## A Thing of Terrible Beauty

Roger Zelazny

I rather liked this one when I wrote it, but I don’t remember why or how I came to write it. Perhaps Hamson Denmark had taken on a life of his own. Perhaps he’s that gentleman I see walking along Bishop’s Lodge Road every day, sometimes in both directions....

How like a god of the Epicureans is the audience, at a time like this! Powerless to alter the course of events, yet better informed than the characters, they might rise to their feet and cry out, “Do not!”—but the blinding of Oedipus would still ensue, and the inevitable knot in Jocasta’s scarlet would stop her breathing still.

But no one rises, of course. They know better. They, too, are inevitably secured by the strange bonds of the tragedy. The gods can only observe and know, they cannot alter circumstance, nor wrestle with ananke.

My host is already anticipating the thing he calls “catharsis.” My search has carried me far, and my choice was a good one. Phillip Devers lives in the theater like a worm lives in an apple, a paralytic in an iron lung. It is his world.

And I live in Phillip Devers.

For ten years his ears and eyes have been my ears and eyes. For ten years I have tasted the sensitive preceptions of a great critic of the drama, and he has never known it He has come close—his mind is agile, his imagination vivid—but his classically trained intellect is too strong, his familiarity with psychopathology too intimate to permit that final leap from logic to intuition, and an admission of my existence. At times, before he drops off to sleep, he toys with the thought of attempting communication, but the next morning he always rejects it—which is well. What could we possibly have to say to one another?

—Now that inchoate scream from the dawn of time, and Oedipus stalks the stage in murky terror!How exquisitel I wish that I could know the other half. Devers says there are two things in a complete experience—a moving toward, called pity, and a moving away from, called terror. It is the latter which I feel, which I have always sought; I do not understand the other, even when my host quivers and his vision goes moistly dim.

I should like very much to cultivate the total response. Unfortunately, my time here is limited. I have hounded beauty through a thousand stellar cells, and here I learned mat a man named Aristotle defined it. It is unfortunate that I must leave without knowing the entire experience.

But I am the last. The others have gone. The stars move still, time runs, and the clock will strike ...

The ovation is enormous. The resurrected Jocasta bows beside her red—socketted king, smiling. Hand in hand, they dine upon our applause—but even pale Tiresias does not see what I have seen. It is very unfortunate.

And now the taxi home. What time is it in Thebes?

Devers is mixing us a strong drink, which he generally does oot do. I shall appreciate these final moments all the more, seen through the prism of his soaring fancy.

His mood is a strange one. It is almost as if he knows what is to occur at one o’clock—almost as if he knows what will happen when the atom expands its fleecy chest, shouldering aside an army of Titans, and the Mediterranean rushes to dip its wine-dark muzzle into the vacant Sahara.

But he could not know, without knowing me, and this time he will be a character, not an observer, when the thing of terrible beauty occurs.

We both watch the pale gray eyes on the sliding panel. He takes aspirins in advance whea he drinks, which means he will be mixing us more.

But his hand ... It stops short of the medicine chest Framed in the tile and stainless steel, we both regard reflections of a stranger. “Good evening.” After ten years, those two words, and on the eve of the last performancel Activating his voice to reply would be rather silly, evenif I could manage it, and it would doubtless be upsetting.

I waited, and so did he.

Finally, like an organ player, I pedalled and chorded the necessary synapses: Good evening. Please go ahead and take your aspirins.

He did. Then he picked up his drink from the ledge,

“I hope you enjoy Martinis.”

“I do. Very much. Please drink more.

He smirked at us and returned to the living room.

“What are you? A psychosis? A dybbuk?”

Oh, no! Nothing like that—Just a member of the audience.

“I don’t recall selling you a ticket”

You did not exactly invite me, but I didn’t think you would mind, if I kept quiet. ...

“Very decent of you.”

He mixed another drink, then looked out at the building across the way. It had two lighted windows, on different floors, like misplaced eyes.

“Mind if I ask why?”

Not at all. Perhaps you can even help me. I am an itinerant esthetician. I have to borrow bodies on the worlds I visit—preferably those of beings with similar interests. —

“I see—you’re a gate-crasher.”

