



VINTAGE

THE BOOK OF FLIGHTS

J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO

Contents

About the Book

About the Author

Also by J.M.G. Le Clézio

Title Page

Epigraph

Can you imagine . . .

One day, the . . .

I invite you . . .

Men and women, . . .

Everything begins on . . .

Self-criticism

This is how . . .

Self-criticism

Meanwhile . . . they had . . .

Town of iron . . .

There was another . . .

Diary of imponderables . . .

And now, a . . .

Savagery of the . . .

Farther still, later . . .

On the following . . .

I want to . . .

This is what . . .

Self-criticism

Farther still, later . . .

Perhaps the answer . . .

Travelling, always urged . . .
The flute player at Angkor
Those who follow . . .
The question now . . .
Young Man Hogan . . .
Self-criticism
Waiting
Itinerary
Self-criticism
A little later . . .
My town is . . .
Animals possess something . . .
The Earth is . . .
Meanwhile . . . Hogan reached . . .
A few days . . .
Self-criticism
But the journey . . .
The flight leads . . .
During that time, . . .
The flute player at Cuzco
The world is . . .
Self-criticism
And one day, . . .

The History of Vintage
Copyright

About the Book

Young Man Hogan's journey begins in the dazzling streets of a nameless necropolis, and leads across fleeting landscapes – deserts, seas, mountains, islands, cities and great plains – to countless entertainments and adventures in four continents. It is an exploration and a celebration, glittering and exuberant, of the writer's art and of life itself.

About the Author

J.M.G. Le Clézio was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2008. He was born in Nice, France, in 1940 to a French mother and her first-cousin, a Mauritian doctor of French origin who, being born in Mauritius when the island was under British rule, held a British passport. However, the family was completely Francophone. Jean-Marie Le Clézio has travelled extensively and is articulate in English and Spanish, but his true homeland is very much the French language. He spends his time between France (Nice, Paris and Brittany), and Albuquerque New Mexico. He has published more than 40 books since he won the Renaudot Prize in 1963, age 23, with *Le Procès-verbal* (*The Interrogation*), and his works have been translated around the world into 36 languages.

OTHER WORKS BY J.M.G. LE CLÉZIO AVAILABLE IN
ENGLISH

The Interrogation

Fever

The Flood

Terra Amata

War

The Giants

*The Mexican Dream, or, The Interrupted Thought of
Amerindian Civilizations*

The Prospector

Onitsha

The Round & Other Cold Hard Facts

Wandering Star

The Book of Flights

J.M.G. Le Clézio

An Adventure Story

Translated from the French by
Simon Watson Taylor

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

But let us leave this city & press on.

(Marco Polo)

CAN YOU IMAGINE that? A great airport building in the middle of nowhere, its roof stretched flat under the sky, and on this roof a small boy sitting in an easy chair is staring straight ahead. The air is white, buoyant, there is nothing to see. Then, hours later, comes the rending noise of a jet plane taking off. The piercing screech grows louder and louder, as though a siren is revolving faster and faster at the other end of the roof. Now the noise's shrillness changes pitch, becomes a roar that bounces off the roof's square surfaces, reaches the depths of the sky and transforms it suddenly into a vast sheet of splintered glass. When the noise is so loud that nothing else can possibly exist, this long silver metal cylinder appears, gliding over the ground and lifting slowly into the air. The small boy sitting in his easy chair has not budged. He has been watching intently, with eyes that the unbearable noise has filled with tears. The metallic tube has torn itself away from the ground, is climbing, climbing. The small boy watches it calmly, he has all the time in the world. He sees the long silver fuselage charge down the concrete runway, its tyres barely skimming the surface. He sees the sky reflected in the round cabin windows. And he sees the great swept-back wings carrying the four jet pods. Blackened exhaust nozzles spout flames, wind, thunder. The small boy sitting in his easy chair is thinking of something. He is thinking that one day, suddenly, for no reason, at some particular moment this long pale cylinder is going to burst apart in a single explosion, igniting a patch of gold and red on the surface of the sky, a vulgar, silent blossom of fire which remains suspended there for a few seconds before fading, sucked into the centre of thousands of black dots. While the wave of a terrible sound spreads out and reverberates in the ears.

