Cosmicomics
by Italo Calvino
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The Distance of the Moon

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

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

Orbit? Oh, elliptical, of course: for a while it would huddle against us and then it would take flight for a while. The tides, when the Moon swung closer, rose so high nobody could hold them back. There were nights when the Moon was full and very, very low, and the tide was so high that the Moon missed a ducking in the sea by a hair'sbreadth; well, let's say a few yards anyway. Climb up on the Moon? Of course we did. All you had to do was row out to it in a boat and, when you were underneath, prop a ladder against her and scramble up.

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

This is how we did the job: in the boat we had a ladder: one of us held it, another climbed to the top, and a third, at the oars, rowed until we were right under the Moon; that's why there had to be so many of us (I only mentioned the main ones). The man at the top of the ladder, as the boat approached the Moon, would become scared and start shouting: "Stop! Stop! I'm going to bang my head!" That was the impression you had, seeing her on top of you, immense, and all rough with sharp spikes and jagged, saw-tooth edges. It may be different now, but then the Moon, or rather the bottom, the underbelly of the Moon, the part that passed closest to the Earth and almost scraped it, was covered with a crust of sharp scales. It had come to resemble the belly of a fish, and the smell too, as I recall, if not downright fishy, was faintly similar, like smoked salmon.

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

My cousin, the Deaf One, showed a special talent for making those leaps. His clumsy hands, as soon as they touched the lunar surface (he was always

the first to jump up from the ladder), suddenly became deft and sensitive. They found immediately the spot where he could hoist himself up; in fact just the pressure of his palms seemed enough to make him stick to the satellite's crust. Once I even thought I saw the Moon come toward him, as he held out his hands.

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

Now, you will ask me what in the world we went up on the Moon for; I'll explain it to you. We went to collect the milk, with a big spoon and a bucket. Moon-milk was very thick, like a kind of cream cheese. It formed in the crevices between one scale and the next, through the fermentation of various bodies and substances of terrestrial origin which had flown up from the prairies and forests and lakes, as the Moon sailed over them. It was composed chiefly of vegetal juices, tadpoles, bitumen, lentils, honey, starch crystals, sturgeon eggs, molds, pollens, gelatinous matter, worms, resins, pepper, mineral salts, combustion residue. You had only to dip the spoon under the scales that covered the Moon's scabby terrain, and you brought it out filled with that precious muck. Not in the pure state, obviously; there was a lot of refuse. In the fermentation (which took place as the Moon passed over the expanses of hot air above the deserts) not all the bodies melted; some remained stuck in it: fingernails and cartilage, bolts, sea horses, nuts and peduncles, shards of crockery, fishhooks, at times even a comb. So this paste, after it was collected, had to be refined, filtered. But that wasn't the difficulty: the hard part was transporting it down to the Earth. This is how we did it: we hurled each spoonful into the air with both hands, using the spoon as a catapult. The cheese flew, and if we had thrown it hard enough, it stuck to the ceiling, I mean the surface of the sea. Once there, it floated, and it was easy enough to pull it into the boat. In this operation, too, my deaf cousin displayed a special gift; he had strength and a good aim; with a single, sharp throw, he could send the cheese straight into a bucket we held up to him from the boat. As for me, I occasionally misfired; the contents of the spoon would fail to overcome the Moon's attraction and they would fall back into my eye.

I still haven't told you everything, about the things my cousin was good at. That job of extracting lunar milk from the Moon's scales was child's play to him: instead of the spoon, at times he had only to thrust his bare hand under the scales, or even one finger. He didn't proceed in any orderly way, but went to isolated places, jumping from one to the other, as if he were playing tricks on the Moon, surprising her, or perhaps tickling her. And wherever he put his hand, the milk spurted out as if from a nanny goat's teats. So the rest of us had only to follow him and collect with our spoons the substance that he was pressing out, first here, then there, but always as if by chance, since the Deaf One's movements seemed to have no clear, practical sense.

