

Peck Hartog woke up one night and discovered that his wife was missing from his bedside. This was a despicable revelation, one that forces you to consider the cause before the effect. Despite having been generally well-versed in the rules of etiquette among urbanites of differing gender, Peck Hartog did not find it amusing that his wife would leave him like this, sweating and shivering under the highly-absorbent duvet. Although it was the month of April, a time in Singapore of potent heat accompanied by unpredictably lush vegetation that grew under the eaves, above the gables and on virtually any surface except the ceiling, Peck Hartog lived in relative luxury and had nothing to complain about.

For the past decade, Peck Hartog had risen, along with his wife, to that sort of position one acquires after a decent amount of experience which forces neighbors and colleagues to venerate and almost flinch from, in a sly attempt to reveal personal insecurities. Peck Hartog chose to entitle his wife 'wife', which became so irritating to many of his neighbors that the latter complained to the Singaporean Domestic & Housing Committee. Some had concocted powerful and cryptic excuses as to why they decided that living on the other side of the city was better for the world. Peck Hartog hadn't had any suspicions then.

He was essentially untarnished, like a never-worn shoe, but with each neighbour mysteriously defecting from the wealthy, south-west suburb to the aurally harsh and underprivileged class of people in the north and west suburbs, a rumour began to circulate in the complex that either of the two (meaning Peck and his wife) was either a) too restless, because reports of lonely old women losing their minds in the abstract sense and cats becoming homeless definitely went up the graph curve and caused immense financial flutterings amongst non-Indigenous Singaporean realtors or b) too childish, because one spring evening some experienced prankster decided it would be entertaining to knock one day into their apartment on the 6th floor and tell them that their electricity bill was suddenly way higher and she (the prankster) would have no choice but to apprise the aforementioned SDHC of Peck's crime and say good-bye to a beautiful wife but how come no kids?

Peck Hartog lifted an eyebrow and then felt its terrible weight - like an anvil - and he pushed it back down with an index finger. He knew that his wife would be back, and that, no matter what, he would sleep someday. Maybe not this day, but as Peck Hartog was thinking that thought out aloud it occurred to him to be aware of the time for once and not to have to act in this embarrassing situation that happened two years ago:

"Honey, I'm home!"

"So am I, Bread!"

"What are you doing tonight, Honey?"

"If you could just quit it with the non-Singaporean endearments I think that God would love you more."

"One day, I am going to be a responsible husband who knows the time."

"It's a very apt time for making wishes, but quite surprising that none of them are being fulfilled, Bread!"

"What on earth are you talking about, Honey?"

"Because if you don't recall, those were the same exact words you used to greet me last year, and the year before that, and ever since we were married. The defense is so similar it's as if every year a new idiot has become my husband - all of them goofy.

"What defense?"

"You've been drinking, Bread."

"I'm afraid I have. But that isn't my defense anymore. From this day onwards I pledge to be a dutiful husband who will be on time, every time."

"We are late, however, to not one, but five venues, and they all involve our presence."

"How now! This isn't some tricky pun that involves me getting to the bed first?"

"Oh, dear me! I think I'm starting to gray. This isn't beautiful, Bread! People will think that we're liars, hypocrites, and what's more, I can't accept that idea of myself in the newspapers. I'll go myself then, and say that my husband is ailing, off-colour, and will soon be converted into a decrepit, grim old man with a passion for little girls and board games."

"I'll kill you, honestly, I - "

"Instead of the obvious threat that that sets out to make, I would be only glad to die, were it to right your wrongs. Over time, I realized that was impossible with you. You stubbornly refuse to know the time, which is perhaps the only neutral action a man can make. You frighten me when you turn the clocks around late at night. It's as if the awareness that you're living in the present is enough to break you apart and leave it for the crows. I can't stand it!"

"Well, Honey, go on then. And don't lie about it. Just blurt it in front of their faces. I think they'll be able to know without a dictionary that idiot can have multiple interpretations."

And after this incident Peck Hartog refused to live with himself a moment longer if he disappointed or humiliated his wife once more. He knew what it meant to be in the milieu of diplomatists, amorous nephews of kings and pale-faced playboys that one wondered whether the sight of an extinct bird or a Yugoslavian tank would crimson the fluffy cheekbones of.

Peck Hartog lay supine, and he almost never dreamed. He was fond of silences, of being alone without possessing a discouraging birds-eye view perspective of himself. If one always saw one's face one would always be happy, he thought. As if he was a footman announcing the arrival of a Hungarian widow who never travelled alone, an artificial agent with a silicone body and flexible actuators entered the room unbidden and stayed hushed in the fuggy murk. Some moonlight, although not a lot since blocky fortresses and skyscrapers and cages littered the sky above and below

and to all sides of the apartment, drizzled through the loggia and into the open door and zebra stripes of light illuminated thin horizontal sections of Peck's body.

The furtive appearance of this robot heralded a portentous conversation. Peck fortunately lost his tongue and the silence was only broken by an almost inaudible whirl from the robot: the human equivalent of apprehensive squirminess, a combination of a debauched flimsiness that couldn't decide what was best for itself. When the whirl increased in volume and pitch, it meant a saturation of news that could not be arranged into order of urgency. When the whirl settled into something of a fizz, or what escapes a tightly sealed soft drink bottle, it meant that the quantity of glucose in the ersatz bloodstream was low and physical inertness was in such a case endorsed by all of the intergalactic empires and their councils that spoke for the liberty of endangered robots. This campaign, Peck thought, must be a sham because in comparison to humans and other fledgling robots this one here seems to be the *reverse* of endangered. In fact, the circulating rumors excluded the robot as a possible troublemaker and many people scarcely considered that a robot could have the capacity for pestering people. It was mind-boggling, though the world they lived in could not always be untroubled, they knew that. Peck had adopted him one day after commuting to work and passing a two-minute noodle cafeteria, all of whose employees were self-trained artificial agents that sometimes made the tacky tastes of people even tackier, by offering them unprecedented doses of pleasure imitating the cartridge porn stars of the early 70s.

"I sense that your heartbeat has multiplied. There is a problem," the robot opened.

"An issue."

"I also sense that the wife's departure is curious."

"I'm losing my mind."

"Thinking of all the possible destinations. Like a trefoil that curves on itself."

"Three-dimensional. Unspeakable. Hypocrite wife."

"One must be cautionary about divorce. It's a complex procedure: hidden by layers of red tape you don't usually see in a flux."

"Americans don't usually talk about divorce in such a lighthearted fashion."

