Mine Is the Kingdom

Roger Zelazny

I

—Far removed are the courts of darkness…

The distance of the stars, he decided, and ten feet from where I’m sitting.

⁠—And far the places of people…

He agreed, silently.

⁠—Near are the un-people.

He nodded.

⁠—You are on Earth and ridiculous.

“Yes,” he murmured.

⁠—You are half-mad and all drunk.

“All mad and half drunk,” he corrected.

⁠—So you will step into the machine, press the button, and join your people in the places of laughter…

“Ha!” he hiccupped. “I’m laughing now.”

He shook his head and sat up, looking around.

He poked the beanstalk of yellow light and waited.

A heartbeat.

“Service?” inquired the pillow.

“Puffy talk-beams mestering again,” he sighed. “Search, screen, block.

“Whenever I drink it is an ‘A’ Situation and priority care is required,” he reminded.

The pillow hummed.

“ ‘A’ Situation prevails. There is no penetration.”

He half-rose.

“Then who was talking to me just now?”

“I certainly wasn’t,” came the reply. “It could be your human imagination, stimulated by the alcohol you have consumed…”

It sounded almost hurt.

“Sorry,” he apologized to invisible coils. “Mix me another.”

He leaned back and took the tube into his mouth.

“And don’t water this one,” he slurred.

“I never water your drinks.”

“They taste weaker.”

“Your tolerance level is rising.”

“Out! Out on’t! Read to me.”

“What shall I read?”

“Anything.”

“ ‘The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning his⁠—’ ”

“Anything but Grahame!”

“How about Vradmer?”

“No.”

“Gelden?”

“No, something older. Near Grahame, maybe.”

“Krin? K’lal? The Old Man of Venus?”

“Older.”

“Flone? Threene? Hemingway? Proust?”

“Older still.”

“ ‘In the beginning⁠—’ ”

“And pagan.”

“How’s Pindar.”

“Very good.”

He took a long drink and settled back to dreaming.

⁠—Why did you kill the puffy?

A long pause.

“I didn’t kill any puffy.”

⁠—Puffies do not murder puffies, and a puffy is dead. You are the last man on Earth. Limitless power is yours. Why did you use it to kill?

A longer pause.

“What’s a puffy?”

⁠—They wanted the Earth. Don’t you remember?

“I don’t know… I was drunk. Go away!”

⁠—Why don’t you go away?

“I can’t!”

⁠—Just step into the machine, push the button, and join your people in the places of laughter…

“There are no places of laughter!”

⁠—Talk to the puffies.

He slapped the side of the couch and a jet of barbiturates entered his bloodstream.

He slept.

\* \* \*

The sun was a dirty dime, fallen upon wet concrete. He stared at it, blinking.

“The times we’ve spent you…” he mused, realizing he was awake.

“Everything’s depreciated.”

He rolled onto his right side, feeling awful.

After awhile the pillow asked him what he wanted for breakfast. He tried to think of the right answer, but gave up and asked for something to settle his stomach.

It was chalk and liver, damming the imminent overflow of a drainage ditch. He spat and rolled onto his left side, feeling less awful.

Finally, he jabbed at the band of light.

“Bridge me ideational control.”

The power was a silent melody: moonlight sawing on strings of milkweed silk, deep winds of liquid blowing timeless through pipes of coral, the collisions of clouds…

He drifted, stretching and yawning.

He willed a firepole and slid a hundred yards upward.

“Mount Athos,” he decided, “and breakfast.”

Standing upon a rocky crag, looking out over the endless room of the Sanct, he smiled. He blanked the walls and molded a flowing panorama of trees and hills, like those which had once existed on Earth; in the distance, a sea. (Was that right? He shrugged.) The invisible ceiling became a bluegreen sky. The sun he painted brutal yellow. Now the slope flowed smooth beneath his sandals. He affected sackcloth and a grin, and he dotted the horizon with shimmering skylines.

“So much for the kingdoms of Earth,” he muttered. “Come now, Lucifer!”

A faceless shadow hovered at his left, reeking of death and final judgments.

“The routine,” he suggested.

