THE ELEPHANTS OF POZNAN
By Orson Scott Card

IN THE HEART of old Poznan, the capital of Great Poland since ancient times, there is a public square called Rynek Glowny. The houses around it aren't as lovely as those of Krakow, but they have been charmingly painted and there is a faded graciousness that wins the heart. The plaza came through World War II more or less intact, but the Communist government apparently could not bear the thought of so much wasted space. What use did it have? Public squares were for public demonstrations, and once the Communists had seized control on behalf of the people, public demonstrations would never be needed again. So out in the middle of the square they built a squat, ugly building in a brutally modern style. It sucked the life out of the place. You had to stand with your back to it in order to truly enjoy the square.

But we'd all seen the ugly building for so many years that we hardly noticed it anymore, except to apologize to visitors, ruefully remember the bad old days of Communism, and appreciate the irony that the occupants of such a tasteless building should include a restaurant, a bookshop, and an art gallery. And when the plague came and the city was so cruelly and suddenly emptied, those of us who could not let go of Poznan, who could not bear to eke out the last of our lives in the countryside, drifted to the old heart of the city and took up residence in the houses surrounding the square. As time passed, even the ugly building became part of the beauty of the place, for it had been part of the old crowded city now lost forever. Just as the toilets with little altars for the perusal of one's excrement reminded us of the many decades of German overlordship, so this building was also a part of our past, and now, by its sheer persistence among us, a part of ourselves. If we could venerate the bones and other bodily parts of dead saints, couldn't we also find holiness of a kind even in this vile thing? It was a relic of a time when we thought we were suffering, but to which we now would gladly return, just to hear schoolchildren again in the streets, just to see the flower shop once more selling the bright excesses of overcopious nature, spots of vivid color to show us that Poland was not, by nature, grey.

Into this square came the elephants, a group of males, making their way in what seemed a relentless silence, except that a trembling of the windows told us that they *were* speaking to each other in infrasound, low notes that the human ear could not hear, but the human hand could feel on glass. Of course we had all seen elephants for years on our forays out into the gardens of suburban Poznan—clans of females and their children following a matriarch, gangs of mature males hanging out to kill time until one of them went into musth and set off in search of the nearest estrous female. We speculated at first about where they came from, whether their forebears had escaped from a zoo or a circus during the plague. But soon we realized that their numbers were far too great to be accounted for that way. Too many different clans had been seen. On Radio Day we learned, from those few stations that still bothered, that the elephants had come down the Nile, swum the Suez, swarmed through Palestine and Syria and Armenia, crossed the Caucasus, and now fed in the lush wheat pastures of Ukraine, bathed in the streams of Belarus, and stood trumpeting on the shores of Estonia and Pomerania, calling out to some god of the sea, demanding passage to lands as yet unpossessed by the great stumpy feet, the probing noses, the piercing ivory, and the deep thrumming music of the new rulers of the world.

Why should they not rule it? We were only relics ourselves, we who had had the misfortune of surviving the plague. Out of every hundred thousand, only fifty or a hundred had survived. And as we scavenged in the ruins, as we bulldozed earth over the corpses we dragged from the areas where we meant to live, as we struggled to learn how to keep a generator or two running, a truck here and there, the radios we used only once a week, then once a month, then once a year, we gradually came to realize that there would be no more children. No one conceived. No one bore. The disease had sterilized us, almost all. There would be no recovery from this plague. Our extinction had not required a celestial

missile to shatter the earth and darken the sky for a year; no other species shared our doom with us. We had been taken out surgically, precisely, thoroughly, a tumor removed with a delicate viral hand.

So we did not begrudge the elephants their possession of the fields and the forests. The males could knock down trees to show their strength; there was no owner to demand that animal control officers come and dispose of the rampaging beasts. The females could gather their children into barns and stables against the winter blast, and no owner would evict them; only the crumbling bones and strands of hairy flesh showed where horses and cattle had starved to death when their masters died too quickly to think of setting them free from their stalls and pens.

Why, though, had these males come into the city? There was nothing for them to eat. There was nothing for *us* to eat; when our bicycles gave out and we could cobble together no more makeshift carts, we would have to leave the city ourselves and live closer to the food that we gathered from untended fields. Why would the elephants bother with such a ruin? Curiosity, perhaps. Soon they would see that there was nothing here for them, and move on.

We found ourselves growing impatient as the hours passed, and the days, and still we kept encountering them on the city streets. Didn't they understand that we lived in the heart of Poznan specifically because we wanted a human place? Didn't they feel our resentment of their trespass? All the rest of Earth is yours; can you not leave undesecrated these crypts we built for ourselves in the days of our glory?

