



title: Toxicology : Stories
author: Aylett, Steve.
publisher: Four Walls Eight Windows
isbn10 | asin: 1568581319
print isbn13: 9781568581316
ebook isbn13: 9780585227405
language: English
subject Fantastic fiction, Science fiction.
publication date: 1999
lcc: PR6051.Y57T6 1999eb
ddc: 823/.914
subject: Fantastic fiction, Science fiction.

Toxicology

stories by
Steve Aylett

FOUR WALLS EIGHT WINDOWS
New York

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PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES BY:

Four Walls Eight Windows
39 West 14th Street, room 503
New York, N.Y., 10011

Visit our website at <http://www.fourwallseightwindows.com>

First printing September 1999.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Aylett, Steve, 1967-
Toxicology : stories / by Steve Aylett.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-56858-131-9

I. Title.

PR6051.Y57T6 1999

823'.914dc21

99-33899

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Canada

Contents

Gigantic	1
Repeater	13
Jawbreaker	21
Tusk	27
The Waffle Code	33
If Armstrong Was Interesting	41
The Siri Gun	45
Infestation	53
Bestiary	55
Sampler	59
Tail	79
Shifa	85
The Passenger	91
The Idler	97
Dread Honor	101
Maryland	109
The Met Are All for This	121
Tug of War	125
Resenter	129
Angel Dust	135

"This regime of the surrounding error"
Jacques Rigaut, *Lord Patchogue*

"Everything is poison, nothing is poison."

Paracelsus

"Snake does not bite man; snake bites what man thinks."

Vinson Brown

"Learning to speak is like learning to shoot."

Avital Ronell

The Telephone Book

Gigantic

Strange aircraft arrived with the sky that morning, moving blood-slow. And Professor Skychum was forced from the limelight at the very instant his ranted warnings became most poignant. "They're already here!"

Skychum had once been so straight you could use him to aim down, an astrophysicist to the heart. No interest in politics to him Marx and Rand were the same because he went by pant size. Then one afternoon he had a vision which he would not shut up about.

The millennium was the dull rage that year and nutters were in demand to punctuate the mock-emotional retrospectives filling the countdown weeks. The media considered that Skychum fit the bill in fact they wanted him to wear one.

And the stuff he talked about. There were weaknesses in his presentation, as he insisted that the whole idea occurred to him upon seeing Scrappy Doo's head for the first time. "That dog is a mutant!" he gasped, leaning forward in such a way, and

with so precise an appalled squint to the eyes, that he inadvertently pierced the constrictive walls of localized space-time. A flare of interface static and he was seeing the whole deal like a lava-streamed landscape. He realized he was looking at the psychic holoshape of recent history, sickly and corrosive. Creeping green flows fed through darkness. These volatile glow trails hurt with incompleteness. They converged upon a cesspit, a supersick build up of denied guilt. This dumping ground was of such toxicity it had begun to implode, turning void-black at its core.

Like a fractal, detail reflected the whole. Skychum saw at once the entire design and the subatomic data. Zooming in, he found that a poison line leading from two locations nevertheless flowed from a single event Pearl Harbor. One source was the Japanese government, the other was Roosevelt's order to ignore all warnings of the attack. The sick stream was made up of 4,575 minced human bodies. In a fast zoom-out, this strand of history disappeared into the density of surrounding detail, which in turn resolved into a minor nerve in a spiral lost on the surface of a larger flow of glowing psychic pollution. A billion such trickles crept in every tendril of the hyperdense sludge migration, all rumbling toward this multidimensional landfill of dismissed abomination. And how he wished that were all.

Future attempts to reproduce his accidental etheric maneuver resulted in the spectacle of this old codger rocking back and forth with a look of appalled astonishment on his face, an idiosyncratic and media-friendly image which spliced easily into MTV along with those colorized clips of the goofing Einstein. And he had the kind of head propeller hats were invented for.

