

moon, and goes home. Same as it ever was. Thus my particular problem was animating this sparse movement. I hoped to do it with the language of this drunken monologue, as the words of the narrator are the only thing percolating on that particular night and in this particular fiction. Fortunately for me, Wapakoneta, Ohio, one of those border towns Hoosier youth visit, was the birthplace of Neil Armstrong, the first human on the moon. The setting sets up the moon as the focus of the narrator's howling for the evening. What form that howling would take presented itself to me as the classic Japanese haiku with a particular fondness for Basho's frog jumping into the pond and his drunk attempting to hug the moon's reflection in the same or similar body of water. Also, I had to find a way to play with time in the form of the story. Time, it seemed to me, is theme, subject, motif as much as place. Or, put another way, time is a kind of place, a locale. I decided to push the technique of repetition, repeating the words "moon," "Ohio," and "Wapakoneta" as many times as I could. I wished that the story would itself, through this incantation, set up a kind of gravitational field as well, mirroring the inescapable force of gravity present that night to this particular narrator. Though this is a monologue, the other players in the drama, for me, continued to be time and gravity and the equilibrium of those forces, now and in the future, to strongly attract and repel and, thereby, keep the narrator and the reader both in flight and perfectly still.

Jim Shepard

LOVE AND HYDROGEN

IMAGINE FIVE OR six city blocks could lift, with a bump, and float away. The impression the 804-foot-long *Hindenburg* gives on the ground is that of an airship built by giants and excessive even to their purposes. The fabric hull and mainframe curve upward sixteen stories high.

Meinert and Gnüss are out on the gangway ladder down to the starboard #1 engine car. They're helping out the machinists, in a pinch. Gnüss is afraid of heights, which amuses everyone. It's an open aluminum ladder with a single handrail extending eighteen feet down into the car's hatchway. They're at 2,000 feet. The clouds below strand by and dissipate. It's early in a mild May in 1937.

Their leather caps are buckled around their chins, but they have no goggles. The air buffets by at eighty-five miles per hour. Meinert shows him how to hook his arm around the leading edge of the ladder to keep from being blown off as he leaves the hull. Even through the sheepskin gloves the metal is shockingly cold from the slipstream. The outer suede of the grip doesn't provide quite the pur-

chase they would wish when hanging their keister out over the open Atlantic. Every raised foot is wrenched from the rung and flung into space.

Servicing the engines inside the cupola, they're out of the blast, but not the cold. Raising a head out of the shielded area is like being cuffed by a bear. It's a pusher arrangement, thank God. The back end of the cupolas are open to facilitate maintenance on the blocks and engine mounts. The engines are eleven hundred horsepower diesels four feet high. The propellers are twenty-two feet long. When they're down on their hands and knees adjusting the vibration dampers, those props are a foot and a half away. The sound is like God losing his temper, kettledrums in the sinuses, fists in the face.

MEINERT AND GNÜSS are both Regensburgers. Meinert was in his twenties and Gnüss a child during the absolute worst years of the inflation. They lived on mustard sandwiches, boiled kale, and turnip mash. Gnüss' most cherished toy for a year and a half was a clothespin on which his father had painted a face. They're ecstatic to have found positions like this. Their work fills them with elation, and the kind of spuriously proprietary pride that mortal tour guides might feel on Olympus. Meals that seem giddily baronial—plates crowded with sausages, tureens of soups, platters of venison or trout or buttered potatoes—appear daily, once the passengers have been served, courtesy of Luftschiffbau Zeppelin. Their sleeping berths, aboard and ashore, are more luxurious than any other place they've previously laid their heads.

Meinert and Gnüss are in love. This complicates just about everything. They steal moments when they can—on the last Frankfurt-to-Rio run, they exchanged an intense and acrobatic series of caresses a hundred and thirty-five feet up inside the superstructure, when Meinert was supposed to have been checking a seam on one of the

gasbags for wear, their glue pots clacking and clocking together—but mostly their ardor is channeled so smoothly into underground streams that even their siblings, watching them work, would be satisfied with their rectitude.