Gradually it dawned on us — dawned on me, actually, but the others realized I was right — that the elephants had come, not to explore Poznan, but to observe *us*. I would pedal my bicycle and glance down a cross street to see an elephant lumbering along on a parallel path; I would turn, and see him behind me, and feel that shuddering in my breastbone, in my forehead, that told me they were speaking to each other, and soon another elephant would be shadowing me, seeing where I went, watching what I did, following me home.

Why were they interested in us? Humans were no longer killing them for their ivory. The world was theirs. We were going to die — I, who was only seven years old when the plague came, am now past thirty, and many of the older survivors are already, if not at death's door, then studying the travel brochures and making reservations, their Bibles open and their rosaries in hand. Were these males here as scientists, to watch the last of the humans, to study our deathways, to record the moment of our extinction so that the elephants would remember how we died with only a whimper, or less than that, a whisper, a sigh, a sidelong glance at God?

I had to know. For myself, for my own satisfaction. If I found the truth, whom else would I tell it to, and for what purpose? They would only die as I would die, taking memory with them into the fire, into the ash, into the dust. I couldn't get any of the others to care about the questions that preyed upon me. What do the elephants want from us? Why do they follow us?

Leave it alone, Lukasz, they said to me. Isn't it enough that they don't bother us?

And I answered with the most perplexing question of all, to me at least. Why elephants? The other wild animals that roamed the open country were the ones one might expect to see: The packs of dogs gone wild, interbreeding back to mongrel wolfhood; the herds of cattle, breeding back to hardiness, and of horses, quick and free and uninterested in being tamed. The companions of man, the servants and slaves of man, now masterless, now free. Unshorn sheep. Unmilked goats. Sudden-leaping housecats. Scrawny wild chickens hiding from ever-vigilant hawks. Ill-tempered pigs rooting in the woods, the boars making short work of dogs that grew too bold. That was the wildlife of Europe. No other animals from Africa had made the journey north. Only the elephants, and not just from Africa — the elephants of India were roaming the orient, and on the most recent Radio Day we learned, through messages relayed many times, that they had somehow crossed the

Bering Strait and were now, in ever greater numbers, grazing the prairies of America, small-eared cousins to the great-canopied beasts that now shadowed us on the streets of Poznan. I pictured them swimming, or piling onto boats that some last human pilot guided for them onto the stygian shore.

They had inherited the Earth, and were bent on surveying their new domain.

So I took to spending my days in the library, reading all I could about elephants, and then about all the processes of life, all the passages of history, trying to understand not only them but ourselves, and what had happened to us, and what our cities might mean to them, our houses, our streets, our rusting cars, our collapsing bridges, our sorry cemetery mounds where winter brought fresh crops of human bone to the surface, white stubble on a fallow field. I write this now because I think I know the answers, or at least have found guesses that ring true to me, though I also know they might be nothing more than a man hungry for meanings inventing them where they don't exist. Arguably, all meanings are invented anyway; and since I have no one to please but myself, and no one to read this who will care, except perhaps one, then I may write as I please, and think as I please, and reread this whenever I can bear it.

They made no effort to follow me inside the library. What good would it do them? Clever as they were with their inquisitive trunks, I could imagine them being deft enough to turn pages without tearing them. But what would the markings on the pages mean to them? Elephants sang their literature to each other in octaves we humans could not hear. Their science was the science of the temporal gland, the probing nose. They observed, but — or so I thought — did not experiment.

I did learn enough to warn the others before the first of the males went into musth. When you see one of them acting agitated, when his temporal glands pour out a steady black streak down his cheeks, when the other males are shy of him and give him room, then we must do the same, staying out of his way, not meeting his gaze. Let him pass. The city is his, wherever he wants to go. He won't stay here long, in musth. He must go and find a female then, and they were all outside in the open fields. He would give his deep rumbling call and pour out his lusty scent into the air and dribble musky fluid onto the ground where every other elephant could smell it and know: This way passed a male bent on making babies. This way passed God, looking for the Holy Virgin.

So we studied each other, and avoided offending each other, and grew used to each other's ways, the elephants and the fifty remaining residents of Poznan.

And then one day they began to push.

The males all gathered in the public square. We, too, gossiping to each other that something important was going to happen, gathered in our houses and leaned at our windows to watch.

They wandered aimlessly through the square, eleven of them — the twelve apostles, I thought, sans Iscariot — until noon made the smallest shadows. Then, as if of one mind, they surrounded the ugly old Communist building, facing it. When all were in place, they moved forward, slowly, each bull resting his massive brow against the miserable façade. Then, slowly, each began to tense his muscles, to shift his weight, to make little adjustments, to plant his feet, and then to push with greater and greater strength against the wall.

They're trying to push it down, I realized. And so did the others, all of us calling out to each other in our high-pitched human voices.

They're critics of architecture!

They've come to beautify Poznan!

We began to address the elephants with our calls, as if they were our football team, as if the plaza were a playing field. We cheered them, laughed in approval, shouted encouragement, placed meaningless bets about whether they could actually break through the walls.