A voice from the bottom of a barrel, monotonous: “Behold the kingdoms of the Earth,” it stated, “in all their glory and power. To me have they been delivered and in this moment of time, and to whomever I will give them. Worship me and they are thine.”

He laughed.

“But they are mine already, dear fellow. I just created them. You too, for that matter. It’s you ought to be paying me a little respect.”

The figure wavered, uncertain.

“Now the punchline,” he suggested.

“Then change thou these stones into bread,” it repeated, wearily, “and I shall believe thee.”

“Ham and eggs,” he corrected. “Won’t you join me?”

“Thanks,” it crackled.

They seated themselves and discussed nothing until he grew bored. Finishing breakfast, he opened a chasm and stuffed the entire scene into it, amidst much thunder and the crackle of skylicking flames.

“To hell with you all!” he belched. “What’ll I do till lunch? Sail with Odysseus?”

\* \* \*

He had begun the tentative towers of Ilium and the outline of a great horse when the Sanct-comm called.

“Puffy ambassadors beg entrance,” it said.

“Tell them I’m busy.”

The horse wavered, went out. The bottomless towers fled toppling, sinking, silent, draining down into the stark floors.

“Oh damn! Start decontaminating them. They’ve already ruined my morning!”

He settled back to the couch to be shaved, cleaned, clipped, and stuffed into fresh garments. The manicurette tsk-tsked at the condition of his nails and he contemplated the dimmie projection of the creatures known as puffies.

A downy, albino aura clung to the man-sized swaying forms. Towers of milk, the bulk of their weight tripod on baboon-dark rears and two snowy sextants, the puffies moved and bellyfuls of vestigial limbs, like hundred-handed clocks, writhed their buried hours.

Bilaterally symmetrical, their head-high mandibles had differentiated into grasping independency at about the same time the antennae antlered in columbine clusters⁠—petalled powder-blue, opening and closing with systolic regularity. Two butterpads beneath them strained the world through flyscreens of topaz.

“Good morning, pretty things,” he suggested, and the puffies revolved, seeking the source of his voice.

“You can’t see me unless I want you to. Why are you here?”

The creatures seemed to consider his question.

“To convince, buy, help, talk, to you, to go,” one buzzed.

He chuckled.

“Pardon, please, repeat, please, your last saying.”

He laughed.

“Come in! Come in!” he cried.

He was suddenly a puffy himself, twenty feet in height.

The wall dialed archway, just as he finished blackening the sky, bulging the floor into rocky irregularity, and raising a glacier front across the half-mile room. He hovered in the air, seated upon a tent-sized snowflake, and ice breezes knifed about his throne, scattering the berries of blizzard before his guests.

“Merry Christmas,” he observed.

The puffies halted on the threshold. The third movement of Sibelius’ Second Symphony unwound from somewhere as the glacier groaned forward.

“How?” asked the creatures.

“I am really quite ugly,” he explained, “and I wanted to put you at ease.”

They were standing beneath him now, staring upward.

“Beautiful,” one buzzed.

“Like home,” hummed the second.

“What are you?” whistled the third.

A fountain jetted fifty feet in the air.

“Have a drink?”

“No. Thank. Cannot, chance, unknown, substance.”

He took a deep drink, then the fountain drained upward into high-leaping spirals that vanished overhead. A globe of the brown liquid hovered beside him, and he sipped it as he spoke.

“These bodies,” he stated, “are rather difficult to operate. How do you manage?”

“Man-edge?” repeated the buzz.

“Yes. You shuffle about when you were obviously meant to leap. Your feet are snowshoes. Why have you come to my world?”

“We have, come, to live,” one droned.

“No one consulted with me on the matter.”

“Please. We only, just, learned, you exist, please.”

“And what do you want of me?”

“Please, go home. Make, the world, safe, for puffies. Ple⁠—”

“This is my home. I own the Earth.”

“Yes. We know. We want, to change, it. But you, are here. Why?”