Skychum went wherever he'd be heard. No reputable journal would publish his paper *On Your Own Doorstep: Hyperdimensional Placement of Denied Responsibility*. One editor stated

simply: "Anyone who talks about herding behavior's a no-no." Another stopped him in the street and sneered a series of instructions which were inaudible above the midtown traffic, then spat a foaming full-stop at the sidewalk. Chat shows, on the other hand, would play a spooky theremin fugue when he was introduced. First time was an eye-opener. "Fruitcake corner this guy's got the Seventh Seal gaffa-taped to his ass and claims he'll scare up an apocalypse out of a clear blue sky. Come all the way here from New York City Dr. Theo Skychum, welcome." Polite applause and already some sniggers. The host was on garrulous overload, headed for his end like a belly-laughing Wall of Death rider. How he got here was anybody's guess. "Doctor Skychum, you assert that come the millennium, extraterrestrials will monopolize the colonic irrigation industry how do you support that?"

Amid audience hilarity Skychum stammered that that wasn't his theory at all. The gravity of his demeanor made it all the more of a crack-up. Then the host erupted into a bongo frenzy, hammering away at two toy flying saucers. Skychum was baffled.

He found that some guests were regulars who rolled off the charmed banter with ease.

"Well see here Ray, this life story of yours appears to have been carved from a potato."

"I know, Bill, but that's the way I like it."

"You said you had a little exclusive for us tonight, what's that about?"

"Believe it or not, Bill, I'm an otter."

"Thought so Ray."

It blew by on an ill, hysterical wind and Skychum couldn't get with the program. He'd start in with some lighthearted quip about bug-eyed men and end up bellowing "Idiots!"

Discarding your own foundation! Oppression evolves like everything else!"

Even on serious shows he was systematically misunderstood. The current affairs show *The Unpalatable Truth* was expressing hour-long surprise at the existence of anti-government survivalists. This was the eighty-seventh time they'd done this and Skychum's exasperated and finally sobbing repetition of the phrase "even a *child* knows" was interpreted as an attempt to steal everyone's faint thunder. And when his tear-rashed face filled the screen, blurring in and out as he asked "Does the obvious have a reachable bottom?", he was condemned for making a mockery of media debate. A televangelist accused him of "godless snoopery of the upper grief" and, when Skychum told him to simmer down, cursed him with some vague future aggravation. The whole thing was a dismal mess, smeared beyond salvation. Skychum's vision receded as though abashed.

There was no shortage of replacements. One guy insisted the millennium bug meant virtual sex dolls would give users the brush-off for being over a hundred years old and broke. Another claimed he spoke regularly to the ghost of Abe Lincoln. "My communications with this lisping blowhead yield no wisdom at all," he said. "But I'm happy." Then he sneezed like a cropduster, festooning the host with phlegm.

The commentators deemed radical were those going only so far as to question what was being celebrated. Skychum himself found he wanted to walk away. But even he had to admit the turn was a big deal, humanity having survived so long and learned so little there was a defiant rebelliousness about it that put a scampish grin on everyone's face. For once people were bound with a genuine sense of kick ass accomplishment and self-congratulatory cool. Skychum began at last to wish he was among them. But just as he felt his revelation slipping away, it

would seem to him that the mischievous glint in people's eyes redshifted to the power of the Earth itself if viewed from a civilized planet. And his brush with perspective would return with the intensity of a fever dream.

Floating through psychic contamination above a billion converging vitriol channels, toward that massive rumbling cataract of discarded corruption. Drawing near, Skychum had seen that ranged around the cauldroning pit, like steel nuts around a wheel hub, were tiny glinting objects. They were hung perfectly motionless at the rim of the slow vortex. These sentinels gave him the heeby-jeebies, but he zoomed in on the detail. There against the god-high waterfall of volatility. Spaceships.

Ludicrous. There they were.

"If we dealt honestly, maturely with our horrors," he told the purple-haired clown hosting a public access slot, "instead of evading, rejecting and forgetting, the energy of these events would be naturally reabsorbed. But as it is we have treated it as we treat our nuclear wastewhere we have dumped it, it is not wanted. The most recent waste will be the first to return."

"Last in, first out eh," said the clown somberly.

"Precisely," said Skychum.

"Well, I wish I could help you," stated the clown with offhand sincerity. "But I'm just a clown."

This is what he was reduced to. Had any of it happened? Was he mad?