Then, abruptly, I was no longer part of the playfulness. For without meaning to, I changed perspective suddenly, and saw us as the elephants must have seen us. This was Africa after all, and we were the primates perched in the trees, hooting and screeching at the giants, unaware of our own insignificance, or at least unbothered by it.

When I pulled my head back inside my window, I was filled with grief, though at that moment I could not have told you why. I thought at first it was because we humans were so diminished, reduced to chattering from safe perches. But then I realized that the human race had always been the same, had never risen, really, from our primate ways. No, what I was grieving for was that ugly old building, that relic of noble dreams gone sour. I had never lived under Communism, had only heard the stories of the Russian overlords and the Polish Communists who claimed to be fulfilling the will of the masses and perhaps, sometimes, believed their own propaganda — so my father told me, and I had no reason to doubt him. When the Communists decided what was good and what was bad, they acted as rigidly as any Puritan. Aesthetic concerns in architecture led to wasteful overspending of the labor of the working class; therefore, the ugliness of all new buildings was a badge of virtue. We human beings had reinvented ourselves, *Homo sovieticus*, *Homo coprofabricus*, or whatever the scientific name would be. A new species that never guessed how quickly it would be extinct.

The elephants would keep pushing until the walls came down — I knew that. Intransigence was built into the elephants' shoulders the way screeching and chattering were built into the primate mouth. And even though the other humans were cheering them, egging them on, I was sad. No, wistful. If we had really wanted that ugly building taken down, we knew where the dynamite was kept, we could have blown it out of existence. Elephants are mighty and strong, as beasts go, but when it comes to destruction, their foreheads are no match for the explosives in the locked sheds at the construction sites of buildings that will never be finished.

We don't need you to take it down, you meddlers, I wanted to say. We built it, we humans. It's ours. What right have you to decide which artifacts should stand, and which should fall?

The fascination of it was irresistible, though. I couldn't stay away from the window for long. I had to check, again, again, to see if they were making any progress, to see if some crack had appeared. The beasts had enormous patience, pushing and pushing until their shadows were swallowed up in the shade of the buildings as the sun headed out past Germany, past France, out to the Atlantic to be plunged steaming into the sea of night. That was the clock they lived by, these elephants; they had put in their day's work, and now they wandered off, heading out of the city as they did most nights, to eat and drink and sleep in some more hospitable place.

The next morning they were back, earlier this time, and formed their circle much more quickly, and pushed again. The betting among us began in earnest, then. Would they succeed? Would they give up? How long till the first crack? How long till a wall fell? We had nothing of value to bet; or rather, we had everything, we had inherited the city from the dead, so that we could bet enormous sums of money and pay in cash or diamonds if we wanted to, but when we wagered we never bothered to carry such useless objects from one house to another. Enough to say who won and who lost. The only reason we had such wealth was because the dead had left it all behind. If they didn't value it any more than that, what was it worth to us, except as counters in games of chance?

There was unguessed-at meaning in their pushing after all. For on the third day of the elephants' pushing — still to no visible effect — Arek came home to Poznan. Arek, whom I had named for my father. Arek, who dashed my last hope. Arek, who killed my wife.

FOR YEARS after the plague, no children were conceived. From Berlin, where one of the survivors was a doctor, we learned that when the plague was new and they were still trying to study it, the medical researchers determined that the virus rooted in the reproductive systems of men and women, specifically attacking their bodies where the

human seed was made. This was not how the plague did its slaughtering, but it guaranteed that the few survivors would be sterile. The message left us in despair.

But I was young, and though I had seen more death before I turned ten than I would ordinarily have seen even if I devoted my whole life to watching American movies, my hope was still undashable. Or rather, my body's hope, which in my teens was much stronger than my reason. As the people from the hinterlands and smaller towns came seeking human company, Poznan became a gathering place. In those days we lived on the outskirts of the city, in a place where we could actively farm, before we realized that farming was redundant with miles and miles of fields and gardens reseeding themselves faster than we could harvest them. So I was hoeing the turnips — the kind of task the adults gratefully left to my strong and flexible young arms and legs — when Hilde and her family came to town in a horse-drawn wagon.

It wasn't Hilde herself that I saw at first, it was the miracle of seeing a family. At first, of course, we assumed they were a nonce family, clinging to each other because no one else in their area

survived. But no, no, they *looked* like each other, that miracle of resemblance that told us all that they were genetically connected. And soon we learned that yes, they were a mother, a father, a daughter, all of whom had survived the plague. They knew it was wrong of them to grieve for the two sons and three daughters who died, for they had not lost everyone they loved, as all the rest of us had done. There was something in them that was stronger than the disease. And Hilde, a plump nordic blonde, soon became beautiful to all of us, because we knew that if any woman had a viable ovum left, it would be her.