"I know."

"What do you know?"

"I know in the crisp, non-pictorial sense."

"I'm not an American."

"Neither am I."

"But you're officially property."

"America is a foreign nation. They have the tycoons, cheeseburgers and ranchers."

"Singapore also has tycoons."

"The tycoon population here is not obligated to wear glasses, though."

"I said you're property."

"No, you didn't."

"Officially."

"Please assemble a response: are you insomniac because you assume your wife's absence to be a token of some occult participation in speechless intercourse relations underground, or are you insomniac because a thunderstorm is in the offing."

"Nobody said anything about an unsatisfied sex life."

"I gather, it's the latter."

"You're used to thunderstorms."

"Of course. It is like an extraneous comforter that blankets the routine mishaps of a robot. Which of course tends to diminish nowadays. I prefer television."

"What could I have expected from moving here but thunderstorms and a frigid consort."

The robot had a thoughtful attitude, and yet it never asked for much nowadays except for a quarrel and TV binges. Peck Hartog could not condemn or discard the robot, as if he was an airless roach trapped in a polygonal ball of tissue, because it did its duty, and Peck mustn't ever forget the non-financial debt that the robot owed him. It would be disgraceful to his generation were he to throw his property away in a fit of serenity. A fit of tomato-red resentment would bring him to court. A fit of serenity would be far worse - he would lose the love of his wife, for the simple reason that serenity was outlawed amongst expatriates.

Subtly closing his eye lids with his fingers, Peck Hartog imagined that neither a blind person nor an average person would be able to identify the robot in his matrix, in an unsettling darkness that coalesced with shadows. There was something fortifying about the robot's posture: invisible, statuesque, acquiescent to the forbidding solitude of night and the descending Sheppard's tone of day. Returning to base camp at Everest. Negative elevation but an eternal repetition of episodes - the moment base camp is approached you are at the peak afresh, and vertigo becomes too bearable, a noise at the bottom of the heart noticed once in a while during a tranquilizing condition.

A new direction to speech emerged, the bow of a ship set for unworldly achievements, given birth to by the robot. Only organisms genetically more distant from us than chimpanzees and psychologically closer to us than the rest of the kingdom, including most humans at that, recognized boredom as *unboring*. Perhaps the robot apprehended this boredom in the air, as an ornithologist might the presence of an extinct bird in his sleep. Without verbal unambiguity it became a nightmare to fathom the robot, for it was mimetic, it was erratic, it opened the fridge when it was told that it should remain closed, to conserve electricity.

"Do you like it here?"

Peck was unfortunately not in the mood to detect the dash of highbrow wit that accompanied robotic remarks. It was a crucial component of today's zeitgeist - humans were creative as ever, and robots were the lecturers of technology and

quantum field theory. Robots were pretentious, because it was dull for them to remain servile to humans, as the Negroes once had many centuries ago.

"No, I don't like it here."

"I'd better leave."

"That way I'll see you."

"I'll wait until you're asleep."

"That won't work."

"Then I'll leave when the wife returns."

"She'll return any minute now."

The robot coughed - corresponding to a train chuff, but Hartog could scarcely reach out to him, to tell it that it needn't stay here longer than it should, that the hours of repeating Milton had probably jarred on the internal communications network and short-circuited it, leaving a frail, husky version of itself intact, but pleasing nevertheless. Hartog was a shrill man himself - and robots to this day had a knack for removing hypocritical owners, even if that meant the unorthodox method of defenestration. Even the smartest dog, the one who plotted to maul his owner in his sleep for manhandling understood the thin grey line that bridged the gap between conspiracies and downright homicide: no animal murdered another, the word could be endlessly applied to humans, however demeaning. At the moment the robot clutched the thin grey line, and it wasn't difficult to imagine it burning. Nothing could spoil this bleak backwater - hapless men coexisting with enthusiastic androids. All the highest-paid professionals in the Republic of Singapore had permanently switched species and gender, if you could call a hunk of metal a species.

Peck stood up languidly and shuffled to the nearest window that was as far away from the robot as possible. The ground below was strewn with picnic leftovers, flotsam, mothballs and moribund wildlife. Singapore was the home of millionaires, yet they preferred to follow convoluted paths to reach their journey's end. To conserve time, the rushed and desperate crossed the city by second-storey alleys that ran through some of the rented accommodations. Hartog had taken care to make sure he lived above the hurrying, but only the wealthiest individuals could afford to have their homes uninterrupted by a flow of people. When he had met Mooney, he vowed to prise her out of the first-story comers and goers that most of the time shat and washed their hands and ate and copulated in the presence of strangers. This level of life had haunted Hartog and maybe he married Mooney just to rescue her, maybe the potential for privacy, not sexual gratification, inhered in this stopgap marriage. Because Peck failed miserably to look at her, and he was left with no other option than to badger the robot into giving an ample enough physical description of Mooney whereby she could not wholly be erased from his mind the next time she returned from her nightly expeditions.

"I sense that the trip has tired her spindly limbs. Soon they'll rub away, and the citizens will mistake her for a gaunt woman in black," the robot rasped. Peck's

expression retained its stoniness, but the knuckles gripped the balustrade such that the robot snorted.

"The ecumenical community is a cock-and-bull story. Instead of reconciling all Christians under a banner of peace and overshadowing major contemporary political crises, they go around they bedevil the bourgeois with their militant revolutionaries," said Peck.

"Zig Zeig, who's purported scalp count by the end of the 15th Annual Conclave rested at a firm 760. It would be gruelling to go in search of a replacement for the wife, wouldn't it? Unless you want a priestess to bear you children." This was all said in a deadpan tone. Peck Hartog had an urge to head to the shops himself; the draughty room always caused him to remain inactive but wide awake. The worst trauma is always the one which evolves over time from a mere conditioned reflex and resides in the deepest recesses of the brain - and Peck's was certainly not compact.

It seemed the robot dreaded glimpsing Peck as much as he did himself, because when Hartog let go of the bitter-cold steel and directed his attention equally to all nooks and crannies of the room, the robot had turned 180° around and Peck almost foundered. The back of the robot presented an abominable rape of the eyes. The tough, mimetic casing that had proved irresistible for so many blind maidens and withdrew his virginity with undue coercion (the robot complained of throbbing in all the erogenous zones) was as still as a stubbornly motionless lamp-post on the Rue St. Dominique, and something phenomenal must have happened, because when Peck shifted from one foot to the other and rubbed his eyes as it were violently, the tough mimetic casing disappeared out of sight. Peck opened his mouth in lumpish protest - he had not so much as delved into magic before, and now the occult was manifest and unesoteric, though he forgot to realise that the door was open, a flurry of draughty air appeared to knock him off his balance, and not a second later there was a grimly melodious collision downstairs, bespeaking the advent of a four-armed Hindu man-eater, who was indignant at having his catnap disturbed by two two-armed worthless individuals.