Then the small boy gets up, and with a slow mechanical movement of arms and legs walks across the flat roof of the

airport building, in the direction of a door above which is written in red letters

EXIT

and he goes down the rubber steps of the steel staircase, all the way down to the centre of the concourse. Inside the walls the elevator hums as it moves up and down; and everything is visible, as though the walls were made of glass. There are strange silent outlines to be seen: children with tired eyes, women wrapped in red overcoats, dogs, men carrying umbrellas.

In the concourse, the light is perfectly white, reflected from hundreds of mirrors. Near the main entrance there is an electric clock. Little shutters revolve in quick jerks on its square face, their numbers superseding each other at regular intervals:

15 05

15 06

15 07

15 08

15 09

15 10

15 11

Women's voices speaking close to microphones say trivial things. People sit in rows on leather settees, waiting. When anyone passes through the invisible ray the great glass doors slide back in a single motion, once, twice, ten times. Can you, can you imagine that?

Can you think about everything that happens on earth, about all these speedy secrets, these adventures, these routs and confusions, these signs, these patterns painted on the sidewalk? Have you run through these grassy fields, or along these beaches? Have you bought oranges with money, have you watched oil slicks moving around on the surface of the water in the docks? Have you read the time on sundials? Have you sung the words of stupid songs? Have you gone to the movies any evening, and watched for hours that seemed like minutes the images of a picture called *Nazarin* or else *Red River*? Have you eaten iguana in Guiana or tiger in Siberia?

Robt BURNS
Cigarillos
If it's not a Robt BURNS it's not THE
cigarillo

Or else:

(Wilfred
Owen)

It seemed that out of battle I escaped
Down some profound dull tunnel, long
since scooped
Through granites which titanic wars had
groined.

Or again:

(Parmenides) . . . αἰεὶ παπταίνουσα πρὸς αὐγὰς ἡελίοιο.

All words are possible, then, all names. They rain down, all these words, they disintegrate into a powdery avalanche. Belched from the volcano's mouth, they spurt into the sky, then fall again. In the quivering air, like gelatine, the sounds

trace their bubble paths. Can you imagine that? The black night through which the rockets streak, and then the slabs of explosive mud, women's faces, eyes, desires that cut the flesh like gentle razor blades. Noise, noise everywhere! Where to go? Where to dive, into what void, where to bury one's head among these stone pillows? What to write on the blank sheet of paper, already blackened with every conceivable handwriting? Choose, why choose? Let all rumours run their noisy course, let impulses hustle crazily towards unknown destinations. Innumerable places, seconds beyond measure, names that string out for ever:

men!
jellyfishes!
eucalyptus!
green-eyed women!
Bengali cats!
pylons!
cities!
springs!
green plants, yellow plants!

Does all that really mean anything? I add my words, I increase the enormous hubbub by a few murmurs. I blacken a few more lines, there, to no purpose, to destroy, to say I am alive, to trace more new dots, more new strokes on the old ravaged surface. I jettison my useless ciphers, choking the insatiable holes, the wells without memory. I add a few more knots to the tangled skein, a few excrements to the pipe of the great sewer. Wherever a blank space still survives, making pure emptiness visible, quick, I write, terror, anchylosis, mad dog. These are eyes that I am putting out, clear innocent eyes that my etching needle suddenly punctures bloodily. Noise, noise, I hate you, but I am bound to you. Captured in the silo, a grain that cracks and lets it powder sift down in the middle of the motionless

sea of the other grains. Letters that cover everything! Laughs, cries, groans that cover everything! Colours with lead copings! Matter with boulder limbs! Living tomb, weight which comes crashing down upon all of us, and I too am a weight, I too press heavily on the head and force it into the earth. I have everything to say, everything to say! I hear, I repeat! Echo of an echo, channel of my throat in which words stumble, channels of air, endless corridors of the world. The blind doors slam, the windows open on to other windows. Farewell was what I wanted to say. Farewell. I am speaking to the living, I am speaking to the millions of eyes, ears and mouths hidden behind the walls. They watch and wait. They come and go, they remain, they do nothing but sleep. But they are there. No one can forget them. The world has incised its war tattoos, it has painted its body and face, and now here it is, muscles taut, hands clutching weapons, eyes burning with a fever to conquer. Who is going to shoot the first arrow?