Meinert loves Gnüss' fussiness with detail, his loving solicitude with all schedules and plans, the way he seems to husband good feeling and pass it around among his shipmates. He loves the celebratory delight Gnüss takes in all meals, and watches him with the anticipatory excitement that an enthusiast might bring to a sublime stretch of *Aida*. Gnüss has a shy and diffident sense of humor that's particularly effective in groups. At the base of his neck so it's hidden by a collar he has a tattoo of a figure-eight of rope: an infinity sign. He's exceedingly well proportioned.

Gnüss loves Meinert's shoulders, his way of making every physical act worthy of a Johnny Weissmuller, and the way he can play the irresponsible daredevil and still erode others' disapproval or righteous indignation. He's openmouthed at the way Meinert flaunts the sort of insidious and disreputable charm that all mothers warn against. In his bunk at night, Gnüss sometimes thinks *I refuse to list all his other qualities*, for fear of agitating himself too completely. He calls Meinert *Old Shatterhand*. They joke about the age difference.

It goes without saying that the penalty for exposed homosexuality in this case would begin at the loss of one's position. Captain Pruss, a fair man and an excellent captain, a month ago remarked in Gnüss' presence that he'd throw any fairy he came across bodily out of the control car.

Meinert bunks with Egk; Gnüss with Thoolen. It couldn't be helped. Gnüss had wanted to petition for their reassignment as bunkmates—what was so untoward about friends wanting to spend more time together?—but Meinert the daredevil had refused to risk it. Each night Meinert lies in his bunk wishing they'd risked it. As a consolation, he passed along to Gnüss his grandfather's antique silver pocket watch. It had already been engraved *To My Dearest Boy*.

Egk is a fat little man with boils. Meinert considers him to have been well named. He whistles the same thirteen-note motif each night before lights out.

How much happiness is someone entitled to? This is the question that Gnüss turns this way and that in his aluminum bunk in the darkness. The ship betrays no tremor or sense of movement as it slips through the sky like a fish.

He is proud of his feelings for Meinert. He can count on one hand the number of people he's known he believes to be capable of feelings as exalted as his.

Meinert, meanwhile, has developed a flirtation with one of the passengers: perhaps the only relationship possible that would be more forbidden than his relationship with Gnüss. The flirtation alternately irritates and frightens Gnüss.

The passenger is one of those languid teenagers who own the world. She has a boy's haircut. She has a boy's chest. She paints her lips but otherwise wears no makeup. Her parents are briskly polite with the crew, and clearly excited by their first adventure on an airship; she is not. She has an Eastern name: Tereska.

Gnüss had to endure their exchange of looks when the girl's family first came aboard. Passengers had formed a docile line at the base of the main gangway. Gnüss and Meinert had been shanghaied to help the chief steward inspect luggage and personal valises for matches, lighters, camera flashbulbs, flashlights, even a child's sparking toy pistol: anything which might mix apocalyptically with their ship's seven million cubic feet of hydrogen. Two hundred stevedores in the ground crew were arrayed every ten feet or so around their perimeter, dragging slightly back and forth on their ropes with each shift in the wind. Meinert made a joke about drones pulling a queen. The late afternoon was blue with rain and fog. A small, soaked Hitler Youth contingent with two bedraggled Party pennants stood at attention to see them off.

Meinert was handed Tereska's valise, and Tereska wrestled it back,

rummaging through it shoulder to shoulder with him. They'd given one another playful bumps.

The two friends finished their inspections and waited at attention until all the passengers were up the gangway. "Isn't she the charming little rogue," Gnüss remarked. "Don't scold, Auntie," Meinert answered.

The first signal bell sounded. Loved ones who came to see the travelers off waved and shouted. A passenger unbuckled his wristwatch and tossed it from one of the observation windows as a farewell present. Meinert and Gnüss were the last ones aboard and secured the gangway. Two thousand pounds of water ballast was dropped. The splash routed the ranks of the Hitler Youth contingent. At 150 feet the signal bells of the engine telegraphs jangled, and the engines one by one roared to life. At 300 feet the bells rang again, calling for higher revolutions.

