing in a vast belly, a churning sickening factory. I felt the bitterness of being born, of being flesh—pick out me a tombstone because it was there you could rest, the cool of the marble your mattress, nothing of your body left and only the carving across it of a word, a name, pronounced dead.

Dullix ix ux: Yea, you can't come over Pontio . . . I chanted in my mind the words from the *Pow-Wows* book, a spell for overcoming your enemies. I might have called upon the spirits of the cabalists to devastate the unholy earth, to cleanse it with water and fire. But I didn't feel any spirits answering. There was only a fever through my body, the cars and the crowd pushing, pushing, until it seemed there was nowhere left to move, no path anywhere.

It carried me along, not even a drift anymore but an immersion, a swim. I felt among the crowd the gazing and searching, the incessant swiveling motion of a thousand heads. I felt among the crowd the quickening frantic rhythm of a thousand hearts. A multitude of words spelling out their chains, a multitude of deals in the making. In that sea of sweat, that pooling of greeds, I helplessly fled like a little child from a monster inside whose mouth he is already being chewed up, consumed. I wandered into a memory of the inscriptions on the hide of the cabalistic snake in the Moses book, the star-jewels that crowned its head, the magic writing hatching inside every available margin and space. For an instant I felt my skin was made of those same indecipherable marks, a skin not just the flesh on my bones but the surfacing skin of the world from which I was being born together with the others as though breathed with their body smoke and sweated through their body heat. As if inside an impossible crystal, outside all proportion, there was a monster with whose legs I shambled, with whose feet I stumbled, with whose tongue I tasted an herb harsh and sweet.

1976: Kirkatron

Roland Kirk out of Ohio, Columbus, green land and the rivers, the railroad bridges and the burial mounds in the humid dark. Later, Rahsaan Roland Kirk: like so many things, the name came to him in a dream.

Frantic. Chicago in the fifties, the crowded streets, the cars and buses and trains, contagion of blasting horns, one blaring hot and the others right away taking it up, short taps and gruff toots and then long-drawn

wails, the sound traveling down the line of traffic as though the least idea that motion might come to a stop was unbearable, an insult and a crime, chains of angry shouts now and the revving, rumbling engines, stink blown out in the air like an incense of oil, the monster-sound spreading in an ephemeral plague, he heard it wandering back and forth between noise and song, in that interval he too felt the itch in the throat, the press and the swell, the need to roar.

(In the movie: the creature made man but whom the master then abhors. He can't bear the sight of the patchwork thing showing all its threads, a thing that isn't covered but instead is exposed by its own skin. The flower and the little girl and the running stream. The mob of villagers hunting him down, an abomination. Trapped in the burning windmill, the monster frantic, keening and wailing, perishing finally with a harrowing cry that skins together its sound with the roar of the consuming flames.)

Chicago: the Loop and Bronzeville and Sixty-third, space to move but at the same time a multiplication in that space of tracks, paths, trajectories—room to trip and stumble, flat on your face; room to bump, slide, and collide. Excuse me, sir. Where the hell you think you're going? Hey buddy watch your step. Move.

Frantic. Everything moving, hotel to rooming-house, doors slamming down the hall all times of the day and night, bang up the window it's hot, bang down the window it's cold, Drexel Boulevard there was sheeting rain, there was feathering snow, there was wind rattling against the panes and there was stalled summer air, the city soaking its bones, the sky gone deaf. At the bottom of the hottest night of the year, unbearable stop of the room, burn box from ceiling to floor, not the slightest touch of a breeze on the shade, stifling mound of a premature burial. Four o'clock in the morning on the Jeffrey bus and the clarinet without a case, in Jackson Park a little wind off the lake and across the lawns the groves and grooves of breathing wood, the hawthorns and elms leafing a green silence, on the Boulevard and the Drive the city running its ghosts and he was keeping the monster awake, nothing to be buried there but all to come bright out of the dark. To come bright in the angle of the shadow dance where he walked like he was staggering, to come bright out of a shadow where for an instant he forgot everything and in the low throating of the clarinet heard the voice of what was coming, a sound like a swimming skin of sun tiding over a night-black wave.