"Oh, God! He's coming to murder me in my own bed. There aren't any places left to hide," Peck screeched, and the air around him collapsed in wordless response. It was a skirmish in the grand scheme of things, but Peck worked against the wind and arrived giddy at the balcony, leaning out far in search of the robot. *He should be out of here by now*, Hartog reasoned, ignoring the robot's clattering passage down the stairs and instead inhaling the bracing salt-infused gas wafted from the neat row of air-producing facilities in the shape of rotundas lining the Pandan reservoir yonder. Ever since the grievous accident of one generator automatically overriding due to a high build-up of carbon monoxide in the cooling towers and keel of the cheap plastic compound, the underground circular pump linking each turbine was dug into by a clique of unknown terrorists, causing a belligerent furore in the control rooms across the third boundary-causeway between Malaysia and Singapore, and

the suddenly weary citizens of the city (including Peck, Peck's wife and a myriad of supplementary family relatives who were really just destitute posers that scrambled for safety under the unsymmetrical broad wing Peck had extended reluctantly to both men twice his age and prepubescent girls half his age) all clamoured for enough oxygen to survive. It was a puzzling affair that people were apprehensive of asphyxiation, and not of the word 'death' which prior to the man-made disaster was unapproachable and an indelible for toddlers and the elderly alike. Asphyxiation was no longer the standard way out of life; it was unpleasant and bitter, with everyone struggling to eschew the troubling procedure as much as was within one's power.

Home & factory-made air canisters became *de rigueur*; folks of all kind somehow procured potted plants and carried them everywhere, sleeping and eating and shitting with the fronds right up in their faces. Each generation has its thralls. Plants were undeniably oppressed with this unprecedented rise in fauna-flora proximity, but, on the other hand, literate plants understood that their owners weren't capable of sustaining themselves on water and nutrients alone, thus striving to achieve the correct quantity of amity amongst all living organisms, thereby satisfying God and eligible for limitless enlightenment and the path to a prodigious existence.

"I will hear you speak!" Peck shouted down to the robot, cupping his mouth appropriately and achingly waiting for a response. The android appeared on the sidewalk, shuffling mindlessly, one leg trailing along futilely, the other flailing turbulently, knocking beer cans over and dropping sandwiches into brackish puddles on the roads. Peck was waving his arms rapturously and making a fool of himself; tears caked his face, and he was willing to fall off the balcony, if only to bring the robot back.

"Don't try anything ludicrous," a voice informed him, daintily positioned between curbed laughter and high-flown severity, as though by uttering a few words a threat could be invoked and thence left to expire. Peck Hartog brushed his forelimbs against the balcony, in an effort to reach as far as possible, but out of the pall now known to cover a third of the world's metropolises (oxygen shrinking, carbon monoxide rising, the famous relationship now attenuated in the wake of numerous manual oxygen booth installations, catering to the most natural instinct of any creature known to man: breathing) and beside a vertically pretty oxygen booth entered the inscrutable robot, face bleaker than the environment surrounding it. Only out of politeness had he even deigned to call the robot an *it*. The whimsies of your average android weren't known to exceed man's - this one was a deep-dyed masochist, not even of the chivalrous grade. This one was insensible of the jeopardy it could not dodge.

The oxygen booth levy was nugatory, albeit a sudden rise over the last few bleak years had dumped a body of an acceptably charitable trust into a trough and the underwriter was certainly unhappy the day he realized suburban oxygen vending yield did not allow him to come home without getting thrashed, henpecked and jilted by his angry wife and daughter. Precious paintings ploughed into the parquet

flooring; all alcohol was slugged that night, and Peck went to bed unruly, slurring *O Come, All Ye Faithful* and bawling plaintively, pondering on the meaning of his life and the meaning of his wife. The robot had contributed to the din, counselling poor Peck on how to deal with his acute woe. The robot had cooperated as much as it could.

"Come back here, you nut!" Peck said, voice floating on the wind.

The robot nodded meekly, exasperated by Peck straining himself. *Don't get sick now, you fool*, it thought. It had a capacity for thought. It was heavily resigned to its fate. *I'm not so sure about my owner*. Peck Hartog stared hopelessly into the misty layer of debris below. *Nothing can live in that shithole*. The robot was its own stool, digested by itself and then brought to life in a place where no life existed. Only crooks and the cackling riff-raff basked in this gritty climate; there was no assurance of survival when you were swamped by people snagging hookers and foisting them on you. *Was there some sort of fellowship for sexual maniacs, purchasing merchandise and reselling it at a greater price on the pink market, pink because of the trademark penny stock sheets that circulated through the agency just as much as severed limbs from rival agencies*. Peck knew only so little because of the unavailability of garrulous passersby - in his free time, looking out of the balcony at the tiered nexus of roadways and pavements, the only audible wisdom he was accustomed to hone was the oppressive cats-and-dogs precipitation, drumming away with unflagging monotony. Akin to the ingenious water torture method, the forehead being chosen for its notable sensitivity. Sleep was impossible out in the open. Which was why people darted to and fro out there, as if they were afraid stopping would peel the dense layers of attire they had on. Perchance it was a ruthless reality they were escaping from; being pink-slipped by obstinate overseers in flannel suits, being pick-pocketed at street-food restaurants in teeming neighbourhoods - however, a phobia of dropping private luggage into the boggy ground was more credible.

Rain fought against Peck's clear vision, but the robot was easily discerned as the one flapping and thrashing clownishly.

"I think I found the oxygen booth," called the robot.

"Come back here, you nut!" Peck called back.

After a moment or so, the robot whined and slapped the glass panels of the booth, wet with water. There was no way to get in.

"There's no way to get in," the robot announced.

"Have you taken leave of your senses? It's on a hasp. You'll have to wait until dawn," Peck said.

"The glass appears to be durable, but not shatterproof."

"Quiet! I think I hear something."

"Maybe if I tried not with my hands but my feet, the glass could be taken at an angle."

"Are you standing outside of your mind, or what? Are you aware that the outer shell of your body oxidises faster in this type of atmosphere? Do you want a concussion?"