“Why not?” he asked. “I’m an Earthman. Being the last one does not alter my rights. I occupy approximately twenty square miles of this world, and I go where I choose and do as I wish in the rest of it. By birthright and law it is mine⁠—and by power. If you attempt to expel me I will resist you with all the machinery of Earth. I can control it from here, and I can destroy you. I can destroy the planet! If you don’t believe me, attack me!”

\* \* \*

His voice cracked and he took another drink. He assumed his own form, magnified a dozen times. He produced a cigarette the size of a fence post and a pillar of fire rose to light it.

“May, we, reason?” asked the flowering snowballs. “Please?”

“All right⁠—reason.”

He exhaled fog and inhaled alcohol.

“Reason!”

“Your people, left, years ago, because, this world, is dead, for them,” it began. “But it, is a, place of, life, for us, a place, of, laughter…”

“Do you know what ‘laughter’ means?” he asked.

“We think, so, please. We have, studied, what, Earth people, left behind. ⁠—Good living? ⁠—Best condition, for species? And all, members? ⁠—Sounds, they make, when life, prevails?”

“Close enough. Go on.”

“Earth is, a place, of laughter, only for, puffies now. No good, for you. Go to, your, people. Let us cold, down, the Earth, more, change it. Your machines, stop us, now. It will be, better, for both, if you go. Why do you, stay?”

“My business,” he growled, “my business. ⁠—Tell me, do you find me ugly?”

“Please, yes…”

“Congratulations, so do I.” He paused, then: “Will you make me go?”

“Please… If we, must…”

They stood upon a desert. An orange sun, like a sudden, giant hand, filled half the sky. It wrung the perspiration from his body. He coughed.

“Please!” whistled the melting snowmen.

Now they drifted through the stellar void, cold as all un-flame and un-sun. He seated himself upon a nothingness and watched the puffies drift, kicking, before him. A Milky Way of starmotes drifted over his right shoulder and past his face. It became a Bourbon Way and he gulped it.

“How?” managed a puffy, weakly.

He did not answer.

\* \* \*

It was not that I loved the Earth…

\* \* \*

“Henry?”

“Yes?”

“We can’t!”

He studied the blondeness of her, and the ghostgray eyes looking (always) past him. Her tiny afterthought of a chin was drawn even smaller by her pout.

“Why is that?” he asked her eyes.

“…To stay behind on this hell’s shelf of a world? The two last people? ⁠—With his best friend?”

“Yes.”

“…With only machines and each other to talk to? And your damned bookreaders? We’d go mad! We’d hate each other! There’d be no purpose⁠—”

“Have you an alternative?” he interrupted. “And could it convince a Eugenics Board?”

“What’s wrong with the way things are now? After the Movement it will be the same.”

“Try saying it this way,” he smiled, “ ‘Henry is handy, like a dimmie or masso, dandy, and as much above suspicion⁠—but to stay here with him… Well, it’s primitive, that’s what it is.’ ”

“You’re wrong,” she colored, “and I’ll prove it⁠—later.”

He shook his head.

“There won’t be any ‘later.’ I’m not going. Somebody should stay behind to water the flowers. It’s not that I love the Earth⁠—I just hate the stars, I hate what they stand for. I hate the people going to the stars, going to recapitulate with stifling monotony all the processes that drained this world and left nothing but filled ashtrays. For a long time I felt that my only purpose in life was to fill ashtrays, myself. But now I know I was wrong. I have something to do now⁠—I’m going to be a grave-keeper. That’s good, very good…”

“Of course you’re going,” she sniffed. “Everyone is. Don’t be childish! There’s nothing here to preserve. The days of Earth are past.”

He nodded, vigorously.

“Phyllis, Phyllis, Phyllis! Of course you’re right, as always. Nothing can be done. History dies the second it is made, and we leave the world emptier than we found it. Grass to dust and life to lust, burning. However, I have made arrangements to move into the Portation Sanct after Exodus. I anticipated some company, but I can push the buttons without your help. You may join me there anytime you wish. Don’t stop around just to say ‘goodbye,’ though.”

“You’re coming with us! I love you, even if you are a regressive!”

He glanced at the clock.

“You had better get dressed for⁠—uh, dinner,” he suggested. “Len will be back soon and I’d better start arriving.”