How to escape fiction?

How to escape language?

How to escape, if only a single time, if only from the word
KNIFE?

ONE DAY, THE person called Hogan was walking on his shadow, in the streets of the town where the harsh sun's light held sway. The town was spread over the ground, a sort of vast necropolis with its dazzling flagstones and walls, and its grillwork of streets, avenues and boulevards. It really seemed as though everything was ready, was fixed up for things to happen in this way. The layout was methodical and left nothing out of account, almost nothing. There were the concrete sidewalks with regularly repeated little patterns along the surface, the asphalt highways scorched by tyre marks, the trees standing up stiffly, the lamp-posts, the vertical buildings rising to dizzy heights, the windows, the shops full of papers and records, the noises, the fumes. A little higher up there was this swollen ceiling, neither blue nor white, the colour of absence, in which the sun's disc hung. An abstracted, anonymous expanse, an undulating desert, a sea in which the waves advanced, one behind the other, without ever changing anything.

This is what the person called Hogan was walking on: he was walking on the white sidewalk, alongside the white road, through the air brimming over with white light. Everything had been enveloped in this powder, this snow, or this salt, and the tons of grain sparkled in unison. Not a patch of colour left anywhere, nothing but this unbearable whiteness that had penetrated each corner of the town. The giant searchlight held this circle of earth in its beam, and the light particles bombarded the matter unceasingly. Each shape and object had been transformed into a tiny lamp whose incandescent filament glowed brightly in the centre of its crystal bubble. The whiteness was everywhere. Vision was blanked out. Faint lines appeared and disappeared at the angle of the walls, under the women's made-up eyes, along the scorching roofs. But the lines no sooner merged than they broke up, spread like fissures, and nothing was certain any longer. There was the line of houses squatting

under the sky, the perspective of the avenues converging in the distant haze, the clouds stretched thin between the two horizons, the jet planes' vapour trails, the exhaust from the vehicles that whizzed past. Surrounded by these things, Hogan advanced, a silhouette wearing white trousers, a white shirt and espadrilles, ready to disappear at any moment, or perhaps in the process of melting gently in the surrounding heat. He advanced without a thought in his mind, his eyes fixed on the millions of sparkles in the ground, the nape of his neck bare to the sun, and under his feet there was a black shadow.

It was odd, walking on one's shadow like this, in the planet's closed atmosphere. It was odd and moving to walk on just one side of the earth, standing upright on the hard shell, looking up in the direction of the infinite. It was like arriving from the far end of the Milky Way, from Betelgeuse or Cassiopeia, encased in a platinum-coloured space suit, and beginning an exploration. From time to time one would have pressed a button and said in a slightly catarrhal voice:

'Space explorer AUGH 212 to Relay station. Space explorer AUGH 212 to Relay station.'

'Relay station to space explorer AUGH 212. Relay station to space explorer AUGH 212. Come in.'

'Space explorer AUGH 212 to Relay station. Have left point 91 and am at present walking toward point 92. Everything under control. Over.'

'Relay station to space explorer AUGH 212. Receiving you loud and clear. What do you see? Over.'

'Space explorer AUGH 212 to Relay station. Everything here is white. I am walking in a symmetrical maze. There are many objects in motion. It is very hot here. I am now approaching point 92. Over.'

'Relay station to space explorer AUGH 212. Do you notice any signs of organic life? Over.'

‘Space explorer AUGH 212 to Relay station. No, none. Over and out.’

It was like walking along the bed of an ocean, too, with the thick silence of heavy bubbles rising from concealed sulphur vents, clouds of mud sliding away, fish crying out, sea urchins screeching, whale sharks grunting. And especially the invisible mass of water bearing down with its countless thousands of tons.