There were places, for example, that he touched merely for the fun of touching them: gaps between two scales, naked and tender folds of lunar flesh. At times my cousin pressed not only his fingers but -- in a carefully gauged leap -- his big toe (he climbed onto the Moon barefoot) and this seemed to be the height of amusement for him, if we could judge by the chirping sounds that came from his throat as he went on leaping.

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

We fell into a special mood on those nights off the Zinc Cliffs: gay, but with a touch of suspense, as if inside our skulls, instead of the brain, we felt a fish, floating, attracted by the Moon. And so we navigated, playing and singing. The Captain's wife played the harp; she had very long arms, silvery

as eels on those nights, and armpits as dark and mysterious as sea urchins; and the sound of the harp was sweet and piercing, so sweet and piercing it was almost unbearable, and we were forced to let out long cries, not so much to accompany the music as to protect our hearing from it

Transparent medusas rose to the sea's surface, throbbed there a moment, then flew off, swaying toward the Moon. Little Xlthlx amused herself by catching them in midair, though it wasn't easy. Once, as she stretched her little arms out to catch one, she jumped up slightly and was also set free. Thin as she was, she was an ounce or two short of the weight necessary for the Earth's gravity to overcome the Moon's attraction and bring her back: so she flew up among the medusas, suspended over the sea. She took fright, cried, then laughed and started playing, catching shellfish and minnows as they flew, sticking some into her mouth and chewing them. We rowed hard, to keep up with the child: the Moon ran off in her ellipse, dragging that swarm of marine fauna through the sky, and a train of long, entwined seaweeds, and Xlthlx hanging there in the midst. Her two wispy braids seemed to be flying on their own, outstretched toward the Moon; but all the while she kept wriggling and kicking at the air, as if she wanted to fight that influence, and her socks -- she had lost her shoes in the flight -- slipped off her feet and swayed, attracted by the Earth's force. On the ladder, we tried to grab them.

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

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

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

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

This is how the story of my love for the Captain's wife began, and my suffering. Because it didn't take me long to realize whom the lady kept looking at insistently: when my cousin's hands clasped the satellite, I watched Mrs. Vhd Vhd, and in her eyes I could read the thoughts that the deaf man's familiarity with the Moon were arousing in her; and when he disappeared in his mysterious lunar explorations, I saw her become restless, as if on pins and needles, and then it was all clear to me, how Mrs. Vhd Vhd was becoming jealous of the Moon and I was jealous of my cousin. Her eyes were made of diamonds, Mrs. Vhd Vhd's; they flared when she looked at the Moon, almost challengingly, as if shewere saying: "You shan't have him!" And I felt like an outsider. The one who least understood all of this was my deaf cousin. When we helpedhim down, pulling him -- as I explained to you -- by his legs, Mrs. Vhd Vhd lost all her self-control, doing everything she could to take his weight against her own body, folding her long silvery arms around him; I felt a pang in my heart (the times I clung to

her, her body was soft and kind, but not thrust forward, the way it was with my cousin), while he was indifferent, still lost in his lunar bliss.

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

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

This had never happened before; the Captain's wife had never gone up on the Moon. But Vhd Vhd made no objection, in fact he almost pushed her up the ladder bodily, exclaiming: "Go ahead then!," and we all started helping her, and I held her from behind, felt her round and soft on my arms, and to hold her up I began to press my face and the palms of my hands against her, and when I felt her rising into the Moon's sphere I was heartsick at that lost contact, so I started to rush after her, saying: "I'm going to go up for a while, too, to help out!"

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

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

None of us could have suspected it. The Deaf One perhaps, but only he: in the shadowy way he knew things, he may have had a presentiment that he would be forced to bid the Moon farewell that night. This is why he hid in his secret places and reappeared only when it was time to come back down on board. It was no use for the Captain's wife to try to follow him: we saw her cross the scaly zone various times, length and breadth, then suddenly she stopped, looking at us in the boat, as if about to ask us whether we had seen him.