He stood and donned his fire cloak.

“I’ll mix the drinks. You can’t take it with you…”

She had much more to say, but it didn’t really matter, much.

\* \* \*

⁠—Far removed are the courts of darkness from the halls of light.

Yes, he decided, the distance of the stars, and ten feet from where I’m sitting.⁠—And that, puffies, is it.

“How?” persisted the foremost puffy.

⁠—Far removed…

Something seemed to be screaming, soundlessly, somewhere.

“Why?”

“I hate me!” he told it, with sudden ferocity. “And you! You are the maggots in Balder’s guts! You’ve come to worm in the corpse of my world, and I just this minute decided that I won’t let you. I hate me, but I hate you more. ⁠—Go back where you came from. I’m keeping the Earth!”

“If you, force, us⁠—”

It became a tiny nova at his feet, a lily pad of flame drifting upon black waters.

“Go home,” he said, and they stood in the Sanct once more, and he was his normal size, and the wall unwound its door again.

The two remaining puffies dragged themselves upright.

“You used, up, your time, your world…” they hummed, “and you are, all, that remains, behind. Your race, is not, justified, and its, only, monument, is wanton, destruction, of life.”

“In that,” he answered, “we emulate the universe. We take!

“Look around you, though⁠—there must be a bright ash in that big ashtray.” He gestured wildly. “There must be something out there to justify us! Go look!” He tried to crack his skull between the palms of his hands, but he could not. “Get out of here! Leave me!

“Go…”

The door winked grotesquely behind them and he struck it with a lightning bolt.

The screaming continued.

II

Far removed are the courts of darkness. Far…

He heard screaming.

He recognized his own voice.

He awakened.

⁠—Far remov⁠—Puffy ambassadors beg⁠—courts of light⁠—entrance…

The words were changing, and he knew.

He was listening to the pillow and twisting the words, he was hearing the words and altering the meaning; he was doing and not doing, he was part awake, part asleep.

He knew.

“Tell them to go away!” he shouted. “Read to me!”

He knew.

…A long story about a woman named Anna and a man named Vronsky.

…The train rushed toward him, spewing black pennants of goblin-cloud and blaring a saurian war-cry, and he knew…

He seized the light.

“Break ideational bridge!”

The train was gone and he was alone, shivering, knowing.

He perspired faster than the couch could absorb it. Oceans raced back from sandbars of his memory.

He covered his face.

“You did clean up all the blood?”

“Yes,” answered the pillow.

“And her body?”

“Gone. Cleanly, completely.”

“Why did she do it?”

The pillow did not answer.

“Why did she come here to bleed?” he insisted.

“Because she could neither go nor stay, like yourself.”

“How long has it been?”

“Seven years, three months, and thirteen days.”

Something fiery flowed from the tube and he swallowed it.

“Were the puffies real, or a part of the therapy?”

“Both.”

“Oh, did I actually kill one?”

“Yes.”

“How long ago?”

“Two weeks yesterday.”

“I’m sick.”

“No, you’re all right now.”

He was sick.

The pillow hummed and the bed vibrated and he was dry again and warm. The pillow clicked.

“Puffy ambassadors beg entrance.”

“Have you been watering my drinks?”

“Yes.

“Let them in,” he said.

III

He stared into the room he had sealed shut on that day, seven years ago… The wall was melted now.

Len had returned, smelling of time and space, and hadn’t said a word⁠—casting only one long, kicked-dog look at him before he hit him⁠—and when he awakened Len was gone and two of his teeth were gone and he was choking on one of them, and he took a drink, began rubbing again at the cinnamon anemones beside the bath pool, and took a drink, then cried some, took a drink, carried her to the couch and praying, cried some more, took a drink, closed off the room, awakened, everything all right, arms hurting from sprayjets and pillow Lycidas to him and he had scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast and everything was all right, yes.

He called a bridge band.

A huge, bright, wild, white trumpet lily broke the floor of the room and unflowered over bed, bath, and dresser, as the other wall dialed door and the puffies came in.

He smiled as they appeared.

“Hello, puffies.”