She and her parents understood that her womb, if it was not barren, could not belong to her alone, and that her only hope of continuing our poor, weak species was to find a mate whose body still could spew forth living sperm. She had been sexually immature when the plague came, but now was womanly, ready to bear if bear she could. One man at a time would husband her, for three months; then a month of solitude, and then the next man's turn to try. That way there would be no doubt of fatherhood if she conceived; he would be her husband, to father more children on her. She agreed to this because there was no other hope.

I was third to try, at fifteen a frightened child myself, approaching her like the temple priestess that she was, begging the god to choose me, to let life come into her from me. She was sweet and patient, and told no one how clumsy I was. I liked her, but did not yet love her, for she was still a stranger to me. I could mate with her, but not speak to her — or at least not be understood, for she came from a German-speaking area in the westernmost mountains, and had but little Polish — though more of Polish than I had of German.

The second month she had no period, and the third, and the fourth. She was kept away from me, from all men, until in the fifth month she asked for me. "You are half of this miracle," she said in halting Polish, and from then on I was her companion. No more fieldwork for me — what if I was injured? What if I caught cold? Instead I stayed with her, taught her to speak Polish and learned to read German, more or less.

In the eighth month the doctor finally came from Berlin. He had never worked in obstetrics, but he was the best hope we had, and since no one in Berlin was pregnant, they understood what was at stake; even a half-Polish baby in Poznan was better than no more babies anywhere at all. We made him welcome; he taught us how to make beer.

The ninth month. Nothing happened. He spoke of inducing labor. We worked to get a room in the hospital powered up, the old equipment working, and he gave Hilde an ultrasound examination. He could not face us after that. "You counted wrong?" he offered, as a possibility.

No, we did not count wrong. We knew the last time she had sex with anyone — with me — and it was nine months and two weeks ago.

"The baby is not ready yet," he said. "Weeks to go. Maybe many weeks. The limb-length tells me this. The development of the face and hands."

And then the worst news. "But the head — it is very large. And strangely shaped. Not a known condition, though. I looked in the books. Not seen before, not exactly this. If it is still growing — and how can I tell, since it is already as big as an adult human head — this does not look happy for her. She cannot bear this child normally. I will have to cut the baby out."

Cut it out now, her parents said. It has been nine months.

"No," the doctor said. "If I cut now, I think that it will die. I think it has the lungs of a fetus of five months. I did not come here to abort a fetus. I came to deliver a baby."

But our daughter....

Hilde agreed with the doctor. "If he has to cut me open anyway, there is no hurry. Wait until the baby himself thinks that he is ready."

We knew now it would be a boy, and were not glad of it. A daughter would have been better, everyone knew that. Everyone but me — I was not ready to play Lot with a daughter of mine, and I was the only man proven to have viable sperm, so I thought it was better that I would have a son and then could wander with Hilde and the boy, through all the world if need be, searching for a place where another mating had happened, where there might be a girl for him. I could imagine that future happily.

Ten months. Eleven. No woman had carried a child for so long. She could not sit up in bed now, for still it grew, and the ultrasound looked stranger and stranger. Wide hips, and eyes far apart on a face appallingly broad. The ultrasound, with its grainy, black-and-white image, made it look like a monster. This was no baby. It would never live.

Worse, it was draining the life out of Hilde. Most of what she ate went across the placenta to feed this cancerous growth inside her. She grew wan of face, weak of muscle even as her belly grew more and more mountainous. I would sit beside her and when she was tired of the book I read, I would hold her hand and talk to her of walks along the streets of the city, of my visit to Krakow when I was six, before the plague; how my father took me along as he escorted a foreign author through the city; how we ate at a country restaurant and the foreigner could not eat the floury bread and the chewy noodles and the thick lard spread. She laughed. Or, as she grew weaker, smiled. And finally, near the end, just clung to my hand and let me babble. I wanted nothing more than to have Hilde. Forget the baby. It's already dead to me, this monster. Just let me have Hilde, the time with her that a man should have with his wife, the life together in a little house, the coming home at night to her embrace, the going forth in the morning with her kiss on my lips and her blessing in my ears.

"I will take it now," said the doctor. "Perhaps the next child will be normal. But she grows too weak to delay any longer."

Her parents agreed. Hilde, also, gave consent at last. The doctor had taught me to be his nurse, and trained me by making

me watch the bloody surgeries he did on hares and once on a sheep, so I would not faint at the blood when the time came to cut into my wife. For wife she was, at her insistence, married to me in a little ceremony just before she went under the anaesthetic. She knew, as did I, that the marriage was not permanent. Perhaps the community would give me one more try to make a normal child with her, but if that one, too, should fail, the rotation would begin again, three months of mating, a month fallow, until a father with truer seed was found.

What we did not understand was how very weak she had become. The human body was not designed to give itself so completely to the care of such a baby as this one. Somehow the baby was sending hormonal messages to her, the doctor said, telling her body not to bear, not to present; the cervix not to efface and open. Somehow it caused her body to drain itself, to make the muscles atrophy, the fat to disappear.