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

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

From the Moon the other sailors hastened to follow his example. Nobody gave a thought to getting the Moon-milk that had been collected into the

boats, nor did the Captain scold them for this. They had already waited too long, the distance was difficult to cross by now; when they tried to imitate my cousin's leap or his swimming, they remained there groping, suspended in midair. "Cling together! Idiots! Cling together!" the Captain yelled. At this command, the sailors tried to form a group, a mass, to push all together until they reached the zone of the Earth's attraction: all of a sudden a cascade of bodies plunged into the sea with a loud splash.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

When the Moon had completed its circling of the planet, there we were again over the Zinc Cliffs. I recognized them with dismay: not even in my darkest previsions had I thought the distance would have made them so tiny. In that mud puddle of the sea, my friends had set forth again, without the now useless ladders; but from the boats rose a kind of forest of long poles; everybody was brandishing one, with a harpoon or a grappling hook at the end, perhaps in the hope of scraping off a last bit of Moon-milk or of lending some kind of help to us wretches up there. But it was soon clear that no pole was long enough to reach the Moon; and they dropped back, ridiculously short, humbled, floating on the sea; and in that confusion some of the boats were thrown off balance and overturned. But just then, from another vessel a longer pole, which till then they had dragged along on the water's surface, began to rise: it must have been made of bamboo, of many, many bamboo poles stuck one into the other, and to raise it they had to go slowly because -- thin as it was -- if they let it sway too much it might break. Therefore, they had to use it with great strength and skill, so that the wholly vertical weight wouldn't rock the boat.

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

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

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

Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown
J. G. Ballard, 1976

A[1] discharged[2] Broadmoor[3] patient[4] compiles[5]
"Notes[6] Towards[7] a[8] Mental[9] Breakdown[10]"
recalling[11] his[12] wife's[13] murder[14], his[15] tria1[6] and[17] exoneration[18].

1
The use of the indefinite article encapsulates all the ambiguities that surround the undiscovered document, Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown, of which this 18-word synopsis is the only surviving fragment. Deceptively candid and straightforward, the synopsis is clearly an important clue in our understanding of the events that led to the tragic death of Judith Loughlin in her hotel bedroom at Gatwick Airport. There is no doubt that the role of the still unidentified author was a central one. The selfeffacing 'A' must be regarded not merely as an overt attempt at evasion but, on the unconscious level, as an early intimation of the author's desire to proclaim his guilt.

2
There is no evidence that the patient was discharged. Recent inspection of the in-patients' records at Springfield Hospital (cf. footnote 3) indicates that Dr Robert Loughlin has been in continuous detention in the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy since his committal at Kingston Crown Court on 18 May 1975. Only one visitor has called, a former colleague at the London Clinic, the neurologist Dr James Douglas, honorary secretary of the Royal College of Physicians Flying Club. It is possible that he may have given Dr Loughlin, with his obsessional interest in manpowered flight, the illusion that he had flown from the hospital on Douglas's back. Alternatively, 'discharged' may be a screen memory of the revolver shot that wounded the Gatwick security guard.

3
Unconfirmed. Dr Loughlin had at no time in his tenyear career been either a patient or a member of the staff at Broadmoor Hospital. The reference to Broadmoor must therefore be taken as an indirect admission of the author's criminal motives or a confused plea of diminished responsibility on the grounds of temporary madness. Yet nothing suggests that Dr Loughlin considered himself either guilty of his wife's death or at any time insane. From the remaining documents - tape-recordings made in Suite B17 of the Inn on the Park Hotel (part of the floor occupied by the millionaire aviation pioneer Howard Hughes and his entourage during a visit to London) and cine-films taken of the runways at an abandoned USAAF base near Mildenhall - it is clear that Dr Loughlin believed he was taking part in a ritual of profound spiritual significance that would release his wife forever from the tragedy of her inoperable cancer. Indeed, the inspiration for this strange psychodrama may have come from the former Broadmoor laboratory technician and amateur dramatics coach, Leonora Carrington, whom Loughlin met at Elstree Flying Club, and with whom he had a brief but significant affair.