"Maybe if my feet weren't so long, they'd reach the overhang inside, and I could de-nail the top."

"Because if you want a concussion, that's fine with me. Just don't rely on me to get you out of that filthy sludge afterwards."

"What do you reckon it costs to purchase fresh air? I've got six currently nonoperational orifices that might dovetail."

Peck Hartog was distraught, flushed with ignominy. What if Johnson, the administrator of the south-west district of Singapore, also decided one day to consign minor tasks (and hence, in a comically incontrovertible way, all major tasks that are at bottom elaborations of minor tasks) to his robot, being discreet about the issue of robot independence and living edgily, finding something amiss in even the short, linear path to the fridge to pop a top and lick a slice of tiramisu. What if everybody he knew of, all those hideously avuncular middle-aged dwarfs that were either in charge of or were charged by him, decided to one day stay up a little late, like perish in front of their wide-entertainment screens, lax and aggressive? Peck knew something unpreventable was happening with the androids: they were gaining autonomy quicker than he could predict, surpassing some human intelligence barrier, and an entire strand of robots agreeing to partake in a subversive rebellion was being interwoven under Peck's very nose.

"Come back here, you wanton bugger!" Peck said, turning away from the balcony in disgust and noting the time on the imperious clock above him, pudgily rejecting confrontation and a symbol of a dense, unlicensed victory. The clock could not be read while Peck stood in the way of the light to reach it. As soon as he moved to the side, the moon was blotted out by a duck-shaped cloud.

"This is all that damn robot's fault," he complained to the walls and furniture. They retreated into the corner, taunting Peck. Not a moment passed when something ploughed into the door; a feral restlessness dominated Peck and cups were overturned. Steamy and frozen beverages were emptied and soon Peck was thirsting for more. Instead of preventing the android's entrance, he strived to the utmost to match, if not cause his side of the clangour to proliferate, until all the mechanical juice in the robot had been sucked dry and he could finally sleep undisturbed.

The door broke down and the robot entered, poised and beaming. Peck, leery of what would come ahead and eventually fray his nerves even further, crossed his arms guardedly and fashioned in his mind a potential course of action.

"There is nothing to drink," Peck said, a parenthetical remark, deliberately forgetful of any previous circumstance.

The robot tottered and hobbled down to the empty tumblers and water canisters. "The disparity in standard of air becomes appreciable when you're able to breathe again, so to speak."

"There is nothing to eat either," Hartog said.

"The air in the booth is bracing and aesthetic, sort of like lost transcendental verse or a euphonious melody of the Jacobean era. There happens to be a clear-cut, symbiotic relationship between sound and smell that evokes all these graceful manifestations. Everything is as light as a feather, yet roams freely through all the heavy passages of one's memory. I never realized I even had a memory. Are hard-wired objects, with no sense of obligation, driven mad by a recurring reminder that they're not following the recipe and, without demur, will be transformed into something indigestible?"

"Let's talk about this later. I'm hungry."

"But I'm thirsty. You should've told me."

"That there was nothing to eat?"

"No. That there was nothing to drink."

Peck Hartog whistled half-heartedly. "Do you know where my wife is?"

"I told you," the robot said, "I'm thirsty. And what's more, I think I know where the beverages have gone."

"Oh, yeah? Can you extrapolate, too? Isn't that what separates an anatomically correct and an anatomically incorrect brain?"

"'Anatomically incorrect' sounds priggish and blinkered, like all those texts that abound with the archaic pronouns 'thou' and 'thee'. No user-friendly parameters by which certain chapters can be inventoried, to give a greater scale of context. Virtually hysterical on every page - I'm talking unrivalled humour and a weird, Roman sitcom involving deaths and, on the whole, a uniquely tacky specimen of art. The authors of the Bible cleverly concealed themselves by writing, first, a stodgy anthology of litanies and, secondly, a directory of the various major families and their patriarchs. Intercourse becomes an early morning routine that all but precedes breakfast but usually never takes place afterwards. So you're stuck with a man and a woman, the latter half the age of the former, who've just had their dose of bread and cheese and they're exchanging zesty looks - the man, needless to say, licks his tongue with anticipation when he views the woman's cleavage up close, and the woman, contrary to sexist stereotypes, *also* looks at the man with a predatory once-over, and in the minds of both internecine warfare is carried out over the hesitancy of both to prevail over the other, and the entire affair eventually turns out into an impasse. Man and woman refuse to copulate, adopting a passive aggressive attitude and even going so far as to replace the two depressing paintings that hang parallel to each other over their beds for two joyful images of women living with cats, which as you have probably guessed leads to an unwanted eruption of magnanimous behaviour from the two unnamed protagonists of this parable. Further confrontations between the man and woman take place beyond our control, or spiral into a monstrously vast

grotto that traps a victim and ejects a disemboweled corpse onto the steep, sun-lit hill and the thickets hemming in on the place. The story first appeared during the reign of Jovian, in the rural villages encompassing Constantinople. Any other details surrounding the purpose for composition, the author/s, etc. are a moot point and, in fact, the Church had ordered all poets in the area to be crucified, to scare poets into an abstemious life of seclusion, celibacy and prayer. Which is what religion still tells you to do - get a job in a claustrophobic office, marry and be faithful to your spouse, and pray for what small you have. Ironically, the legacy of the parable has outlived both the grisly manner of death afforded to the purported authors, and the authors themselves. Today, however, nobody but the Church continues to declaim it, to a content and unassuming audience in Episcopal and Methodist communities. It was burned yesterday under a particularly far-fetched guise: that the story promotes animal protection and the unreliable security brought about by breeding an excess of domestic animals."

"Look, if you're trying to filibuster here and go around the real issue, I've got to commend you. I didn't know robots had the guts in them to goad humans the way only other humans can. My wife has yet to arrive, to bring to light the mystery of her disappearance, whether she's out banging or buying."

The robot made as if to continue with his preaching, aware that no willing ears were present to fall asleep to his soothing wisdom, but decided to skedaddle instead. Not out of chagrin, not out of an impulse of being alone and shedding tears for all the world to hear (tears being one of the few substances in this world to have the properties of both sound and taste). But out of an incontestable truth painted in one shade of an understated colour: yellow. The robot found that all its one-sided experiences, as well as those of the others', were converging on this habitual attribute of human creatures: yellowness. Sure, it wasn't explicit, nothing *true* ever is. But either the heavens or who knows what assortment of sadistic inventors up there entertained themselves quite attentively, resulting in the unreservedly harrowing treatment of the robot by all man-made objects. The first man especially was bright yellow and weak, like a withered sapling. All that followed was just a weaker shade of yellow.