The doctor's incision was not large enough at first. Nor with the second cut. Finally, with the third, her womb lay open like the belly of a dissected frog, and at last he lifted the little monster out. He handed it to me. Almost I tossed it aside. But it opened its eyes.

Babies aren’t supposed to be able to do that, I know now. But it opened its eyes and looked at me. And I felt a powerful trembling, a vibration in my chest and arms. It was alive, whatever it was, and it was not in me, its father, to kill it. So I set it aside, where a couple of women washed it, and did the rituals that the doctor had prescribed — the drops into the eyes, the blood samples. I did not watch. I returned to Hilde.

I thought she was unconscious. But then the baby made a sound, and even though it was lower than a baby’s mewling ought to be, she knew it was his voice, and her eyes fluttered open. "Let me see," she whispered. So I ran and took the baby from the women and brought it to her.

It was as large as a toddler, and I was loath to lay such a heavy burden on her chest. But Hilde insisted, reaching with her fingers because she could not raise her arms. I leaned over her, bearing as much of the baby’s weight as I could. He sought her breast and, when she found the strength to raise a hand and guide a nipple into his mouth, he sucked mightily. It hurt her, but her face spoke of ecstasy as well as pain. "Mama loves the baby," her lips said silently.

She died as the doctor was still stitching her. He left the wound and tried to revive her, shoving the baby and me out of the way and pumping at her heart. Later, after the autopsy, he told me that her heart had been used up like all her other muscles. The child had ruled the mother, had demanded her life from her, and she had given it.

My Hilde. Till death parted us.

There was some debate on whether to feed the child, and then on whether to baptize it. In both cases, mercy and hope triumphed over fear and loathing. I wanted to oppose them, but Hilde had tried to feed the baby, and even after she was dead I did not wish to contradict her. They made me choose a name. I gave it my father’s name because I could not bear to give it mine. Arkadiusz. Arek.

He weighed nearly ten kilograms at birth.

At two months he walked.

At five months his babbling noises became speech. They taught him to call me papa. And I came to him because he was, after all, my own.

Hilde’s parents were gone by then. They blamed me — my bad seed — for their daughter’s death. In vain did the doctor tell them that what the plague had done to me it no doubt also did to her; they knew, in their hearts, that Hilde was normal, and I was the one with the seed of monstrosity. They could not bear to look at me or at Arek, either, the killers of their last child, their beautiful little girl.

Arek walked early because his wideset legs gave him such a sturdy platform, while crawling was near impossible for him. His massive neck was strong enough to hold his wide-faced, deep-skulled head. His hands were clever, his arms long and probing. He was a font of questions. He made me teach him how to read when he was not yet two.

The two strange apertures in his head, behind the eyes, before the ears, seeped with fluid now and then. He stank sometimes, and the stench came from there. At the time we did not know what to call these things, or what they meant, for the elephants had not yet come. The whole community liked Arek, as they must always like children; they played with him, answered his questions, watched over him. But beneath the love there was a constant gnawing pain. He was our hope, but he was no hope at all. Whatever his strange condition was, it might have made him quicker than a normal child, but we knew that it could not be healthy, that like most strange children he would no doubt die before his time. And definitely, mutant that he was, he must surely be as sterile as a mule.

And then the elephants came, great shadowy shapes out in the distant fields. We marveled. We wondered. They came nearer, day by day. And Arek became quite agitated. "I hear them," he said.

Hear what? We heard nothing. They were too far off for us to hear.

"I hear them," he said again. He touched his forehead. "I hear them here." He touched his chest. "And here."

The flow from the apertures in his head increased.

He took to wandering off. We had to watch him closely. In the middle of a reading lesson, he would stand up and face the distant elephants — or face the empty horizon where they might be — and listen, rapt. "I think I understand them," Arek said. "Here's a place with good water."

All of Poland has good water now, I pointed out.

"No," he said impatiently. "It's what they said. And now they talk of one who died. They have the scent of him. The one who died." He listened more; I still heard nothing. "And me," he said. "They have the scent of me."

Elephants care nothing for you, I said.

He turned to me, his eyes awash with tears. "Take that back," he said.

Sit and do your lessons, Arek.

"What do I care what dead people say? I have no need of what they said!"

You're five years old, Arek. I know better than you what you need to know.

"Your father had to know all this," he said. "But what is it to me? What good has reading done for you?"

I tried to hold him, but at five years old he was too strong. He ran from the room. He ran out into the field. He ran toward the elephants.