4
A remarkable feature of Dr Loughlin's confinement at Springfield is how little he conforms to the stereotype of 'patient'. Most of his fellow inmates at the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy are under some form of restraint, but Loughlin's behaviour is closer to that of a member of staff. He has informal access to all the facilities of the Unit, and with his medical training and powerful physique often stands in as an auxiliary nurse, even on occasion diagnosing minor ailments and supervising the administration of drugs. Characteristic of Loughlin is the high level of his general activity. He is forever moving about on errands, many of barely apparent significance, as if preparing for some important event in the future (or, conceivably, in the past). Much of his thought and energy is occupied by the construction of imaginary flying machines, using his bed, desk and personal cutlery. Recently, when his attempts to streamline all the furniture in the dayroom unsettled the other patients, Dr Grumman encouraged Loughlin to write about his experiences as a weekend pilot. For the first time Loughlin was prepared to consider any aspect of his past, and immediately came up with a title, Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown.

5
What method Dr Loughlin employed in the preparation of this document has not been revealed, or indeed whether a single word exists other than the title. Given the powerful repressive forces at work, it seems likely that the author will employ any method other than that of straightforward narration. A clue may be found in Loughlin's previous experience as editor of the Proceedings of the Institute of Neurosurgery, and the habit of meticulous attention to editorial detail which he brought with him to Springfield. One manifestation of this obsession is his custom of annotating the books in the

hospital library with copious footnotes. Several pages of the 1972 edition of The British Pharmacopoeia Codex, particularly those referring to anti-carcinogenetic drugs, have been so annotated that every word has been footnoted with imaginary aviation references.

6
Why Loughlin chose this term, with its suggestion of a preparatory sketch, to describe the most important and traumatic events of his life remains unclear. However, it is now known that this was not the only such document that he prepared. Two years earlier, during the first of his marital difficulties, Loughlin had kept a speculative diary, describing in minute detail the events of his personal and professional life. It seems that he was already aware of the erratic nature of his behaviour and of the recurrent fugues, each lasting several days, from which he would emerge in an increasingly dissociated state. At one point, after his wife's first nervous collapse, Loughlin secretly hired a private investigator to follow him, posing as her lover. Mr R. W. Butterworth of the Advance Detection Agency testified at Kingston Crown Court that he followed Loughlin and Leonora Carrington as they drove at random around eastern Suffolk, visiting one abandoned airfield after another. In his February 1975 Diaries (a few weeks before his wife's death) Loughlin describes his attempt to hire the main No .2 runway at London Airport: "'Don't you understand, man, I only need it for half an hour. There's a special cargo going out." Airport manager totally baffled. "What, for heaven's sake?" But I couldn't tell him. I didn't know then.'

7
Implicit in Loughlin's use of the preposition is the sense that he deliberately moved to meet his breakdown, constructing it of his own volition. This is confirmed by his behaviour in the months leading to his wife's death. Loughlin appears to have decided on a radically new course of action to save his wife, literally within the extreme metaphor of his own insanity. His wife's subsequent murder, his own breakdown and the entire period of his incarceration at Springfield must thus be regarded as a terminal metaphor, a labyrinth building itself from within which he began at last to unravel by writing Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown.

8
Again (cf. footnote 1) the use of the indefinite article underlines Loughlin's distance from his own crisis, which he now (January 1975) regarded as a complex of events and possibilities existing outside himself. Leaving his wife who was bedridden in their Hendon apartment, cared for by Dr Douglas, her old friend and former lover - Loughlin embarked on a series of extended excursions around London and the Home Counties. Usually accompanied by Leonora Carrington, he visited the Mullard radio-observatory near Cambridge and the huge complex of early warning radar installations on the Suffolk coast. For some reason, empty swimming pools and multistorey car parks exerted a particular fascination. All these he seems to have approached as the constituents of 'A' mental breakdown which he might choose to recruit at a later date.

