

Mazes

I have tried hard to use my wits and keep up my courage, but I know now that I will not be able to withstand the torture any longer. My perceptions of time are confused, but I think it has been several days since I realized I could no longer keep my emotions under aesthetic control, and now the physical breakdown is also nearly complete. I cannot accomplish any of the greater motions. I cannot speak. Breathing, in this heavy foreign air, grows more difficult. When the paralysis reaches my chest I shall die: probably tonight.

The alien's cruelty is refined, yet irrational. If it intended all along to starve me, why not simply withhold food? But instead of that it gave me plenty of food, mountains of food, all the greenbud leaves I could possibly want. Only they were not fresh. They had been picked; they were dead; the element that makes them digestible to us was gone, and one might as well eat gravel. Yet there they were, with all the scent and shape of greenbud, irresistible to my craving appetite. Not at first, of course. I told myself, I am not a child, to eat picked leaves! But the belly gets the better of the mind. After a while it seemed better to be chewing something, anything, that might still the pain and craving in the gut. So I ate, and ate, and starved. It is a relief, now, to be so weak I cannot eat.

The same elaborately perverse cruelty marks all its behavior. And the worst thing of all is just the one I welcomed with such relief and delight at first: the maze. I was badly disoriented at first, after the trapping, being handled by a giant, being dropped into a prison; and this place around the prison is disorienting, spatially disquieting, the strange, smooth, curved wall-ceiling is of an alien substance and its lines are meaningless to me.

So when I was taken up and put down, amidst all this strangeness, in a maze, a recognizable, even familiar maze, it was a moment of strength and hope after great distress. It seemed pretty clear that I had been put in the maze as a kind of test or investigation, that a first approach toward communication was being attempted. I tried to cooperate in every way. But it was not possible to believe for very long that the creature's purpose was to achieve communication.

It is intelligent, highly intelligent, that is clear from a thousand evidences. We are both intelligent creatures, we are both maze-builders: surely it would be quite easy to learn to talk together! If that were what the alien wanted. But it is not. I do not know what kind of mazes it builds for itself. The ones it made for me were instruments of torture.

The mazes were, as I said, of basically familiar types, though the walls were of that foreign material much colder and smoother than packed clay. The alien left a pile of picked leaves in one extremity of each maze, I do not know why; it may be a ritual or superstition. The first maze it put me in was babyishly short and simple. Nothing expressive or even interesting could be worked out from it. The second, however, was a kind of simple version of the Ungated Affirmation, quite adequate for the reassuring, outreaching statement I wanted to make. And the last, the long maze, with seven corridors and nineteen connections, lent itself surprisingly well to the Maluvian mode, and indeed to almost all the New Expressionist techniques. Adaptations had to be made to the alien spatial understanding, but a certain quality of creativity arose precisely from the adaptations. I worked hard at the problem of that maze, planning all night long, reimagining the lines and spaces, the feints and pauses, the erratic, unfamiliar, and yet beautiful course of the True Run. Next day when I was placed in the long maze and the alien began to observe, I performed the Eighth Maluvian in its entirety.

It was not a polished performance. I was nervous, and the spatio-temporal parameters were only approximate. But the Eighth Maluvian survives the crudest performance in the poorest maze. The evolutions in the ninth encatenation, where the "cloud" theme recurs so strangely transposed into the ancient spiraling motif, are indestructibly beautiful. I have seen them performed by a very old person, so old and stiff-jointed

that he could only suggest a dim reflection of the thing moved. There is no nobler was carried away by the prisoner, forgot the alien the maze and my own we have never danced it before

When it was done, the first maze—the short one learned how to talk.

Was the humiliation there is no way to know. But to ignorance.

After all, it is not bl enough like our eyes that mouth, four legs, can move gigantism and strange look us, physically, than a fish. own stupid way, communicate with me. It has been with me for days; but all its motions is evidently a solitary creature

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that he could only suggest the movements, hint at them, a shadow-gesture,
 a dim reflection of the themes: and all who watched were inexpressibly
 moved. There is no nobler statement of our being. Performing, I myself
 was carried away by the power of the motions and forgot that I was a
 prisoner, forgot the alien eyes watching me; I transcended the errors of
 the maze and my own weakness, and danced the Eighth Maluvian as I
 have never danced it before.

When it was done, the alien picked me up and set me down in the
 first maze—the short one, the maze for little children who have not yet
 learned how to talk.

Was the humiliation deliberate? Now that it is all past, I see that
 there is no way to know. But it remains very hard to ascribe its behavior
 to ignorance.