I followed him as best I could. Others joined me, calling out Arek's name. He was not swift, and we could have caught him if we were willing to tackle him like rugby players. But our goal was only to keep him safe, and so we jogged alongside him, his short and heavy legs lumbering forward, ever closer to the elephants. A matriarch and her clan, with several babies of varying sizes. We tried to stop him then, to hold him back, but by then the matriarch had noticed us, and as she approached, Arek screamed and tried more violently to get away, to run to her. She trumpeted at us, and finally, tentatively, in fear of her we set him down.

She let him embrace her trunk; he clambered upward, over her great impassive brow, and sprawled his body across the top of her head. Her trunk reached up to him; I feared that she would sweep him from her head like lint. Instead she touched the leaking aperture on his right cheek, then brought the tip of her trunk down to her mouth. To smell and taste it.

That was when I realized: The matriarch, too, had an aperture between eye and ear, a leaking stinkhole. When I did my reading, I learned that it was the temporal gland. The elephants had it, and so did my son.

Neither Hilde nor I was elephantine. Nor was there any logical way, given the little science that I knew, for me to explain how a gland that only elephants had should suddenly show up on a human child. It wasn't just the temporal glands, either. As he sat perched atop the matriarch, I could see how closely his brow resembled hers. No great flapping ears, no abnormality of nose, and his eyes were still binocular, not side-aimed like the elephant's. Yet there was no mistaking how his forehead was a smaller echo of her own.

He has been waiting for them, I murmured.

And then I thought, but did not say: They came in search of him.

He would not go home with me. One by one the others drifted back to our village, some returning to bring me food and offer food to Arek. But he was busy riding on the matriarch, and playing with the babies, always under the watchful gaze of the mothers, so that no harm would come to him. He made a game of running up the trunks and turning somersaults onto an elephant's back. He swung on tusks. He rode them like horses, he climbed them like trees, and he listened to them like gods.

After two days they moved on. I tried to follow. The matriarch picked me up and put me back. Three times she did it before I finally acquiesced. Arek was their child now. They had adopted him, he had adopted them. Whatever music they were making, he heard it and loved it. The pied piper had come to lead away our only son, our strange inhuman child, the only hope we had.

From that day I did not see him, until the twelfth bull elephant arrived with Arek astride his neck.

Full-grown Arek — just a little taller, I estimated, than his father, but built like a tractor, with massive legs and arms, and a neck that made his enormous head look almost natural. "Father!" he cried. "Father!" He had not seen me at the window. I wanted to hide from him. He must be fifteen now. The age I was when I met Hilde. I had put him from my mind and heart, as I had already done with my parents, my baby sister, whom I had left behind unburied when I was too hungry to wait any longer for them to wake again, for God to raise them up from their sickbeds. Of all those I had lost, why was he the one that could return? For a moment I hated him, though I knew that it was not his fault.

He was their child anyway, not mine. I could see that now. Anyone could see it. His skin was even filthy grey like theirs.

He didn't see me. He slid down the brow and trunk of the bull he was riding and watched as his steed — his companion? His master? — took its place in the circle that pushed against the walls of the ugly building. He walked around them, a wide circle, looking up at the windows on the opposite side of the square. But it was not by sight that he found me. It was when he was directly under my window, looking the other way, that he stopped, and turned, and looked up at me, and smiled. "Father," he said. "I have seen the world!"

I DID NOT want him to call me father. Those were his fathers, those bull elephants. Not me. I was the bearer of the seed, its depositor, but the seed itself had been planted in both Hilde and me by the plague. Born in Africa and carried to the world on airplanes, virulent and devastating, the plague was no accident of nature. Paranoid as it sounded even to myself, I had the evidence of Arek's elephantinism to bolster what I knew but could not prove. Somehow in the kettle of the temporal gland, the elephants created this new version of man, and sent the seed out into the world, carried by a virus. They had judged us, these beasts, and found us wanting. Perhaps the decision was born as grieving elephants gathered around the corpses of their kinfolk, slain and shorn of their tusks. Perhaps the decision came from the shrinking land and the drying earth. Perhaps it was their plan all along, from the time they made us until they finally were done with us.

For in the darkness of the library, as I moved along the table, keeping my yellowing books always in the slant of light from the window, I had conjured up a picture of the world. The elephants, the true gods of antiquity. They had reached the limit of what they could do with their prehensile noses. What was needed now was hands, so virus by virus, seed by seed, they swept away one species and replaced it with another, building and improving and correcting their mistakes. There was plenty of the primate left in us, the baboon, the chimpanzee. But more and more of the elephant as well, the kindness, the utter lack of warfare, the benevolent society of women, the lonely wandering harmless helpful men, and the absolute sanctity of the children of the tribe. Primate and elephant, always at war within us. We could see the kinship between us and the apes, but failed to see how the high-breasted elephant could possibly also be our kind.

Only now, with Arek, could the convergence at last be seen. They had made at last an elephant with hands, a clever toolmaker who could hear the voices of the gods.