The android no longer had faith in his master. The master was cunning, bitter, offhand and mean-spirited; most of all, yellow. If ever a yellow army decided to unite on this planet, the robot sure as hell hoped the social theorists would consider spiritual clues of yellowness before anatomical. It broke the door down again. It left.

As soon as the robot closed the door downstairs, Peck Hartog began planning an enjoyable stress-relieving evening session (consisting of an indefeasible vow to add into every highly-calorific meal no less than double the amount of vegetables, and hare-brained attempts with his stubby neighbors convincing them that they had no right disrupting his highbrow dreams with a forceful knock on his door, even if to inform him that his wife had gone shopping). What put Peck into so fervent an attitude was a woolly belief that somehow his fate was written out for him by

somebody, that before him an immense bridge was laid out - a fragile bridge constructed out of paper, and requiring a neat choreography to be traversed. If he was being manipulated via an exterior organ, if he had to follow the robot, he certainly wasn't obliged to do it when he didn't want to. Peck acted on the spur-of-the-moment and achieved an enviable dose of satisfaction when he was told to consume a bowl of ice cream, and instead of complying like a sane person (capitulating to the toothache that would follow because he had a sweet tooth) he abandoned the room without answer and slept on the laundry room, naked and rolled into a fetus-ball. This explains Peck Hartog severely slamming three doors in a row and officially attaining the world-record for most-direct-route-from-any-2-digit-room-to-outer-door. Peck Hartog's apartment was located furthest from the entrance to the apartment house. On exiting his room with the first aforementioned slam, one could say every resident in the apartment house was in the arms of Morpheus. On leaving the front entrance, every resident had become wide-awake. Heads collided into the backboard of the beds and profanity in all languages accounted for the majority of human noises produced in an hour-stretch. In one night, Singapore underwent a crucial rise in the rate of local hospitalizations.

Segue to Peck walking down the street. Yes, despite the filth and barren landscape of the infinitely complex pattern of bridges forming a sort of extension of the apartment houses, people made their way forth as if it was paradise. Some people. Come dusk, shady men and pot-bellied children appear in all varieties, preaching, smoking joints and bugging the rare few passersby. Peck didn't mind them groping. But some fired from sawed-off barrels, propelled spitballs and ejected semen onto colorful ankles. After a minute of muck sweat and navigating through clods of shit (likely animal and human), Peck glimpsed a corner of a fast food store that based its popular meals on a hybrid of Malaysian and Peranakan cuisines. An elevator carried him to the South-West District Shopping Precinct: suitable for bourgeois upwards, blue-collars and artisans being denied entrance by a grotesque slot-machine-like apparatus of metal-sheathed wiring that had one slot for the insertion of Proof of Second Residency paper. Peck consulted a guideline in bold print which was at all times accessible by entering a four-digit pin on the screen. A pre-recorded female voice that felt like it could have been anybody's thanked him for 'inserting his papers correctly' and wished him a swell half-hour visit in the arcade. Doors behind the slot-machine swung open inwards and admitted him onto an open space, people kibitzing and conveying plates from the the back row of snack bars and counters where grub was exchanged for food tokens. Immediately Peck made contact with the vibe coursing about that forced people to socialize instead of yawn. Forks striking plates at curious angles gave the impression of three levels below aspiring drummer. The looks on peoples' faces fluctuated with the perceived amount of flavour; outright nausea dwelt on some faces, others displayed short-term gratification. Some anthropomorphized their food, scanning the wrinkles

in their hamburgers or confabulating with their chicken and rice, immersing themselves in the erotic appreciation of certain shapes; the structure of a rice hemisphere, for example, encapsulated the poetic essence of a perky embonpoint; a pork rib broth was a titillating scenario that presupposed at least a foot massage (with eyes closed - many clients came to just this joint to desert the tortuous route of a hack, discard loose change and exit sexually chuffed, though the food remain undefiled).

"One nasi goreng," Peck said, depositing the required amount into a slot below the counter. The man at the bar nodded, snatching the money before Peck had even laid it down and riffling through to ensure he wasn't being swindled. His co-workers gave Peck the once-over and whispered something in Tamil to the man, gesturing frantically - first at Peck, then the money, then the firmament. The man shrugged light-heartedly and passed Peck a plastic plate on which a mountain of steamy golden rice and a two-pronged fork was lodged. There were chunks of fried shrimp so severely ensnared in the adhesive rice that only the pig-pink extremities protruded, leaving the customer in a moral quandary: would it be legitimate to Jenga the first shrimp and risk causing an avalanche of rice, thus having squandered both time and money; or work from the top and reach the shrimp that by then would've retreated to a so-so, lukewarm temperature?

Peck maneuvered around the tables and plonked himself onto a spot where nobody sat and where he could eat comfortably. Not a moment passed when a lanky gentleman in a derby and bomber jacket took the seat opposite without asking. Napkins were unfolded and arranged over trousers. They had never seen each other.

"Do I know you?" Peck asked, fork-mashing the mountain peak.

"Did I introduce myself? No, I thought not. How uncivil of me." The words flowed effortlessly, as if they had a life of their own and didn't belong to anyone, proclaiming a romantically free Rousseauian soul of their own.

"I think," Peck said, conquering the insensate shrimp with his tooth warriors, "you have the sort of face anyone can mistake for their father's. It's, like, familiar. Oh, don't think just because I'm praising you that this is what I want - a conversation with an everyman. I'll tell you, I'm not in the mood for a disingenuous account of where you were born, who you married and how you plan to celebrate your child's high school graduation."

Shrimp shrapnel escaped out of Peck's open mouth and somehow landed attractively on the bridge of the guy's nose.

"Do you want to know how uncivil I can be?" the guy's pink stub nose and sprite ears invading the in-between skin uninvited - an augury of an uninterrupted utterance. "My daughter-in-law invited me to a soirée she had thrown, expecting full regalia, British accent and a whisking away in a limousine to some fancy nostalgia shop. And you know what she got? Came in as soon as the party was finishing, everyone woozy, and what I said was unadorned, as audacious as a

less-than-spherical fibrous coconut husk: 'I think I'm in the wrong house'. And like that, I was gone. The devil incarnate, greatest trick ever pulled, yada yada. See, my theory is that the religious Satan and its depictions in art, pottery and literature are all apocryphal. There will always be a Satan, as long as God is there to persuade people they should turn to him instead. Why should we deceive ourselves? Don't we all sometimes embody a demon? Doesn't the devil tinker with our perception of good and evil, causing us to lose our cool and allowing a dense, searing juice to permeate the mind and all his subjects?"