A matter of days before the ball dropped in Times Square and Skychum was holed up alone, blinds drawn, bottles empty. He lay on his back, dwarfed by indifference. So much for kicking the hive. The authorities hadn't even bothered to demonize him. It was clear he'd had a florid breakdown, taking it to heart and the public. Could he leave, start a clean life? Everything was strange, undead and dented. He saw again, ghosting across his ceiling,

a hundred thousand Guatemalan civilians murdered by US-backed troops. He'd confirmed this afterwards, but how could he have known it before the vision? He only watched CNN. In a strong convulsion of logic, Skychum sat up.

At that moment, the phone rang. A TV guy accusing him of dereliction of banalitylaughing that he had a chance to redeem himself and trumpet some bull for the masses. Skychum agreed, too inspired to protest.

It was called *The Crackpot Arena* and it gathered the cream of the foil hat crowd to shoot the rarefied breeze in the hours leading up to the turn. This interlocking perdition of pantootonic pundits and macabre gripers was helped and hindered by forgotten medication and the pencil-breaking perfectionism of the director. One nutter would be crowned King of the Freaks at the top hour. The criteria were extremity and zero shame at the lectern. Be ridiculed or dubbed the royal target of ridiculeSkychum marvelled at the custom joinery of this conceit. And he was probably in with a chance. In the bizarre stakes, what could be more improbable than justice?

The host's eyes were like raisins and existed to generously blockade his brainlobes. As each guest surfaced from the cracker-barrel he fielded them with a patronizing show of interest.

A man holding a twig spoke of the turn. "All I can reveal," he said, meting out his words like a bait trail, "is that it will be discouraging. And very, very costly."

"For me?" asked the host, and the audience roared.

"For me," said the man, and they were in the aisles.

"Make a habit of monkey antics," declared another guest. "Pleasure employs muscles of enlightenment." Then he led in a screaming chimp, assured everyone its name was Ramone, pushed it down a slide and said "There you go." Skychum told him he was playing a dangerous game.

A sag-eyed old man pronounced his judgment. "The dawn of the beard was the dawn of modern civilization."

"In what way."

"In that time spent growing a beard is time wasted. Now curb this strange melancholy let us burn our legs with these matches and shout loud."

"I . . . I'm sorry . . . what . . ."

And the codger was dancing a strange jig on the table, cackling from a dry throat.

"One conk on the head and he'll stop dancing," whispered someone behind the cameras.

Another suspect was the ringmaster of the Lobster Circus, who lashed at a wagon-ring of these unresponsive creatures as though at the advancing spawn of the devil. "The time will come," he announced, "when these mothers will be *silent*." And at that he laid the whip into a lobster positioned side-on to him, breaking it in half.

A little girl read a poem:

behind answers are hoverflies
properly modest,
but they will do anything
for me

One guy made the stone-faced assertion that belching was an actual language. Another displayed a fossilized eightball of mammoth dung and said it was "simply biding its time". Another stated merely that he had within his chest a "flaming heart" and expected this to settle or negate all other concerns.

Then it was straight in with Skychum, known to the host as a heavy-hitter among those who rolled up with their lies at a moment's notice. The host's face was an emulsioned wall as he

listened to the older man describe some grandiose reckoning. "Nobody's free until everyone is, right?" was the standard he reached for in reply.

"Until *someone* is."

"Airless Martians still gasping in a town of smashed geodesics," he stated, and gave no clue as to his question. After wringing the laughs out of Skychum's perplexed silence, he continued. "These Martians what do they have against us?"

"Not Martiansmetaversal beings in a hyperspace we are using as a skeleton cupboard. Horror past its sell-by date is dismissed with the claim that a lesson is learned, and the sell-by interval is shortening to minutes."

"I don't understand," said the host with a kind of defiance.

"The media believe in resolution at all costs, and this is only human." Once again Skychum's sepulchral style was doing the trickthere was a lot of sniggering as he scowled like a chef.

"Dismissal's easier than learning."

"So you're calling down this evangelical carnage."

"I'm not"

"In simple terms, for the layman"the eyebrows of irony flipped to such a blur they vanished"how could all these bodies be floating out in 'hyper' space?"

"Every form which has contained life has its equivalent echo in the super-ethericif forced back into the physical, these etheric echoes will assume physical shape."

"Woh!" shouted the host, delighted, and the audience exploded with applausethis was exactly the kind of wacko bullshit they'd come to hear. "And why should they arrive at this particular time?"

"They have become synchronized to our culture, those who took on the taskit is appropriate, poetic!"