9
How far the events of this period (January to March 1975) were mentalised by Loughlin is hard to decide. To some extent all the factors surrounding Judith Loughlin's death - even the identity of her husband - may be said to be fictions of an over-worked imagination, as meaningless and as meaningful as the elaborate footnotes in BP Codex. Was Judith Loughlin suffering from cancer of the pancreas? What was the role of the young lexicographer and icedance champion, Richard Northrop, whom Loughlin treated at the London Clinic for migraine? The unmistakable elements of some kind of homoerotic involvement hover in the background of their relationship. It may be that the apparent physical closeness of the two men masks the fact that they were one and the same man. Their holiday together, the three distressing weeks spent at the Gatwick hotel, and the shot fired at the airport security guard, inevitably recall Rimbaud and Verlaine, but Loughlin may well have passed the time there on his own waiting for his wife to appear with her lover, devising the identity of the lexicographer as a psychic 'detonator'. It is known that he spent much of his spare time stumbling around the airport ice rink.

10
A vital role seems to have been played during these last days by the series of paintings by Max Ernst entitled Garden Airplane Traps, pictures of low walls, like the brick-courses of an uncompleted maze, across which long wings have crashed, from whose joints visceral growths are blossoming. In the last entry of his diary, the day before his wife's death, 27 March 1975,

Loughlin wrote with deceptive calm: 'Ernst said it all in his comment on these paintings, the model for everything I've tried to do... "Voracious gardens in turn devoured by a vegetation which springs from the debris of trapped airplanes... Everything is astonishing, beart-breaking and possible... with my eyes I see the nymph Echo..." Shortly before writing out these lines he had returned to his Hendon apartment to find that his wife had set off for Gatwick Airport with Dr Douglas, intending to catch the 3.15 p.m. flight to Geneva the following day. After calling Richard Northrop, Loughlin drove straight to Elstree Flying Club.

11
The extent to which Loughlin retains any real 'recall' of the events leading to his wife's death is doubtful. On occasions his memory is lucid and unbroken, but it soon becomes evident that he has re-mythologised the entire episode at Gatwick, as revealed in the following taped conversation between himself and Dr Grumman.
GRUMMAN: You say that you then drove to Elstree. Why?
LOUGHLIN: I had rented an aircraft there - a Piper Twin Comanche.
GRUMMAN: I see. Anyway, you then flew across London and on down to Gatwick, where you paralysed the airport for an hour by buzzing all the BEA jets parked on the ground.
LOUGHLIN: I knew that if I could find Judith's plane I could somehow fuse my aircraft with hers, in a kind of transfiguring
GRUMMAN:... crash? But why?
LOUGHLIN: I was convinced that I could fly her to safety. It was the only way she would survive her cancer.
GRUMMAN: What actually happened?
LOUGHLIN: I landed and skidded into the nosewheel of a VC1O. Richard Northrop pulled me out. We had some sort of disagreement - he resented my dependence on him, and my involvement with Judith - and then the security guard was accidentally shot.

12
Although there is no doubt that Judith Loughlin had been married to her husband for three years, their relationship was never close, and she in no way could be regarded as 'his'. Before her marriage she had been involved in a longstanding liaison with Dr Douglas, whom she continued to see even after the latter's engagement and marriage in 1974. A successful barrister, self-willed and ambitious, she found herself increasingly unsympathetic towards Loughlin's erratic mental behaviour and incipient alcoholism. It is almost certain that but for her death she would have divorced Loughlin the following year. Viewing her charitably, one may say that her actions that fatal afternoon in the bathroom of her Gatwick hotel had been provoked by years of marital unhappiness.