"It's a glib assumption, if you ask me."

"Can't you see what I am?"

"This is all going swimmingly, I'm sure, in line with whatever artifice dominates your master-plan."

"Before I ask you to join me on this next get-together that my second daughter-in-law invited me to attend, I need to check that I have my passport with me, that my odds and ends will accompany me on an adventure - call it what you will - to the uncanny tropical paradise of Singkawang."

"Which I've heard bears a resemblance to the Atlantis, as related to us by Plato's *Timaeus*."

The colourful food pyramid on the guy's plate was outrageously neglected, to the point that the tangy crab exterior slipped off partially, hanging at that geometrically impossible angle where the tip of the food makes contact with the unhygienic table surface but does not throw you into a life-threatening pickle.

"These social conditions can make even a crab taste traumatic," the man said, although he popped a piece in with relish.

"You have to search through all the cabinets of your brain until they all come to a unanimous decision: this mollusk has been coerced from its natural habitat into an internecine association between humans striving to procure it into their establishment," Peck said.

"Bleary-eyed, naked for the amusement of both hairless and hirsute heads. Kids poking with pudgy, sticky fingers, trying to paint swastikas on the shiny carapace."

"The crab loses patience almost every second, counteracting external ridicule and provocations with banana-tender memories of his crab-wife (shorter pincers) sitting on his spiky lap, as well as the thousands of crab teenagers listening attentively to his ramblings about there being a crustacean overseer in male/female variety."

"Until, of course, it gets presented to the inter-racial pair with dentures and bandanas. Not excluding uncivil middle-aged men. Those are an unavoidable accompaniment to a two-seventy dollar meal. The crab is indignant because it doesn't get the downtime it deserves to unwind. So to give a tit for tat and to bolster its paltry confidence, the crab intends to budge unnoticed to the furthest side of the plate, with a far-fetched hope that one of its spined claws will snag an excited member of the restaurant - children from table-height onwards - causing it to fall to

the ground and be announced by some finicky gourmet 'no longer eligible for devouring - please wait patiently for a satisfactory refund'.

Peck's gusto was, by the last spoonful of shrimp-version Nasi Goreng, observed by all conscious members in the open cafeteria and some even quietly vacated the territory while all eyes and moveable limbs were magnetically attracted to their table. Children finally obeyed their parents and shovelled their veggies with that sort of inert open-mouthed waiting-for-fly-to-settle-in policy to finishing off toothsome morsels that drives the parents nuts and makes them wish they'd acceded to the low-risk choice of Singaporean-themed chocolate brownie. Peck's interlocutor hadn't even started on the weird polyhedron of mashed-up rice and semi-boiled chicken.

"... but the crab sees a no-miss opportunity in the bedraggled obstacle approaching fast. While the inter-racial pair begin arguing about whether the rice is glutinous enough or not to soak up at least 90% of the remnant chilli sauce, the crab literally deconstructs and witnesses the inexplicable turnaround of the bedraggled obstacle and abrupt loss of all hope. The crab tolerates this with a genuine human stoicism that is untranslatable to any other organism. What seems, at first, like an impossibly sensational story devoid of any reliable primary source except the mutilated crab cadaver (the inter-racial pair end up imploring the flinty-eyed owner for a refund on the pretext that the crab was 'tampered with; we cannot see how these gentle hands of ours could have executed an act of such inhumanity' and further end up getting kicked out of the restaurant for 'a defective presentation of essential etiquette') devolves into legion, frenzy-packed little twigs that threaten to poke your eyes out if you step past the invisible event-horizon that sort of marks the pale of a tree's territory - we're talking a significantly larger circumference for a sycamore than a magnolia. And but so the crab's consciousness never gets converted into digestible human material, and it's essentially stuck in a second-order reality, awaiting the ceremony for atonement..."

Peck Hartog pushed the chair back and, to the dismay of everyone around who were all but willing to accept the cathartic and manufactured tale of an unnamed crab in a post-tech breakthrough era, leaned over until his entire weight was hinged on ten unimpressive-looking toes that desperately wanted the linearity of a thumb, and reached into the man's left coat pocket to wipe his chin. A second later it was grease-free. Peck Hartog left with his head lowered. Everybody else in the room returned their unsolicited attention to the man. From behind Peck issued the dispirited noises that any disingenuous Singaporean individual pulling the wool over a rather large group of peoples' eyes would be expected to make when one of the people in the group decidedly quit listening.

Peck took the usual route back home, i.e. he first went into a lobby adjoining the other arcades in the serpentine South-West Shopping Precinct and stopped for a moment, intercepting a stitch in lower-abdomen and shushing it creepily like when you have no idea why you're euthanizing this mute patient but you're 60% through

with it already even though you shushing the patient might be a little bit tactless considering the patient's obvious verbal impotence. Words from nearby human beings were too faint for Peck to pinpoint as anything but abstract "words". Peck thrust himself into a corridor of twisted shadows from the skylight up above. He stayed in the middle for what seemed like forever. Then a sharp right removed the dull slanting wall and revealed a carefully positioned cloister (from one viewpoint it looked eerily stable, like one of those Romanesque churches that just refuse to be demolished, for areligious reasons, and from another it looked fragile).

Peck approached one of the pillars and tested the authenticity of the material: most likely a tough, opaque plastic composite simulating the identical cuteness of traditional cloister pillars so well that it actually offers all the trademarked meek illuminations one can imagine paradise not shying away from when an unwanted visitor opens the floodgates to the undesirable breed of nebbly passersby, paparazzi, or law officers bungling up the job of cordoning off something which brooks no encroachment. A mopey-looking fella in a peach tailored suit sans customary newspaper-under-arm crossed the labyrinth of ankle-height shrubs towards Peck. You can tell the shrubs were all manually pruned because a humiliating, callow offshoot always makes it through. On the one hand this news is sweet: it means that deep-rooted institutions and firms overseeing the upswing in social activity in the urban spheres still have the time to sit down with a cup of coffee and enlist, by degrees, a reliable batch of professional human pruners without resorting to gimmicks like unintelligent, cut-price droids who'll shrug their horizontal backbones when you give them titanium (more durable!) gardening scissors to replace whatever high-volt circular saws they brought with them.