The audience whooped, flushed with the nut's sincerity.

"The great thing about being ignored is that you can speak the truth with impunity."

"But I call you a fraud, Dr. Skychum. These verbal manipulations cause a hairline agony in the honest man. Expressions of the grave should rival the public? I don't think so. Where's the light and shade?"

Skychum leaned forward, shaking with emotion. "You slur me for one who is bitter and raging at the world. But you mustn't kick a man when he's down, and so I regard the world." Then Ramone the chimp sprang on to his head, shrieking and flailing.

"Dr. Skychum," said the host. "If you're right, *I'm* a monkey."

The ringmaster of the Lobster Circus was declared the winner. The man with the flaming heart died of a coronary and the man with the dung fossil threw it into the audience and stormed off. A throne shaped like the halfshells of a giant nut was set up for the crowning ceremony. Skychum felt light, relieved. He had acquitted himself with honor. He enjoyed the jelly and ice cream feast set up for the contestants backstage. Even the chimp's food-flinging antics made him smile. He approached the winner with goodwill. "Congratulations sir. Those lobsters of yours are a brutal threat to mankind."

The winner looked mournfully up at him. "I love them," he whispered, and was swept away by the makeup crew.

At the moment of the turn, Skychum left the studio building by a side entrance, hands deep in his coatpockets. Under a slouch hat which obscured his sky, he moved off down a narrow street roofed completely by the landscape of a spacecraft's undercarriage.

During the last hour, as dullards were press-ganged onto ferris wheels and true celebrants arrested in amplified streets, hundreds of multidimensional ships had hoveled near, denial-allow

shields up. Uncloaking, they had appeared in the upper atmosphere like new moons. Now they hove into position over every capital city in the world, impossible to evade. Fifteen miles wide, these immense overshadow machines rumbled across the sky like a coffin lid drawing slowly shut. New York was being blotted out by a floating city whose petalled geometry was only suggested by sections visible above the canyon streets. Grey hieroglyphics on the underside were actually spires, bulkheads and structures of skyscraping size. Its central eye, a mile-wide concavity deep in shadow, settled over uptown as the hovering landscape thundered to a stop and others took up position over London, Beijing, Berlin, Nairobi, Los Angeles, Kabul, Paris, Zurich, Baghdad, Moscow, Tokyo and every other conurbation with cause to be a little edgy. One nestled low over the White House like an inverted cathedral. In the early light they were silent, unchanging fixtures. Solid and subject to the sun.

The President, hair like a dirty iceberg, slapped on a middling smile and talked about caution and opportunity. Everywhere nerves were clouded around with awe and high suspension. Traffic stopped. Fanatics partied. The old man's name was remembered if not his linea woman held a sign aloft saying I'M A SKY CHUM. Cities waited under dumb, heavy air.

Over the White House, a screeching noise erupted. The central eye of the ship was opening. Striation like silver insect wings cracked, massive steel doors grinding downward.

The same was happening throughout the world, a silver flower opening down over Parliament, Whitehall and the dead Thames; over the Reichstag building, the World Bank, the Beijing Politburo.

The DC saucer eye was open, the bellow of its mechanism echoing away. Onlookers craned to see up inside.

For the space of two heartbeats, everything stopped. Then a tiny tear dropped out of the eye, splashing on the White House roof.

And then another, falling like a light fleck of snow.

These were corpses, these twohuman corpses, followed by more in a shower which grew heavier by the moment, some crashing now through the roof, some rolling to land in the drive, bouncing to hit the lawn, bursting to paint the porticoes. And then the eye began gushing.

Everywhere the eyes were gushing. With a strange, continuous, multiphonic squall, the ragged dead rained from the sky.

Sixty-eight forgotten pensioners buried in a mass grave in 1995 were dumped over the Chicago social services. Hundreds of blacks murdered in police cells hit the roof of Scotland Yard. Thousands of slaughtered East Timorese were dumped over the Assembly buildings in Jakarta. Thousands killed in the test bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki began raining over the Pentagon. Thousands tortured to death showered Abuja.

Thousands of Sudanese slaves were dumped over Khartoum. The border-dwelling Khmer Rouge found themselves cemented into a mile-high gut slurry of three million Cambodians. Thousands of hill tribesmen were dropped over the Bangladeshi parliament and the World Bank, the latter now swamped irretrievably under corpses of every hue.