That’s exactly how it was. Hogan was making his way through the streets of a submerged town, surrounded by the ruins of porticoes and cathedrals. He passed men and women, occasionally children, and they were strange marine creatures with flapping fins and retractile mouths. The shops and garages were gaping caverns where greedy octopuses lurked. The light circulated slowly, like a fine rain of mica dust. One could float for a long time among this debris. One could glide along currents that were alternatively warm, cold, warm. The water penetrated everywhere, sticky, acrid, it entered through the nostrils and flowed down the throat to fill the lungs, then swirled over the eyeballs, mingled with the blood and urine, and took leisurely possession of the whole body, impregnating it with its dream substance. It entered the ears, pressing against the tympana two little air bubbles that excluded the world for ever. There were no cries, no words, and thoughts became like coral, immobile living lumps lifting superfluous fingers.

It was odd, but it was terrible too, because there was no possible end to it all. He who walks in the permanent illumination of the sun, unafraid of falling one day when the harsh rays have entered through the windows of the eyes and reached the secret chamber of the skull. He who inhabits a city of invincible whiteness. He who sees, understands and thinks the light, he who hears the light with its sounds of ceaseless rain. He who seeks, as though

in the depths of a misty mirror, the fixed point of an incandescent face, the face, his face. He who is only an eye. He whose life is attached to the sun, whose soul is a slave of the heavenly body, whose desires are all forging their way toward this sole meeting place, gulf of fusion, in which everything vanishes by creating its imperceptible drop of sweat, sweat of melted granite that gleams on the forehead, sweat weighing a ton. He who . . . Hogan walked in the dazzling street, in the whirlwind of bright light. He had already forgotten what colours were. Since the beginning of time the world had been thus: white. WHITE. The one thing that remained in all this snow, in all this salt, was this shadow gathered around his feet, a leaf-shaped black blob that glided silently forward.

Hogan took a step to the right; the shadow glided to the right. He took a step to the left; the shadow immediately glided to the left. He started walking faster, then slower; the shadow followed. He jumped, staggered, waved his arms; the shadow did the same. It was the only form still visible in all this light, the only creature still living, perhaps. All his intelligence, thought and strength had flowed into this blob. He had become transparent, impalpable, easy to lose, while the shadow had assumed his whole weight, his whole indefectible presence. It was the shadow that led the way, now, guiding the man's steps, it was the shadow that secured the body to the earth and prevented it from volatilizing in space.

At one moment Hogan stopped in his tracks. He stood motionless on the sidewalk, in the brightly lit street. The sun was very high in the sky, blazing fiercely. Hogan looked down toward the ground and plunged into his dense shadow. He entered the well thus opened up, as though he were closing his eyes, as though night were falling. He lowered himself into the black blob, impregnating himself with its form and power. Stretched out on the ground he

sought to drink this shadow, to pump its alien life into himself. But it always broke loose without budging from the spot, rebuffing his gaze, extending the boundaries of its domain. Diligently, while the sweat trickled down his neck, his back, his loins, his legs, Hogan attempted to flee the light. He would have to go lower, still lower down. He would have to switch off fresh lamps, break fresh mirrors, in a never-ending process. The burning bodywork of passing vehicles threw off stars and sparks. He would have to crush these stars, one after the other. The light falling from the sky fragmented into millions of droplets of mercury. This dust continued to accumulate, and he would have to sweep it away as fast as it formed. Silhouettes of men and women, heavy necklaces, gold pendants, glass earrings, cut-glass chandeliers, glided around him. Each second, Hogan would have to smash all this trumpery into smithereens. But it could never be exterminated. The eyes shone white and fierce from the depths of their sockets. The teeth. The nails. The lamé dresses. The rings. The walls of the houses were heavy with the whole weight of their chalk cliffs, the flat roofs sparkled outside the field of vision. The street, the one street, always taking up where it left off, traced its phosphorescent line as far as the horizon. The plane trees rustled their leaves like rows of flames, and the windowpanes were as hermetically sealed as mirrors, simultaneously icy and boiling hot. The air crumbled into powder as it arrived, breaking like a wave, skidding along, spreading its branches of living grains. All around was a mineral hardness. Water, clouds, blue sky had ceased to exist. There was nothing but this refractory surface where lines broke up and electricity flowed in a constant stream. The noises themselves had become luminous. They described their brutal arabesques, their spirals, their circles, their ellipses. They went through the air tracing whitish scars, they wrote signs, zigzags, incomprehensible letters. The horn of a steel-clad motor coach gave a bellow, and it