13
Careful reconstruction of the events surrounding the murder of Judith Loughlin on 28 March 1975, indicates that she had arrived at Gatwick with Dr Douglas the previous day. They passed the night in room 117 of the Skyport Hotel, intending to take the 3.15 p.m. flight to Geneva the following afternoon. It was while they were having lunch in the hotel restaurant that Loughlin appeared at the airport, already in an extreme state of alcoholic distress. He began a futile search among the parked airliners for the Trident jet then being prepared for the 3.15 flight, possibly intending to hijack the plane or even to blow it up with himself aboard. In the course of this search the security guard was shot. Loughlin then made his way to the Skyport Hotel, and by some ruse located and entered his wife's room. Befuddled by a heavy overdose of alcohol and amphetamines, he decided to revive himself in a bath of cold water. He was lying unconscious in the bath, fully clothed, when Judith Loughlin returned alone to her room after lunch.

14
All the evidence collected indicates that Judith Loughlin's decision to murder her husband was a sudden response to the sight of him slumped unconscious in her bath. Shocked by the damage he had done to the room - in his rage Loughlin had torn apart Dr Douglas's clothes and suitcases - she apparently decided to put an end to the sufferings of this unhappy man. Unfortunately she had reckoned neither with Loughlin's powerful physique - the moment she pressed his head below the bath water he leapt up and seized her - nor with the total transformation that had taken place within her husband's mind. Already he seems to have decided that she was leaving him only in the sense that she was dying of pancreatic cancer, and that he might save her by constructing a unique flying machine.

15
Questions as to the exact person indicated by this pronoun have been raised since the moment Loughlin was rescued from the fire blazing in room 117.

It was first assumed from the ravings of the injured man that he was an airline pilot. He was sitting on the burning bed in the tandem position behind the charred body of a similarly seated woman, as if giving her pilot tuition. His wife had been forcibly trussed into a flying suit and wore helmet and goggles. She was identified by the double-helix of her intra-uterine device. Thanks to his sodden clothes, only Loughlin's hands and feet had been burned. The furniture in the room had been arranged to form a rough representation of an aircraft, perhaps inspired by the elaborate aeronautical motifs in the bedroom decor.

16
Not surprisingly, the trial exposed all the contradictions inherent in this puzzling case. Questions as to 'Loughlin's' identity continued to be raised. There was no evidence that he was a qualified pilot, though a Private Pilot's Licence in his name was found in a locker at Elstree Flying Club, perhaps left there as part of a false identity carefully fabricated by him. Certainly he was obsessed with aviation, as his use of aircraft manufacturers' names for his medical colleagues indicates. Nor was there any real confirmation that he was a physician, particularly when we consider his lavish use of meaningless pseudo -medicalese (e.g. 'serotonin'9 and2¡ proteinreaction21 suppressor22 m.v.d.23' etc.).

17
This afterthought, attached to the previous 16 words with their apparently straightforward description of the events leading up to his trial, almost certainly indicates the author's real intent in compiling his ambiguous history.

18
The author's evident conviction of his own innocence, like his earlier belief that he had been discharged from hospital, may be taken as an expression of hope for the future. Meanwhile he continues with his busy round of activities in the Unit of Criminal Psychopathy, constructing his bizarre 'aircraft' and tirelessly editing the footnotes with which he has annotated so many of the medical textbooks in the library. Ultimately the entire stock will have been provided with a unique gloss. As all these books are out-of-date, like the 1972 BP Codex, little harm is done. Most of his complex annotations have been shown to be complete fictions, an endlessly unravelling web of imaginary research work, medical personalities and the convoluted and sometimes tragic interrelationships of their private lives. Occasionally, however, they describe with unusual clarity a sequence of events that might almost have taken place. The patient seems trapped between what his psychiatrists call 'paradoxical faces', each image of himself in the mirror reinforcing that in the glass behind him. The separation of the two will only be achieved by the appearance of the as yet incomplete document Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown, of which we possess only an 18-word synopsis and its set of footnotes. It seems possible that although the synopsis conceals a maze of lies and distortions, it is a simple and incontrovertible statement of the truth.