Berlin was almost instantly clotted, its streets packed wall to wall with victims. Beijing was swamped with tank fodder and girl babies.

The Pentagon well filled quickly to overflowing, blowing the building outward as surely as a terrorist bomb. Pearl Harbor dupes fell on Tokyo and Washington in equal share. The streets of America flooded with Japanese, Greeks, Koreans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Indonesians, Dominicans, Libyan, Timorese,

Central Americans and Americans, all beclouded in a pink mist of Dresden blood.

London was a flowing sewer then the bodies started falling. Parliament splintered like a matchstick model. In the Strand the living ran from a rolling wall of the dead. A king tide of hole-eyed German, Indian, African, Irish and English civilians surged over and against buildings which boomed flat under the pressure. Cars were batted along, flipped and submerged. The Thames flooded its banks, displaced by cadavers.

No longer preserved by denial, they started to sludge. Carpet-bombing gore spattered the suburbs, followed by human slurry tumbling down the streets like lava. Cheap human fallout from pain ignored and war extended for profit. The first wave. So far only sixty years' worth yet, tilling like bulldozed trash, it spread across the map like red inkblots destined to touch and merge.

Skychum had taken the 8:20 Amtrak north from Grand Central it had a policy of not stopping for bodies. Grim, he viewed the raining horizon dust motes in a shaft of light and presently, quietly, he spoke.

"Many happy returns."

Repeater

After an hour recording parkbirds I strolled back through town, the mike in my shoulderbag laying down the traffic. Streets like the deeps of a full ashtray. A plainclothes cop trundled up offering drug I declined and was arrested. At the kennel the cops were embarrassed and angry when I replayed the proof of my lamblike innocence. As they handed me my jaw on a plate I had an idea. Saw it all red and gold and full of justice. Put it at the front of a piece of Debussy and let the music carry it forward, filling it out. A notion and a half. Have to ask the old soldier.

The beating was over and I hadn't noticed. Cops regarding me with stall-cod eyes. Time to get upbut don't do it again.

Back on the street feeling four snapped ribsI've had worse and laughed with the correct medication. I was partly my fault for taking that route. The area was famous for the cops' planting of drugs and users had begun flocking there in the hope of being able to keep some in exchange for violence. But I wondered what Dogger would say.

The old soldier lived in a shed made of biscuit and was never without his dog Fire, the calling of whose name caused alarm and mayhem. Dogger had dodged so many bad laws his spine had corkscrewed. In classic style he had swallowed media promises of a better life and then overstepped the boundary of etiquette by actually trying to secure one. He was like Fagin without the charm and carried lemons in his coat as a tear gas precaution. He was so real his toaster ran on diesel. As I descended the railway embankment I heard him yelling in the hut. "The chains of your repression are as familiar to you as the teeth in your head. Born to it you were."

"Hello Dogger," I said cautiously, entering he was alone. I told him about the cops' theft of my equipment.

"There's no limit to what a dying system will demand of you, Hypnojerry," he laughed, showing braces like a knuckleduster. "Only a narrow land could end at one stroke the right to sound and the right to silence." He was referring to a brace of laws which curtailed the activities of those with an aptitude for reflection and enjoyment. "For fear of copycat outbreaks of happiness and laughter. Not that the deeper implications matter to a public soundproofed by indifference. Sad as a galleon in a bottle."

His hands flew over the eight-track sound desk. He was messing with the sound of a prefab saying "nothing you need fear" it was reversed, accelerated, cracked like a whip. "They did the same to me tried to send me to clench for heseltine possession." This was a laugh as cocaine would have slowed Dogger's thoughts to a constabulary crawl. He had an eight-track mind. "It's genius envy, Jell, pure and sour. I felt pity for the bastards so as not to get too angry. Injustice rings down through history to a deserted callbox. Let stress get into your tripe you'll end up in surgery under a blithe knife. Watch this."

And he played the word "fear" while pointing to a screen where the sound was rendered as a geometrical netshape which bulbed like a soapbubble. He tapped at a keyboard which froze the shape then flipped it inside-out like a mitten. "Now let's play this shape as a noise," he said, and pressed return. The system emitted the worst fart I'd ever heard.