was a broad trail of light advancing like a crevasse. A woman, her open mouth displaying two rows of enamelled teeth, yelled: 'HI!' and immediately one could see a large star scratched roughly into the concrete of the sidewalk. A dog barked, and its call slid rapidly along the walls like a burst of tracer bullets. From the back of a shop glaring with neon and plastics an electric apparatus blared a barbarous music, and it was the tongues of fire of the drums, the burning gas of the organ, the vertical bars of the double bass, the horizontal bars of the guitar, plus, from time to time, the extraordinary confusion of magnetic particles when the human voice chimed in to yell its words.

Everything formed a drawing, a handwriting, a sign. Odours sent out their luminous signals from the top of their towers, or from where they lay buried in their secret grottoes. Hogan drew his rubber sole lightly along the ground, and at once the eddies widened their floating circles. He lit a cigarette with the white flame of a lighter, and for just a moment, at the top of his hand, this thing resembling a volcano spouted fire and lava into the sky. Each movement he made had become dangerous because it immediately unleashed a sequence of phenomena and catastrophes. He walked alongside the wall, and the concrete crackled with sparks underfoot. He brought his right hand up to his face, and on thousands of glazed panels positioned in the air a kind of dazzling S could be seen swelling its curves. He looked into the face of a young woman, and her unbearably clear eyes sent out two sharp beams which stabbed him like blades. He expelled the air from his lungs through the nostrils, a simple breath that promptly began to burn with pale smoke spirals. Nothing more was possible. Nothing more came into being, then forgot its own existence. Everywhere there was this gigantic sheet of blank paper, or this field of snow, on which the traces of fear formed a deposit. Everything had its paw, its

closefisted imprint, its hoofmarks. Wrinkles, marks, stains, white wounds with lips that did not close.

One could not even think any longer. Hogan thought: ORANGE FRUIT WATER CALM SLEEP, and instantly a writing appeared in front of his eyes, inscribing in glowing outlines two concentric circles, a rain of downstrokes, a dash ending in a hook, and a grillwork that covered sky and earth. IDIOT ENOUGH ENOUGH: a flash of lightning with sharp angles, and a sun in the process of exploding slowly. DEPART CLOSE THE EYES LET'S BE OFF YES: and a host of windows opened in space, shining from all their bubble-flawed panes.

Thinking was dangerous. Walking was dangerous. Talking, breathing, touching were dangerous. From all sides, the bursts of brilliance hurled themselves into the attack, the signs with their arms full of lightning sprang up before the eyes. The immense blank page was stretched above the world like a snare, waiting for the moment when everything would be truly erased. Men, women, children, animals and trees all stirred behind these transparent skins, and the sun sent down the raking fire of all its hard, white heat. Everything was like that, there was probably nothing to be done about it. And sooner or later, presumably, one would have become just like the others, a true light signal at the corner of a crossroads, a slightly flickering lamp, hint of a star with a fraying twinkle, a star that is a prisoner of its design. One would no longer be able to say no, or close one's eyes as one went away. One would exist as a fanatical insect, all alone right in the midst of the others, and one would say, yes, yes, I love you, all the time.

Then Hogan planted himself firmly on his two feet, and tried with all his might to bend his shadow upward in the direction of the sun.

Nothing easier than pouring a little water from a bottle into a glass. Go on, try it. You'll see.