On the way to their subsequent duties, the two friends took a moment at a free spot at an observation window, watching the ground recede. The passengers were oohing and aahing the mountains of Switzerland and Austria as they fell away to the south, inverted in the mirrorlike expanse of the lake. The ship lifted with the smoothness of planetary motion.

Aloft, their lives had really become a pair of stupefying narratives. Frankfurt to Rio in three and a half days. Frankfurt to New York in two. The twenty-five passenger cabins on A deck slept two in state-room comfort and featured feather-light and whisper-quiet sliding doors. On B deck passengers could lather up in the world's first airborne shower. The smoking room, off the bar and double-sealed all the way round, stayed open until the last guests said goodnight. The fabric-covered walls in the lounge and public areas were decorated with hand-painted artwork. Each room had its own theme: the main salon, a map of the world crosshatched by the routes of famous explorers; the reading room, scenes of the history of postal delivery. An aluminum bust of General von Hindenburg sat in a halo of light on an ebony base in a niche at the top of the main gangway. A place

setting for two for dinner involved fifty-eight pieces of Dresden china and silver. The butter knives' handles were themselves mini-zeppelins. Complimentary sleeping caps were bordered with the legend *An Bord Des Luftschiffes Hindenburg*. Luggage tags were stamped *Im Zeppelin Über Den Ozean* and featured an image of the *Hindenburg* bearing down, midocean, on what looked like the Santa Maria.

WHEN HE CAN put Tereska out of his head, Gnüss is giddy with the danger and improbability of it all. The axial catwalk is ten inches wide at its base and 782 feet long and 110 feet above the passenger and crew compartments below. Crew members require the nimbleness of structural steelworkers. The top of the gas cells can only be inspected from the top of the vertical ringed ladders running along the inflation pipes: sixteen stories up into the radial and spiraling bracing wires and mainframe. Up that high, the airship's interior seems to have its own weather. Mists form. The vast cell walls holding the seven million cubic feet of hydrogen billow and flex.

At the very top of Ladder #4 on the second morning out, Meinert hangs from one hand. He spins slowly above Gnüss, down below with the glue pots, like a high-wire act seen at such a distance that all the spectacle is gone. He sings one of his songs from the war, when as a seventeen-year-old he served on the LZ-98 and bombed London when the winds let them reach it. His voice is a floating echo from above:

*In Paris people shake all over
In terror as they wait.
The Count prefers to come at night,
Expect us at half-past eight!*

Gnüss nestles in and listens. On either side of the catwalk, great tanks carry 143,000 pounds of diesel oil and water. Alongside the

tanks, bays hold food supplies, freight, and mail. This is one of his favorite places to steal time. They sometimes linger here for the privacy and the ready excuses—inspection or errands—which all this storage space affords.

Good news: Meinert signals that he's located a worn patch, necessitating help. Gnüss climbs to him with another glue pot and a pot of the gelatine latex used to render the heavy-duty sailmaker's cotton gas-tight. His erection grows as he climbs.

THEIR REPAIRS COMPLETE, they're both strapped in on the ladder near the top, mostly hidden in the gloom and curtaining folds of the gas cell. Gnüss, in a reverie after their lovemaking, asks Meinert if he can locate the most ecstatic feeling he's ever experienced. Meinert can. It was when he'd served as an observer on a night attack on Calais.

Gnüss still has Meinert's warm sex in his hand. This had been the LZ-98, captained by Lehmann, Meinert reminds him. They'd gotten nowhere on a hunt for fogbound targets in England, but conditions over Calais had been ideal for the observation basket: thick cloud at 4,000 feet, but the air beneath crystalline. The big airships were much safer when operating above cloud. But then: how to see their targets?

The solution was exhilarating: on their approach they throttled the motors as far back as they could while retaining the power to maneuver. The zeppelin was leveled out at 500 feet above the cloud layer, and then, with a winch and a cable, Meinert, as air observer, was lowered nearly 2,000 feet in the observation basket, a hollow metal capsule scalloped open at the top. He had a clear view downward, and his gondola, so relatively tiny, was invisible from the ground.