And they came in and they came in, and the Sanct was full of puffies, and he smiled and he nodded and they stood before the couch.

He moved back and sat on its edge.

“You have come,” he said, “hungering and thirsting after justice.”

“What do, you want?” they asked.

“Nothing,” he said.

It was quiet. The puffies caught him like a butterfly in yellow nets of seeing.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Why do, you, kill us?” they asked.

“It was not me,” he answered, “it was my madness. I am sorry.”

“If you,” said a puffy, “go,” said a puffy, “everything,” said a puffy, “will be, well,” said a puffy.

“If you,” pause, “stay,” said another, “you must,” said another, “die,” said the largest.

“Useless,” said another, “freak!”

“Very good,” he sighed, “very good indeed.

“Whatever I am, whatever I do,” he told them, “read the Earth, study the Earth, and judge us fairly for what we did with it when we lived here. I am not truly representative of my species⁠—only, perhaps, of its failures. I have wasted several lives proving the worthlessness of life, and I have only just now decided I was wrong.”

He paused, looked about, then asked: “If I leave you the Earth, what will you do with the works of man?”

“Burn them,” buzzed one.

“Bury them,” droned another.

“Replace them,” hummed a third.

“Forgive them,” whistled a fourth, “for existing.”

The others looked at him and made odd noises. Laughter?

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Jester,” said the vanilla pyramid. “I mock, our leaders.”

“Who are you?” he asked the first who had spoken.

“First, among peers.”

“And you?” to the second.

“Second.”

“And you?”

“Third.”

“And Jester makes four. Good!” He began to laugh.

“Comedic king of the snowballs, I salute thee!”

\* \* \*

He bowed. The Second extended a mandible, tentatively, in his direction.

He did move, not until its blade neared his neck. Then he straightened and seized it in his right hand.

“Give me your pardon, sir. I’ve done you wrong,” he winced. “What I have done that might your nature, honor, and exception roughly awake, I here proclaim was madness.”

The hand and mandible were frozen as the lights began to fade. The buzzing began again when the room became completely black. Then all grew quiet, and he continued:

“Let my disclaiming from a purpos’d evil free me so far in your most generous thoughts…”

Light once more, but from instant-grown torches, sprung like mushrooms from sooty niches of brick. Fifty or sixty gaily garbed people crowded the shadow-pavilioned chamber. His couch had become a throne, and a bearded man with heavy purple robes and a crown of gold sat upon it.

The walls wore rough-woven allegories of bright color, the heads of vanquished predators, and axes with complexions of smoke and eyes of rust. The night moved twenty or thirty feet upward and hung there, leaking creeks of darkness down the seams of the walls.

He wore black trousers and had on a white shirt, opened at the neck, and his hair was a burnished mirror, and his sky eyes held the darker man, whose hand he still clasped.

Say it! he willed.

The mouth moved uncertainly, the throat constricted, relaxed:

“I am satisfied, in nature, whose motive, in this case, should stir me most, to my revenge,” the other stated, slowly; the voice cleared, rose: “But till that time I do receive your offer’d love like love, and will not wrong it.”

“I do embrace it freely,” he replied, “and will this brother’s wager frankly play.” He wrung the hand, released it, and spun away with a laugh. “Give us the foils!”

“Come! One for me!”

“I’ll be your foil,” he smiled.

“You mock me, sir!”

“No, by this hand.” He held it forth again.

The other turned and walked off a few paces, as though the process were completely new to him. Surprised by his sudden grace, he executed a fencer’s lunge and laughed aloud.

“Give them the foils,” ordered the crowned one. “You know the wager?”

“Very well, my lord.”

His opponent inspected the point of his weapon.

“This is too heavy, let me see another.” He selected another blade and eyed his opponent who simply nodded.

The Earthman licked his lips, extended his weapon several times, and stepped into a line with his opponent.

“This likes me well,” he stated. “These foils have all a length?”

“Ay, my good lord.”

So he smiled over the skewed curve of his salute and struck an en garde. His opponent did the same.

\* \* \*

It was a game, a beautiful game they were being forced to play, with the wild feeling of moving in another form, of seeing the colors of Earth through the eyes of Earthmen, of speaking with the tongues of Earthmen.