I INVITE YOU to take part in the reality entertainment. Come and see the permanent exhibition of adventures retailing the gossip that makes up the world's history. There they are. They work. They come and go for days, hours, seconds, centuries on end. They move. They possess words, gestures, books and photographs. They act upon the imperceptibly changing surface of the earth. They add, multiply. They are themselves. They are ready. There is nothing to analyse. Everywhere. Always. They are the millions of centipedes scurrying around the old overturned garbage bin. The spermatozoa, bacteria, neutrons and ions. They quiver, and this long-drawn-out shudder, this vibration, this painful fever is beyond life or death, beyond words or belief, it is fascination.

I would like to be able to write to you, as though in a letter, all that I am living through. I would like so much to be able to make you understand why I have no choice but to go away one day, without a word to anyone, without explanation. It is an action that has become necessary, and when the moment has come (I cannot say where, or when, or why) I will carry it out, just like that, simply, keeping quiet about it. Heroes are mutes, it is true, and genuinely important acts take on the appearance of the phrases carved on tombstones.

So I would like to send you a postcard, to try to tell you about all that. On the back of the card there would be a panchromatic photograph, coated with a layer of varnish, and signed MOREAU. The photo would depict a little girl clad in rags, her skin the colour of copper, staring at you with scared eyes ringed by black lashes and eyebrows. The pupils of her eyes would be dilated, carrying a luminous reflection in their centre, and that would mean that her look was alive, for eternity perhaps.

The little girl with budding breasts would be holding her body in a clumsy pose, her head and shoulders turned in the opposite direction to her hips, and that would mean that she was ready to take flight, to disappear into nothingness.

She would bring her right hand up to her mouth, with a gesture that might have been intended to be mutinous and a bit perverse but had remained scared, a defensive gesture. As for the left hand, it would be dangling by the side of her body, at the end of a naked arm, the skin deep brown. A tinplate bracelet would have slipped down around her wrist. And the hand, with its long dirty fingers, would be closed over the coin she had been given so that the photo could be taken.

She would have been thus, appearing suddenly out of space one day, then forgotten, and all that would have remained of her would have been this fragile image, this prow-like figure sailing in the face of the unknown, affronting dangers, braving the spray that would break over her.

She would have been thus, magically multiplied in thousands of copies, stuck into the wire clips of revolving stands outside souvenir shops. Starved face, eyes circled with black, dirty locks of hair hanging loose, no thoughts knitting her brow, no throb at her temples, no prickle at the nape of her neck, red mouth half open and constantly gnawing the curled index finger of the right hand. And then shoulders motionless, body covered by torn fabric, all drained of blood and water. Paper body, paper skin, fibrous flesh tinted by chemical colouring matters. It was she and she alone who had to be found again one day, had to be taken away, setting off with her, then, along the roads that lead endlessly from falsehood toward truth.

Signed:

Walking Stick

MEN AND WOMEN, now. There are lots of them, of various sorts and ages, in the town's streets. They are born one day without being aware of the fact, and from that day onward they have never stopped fleeing. If one follows them as they wander around, or if one watches them through keyholes, one can see them in the process of living. Then in the evening, if one enters the post office, one can open the old dusty book and read their names slowly, all the names they have: Jacques ALLASINA. Gilbert POULAIN. Claude CHABREDIER. Florence CLAMOUSSE. Frank WIMMERS. Roland PEYETAVIN. Patricia KOBER. Milan KIK. Gérard DELPIECCHIA. Alain AGOSTINI. Walter GIORDANO. Jérôme GERASSE. Mohamed KATSAR. Alexandre PETRIKOUSKY. Yvette BOAS. Anne REBAODO. Patrick GODON. Apollonie LE BOUCHER. Monique JUNG. Genia VINCENZI. Laure AMARATO. All their names are beautiful and clear, it is fascinating to read them on the directory's much-pawed pages.

One could equally well be called HOGAN, and be a man of white race, dolichocephalic, with fair hair and round eyes. Born in Langson (Vietnam) about twenty-nine or thirty years ago. Living in a country called France, speaking, thinking, dreaming, desiring in a language called French. And that was important: if one had been called Kamol, born in Chanthaburi, or else Jésus Torre, born in Sotolito, one would have had other words, other ideas, other dreams.