Dropping into space in that little bucket had been the most frightening and electric thing he'd ever done. He'd been swept along alone under the cloud ceiling and over the lights of the city, like the messenger of the gods.

The garrison of the fort had heard the sound of their motors, and all the light artillery had begun firing in that direction. But only once had a salvo come close enough to have startled him with its crash.

His cable extended up above his head into the darkness and murk. It bowed forward. The capsule canted from the pull. The wind streamed past him. The lights rolled by below. From his wicker seat he directed the immense invisible ship above by telephone, and set and reset their courses by eye and by compass. He crisscrossed them over the fort for forty-five minutes, signaling when to drop their small bombs and phosphorus incendiaries. The experience was that of a magician's, or a sorcerer's, hurling thunderbolts on his own. That night he'd been a regular Regensburg Zeus. The bombs and incendiaries detonated on the railroad station, the warehouses, and the munitions dumps. When they fell they spiraled silently out of the darkness above and plummeted past his capsule, the explosions always carried away behind him. Every so often luminous ovals from the fort's searchlights rippled the bottoms of the clouds like a hand lamp beneath a tablecloth.

Gnüß, still hanging in his harness, is disconcerted by the story. He tucks Meinert's sex back into the opened pants.

"That feeling comes back to me in memory when I'm my happiest: hiking or alone," Meinert muses. "And when I'm with you, as well," he adds, after having seen Gnüß' face.

Gnüß buckles his own pants, unhooks his harnesses, and begins his careful descent. "I don't think I make you feel like Zeus," he says, a little sadly.

"Well, like Pan, anyway," Meinert calls out from above him.

THAT EVENING DARKNESS falls on the ocean below while the sun is still a glare on the frames of the observation windows. Meinert and Gnüß have their evening duties, as waiters. Their stations are across the room from one another. The dining room is the

very picture of a fine hotel restaurant, without the candles. After dinner, they continue to ferry drinks from the bar on B deck to thirsty guests in the lounge and reading rooms. Through the windows the upper surfaces of the clouds in the moonlight are as brilliant as breaking surf. Tereska is nowhere to be found.

Upon retiring, passengers leave their shoes in the corridor, as on shipboard. Newspaper correspondents stay up late in the salon, typing bulletins to send by wireless ahead to America. In the darkness and quiet before they themselves turn in, Gnüß leads Meinert halfway up Ladder #4 yet again, to reward him for having had no contact whatsoever with that teenager. Their continuing recklessness feels like love itself.

Like their airship, their new home when not flying is Friedrichshafen, beside the flatly placid Lake Constance. The company's presence has transformed the little town. In gratitude the Town Fathers have erected a zeppelin fountain in the courtyard of the Rathaus, the centerpiece of which is the count bestride a globe, holding a log-sized airship in his arms.

Friedrichshafen is on the north side of the lake, with the Swiss mountains across the water to the south, including the snowcapped Säntis, rising some 8,000 feet. Meinert has tutored Gnüß in mountain hiking, and Gnüß has tutored Meinert in oral sex above the tree line. They've taken chances as though cultivating a death wish: in a lift in the famous Insel Hotel, in rented rooms in the woodcarving town of Überlingen, and in Meersburg, with its old castle dating back to the seventh century. In vineyards on the southern exposures of hillsides. Even, once, in a lavatory in the Maybach engine plant, near the gear manufacturing works.

When not perversely risking everything they had for no real reason, they lived like the locals, with their coffee and cake on Sunday afternoon and their raw smoked ham as the ubiquitous appetizer for every meal. They maintained their privacy as weekend hikers, and developed the southerner's endless capacity for arguing the merits of

various mountain trails. By their third year in Friedrichshafen their motto was "A mountain each weekend." They spent nights in mountain huts, and in winters they might go whole days skiing without seeing other adventurers. If Meinert had asked his friend which experience had been the most ecstatic of *his* young life, Gnüss would have cited the week they spent alone in a hut over one Christmas holiday.