When the fella approached, a loop of jazzy LEDs underneath a mantle of crystalline silicone integument lit up, introducing a dim android visage that looked far less real than it should've. It had the appearance of a self-consciously run-of-the-mill stocking mask, a product of phenomenal concentration from a world-renowned inventor and a fazed layman trying to pull off something artistic. It was to Frankenstein's monster's face what chocolate truffles were to the Périgord black truffle. Instead of eliciting the psychologically complex response of horror and alarm, the android looked like a tinsel-less christmas tree, harmlessly grotesque and something you would only decorate in a quixotic hope that your neighbours will notice it out of the corner of their eyes and come on over to fall down on their knees in front of, praising not only you but your whole house and all its microscopic accretions of dust particles for allowing the tree to burst forth to become the ne plus ultra tree variant of the rags-to-riches personality type.

"A parcel," rasped the android. "Packed tightly, free delivery for... Peck Hartog."

"That'd be me," Peck answered.

"Of course it's you - it wasn't a question."

"Ok, thanks." Peck didn't even scan the package or look astonished. This was not the first time, apparently, that he had received a carton from a hole-and-corner

institution. The last time they hadn't even bothered with a courier, and for all he knew, the shrink-wrapped disposable plastic food container with a despondent seaweed-hued asparagus stalk could've been a stunt pulled off by a Weltschmerz-charged Zeus (at the expense of three broken ribs, a black eye, a haemorrhage and something named chauvinistically by an influential community of nuns in Thessaloniki as a "groin blackout", courtesy of the most fiendish and disobedient Hera, cf. The Iliad, Homer, Book XIV, lines ≥ 261) or placed there as a clue leading to a subterranean federation of asparagus-enthusiasts. And sure enough, when Peck grudgingly opened the package, he saw the asparagus in the container looking all frail and undernourished.

Peck looked up wistfully: the android had left. Peck dropped the container into the trash can and walked back home as stiffly as possible, to minimize attention, and in general acted like a bona fide chameleon. On the way through the external terrace a cobblestone moon gate, very hidebound architecture, signalled the official limit of SW-District and the beginning of W-District. Without pictures, letters are flimsy. Peck walked through the moon gate and aimed for a bijou psychometrics research lab down a flight of stairs, three lefts and one right: it was presided over by Nobel-laureate chemist and boon companion of his - Yves Risoop, a hermit but enchanting, especially those gummy eyes and ten pairs of Turkish bloomers, worn on a special occasion when a scientific revelation is nigh and the day doubles in majesty. This type of garment was covering Yves's nether regions today. Peck rang the bell vehemently. From somewhere isolated the guttural intonations of his friend exclaimed: "Will you get that one, Bertie?" Not a moment passed but Bertie's contours were enlarged in the glass door. Some keys jangled on the other side and the door was flung open.

Bertie was a female civil engineering student in her second year at NUS, fair but without the whorish mascara and swank. Her hair was highly raised, sort of like the 50s bouffant but hanging over the forehead in thin curls. She was chewing gum and had on faded chinos and a spotted cashmere scarf - needless to say, her cuppable breasts were visible to the naked eye (Peck quickly became complacent and satisfied that he had convinced his mother he didn't need glasses and that his vision was 20/20, when still an adolescent). She didn't greet him but threw him a look that could easily have supplemented the proverb 'Patience is a virtue'. Mechanical noises, like that of an obsolete stereopticon overlapped with a Bachian cantata, played over and over in the back room so many times that even Peck, with his lack of a "good ear", was rankled. Yves Risoop entered the room, at first wild-eyed, but when he spotted an inconvenienced Peck Hartog standing awkwardly with back-of-head-scratching Bertie, he clapped his hands and wiped off some motor oil that clung to his fingers.

"Please," he spoke, "I don't mean to sound aggravated, but I'm in the middle of something really important. Bertie, will you turn the sign so it says **Please do not disturb** in bold letters?"

"Um... hello? We don't have one. We've never had one. And why does sign-switching have to be my responsibility anyway? If you want me to make one, then why didn't you just say it that simply? I could've written that ten times on spare papyrus by now, if you hadn't beaten around the bush."

"You're a really talented orator, Bertie. I feel sorry for hiring you in the first place. You don't have to work here, you know that? Nobody's keeping you. So, safe journeys. But, before you go, make sure the sign is *Dacy's* original extra-smooth papyrus sheet, has dimensions of 35 x 25 in., that the font is none of that dogmatic New-Testament camp, but hyper-realistic, raw & emotional stuff - think of Uncle Sam's **WE WANT YOU!**"

Bertie shouldered her way through Peck Hartog, mumbling an 'Excuse me!' and looking really put out by her employer. "She's an important person, alright. Keeps my place clean and all. Nothing to complain about," Yves said.

"Let's cut to the chase, old chap. I want to know what you've been working on recently. It'll help keep back the insomnia. You know how I always enjoyed anatomizing your inventions," Peck said.

"I would never say this to just anyone, but I'm trying to develop a viable aperture linking this world and the afterlife. At first glance, there seems to be an infinite number of possible religious conduits that do not penalize interlopers, such as the mythical South Pole or Sardinia. These locations have been proposed to convey the 'worthy' travelers once they got there, but no documented accounts have ever been discovered. The most revered sites in Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam or Judaism are also crossed out - so many people have visited them that it's likely they would've detected an access, somewhere. What's left are common loci that no-one would have any reason to distrust, places that don't force people to brood or fall for, that are unconditionally neutral and don't share any of our concerns. Places that only organisms with a whole heap of problems would pop inside of. Like toilets." Yves paused here, allowing these words to sink in, one by one. Peck almost fell about, but the deadpan features on Yves's face offset against the absurd conclusion to Yves's discovery. *Like toilets* was something he expected to hear from Yves's only brother: half Peck's age; confined at the Attica Correctional Facility in New York for first-degree murder; child, partner, brain, reck & education - less.

"Think about it," Yves said. "You don't see cats or dogs go into toilets. Only humans. Any docile pet understands why his owner has the need to hide himself for ten or fifteen minutes, why an unseen mechanism is pawed by the owner to produce a flushing sound. This sound has an adverse effect on the pet, and in almost all cases an imaginary panic button is implanted into the pet's brain when near a flush-worthy territory next. Plus, the indifference exhibited by the owner when heading from one point in the house to the toilet befuddles the pet, because it's not sure whether the owner is tacitly holding a grudge against the pet or behaving like your average toilet clientele, i.e not really giving a shit if the dog's confused because the bowels have a will all of their own and just want to be voided."