Sort of, I guess. I try not to cause any trouble, though. Generally, my host never even learns of my existence. But I have to leave soon, and something has been troubling me for the past several years.... Since you have guessed at my existence and managed to maintain your stability, I’ve decided to ask you to resolve it.

“Ask away.” He was suddenly bitter and very offended. I saw the reason in an instant Do not think, I told him, that I have influenced anything you have thought or done. I am only an observer. My sole function is to appreciate beauty.

“How interesting!” he sneered. “How soon is it going to happen?”

What?

“The thing that is causing you to leave.”

Oh, that...

I was not certain what to tell him. What could he do, anyhow? Suffer a little more, perhaps."Well?”

My time is up, I told him.

“I see flashes,” he said. “Sand and smoke, and a flaming baseball.”

He was too sensitive. I thought I had covered those thoughts.

Well... The world is going to end at one o’clock...

“That’s good to know. How?”

There is a substratum of fissionable material, which Project Eden is going to detonate. This will produce an enormous chain reaction....

“Can’t you do something to stop it?”

“I don’t know how. I don’t know what could stop it. My knowledge is limited to the arts and the life-sciences.—You broke your leg when you were skiing in Vermont last winter. You never knew. Things like that, I can manage....

“And the horn blows at midnight,” he observed.

One o’clock, I corrected. Eastern Standard Time.

“Might as well have another drink,” he said, looking at his watch. “Ifs going on twelve.”

My question ... I cleared an imaginary throat.

“Oh, yes, what did you want to know?”

—The other half of the tragic response. I’ve watched you go through it many times, but I can’t get at it. I feel the terror part, but the pity—the pity always eludes me.

“Anyone can be afraid,” he said, “that part is easy. But you have to be able to get inside people—not exactly the way you do—and feel everything they feel, just before they go smash—so that it feels you’re going smash along with them—and you can’t do a damn thing about it, and you wish you could—that’s pity.”

Oh? And being afraid, too?

“—and being afraid. Together, they equal the grand catharsis of true tragedy.”

He hiccupped.

And the tragic figure, for whom you feel these things? He must be great and noble, mustn’t he?

“True,” he nodded, as though I were seated across the room from him, “and in the last moment when the unalterable jungle law is about to prevail,, he must stare into the faceless mask; of God, and bear himself, for thatbrief moment, above the pleas of his nature and the course of events.” We both looked at his watch.

“What time will you be leaving?” In about fifteen minutes.

“Good. You have time to listen to a record while I dress.”

He switched on his stereo and selected an album.

I shifted uneasily.

If it isn’t too long....

He regarded the jacket.

“Five minutes and eight seconds. I’ve always maintained that it is music for the last hour of Earth.”

He placed it on the turntable and set the arm.

“If Gabriel doesn’t show up, this will do.”

He reached for his tie as the first notes of Miles Davis’ Saefa limped through the room, like a wounded thing climbing a hill.

He hummed along with it as he reknotted his tie and' combed his hair. Davis talked through an Easter my with a tongue of brass, and the procession moved before us: Oedipus and blind Gloucester stumbled by, led by Antigone and Edgar—Prince Hamlet gave a fencer’s salute and plunged forward, whUe black Othello lumbered on behind—Hippolytus, all in white, and the Duchess of Malfi, sad, paraded through memory on a thousand stages.

Phillip buttoned his jacket as the final notes sounded, and shut down the player. Carefully rejacketting the record, he placed it among his others.

What are you going to do?

“Say good-bye. There’s a party up the street I hadn’t planned on attending. I believe I’ll stop in for a drink. Good-bye to you also.

“By the way,” he asked, “what is your name? I’ve known you for a long time, I ought to call you something now.”

He suggested one, half-consciously. I had never really had a name before, so I took it.

Adrastea, I told him.

He smirked again.

“No thought is safe from you, is it? Good-bye.”

Good-bye.

He closed the door behind him, and I passed throughthe ceilings and floors of the apartments overhead, then up, and into the night above the city. One eye in the building across the street winked out; as I watched, the other did the same.

Bodiless again, I fled upward wishing there was something I could feel.