NEITHER HAS BEEN back to Regensburg for years. Gnüss' most vivid memory of it, for reasons he can't locate, is of the scrape and desolation of his dentist's tooth-cleaning instruments one rainy March morning. Meinert usually refers to their hometown as Vitality's Graveyard. His younger brother still writes to him twice a week. Gnüss still sends a portion of his pay home to his parents and sisters.

Gnüss knows that he's being the young and foolish one but nevertheless can't resist comparing the invincible intensity of his feelings for Meinert with his pride at serving on this airship—this machine that conquers two oceans at once, the one above and the one below—this machine that brought their country supremacy in passenger, mail, and freight service to the North and South American continents only seventeen years after the Treaty of Versailles.

Even calm, cold, practical minds that worked on logarithms or carburetors felt the strange joy, the uncanny fascination, the radiance of atmospheric and gravitational freedom. They'd watched the *Graf Zeppelin*, their sister ship, take off one beautiful morning, the sun dazzling on its aluminum dope as if it were levitating on light, and it was like watching Juggernaut float free of the earth. One night they'd gone down almost to touch the waves and scared the crew of a fishing boat in the fog, and had joked afterwards about what the crew must have experienced: looking back to see a great dark, whirring, chugging thing rise like a monster upon them out of the murky air.

They're both Party members. They were over Aachen during the

national referendum on the annexation of the Rhineland, and helped the chief steward rig up a polling booth on the port promenade deck. The Yes vote had carried among the passengers and crew by a count of 103 to 1.

MEALS IN FLIGHT are so relaxed that some guests arrive for breakfast in their pajamas. Tereska is one such guest, and Gnüss from his station watches Meinert chatting and flirting with her. *She's only an annoyance*, he reminds himself, but his brain seizes and charges around enough to make him dizzy.

The great mass of the airship, though patrolled by crew members, is off limits to passengers except for those on guided tours. Soon after the breakfast service is cleared, Meinert informs him, with insufficient contrition, that Tereska's family has requested him as their guide. An hour later, when it's time for the tour to begin, there's Tereska alone, in her boyish shirt and sailor pants. She jokes with Meinert, and lays a hand on his forearm. He jokes with her.

Gnüss, beside himself, contrives to approach her parents, sunning themselves by a port observation window. He asks if they'd missed the tour. It transpires that the bitch has forewarned them that it would be a lot of uncomfortable climbing and claustrophobic poking about.

He stumbles about belowdecks, only half remembering his current task. What's happened to his autonomy? What's happened to his ability to generate pleasure or contentment for himself independent of Meinert's behavior? Before all this he saw himself in the long term as first officer, or at least chief sailmaker: a solitary and much-admired figure of cool judgments and sober self-mastery. Instead now he feels overheated and coursed through with kineticism, like an agitated and kenneled dog.

He delivers the status report on the ongoing inspection of the gas cells. "Why are you *weeping*?" Sauter, the chief engineer, asks.

RESPONSIBILITY HAS FLOWN out the window. He takes to carrying Meinert's grandfather's watch inside his pants. His briefs barely hold the weight. It bumps and sidles against his genitals. Does it show? Who cares?

HE SEES MEINERT only once all afternoon, and then from a distance. He searches for him as much as he dares during free moments. During lunch the chief steward slaps him on the back of the head for gathering wool.

Three hours are spent in a solitary and melancholy inspection of the rearmost gas cell. In the end he can't say for sure what he's seen. If the cell had disappeared entirely it's not clear he would have noticed.

RHINE SALMON FOR the final dinner. Fresh trout from the Black Forest. There's an all-night party among the passengers to celebrate their arrival in America. At the bar the man who'd thrown away his wristwatch on departure amuses himself by balancing a fountain pen on its flat end.

They continue to be separated for most of the evening, which creeps along glacially. Gnüss sorts glassware for storage upon landing, and Meinert lends a hand back at the engine gondolas, helping record fuel consumption. The time seems out of joint, and Gnüss finally figures out why: a prankster has set the clock in the bar back, to extend the length of the celebration.

On third watch he takes a break. He goes below and stops by the crew's quarters. No luck. He listens in on a discussion of suitable first names for children conceived aloft in a zeppelin. The consensus favors Shelium, if a girl.