There were constraints, of course⁠—this one must stand here, that one there, this one speak so, and then. The king must order wine and throw a pearl into the goblet before saying, “Come! Begin! And you, the judges, bear a wary eye!” But the air burned with the invisible electricities of anticipation, and the half-controlled movements seemed more than half their own as they crowded forward to the cry: “Come on, sir!”

“Come, my lord!” was the rejoinder, and the blades leapt and touched like the tongues of steel toads.

(Beat⁠—extend⁠—feint⁠—feint⁠—thrust.)

Click!

“One.”

“No.”

“Judgment.”

“A hit, a very palpable hit.”

“Well, again!”

“Stay,” called the king. “Here’s to thy health!”

He motioned to a servant

“Give him the cup,” he said.

“I’ll play this bout first,” the Earthman answered. “Set it by awhile.”

He sank completely into the illusion of the moment, unrolling memory in its opposite direction and through a series of new discoveries. He lunged.

“Another hit. What say you?”

“A touch, a touch, I do confess,” agreed his opponent.

“Our son shall win,” snarled the king.

“The queen carouses to your fortune.” The lady beside the king raised the cup.

“Do not!” snapped the king; and in the distance a whisper, struggling: “I, cannot, help, myself!”

The king gnashed his teeth.

The Earthman bit his lip.

“Have at you now!”

His blade clattered to the floor. A single tooth bit blood from his body, tore seeing from his eyes, and the entire room shuddered like a candle flame brought near a window.

Then it steadied, and he dropped to one knee.

He drove his elbow into his opponent’s rib cage and, reaching up, he seized the fencer’s right wrist. He duckstepped under it and straightened, twisting.

A second blade rang upon the floor.

“Part them! They are incensed!” came the cry.

He seized the other weapon.

“Nay! Come again!”

His opponent snatched up the other foil, heaved a loud gasp, and sprang into a balestra.

\* \* \*

He caught the sudden febra in a bind, then cross-stepped into a back leap. The blades disengaged with a rasp. He beat the outside of the extended foil, feinted in four, lunged in six. This was met with a lightning parry and a riposte in six, beneath his own blade. He beat it down, stepped back, caught the forte, and dashed forward in a flesche attack.

The other howled.

The queen fell to her knees.

“Look to the queen! Ho!”

“They bleed on both sides! How is’t, my lord?”

“How is’t?”

The other clutched his arm, and a look of terror contorted his features as his lips moved.

“I am, justly, killed, with mine own, treachery(!).”

“How does the queen?”

“She swounds to see them bleed.”

“No, no! The drink!” she moaned, hysteria mounting as the words emerged from her mouth. “The drink! I am poisoned!”

Then she fell and was silent.

“O villainy! Ho!” chuckled the Earthman. “Let the door be locked! Treachery! Seek it out!”

“It is here,” sighed the one at his feet. “Thou art slain. No medicine in the world can do thee good. In thee there is not half an hour of life. The treacherous instrument is in thy hand, unbated and envenomed…”

He nodded agreement and looked about him at the inheritors of the Earth. This, at least, would remain with them.

“Then, venom, to thy work!” he cried, and with a smile he stabbed the king, then forced the cup to his mouth and poured what remained within through his teeth.

“You wanted the Earth,” he muttered. “You wanted its bones without its flesh. Ugly or lovely, man has tattooed its body and you cannot scrape our mark from its corpse. You wanted it⁠—try being it!”

The form went limp in his arms.

“He is, justly, served,” came the forced gutturals, as the other fencer closed his eyes and grimaced.

Are you sure he was right? asked his own voice in his head.

“Was he?” he cried.

A throbbing began in his temples. Whispers in a puffy-staccato of horror began to grow louder. A gale swept through the room, and the torches flickered. Somewhere a wailing. He began to burn.