Ira Sullivan presents, album on Argo. Andrew Hill, the Freeman brothers. In Chicago, plenty of work. But at times a silence from the audience, comments in the front row or backstage. Learn to play one horn right instead of sticking two in your mouth. Somebody messing with him, sound of a hand in front of his face waving, a shoe across the path of his cane. *Freak show shit* he heard in a junky whisper one night at Club De Lisa, and though he was blind he could see the smug whiskered face, cool with being high and hanging out with musicians, sure of his fix, fixed on his for sure, for sure; certainly, my man.

Not cool, those sighs, those grunts, those ejaculations when he was slinging a horn aside, taking up another; or coming off a double or triple barreling, heavy ordnance, the vibration there like being in the middle of Ellington's bandstand or Basie's tenor section, shouting for joy inside a hard throttle of delight. Talked to himself in between because he needed to hear his own throat and the hot sob in his voice, body flank from which to next attack, and maybe talking to the others, too, commentary, defense, exhortation. Going down deep for breath, for wind, surfacing like a whale. Had to vent, blow his top. In the suit, necklaced with horns, slogging through buckets of sweat. A fat clown with big wet feet. In the wind and the whirlwind, where were all you all?

Sweat in buckets. Standing inside a river of it. Around the river, a fire like Chicago burning down, O'Leary's cow. A panicked stallion trying to break out of the stable, whinnying in terror and rage, aware of the fatuity of its imprisonment: all it would take was a hand, the merest finger, to raise the latch and set him free. At the last, a tearing bellow, a sound itself like a whipping flame. A burning church, the heat cooking the varnish off the pews and lead-fuming the stained-glass windows, images fogging and shattering and the pulpit catching in a roar together with the frantic voices of the men and the women and the children in a scream sermon, hell hymn.

The truth shall make you free. The ones who raised the glass, the ones like someone in love, even the ones hung cool in junk who thought they could safely disappear. Furnaced all. Without their faces their words their clothes, excoriated, flayed, boned out to smell of food on the mouth and sweat under armpits and fond-self stench of the crotch. Sound of breath inside the throat and down in the lungs, how the holies of the air were welcomed, how the fogged evils warded off. Sound of the skin in its catch-

ing and rustling and folding under clothes, touch of the skin in its radiance and its obscurity, its secret heats and colds.

Up in the air they're nothing but skins, no more than a disposition of surfaces. They hang like drapes, fluttering and flapping and freaking against and across and among one another. Skins palpable, impalpable—sometimes a greasy jelly hoping to gobble another and go quivering on to the next score. Sometimes foamed on a shaky wave, bobbing and swimming and eager for overwhelming. Sometimes riding in air, and while the eye wanders in its sleep, the ear stays always awake, even in dream. Furors, cries, songs.

The ones who brought him ears. Friends, Romans, and clergymen, I only ask for a loan and not a gift. And in return pay you a pearl of great price. In the middle of tumult and noise, Babsy shrieking and Donna Mae getting pissed off, Jimmy talking up another woman and his man Sonny laying out the last bill from his wallet, he could hear the sound of listening itself. Like a dream drifting into him, a crazy rubbery cartoon of a huge ear sitting on a wooden chair. All skin and folds and orifices and caving echoing canals, aura of the naked and obscene about it, organ of an ultra sex. Crossing its legs, contriving a smile or a pout or an arch frown, every motion provocative, revealing, inviting, the tiny follicles an exquisite susceptible fringe, don't you want me, want me. And the dream-coupling of the lascivious ears: tease over porch and vestibule, the room in the back in the steamy dark, long peeled stocking and the subtle convulsing hammering across a sort of opening where what you called bodies was only what happened between the stretch, the tract and traction of blanked trembling skins, echo attending echo.

Audience—noise of the world, the traffic horns, the huffing buses and the swooping cars, the gurgling drains and the doors banging and sighing and the footfalls, the footfalls: soft shoe, scraped heel, glide and march and stride and stumble and stomp. The crowd in the seats, the talk and the laughter, snap of the match and the sucked smokes, clink of glasses, sloshed liquor. Audience: a solid wall, a roar: don't interrupt me when I'm speaking; listen, listen to me. Haw haw haw.