I thought of the bulldancers of Crete, and then of Arek running up the trunks of elephants and somersaulting on their heads. The mastodons and mammoths were all gone, and the elephants were south of the Mediterranean; but they were not forgotten. In human memory, we were supposed to dance with joy upon the horns and head of a great loving beast, our father, our maker. Our prophets were the ones who heard the voice of God, not in the tempest, but in the silent thrumming, the still small voice of infrasound, carried through stone and earth as easily as through the air. On the mountain they heard the voice of God, teaching us how to subdue the primate and become the sons of God, the giants in the earth. For the sons of God did marry the daughters of men. We remembered that God was above us, but thought that meant he was above the sky. And so my speculation and imagining led me to this mad twisting of the scripture of my childhood; and no less of the

science and history in the library. What were the neanderthals? Why did they disappear? Was there a plague one day, carried wherever the new-made Cro-Magnon wandered? And did the Neanderthals understand what their woolly mammoth deities had done to them? Here was their ironic vengeance: It was the new, godmade men, the chosen people, who hunted the mammoths and the mastodons to extinction, who bowed the elephants of India to slavery and turned the elephants of Africa into a vast wandering ivory orchard. We men of Cro-magnon descent, we thought we were the pinnacle. But when God told us to be perfect, as he was perfect, we failed him, and he had to try again. This time it was no flood that swept our souls away. And any rainbow we might see would be a lie.

I spoke of this to no one — I needed human company too much to give them reason to think me mad. Elephants as gods? As God himself? Sacrilege. Heresy. Madness. Evil. Nor was I sure of it myself; indeed, most days, most hours of the day, I mocked my own ideas. But I write them here, because they might be true, and if someday these words are read, and I was right, then you'll hear my warning: You who read this, you are not the last and best, any more than we were. There is always another step higher up the ladder, and a helpful trunk to lift you upward on your way, or dash you to the ground if you should fail.

Arek called me father, and I was not his father. But he came from Hilde's body; she gave her life to give him breath, and loved him, ugly and misshapen as he was, as she held him to her empty breasts while her heart pushed the last few liters of blood through her worn-out body. Not a drop of pap came from her into his mouth. He had already sucked her dry. But for that moment she loved him. And for her sake — and for his, at first, I will be honest here — I tried to treat him well, to teach him and provide for him and protect him as best I could. But at five years of age they took him and he was raised by elephants. In what sense now was he my son?

"Father," he said to me again. "Don't be afraid. It's only me, your boy Arek."

I'm not afraid, I almost said.

But he would know it was a lie. He could smell a lie on me. Silence was my refuge.

I left my room and went down the stairs to the level of the street. I came blinking into the sunlight. He held out a hand to me. His legs were even stockier now; whenever he stood still, he looked as planted as a pair of old trees. He was taller than I am, and I am tall. "Father," he said. "I want them to meet you. I told them all the things you taught me."

They already know me, I wanted to say. They've been following me for years. They know when and where I eat and sleep and pee. They know all they want to know of me, and I want nothing at all from them, so ...

So I followed him anyway, feeling my hand in his, the firm kind grasp, the springy rolling rhythm of his walk. I knew that he could keep walking forever on those legs. He led me to the new elephant, the one he had arrived with. He bade me stand there as the trunk took samples of my scent for tasting, as one great eye looked down on me, the all-seeing eye. Not a word did I say. Not a question did I ask.

Until I felt the thrumming, strong now, so powerful that it took my breath away, it shook my chest so strongly.

"Did you hear him, Father?" asked my son.

I nodded.

"But did you understand?"

I shook my head.

"He says you understand," said Arek, puzzled. "But you say that you don't."

At last I spoke: I understand nothing.

The elephant thrummed out again.

"You understand but do not know you understand," said Arek. "You're not a prophet."

The elephant had made me tremble, but it was Arek's word that made me stumble. Not a prophet. And you *are*, my son?

"I am," said Arek, "because I hear what he says and can turn it into language for the rest of you. I thought you could understand him, too, because he said you could."

The elephant was right. I did understand. My mad guesses were right, or somewhat right, or at least not utterly wrong. But I said nothing of this to Arek.

"But now I see you do understand," said Arek, nodding, content.

His temporal glands were dripping, the fluid falling onto his naked chest. He wore trousers, though. Old polyester ones, the kind that cannot rot or fade, the kind that will outlast the end of the universe. He saw me looking, and again supposed that I had understood something.

"You're right," he said. "I've had it before. Only lightly, though. And it did me no good." He smiled ruefully. "I've seen the world, but none like me."

Had *what* before?

"The dripping time. The madness."

Musth, I said.

"Yes," he answered. He touched the stream of fluid on his cheek, then streaked it on my cheek. "It takes a special woman to bear my child."

What if there isn't one?

"There is," he said. "That's why I came here."

There's no one here like you.

"Not yet," he said. "And besides, I had this gift to give you."

What gift?