One was there, inside the square traced in the muddy ground, together with the shrubs and boulders. One had eaten so much from this soil, drunk so much from these rivers. One had grown up in the middle of this jungle, one had sweated, urinated, defecated in this dust. The drains had run under the skin like veins, the grass had trembled like a tuft of hair. The sky had been there, all the time, and it was a familiar sky dappled with little wispy clouds. At night there had been many stars, and a moon that was sometimes round, sometimes hollowed out. One had

performed these countless acts without thinking twice about them. One day, one had seen a fire burning in the middle of a field, on this very portion of the earth, that same day of that same year, under just such a grey cloud, twisting these twigs and gnawing this bit of rotten wood.

Another day, one had seen a young woman passing in the street, keeping to the sidewalk. She was holding a yellow plastic handbag in her right hand. And one had thought that she was the only woman in the world, as she advanced, placing one foot firmly in front of the other, moving her long naked legs, making her hips sway under the pink woollen dress, carrying before her her two breasts encased in the black nylon brassière. She was walking in a very straight line up the deserted street, and one had said:

‘Miss, I wanted, I wanted to ask you something, if you don’t mind, forgive me for accosting you like this, but I wanted to tell you, I.’

Lighting a cigarette, in the noisy café, and sniffing the pleasant odour emanating from the pink woollen body:

‘You know, you are very beautiful, yes, it’s true, you are beautiful. What’s your name? Mine’s Hogan, I was born in Langson (Vietnam), do you know where that is? It’s on the Chinese border. Shall we have another coffee? Listen, honey do – you mind if I call you honey? – there’s a good movie at the Gaumont, *Shock Corridor*, I’ve already seen it twice. How about it, huh?’

And it would have needed very little, an insignificant shift to the right, a few different syllables in the name, and, instead of saying that, one would have said:

‘You filthy slut! Do you think I’m not on to your tricks? You, you did it on purpose, I got wise to you months ago, you’re trying to kid me. Do you think I’m not on to that cigarette-pack stunt of yours? Do you think I didn’t see what was going on? Slut, crummy bitch, and stop walking, will you, listen to me while I’m talking to you, don’t, don’t pretend you can’t hear me!’

And one would have made a gesture with the arm, and at the end of the arm the hand would be gripping the handle of a sharp knife, and the cold blade would have penetrated the young woman's left breast at a slight angle and she would have said:

‘Hah!’

– just once and died.

It was a particular day in this century, in a street of a town, on this earth, under the sky, in the air, with the light that infused everything through and through. It was about noon, with man's constructions all around. It was raining, it was fine, the wind was blowing, not very far from there the sea was producing waves, black or blue vehicles were speeding along the highway bordered with plane trees whose trunks were painted white. Inside the concrete casemates, the transistors were playing music, the television sets were crammed with jerky images. In the movie house called OCEAN, at one end of the dark hall, there was a white blur on which one could see a man lying on a bed beside a naked woman with loose, flowing hair, and he was stroking the same shoulder over and over again. Their voices could be heard coming out of the wall, raucous, cavernous, sibilant. They were saying trite things,

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL, YOU KNOW YOU

I'M SCARED SIMON

YOU'RE SCARED

YES YES

YOU'RE SCARED OF ME

NO IT'S NOT THAT I MEAN FOR A LONG TIME NOW I'VE WELL WHEN I FIRST SAW YOU I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD TURN OUT LIKE THIS ONE DAY AND THEN YOU'RE GOING AWAY AND IT WILL BE LIKE NOTHING HAD HAPPENED YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN

and a little farther away, at the back of the huge darkened hall, a woman was counting coins in her hand, examining them one by one in the glimmer of a pocket flashlight.

The street was full of names, everywhere. They glittered above doors, on transparent shop windows, they blazed at the back of gloomy rooms, they flashed on and off again in a never-ending sequence, they were exhibited, hanging from pasteboard placards, engraved into tinplate, painted in blood-red, stuck on to walls, on to slabs of sidewalk. Sometimes, an airplane passed across the sky, trailing a thin thread of white smoke that was supposed to be saying 'Rodeo' or 'Solex'. One could talk to these names, one could read each of these signs and answer them. It was a strange dialogue, as though with ghosts. One said, for example:

'Caltex?'