Dogger explained that he had found a way to disclose the inner nature of a recorded verbal statement. Some remarks produced the zenlike sound of a gong. Others particularly those of the young the howl of a desert wind. Politicians from both dum and dee almost always created flatulence.

It was the latest in a long course of experimentation. Dogger had discovered birdsong slowed down was whalenoise and whalenoise speeded up was birdsong. He found that Nixon's resignation speech reversed was an invocation to the Devil in exquisitely pronounced Lithuanian. When he heard about the rave laws outlawing repetitive beats he examined the issue in fly-leg detail. Rhythm requires an alternation between sound and silence, or one sound and another. Dogger had considered whether the legislation could apply to repetitive injustice and bullshit but these activities were so constant as to be a seamless, mundane hum. Only regular interruptions of this mundanity could set up a beat. That was why raves were against the laws so that the unjust and dishonest would not be seen to be part of an illegal process. "It's all in the game, Hypnojerry. Mischief distinguishes man from the other animal that and the opposable thumb."

A train shrieked past and Fire woke up, raising his ears and eyebrows.

The next evening we retrieved my gear with the help of Antifrog. We figured since two wrongs don't make a right our act would not stand out against the general corruption.

Antifrog was a gay black youth with a strong Irish accent and herbal trousers. When this montage of minorities swanned into the kennel the cops couldn't believe their luck and set about his punishment. Truncheons leapt like salmon as he tried to report a theft. Dogger and I slipped past before the party was dampened by blood and boredom.

Since the passing of the new laws so much sound equipment had been seized we had learned that the safest thing to do was break into the cop confiscation store and dump our stuff there without a tag. Other than drugs they never touched a thing. But with the party approaching we'd need the gear and f once we had a legitimate reason for entrymy recording rig. Dogger kept up a running commentary as he worked the bolt cuttershe'd speak till the bitter, amp-smashing end. "Almost gave up on your generation, Jell. Tunnel vision without a flashlight. A passionless blank. Then by god the color starte seeping out of the walls. Back from the deadand me too. Should have seen me in the eighties, boyso out of it I had sideburns on someone else's face. Then one day I strode toward the horizon and was damn near garrotted by a rainbow."

We were into the storeroomI found my gear and knew this was the only way I could have retrieved it. The truth is easiest to disproveits defenses are down.

Dogger meanwhile was flashing a Mysteron beam over amplifier stacksthe stuff of villainy. "Jell, disorder's an offense with no mappable contours and the ideal fog for all occasions. Laws have gone by like motes on the film of my eye and with as much effectbut disorder? By god it's a beauty."

"We're in a hurry-up," I reminded him.

But Dogger had a philosophy you could stand a spoon inhe took a book from a shelf, blowing at the dust and frowning.

"*After London*. Damn fine book you can keep your trifflids. Jefferies got there first, with a flood. Well written too."

"Most books are so well written they barely have any effect on the reader's senses," I told him urgently. "Let's conclude this procedure and get out."

"With a bang or a whimper though Jell, how'd you picture it ending? The world, I mean?" We lifted the stack and moved between us and started off. "Here's how I see it," Dogger grunted through his exertions. "Denial. Vacuum competes with vacuum. Laws outlaw the harmless to make the effective inconceivable. Scholarly incomprehension. No questions asked. Banality given the terms and prestige of science. Ignorance worn like a heraldic crest. Mediocrity loudly rewarded. Misery by installments. Hypocrisy too extreme to process. Maintenance of a feeble public imagination. Lavish access to useless data. Fashion as misdirection. Social meltdown in a cascade pattern, consumed by a drought of significance. Drabness as ordered as the grey cells of a deserted wasp's nest."

"It's a thought."

On the way out we were approached by someone as featureless as a figure in a crash procedure diagram. It asked who we were and we pretended to be cops by saying we didn't know.

A few days later we visited Antifrog in hospital. The beating had been worse than we expected but he wished us well through a broken mouth. We taped the irregular bleep of his coronary monitor and set off for the country. A convoy of cars processioned through darkness toward a repeated thumping which could have been the heartbeat of the land itself. By degrees it became audible as Ravel's *Bolero* played across a fallow field stretching so far it seemed not to end. Acres of grass

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