The chamber faded and reappeared, faded and reappeared, and in a between-moment of shimmering limbo he seemed to be standing in the midst of a vast field of ice, surrounded by a village of igloos, each sporting antennae. High overhead, the wheeling galaxy was an enormous ashtray, and he knew that it would go on forever, turning, collecting, after he had ceased. And he knew that he was meant to fill that ashtray⁠—his race and the unborn children of his race⁠—powdering into it forever, and occasionally flaming in bright flakes, as he had tonight, to justify an absurdity with an absurd beauty and to cancel some of the absurdities and leave some of the beauty behind, to some end, and he knew he was sane once more, and he smiled at the puffies and switched on the court tableau for his final scene.

“O, I die, Horatio!” he croaked. “The potent poison quite o’er-crows my spirit.” He looked up at the puffy-courtier who supported him in a sitting position. “I cannot live to hear the news from (England?),” he continued, “but I do prophesy the election lights on (Fortinbras?). He has my dying voice.” He gestured with his head toward the door which masked the frozen Jester. “So tell him, with the occurrents, more and less, which have solicited⁠—the rest is silence…”

He leaned back and focussed his will upon the next part.

The Horatio-puffy was speaking of his cracked heart and the singing of angels. It mentioned the drum, and he heard it, distantly, before the silence finally came.

The Jester shuffled forward, changing shape as he moved. He flickered on and off, then he stood⁠—a mountain of ice⁠—looking down at the Earthman. Hives of bells opened and closed, opened and closed. The others watched him, for they knew that he knew the Earth, for he was the mocker, and he would know what had happened, what to do next.

He regarded the last dead Earthman on Earth.

“Take up, the body,” he said. “Such, a sight, as this, becomes, the field, but here, shows much amiss. Go, bid the, soldiers shoot.”

And they carried him out and buried him, as was not the custom with puffies, and the Sanct extended cannons and fired them into the night, as had not been the custom with men for many years; and the Jester made the Earth a place of laughter, and the puffies dwelt upon the ways of men.

Notes

Mestering is an intended neologism present in the original, archived manuscript. Context suggests that the word combines the meaning of both pestering (harassing) and mustering (gathering), i.e., that the puffies were once more gathering together to harass the narrator with unwanted communications. Search, screen, block are abbreviated commands issued by the narrator to his home security system to search and screen for incoming transmissions from the puffies and block them.

There are numerous allusions in this “Last Man on Earth” tale, including a reenactment of Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, and Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey. The Mole had been working very hard all the morning, spring-cleaning is the first line from Kenneth Grahame’s novel The Wind in the Willows. In addition to fictional future authors, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust and the ancient Greek poet Pindar are mentioned. Mount Athos is in Greece and is called Holy Mountain; it is the home to many Eastern Orthodox monasteries. Odysseus was the Greek hero whose exploits were described in Homer’s Iliad (Ilium) and Odyssey. Sibelius’ Second Symphony was composed by Jean Sibelius, and its major theme was based on Dante’s The Divine Comedy. Balder is the god of light, joy, purity, beauty, innocence, and reconciliation; all living things except mistletoe had sworn not to harm him. The gods used Balder as a target for practice throwing knives and shooting arrows, since nothing could harm him. Jealous Loki took advantage of this by having an arrow made of mistletoe, which killed Balder.

The tale of a woman named Anna and a man named Vronsky is Leo Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Lycidas is a poem by John Milton that was written as a lament for a friend who drowned on the Irish Sea. The puffies are forced to reenact the ending of Shakespeare’s The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark in part III, and most of the dialogue from “Give me your pardon, sir” to “Go, bid the soldiers shoot.” comes from that play. A balestra is a move in fencing that consists of a forward hop or jump, typically followed by an attack. Febra is not a standard fencing term. Its usage suggests a sudden, feverish slicing or cutting movement with the épée, such as one taught by Salvator Fabris in the 1500s. Fabris reportedly choreographed the fencing moves in Hamlet at Shakespeare’s request. A feinte is an attack into one line with the intention of switching to another line before the attack is completed. The forte is the lower, stronger portion of the blade. A fleche is an attack in which the aggressor leaps off his leading foot, attempts to make the hit, and then passes the opponent at a run. A riposte is an attack made immediately after a parry of the opponent’s attack. Swounds is an archaic synonym for “swoons”.