And audience—wasn't it also a perfume and a fragrance? Her nostrils flared as she heard his words. Insulted, he sniffed haughtily. Her scent intoxicated his senses. The sweating jubilant crowd called for an encore.

Smell of oil in the bore, clean edge of brass, fresh wood of the reed.

Freak show shit. Words trying to smear his fingers, trying to slide inside his throat, trying to cheese his wind. Placard on his chest: Blind Boy from Ohio. Amazing Negro Plays at Once Three Saxophones.

Roar that shit down. Turn out the fat lady to plop herself on a giant mattress under which the needling bugs are crushed and around which her gargantuan lovers deliver crates of candy and flowers. Turn out the two-headed cow to a double pasture where she grazes on sweet new grass and then turns and munches on big fluffy clouds that sometimes look like two-headed cows. Go into business for yourself. Your own owner, your own shop. Your own company, corporation. Head of heads, cap of your capital. Branches and networks, distribution points. Dispatches and subsidiaries and local offices.

Rahsaan, Inc. Squid cloud blinding and bewildering. Escape, flight, a thing that bladders with air, propelled and propelling by virtue of its hollowing, its interval. Solvency, insolvency.

What he builds. Fingers that run and crowd and cluster, fingers that grow themselves into candelabra, into fans, into webs. Mahogany wood, structural steel, rocket titanium.

What he builds. Throat. A tower through which an elevator rises giddy in its ascent, through which an elevator drops vertiginous to the lowest subfloor. Gears and cables humming and whirring, odor of power, every friction smoothed with oil. Top of the Empire State or the Prudential, the view over the city. A clearing in the air, down below and far off the murmurous traffic, the crowds and the streets. In an almost-silence the infiltrating vibration, the echoing yea, the need to roar.

(In the movie: Godzilla playing with trains, power lines crackling around his spiky head, airplanes weaving and diving. The frantic crowds trapped in the carriages, their terrified cries. From the frantic monster, a sound like a stalled locomotive inside an express tunnel, a sound like an air-raided siren strapped to an atom bomb, a sound like a Japanese technician shouting into a length of bamboo an incomprehensible voice that might sound like the fury of a god.)

What he builds. Wind. Mountain of air, caves of its body, at the summit the whirlwind. Wind over the swaying bridge, the catwalks and girders, march of the piers. The river below running heavy and swift, tangles of branches and flowing hair of weeds.

Liquidity, liquidation. On the highest verge where the cables hum and quiver in the wind, the monster also sways. He gazes over the dark water.

1976, Ratso's, a club on Lincoln Avenue. He'd suffered a stroke a few months before, but Rahsaan was back again working, touring. Audience: the applause sounding like rain on the window, sounding like green leaves in the wind. Sounding like skin talking about skin.

And the thing we were waiting for—the Rahsaan-machine, Kirkatron, the mystic organ grinder (lost on the way to Cleveland, the carnival in Cadiz, in the dark night the wild calliope seemed the only living thing in that town . . .)—it had to be impossible, it needed the right and the left. Rahsaan a little unsteady walking through the audience to the stage, touching people's shoulders, absorbing greetings, wishes. The flute sung through Minnie Ripperton's "Loving You" and then the breath spitting and snorted and hummed and rumbled through that love futile and necessary, the song turned over then to the tenor like a hard-boned wing taking it up, chorused a while with the stritch a gigantic soprano, long body without a bow, crocodile with speed, and the tenor coming back alone a different creature, a different song, "Theme for the Eulimpians," those gods in the ears of all of us, and the tenor now the master register, keys of a monster organ, fleet as a clarinet and heavy as a bari, stops skated across, stops plunged full tilt, circle and cycle of Rahsaan's breath and the hot mob of the notes pushed, pushed, approaching collision and smash-up, paths tracking out in all directions and then swept again into the whirlwind, everything being eaten up and in an instant almost nothing left, Rahsaan's groan over a stuffed-huge repletion where the phrases and runs at the same time never stopped, columned up and spilling in frantic cascade, an extravagant cataract that seemed stilled even as it was crossed by mutating intervals like jumping looping ropes, elastic stochastics, doors of his face, lamps of his mouth, shagged and shaken skins of a dark matter.