And the answer came immediately, in a bellow:

'Toledo! Toledo!'

'Minolta? Yashica Topcon?'

'Kelvinator.'

'Alcoa?'

'Breeze. Mars. Flaminaire.'

'Martini & Rossi Imported Vermouth.'

'M.G.'

'Schweppes! Indian Tonic!'

'Bar du Soleil. Snacks. Ices.'

'Eva?'

'100. 10,000. 100,000.'

'Pan Am.'

'Birley Green Spot. Mekong. Dino. Alitalia. Miami. Cook's. Ronson. Luna Park.'

'Rank Xerox! Xerox! Xerox!'

'CALOR . . .'

Words, everywhere, words which men had written and which had since got rid of their authors. Cries, lonely appeals, interminable incantations travelling aimlessly along

the earth's surface. So it was, today, at this hour, with this sky, this sun, these clouds. Red, or black, or white, or blue letters were affixed to the premises, they were the signatures of space and time. Impossible to wrench anything off, steal anything. They were there, and repeated stolidly, it's mine, it's mine and you can't take it, just try to take it and you'll see, try to put down your name, to move in here, to take over from me. Just try! And you'll see . . .

But no one tried. People moved in all directions over the street's level surface. They were not thinking about words.

It was the same thing with cars, for example. People climbed effortlessly inside the gleaming coachwork, sat down on the red upholstery, turned the ignition key, pressed their left foot down on a pedal, and pushed the lever upward. And the car moved off gently with a trembling glide, and there was no one sitting at a café terrace to look at the tyres and say:

'Why, when one comes to think of it, why does the wheel start turning like that?'

At the most, there was someone, a youngish man with a thin face and flaxen hair, reading a paper with a ballpoint pen in his right hand. Coming up behind him, it was possible to read over his shoulder:

DURING THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

There were many other things around the place. There was a young woman with a very white face, heavy eyes shining within their dark haloes, body squeezed into a white dress, legs planted firmly on the concrete ground. She was saying nothing, doing nothing. Between two fingers of her left hand, an American filter-tipped cigarette was smouldering. She was standing in front of the entrance to a bar, and from time to time she took a puff while looking across the street. Behind her, inside the bar, the sound of some piece of music vibrated mechanically. As she blinked, her gaze slid to the

left. Her legs shifted slightly, bringing her body forward, then back again. She was there nonstop, like a statue of iron and silk, exhaling her perfume, breathing, her heart beating, her muscles tense, brassière fastened by a bakelite clasp pressed against the flesh of her back, her lungs filled with tobacco smoke, sweating a little under the armpits and along the loins, listening. Thoughts of a kind passed behind the eyes, fugitive images, words, mysterious impulses.

LEON MARTINE phoned yesterday evening BASTARD bastard leave sooner get the hell out 2000 red car well well I know him AV yesterday why 2000 2500 or 3000 and Kilimanjaro rendezvous and buy ham take it easy Victor Mondolini ah that's the coiffeur she must be 35 more perhaps no and at the Pam Pam all this lot all these things to cope with this whole parade.

But she was not the only one. Everyone thought, everyone had ideas, longings, words, and that whole lot stayed hidden inside their skulls, their bowels, even their clothes, and one could never read everything that had been written.

One would have had to understand this total language, know the meaning of this quivering of the lips, this gesture of the hand, this slight limp of the left foot, this cigarette glowing in the corner of an entryway. One would have had to understand all the words that make up the story, all the fabrics, papers, combs, wallets, leathers, metals, nylons.

→ this is what one would have had to do, to get a real idea of just where one was: stay there standing in the middle of this street without budging, and watch, hear, feel, just like that, avidly, the spectacle in the process of unfolding. Without a thought, without a gesture, like a signpost, silent, standing on two cast-iron legs, immobile.

Truth was lost. Scattered, winking, skipping about, truth was exploding rapidly in the cylinder heads of engines, was perforating cardboard tickets, was a shell of hard metal with tender curves, headlights with sharply focused reflections. It