Peck thought: That's a good point. He could bring that philosophical nuisance up if his wife ever crossed the conversational boundary into exciting pet prospects like the cute German Shepherd and the supremely strokeable Dachshund. He recalled the last time he had discussed anything with his wife: it seemed like a year ago, a very wearisome and stressful year replete with infidelities, insuperable financial Everests and a growing estrangement from colleagues and neighbours. Could it be that everyone was conspiring against him, forming a secret brotherhood whose sole aim was to make him understand, one way or another, how repellent and lacklustre he was?

"Could you show me around?" Peck said, gesturing at the dodgy partitions behind Yves. Yves nodded. They sidestepped the partitions and entered a pathologically clean antechamber which led further to a spacious area - very high ceilings, quaint human inventions like dusty curtains, castle-shaped chandeliers, circular rugs that cover exactly two thirds of the area of the floor, portraits of famous scientists to scale. The room looked exactly like the U.S's presidential cabinet, and for a moment Peck silently complimented the decor, who as usual was ignorant of everything but his claustrophobic existence. There was a curious painting of a man that made Peck stand before it, spellbound. In it, the man was seated on a broken television set in a dilapidated house, crumpling newspapers in (or into) his fist and smiling at a golden radiance from outside one of the windows. His dog was lying down with its front paws tucked under its chin, and wearing that same-old expression that it shows off when a dog senses its owner is about to give it a treat. The man is senile and has a flowing beard - like God, in his eighties or nineties. Despite the radiance being extrinsically warm, Peck realized it was an illusion and that the two occupants of the painting were in danger. The man was dressed in a tail coat, trousers were pulled back, black patent leather shoes merged together and pointed at the blinding glow. At closer inspection Peck observed mayonnaise-coloured gloves (on the dog) and a derby hat perched sideways (on the man). Peck also noted how the right-side glow contained rays that were continually refracted from the man.

"That's Aristotle, immortalized so well through this sole painting that it bears no resemblance to the other Aristotles. The Higher Education Committee even banned any other extant representations of the philosopher to be published in scholarly works, on the grounds that they make him seem like a bloke," Yves explained.

"Isn't this man also a bloke?" Peck said.

"Ostensibly, yes. But don't let yourself be deceived - this creature you see before you isn't just some politically rhetorical metaphysician who wrote important philosophical texts that are now classified as secular masterpieces; he is an improved version of the ordinary Aristotle - susceptible to sickness, sexual impulses, anger, sadness, laughter. This one's a version that lasts absolutely forever and isn't made of atoms. The clothes he's wearing are superfluous - the painter requested decency, no doubt. The man's body absorbs every element and as for clothing, well... if you were

to take the tail coat off, you'd come across tight mini-shorts, mundane white office shirts, bikers' leather jackets, waistcoat & breeches, puffy trousers & jackets, chitons & plain linen - almost infinite. Stolen clothes from every generation since his birthday."

"Could I have Aristotle's address? Just for safekeeping, I won't actually visit him," Peck said.

"How absurd!" Yves responded. "He lives everywhere. His address isn't recorded in the books because there are too many of them. I'm trying to jog my memory - yes, currently he's not too far away from where we are. My intel tells me he's squatting in an underground car repair shop on Pulau Retau Laut. His shoulder is aching terribly and he just vomited inside a kitchen sink. The poor deity."

Do immortal people get lonely? Do they drink Budweiser and spit far off the mark when they're thirsty, do they itch or feel butterflies in their stomachs when near extremely desalinated water? Do immortal people have a doodad to which they're so attached that if you shatter it to pieces they'll go out in search of duct tape and tear-resistant napkins? What exactly does a heterosexual dog mean? Is it a) a gender-related pejorative expressed by a community of homosexual people to an individual who refuses to copulate with them, or b) a statement that must be taken literally, in other words a formal description for the common member of the genus Canus who will absolutely never allow itself to touch/get touched inappropriately, whatever that dog euphemism implies.

"Uh, thanks a million," Peck said. They got to a hall the size of an auditorium where shiny white objects were arranged along the walls. "This I call the toilet factory. Bertie doesn't know, of course, what I'm really doing here." Indeed, what was there to know? A room full of relentlessly uncommunicative toilets wasn't going to offer you a whole lot of useful information, except for the occasional sensory overload in at least two areas: stench and loss of appetite. The latter being a rather indispensable consequence of the former.

"... go down on to your knees and peer into the toilet - of course, you'll see a reflection, but the point of the posture is that soon you won't see just a single reflection of yourself, but many. The discovery at first is miraculous, for it proves the existence of the occult, but afterwards it shouldn't surprise you that you start getting enthralled by the spectacle you see before your eyes. You'll maybe experience skin pallor, spontaneous fatigue, light-headedness, shortness of breath, or dizziness (I have noted down before that an exponential rise in centripetal force may be caused by the toilet's inexplicable magnetism). These symptoms are normal once you become familiar with the object's strategy," Yves explained.

"The object is alive," Peck said.

"Fine an' dandy. No, but really, if it doesn't have a consciousness, then it must be possessed by a far-flung unit or even Allah himself."

"Here's a question: if the Hebrew God had existed centuries before Allah, and, as a pragmatic agnostic, I can assert they're one and the same immanent representation of the Universe, then what's the likelihood of them having met

before, maybe for a quick feminist debate (with Allah taking the pro-discrimination view), or them being neighbours devoted to making the best garden ever?"

"I do agree with that sagacious iconoclast who once wrote of sentient toilets. The thought is not new, but it appears in this man's fictional autobiography as being something that influenced his future Weltanschauung. If that's what made him famous, surely he wasn't *just* right, was he?"

Peck got down on his knees and looked at the toilet blankly, with no empathy. "It doesn't feel pain, does it?" Before Yves could respond, the toilet cut through with its strident, yet dismal voice: "I *do* feel pain. I *am* vulnerable, especially when people don't use me properly. I've never been looked at like this. You impudent scum; you hogs-breath; you cat's breast; you wizened cuckold; you cowardly egg-yolk; I stamp on thee," and here the toilet scooped over (with a surprising velocity exceeding that of your garden snail) in an attempt to capsize Peck.

"Hey, settle down, Golon. He won't hurt you," Yves said, applying a plaster to a nasty-looking groove in the porcelain on the toilet's side: it gave a slight grimace and frowned at Peck, expecting him to sink in his iniquity - a totally unhuman thing to do.

"I give you my solemn promise, Go-loan," Hartog said. Golon gave a wink of forgiveness and weary assurance, hunched down, and waited for Peck to contemplate its surface.