After all, it is not blind. It has eyes, recognizable eyes. They are
 enough like our eyes that it must see somewhat as we do. It has a
 mouth, four legs, can move bipedally, has grasping hands, etc.; for all its
 gigantism and strange looks, it seems less fundamentally different from
 us, physically, than a fish. And yet, fish school and dance and, in their
 own stupid way, communicate! The alien has never once attempted to
 talk with me. It has been with me, watched me, touched me, handled me,
 for days: but all its motions have been purposeful, not communicative. It
 is evidently a solitary creature, totally self-absorbed.

This would go far to explain its cruelty.

I noticed early that from time to time it would move its curious
 horizontal mouth in a series of fairly delicate, repetitive gestures, a
 little like someone eating. At first I thought it was jeering at me; then I
 wondered if it was trying to urge me to eat the indigestible fodder; then
 I wondered if it could be communicating *labially*. It seemed a limited
 and unhandy language for one so well provided with hands, feet, limbs,
 flexible spine, and all; but that would be like the creature's perversity, I
 thought. I studied its lip-motions and tried hard to imitate them. It did
 not respond. It stared at me briefly and then went away.

In fact, the only indubitable *response* I ever got from it was on a
 pitifully low level of interpersonal aesthetics. It was tormenting me with
 knob-pushing, as it did once a day. I had endured this grotesque routine

pretty patiently for the first several days. If I pushed one knob I got a nasty sensation in my feet, if I pushed a second I got a nasty pellet of dried-up food, if I pushed a third I got nothing whatever. Obviously, to demonstrate my intelligence I was to push the third knob. But it appeared that my intelligence irritated my captor, because it removed the neutral knob after the second day. I could not imagine what it was trying to establish or accomplish, except the fact that I was its prisoner and a great deal smaller than it. When I tried to leave the knobs, it forced me physically to return. I must sit there pushing knobs for it, receiving punishment from one and mockery from the other. The deliberate outrageousness of the situation, the insufferable heaviness and thickness of this air, the feeling of being forever watched yet never understood, all combined to drive me into a condition for which we have no description at all. The nearest thing I can suggest is the last interlude of the Ten Gate Dream, when all the feintways are closed and the dance narrows in and in until it bursts terribly into the vertical. I cannot say what I felt, but it was a little like that. If I got my feet stung once more, or got pelted once more with a lump of rotten food, I would go vertical forever . . . I took the knobs off the wall (they came off with a sharp tug, like flowerbuds), laid them in the middle of the floor, and defecated on them.

The alien took me up at once and returned to my prison. It had got the message, and had acted on it. But how unbelievably primitive the message had had to be! And the next day, it put me back in the knob room, and there were the knobs as good as new, and I was to choose alternate punishments for its amusement . . . Until then I had told myself that the creature was alien, therefore incomprehensible and uncomprehending, perhaps not intelligent in the same *manner* as we, and so on. But since then I have known that, though all that may remain true, it is also unmistakably and grossly cruel.

When it put me into the baby maze yesterday, I could not move. The power of speech was all but gone (I am dancing this, of course, in my mind; "the best maze is the mind," the old proverb goes) and I simply crouched there, silent. After a while it took me out again, gently enough. There is the ultimate perversity of its behavior: it has never once touched me cruelly.

It set me down in the pen with inedible food. Then it

Its face is very mobile, but I cannot understand it, that is too covered with bulky, binding. Vow of Silence. But I had the angular character of its face, like saying a steady stream of horrible nonsense—dance like that they were strictly pure, little beyond that, in its pure communication. I saw, as it angry sadness—as clear as last immobility, the bentness came clear, and yet it told impatience, and frustration wanted me to help it. I am to say, "What is it you want?" But I was too weak to speak, never understood.

And now I have to die, but it will not understand it

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It set me down in the prison, locked the gate, and filled up the trough
 with inedible food. Then it stood two-legged, looking at me for a while.

Its face is very mobile, but if it speaks with its face I cannot
 understand it, that is too foreign a language. And its body is always
 covered with bulky, binding mats, like an old widower who has taken the
 Vow of Silence. But I had become accustomed to its great size, and to
 the angular character of its limb-positions, which at first had seemed to
 be saying a steady stream of incoherent and mispronounced phrases, a
 horrible nonsense-dance like the motions of an imbecile, until I realized
 that they were strictly purposive movements. Now I saw something a
 little beyond that, in its position. There were no words, yet there was
 communication. I saw, as it stood watching me, a clear signification of
 angry sadness—as clear as the Sembrian Stance. There was the same
 lax immobility, the bentness, the assertion of defeat. Never a word
 came clear, and yet it told me that it was filled with resentment, pity,
 impatience, and frustration. It told me it was sick of torturing me, and
 wanted me to help it. I am sure I understood it. I tried to answer. I tried
 to say, “What is it you want of me? Only tell me what it is you want.”
 But I was too weak to speak clearly, and it did not understand. It has
 never understood.

And now I have to die. No doubt it will come in to watch me die;
 but it will not understand the dance I dance in dying.

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