He gestured, as if I should have understood all along. The building that the elephants were pushing at. "You always told me how much you hated this building. How ugly it was. I wanted to give you something when I came again, but I couldn't think of anything I could do for you. Except for this."

At his words, the elephants grunted and bellowed, and now it was clear that all their pushing before had been preliminary to this, as they braced themselves and rammed, all at once, again and again. Now the building shuddered. Now the façade cracked. Now the walls buckled.

Quickly Arek drew me back, out of danger. The elephants, too, retreated, as the walls caved in, the roof collapsed. Dust blew out of the place like smoke, blinding me for a moment, till tears could clear my vision.

No silence now, no infrasound. The bulls gave voice, a great triumphant fanfare.

And now the families came: the matriarch, the other females, their babies, their children. Into the square, now unobstructed except for the rubble pile, they came by the dozens. There must be three clans here, I thought. Four. Five. Trumpeting. Triumphant.

All this, because they knocked down a building?

No. The fall of the building was the gift to the father. It was the signal for the real festivities to begin.

"I made them bring her here," said Arek. "You're my family, and these are my friends." He indicated the people leaning out of the windows over the square. "Isn't that what weddings are for?"

The elephants made way for one last arrival. An Indian elephant lumbered into the square, trunk upraised, trumpeting. It progressed in stately fashion to the place where Arek and I were standing. On its back sat Arek's bride-to-be. At first glance she was human, boldly and charmingly nude. But under the shock of thick, straight hair her head was, if anything, larger than Arek's, and her legs were set so wide that she seemed to straddle the elephant's neck the way a woman of my species might bestride a horse. Down the forehead and the trunk of the beast she slid, pausing only to stand playfully upon the tusks, then jump lightly to the ground. Those legs, those hips — she clearly had the strength to carry a baby as large as Arek had been for the entire year. But wide as her body was, could such a head pass through the birth canal?

Because she was naked, the answer was before my eyes. The entrance to her birth canal was not between her thighs, but in a pouch of skin that drooped from the base of her

abdomen; the opening was in front of the pubis. No longer would the pelvic circle limit the size of a baby’s head. She would not have to be cut open to give birth.

Arek held out his hand. She smiled at him. And in that smile, she became almost human to me. It was the shy smile of the bride, the smile that Hilde had given me when she was pregnant, before we knew it was no human child she carried.

"She’s in heat," said Arek. "And I’m ... in musth. You have no idea how crazy it makes me."

He didn’t sound crazy, or act it, either. Instead he had the poise of a king, the easy confidence of an elephant. At the touch of her hand, his temporal glands gave forth such a flow that I could hear the fluid dripping onto the stones of the plaza. But otherwise he betrayed no eagerness.

"I don’t know how it’s done," said Arek. "Marriage, I mean. They said I should marry as humans do. With words."

I remembered the words that had been said for me and Hilde. As best I could, I said them now. The girl did not understand. Her eyes, I saw now, had the epicanthic fold — how far had they brought her? Was she the only one? Were there only these two in all the world? Is that how close they came to the edge of killing us all, of ending the whole experiment?

I said the words, and she shaped the answers. But I could tell that it didn’t matter to her, or to him either, that she understood not a bit of the Polish words she had to say. Below the level of audible speech, they had another kind of language. For I could see how her forehead thrummed with a tone too low for my ears to hear. But he could hear. Not words, I assumed. But communication nonetheless. The thing with speech, they’d work that out. It would still be useful to them, when communication needed to be precise. But for matters of the heart, they had the language of the elephants. The language of the gods. The adamic tongue. The idiom God had used one time to say, Multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it. We did the first; we did the last. Now, perhaps, this new couple in their new garden, would learn the replenishing part as well. Only a few of us lingering beasts, of us the dust of the earth, would remain, and not for long. Then the whole world would be their garden.

Today they’re gone. Out of Poznan, the elephants and their new creatures, the son and daughter of the gods. My Arek and his wife, whose name he never spoke aloud to us. No doubt he has some deep and rumbling name for her that I could never hear. They will have many children. They must watch them carefully. Or perhaps this time it will be different. No stone crashed against a brother’s head this time. No murder in the world. Only the peace of the elephants.

They’re gone, and the rejoicing is over — for we did rejoice, because even though we know, we all know, that Arek and his bride are not of our kind, they still carry the only portion of our seed that will remain alive in the earth; better to live on in them then to die utterly, without casting seed at all.

They’re gone, and now each day I go out into the square and work amid the wreckage of the building. Propping up the old façade, leaning it against a makeshift wall. Before I die, I’ll have it standing again, or at least enough of it so that the square looks right. Already I have much of one wall restored, and sometimes the others come and help me, when they see I’m struggling with a section of wall too heavy or awkward for a man to raise alone.

It may have been an ugly thing, that Communist monstrosity, but it was built by humans, in a human place, and they had no right to knock it down.