Someone asks if he's seen Meinert. Startled, he eyes the questioner. Apparently the captain's looking for him. Two machinists exchange looks.

Has Gnüss seen him or not? the questioner wants to know. He realizes he hasn't answered. The whole room has taken note of his paralysis. He says he hasn't, and excuses himself.

He finds Meinert on the catwalk heading aft. Relief and anger and frustration swarm the cockleshell of his head. It feels like his frontal lobe is in tumult. Before he can speak Meinert tells him to keep his voice down, and that the party may be over. What does *that* mean? Gnüss wants to know. His friend doesn't answer.

They go hunting for privacy without success. A crossbrace near the bottom of the tail supports a card game.

On the way back forward, they're confronted by their two roommates, Egk and Thoolen, who block the catwalk as though they've formed an alliance. Perhaps they feel neglected. "Do you two *ever* separate?" Egk asks. "Night and day I see you together." Thoolen nods unpleasantly. One is Hamburg at its most insolent, the other Bremerhaven at its foggiest. "Shut up, you fat bellhop," Meinert says.

They roughly squeeze past, and Egk and Thoolen watch them go. "*I'm so in love!*" Egk sings out. Thoolen laughs.

Gnüss follows his friend in silence until they reach the ladder down to B deck. It's a busy hub. Crew members come and go briskly. Meinert hesitates. He seems absorbed in a recessed light fixture. It breaks Gnüss' heart to see that much sadness in the contours of his preoccupation.

"What do you mean, the party may be over?" Gnüss demands quietly.

"Pruss wants to see me. He says for disciplinary matters. After that, you know as much as I," Meinert says.

The radio officer and the ship's doctor pass through the corridor at the bottom of the stairs, glancing up as they go, without stopping their quiet conversation.

When Gnüss is unable to respond, Meinert adds, "Maybe he just wants me to police up my uniform."

At a loss, Gnüss finally puts a hand on Meinert's arm. Meinert

smiles, and whispers, "You are the most important thing in the world right now."

The unexpectedness of it brings tears to Gnüss' eyes. Meinert murmurs that he needs to get into his dining room whites. It's nearly time to serve the third breakfast. They've served two luncheons, two dinners, and now three breakfasts.

They descend the stairs together. Gnüss is already dressed and so gives his friend another squeeze on the arm and tells him not to worry, and then goes straight to the galley. His eyes still bleary with tears, he loads linen napkins into the dumbwaiter. Anxiety is like a whirling pillar in his chest. He remembers another of Meinert's war stories, one whispered to him in the early morning after they'd first spent the night together. They'd soaked each other and the bed linens with love and then had collapsed. He woke to words in his ear, and at first thought his bedmate was talking in his sleep. The story concerned Meinert's captain after a disastrous raid one moonless night over the Channel. Meinert had been at his post in the control car. The captain had started talking to himself. He'd said that both radios were smashed, not that it mattered, both radiomen being dead. And that both outboard engines were beyond repair, not that *that* mattered, since they had no fuel.

AROUND FOUR A.M., the passengers start exclaiming at the lights of Long Island. The all-night party has petered out into knots of people waiting and chatting along the promenade. Gnüss and Meinert set out the china, sick with worry. Once the place settings are all correct, they allow themselves a look out an open window. They see below that they've overtaken the liner *Staatendam*, coming into New York Harbor. She salutes them with blasts of her siren. Passengers crowd her decks waving handkerchiefs.

They're diverted north to avoid a front of thunderstorms. All

morning, they drift over New England, gradually working their way back to Long Island Sound.

At lunch Captain Pruss appears in the doorway for a moment, and then is gone. They bus tables. The passengers all abandon their seats to look out on New York City. From the exclamations they make it's apparently some sight. Steam whistles sound from boats on the Hudson and East Rivers. Someone at the window points out the *Bremen* just before it bellows a greeting. The *Hindenburg's* passengers wave back with a kind of patriotic madness.

The tables cleared, the waiters drift back to the windows. Gnüss puts an arm around Meinert's shoulders, despair making him courageous. Through patchy cloud they can see shoal water, or tide-rips, beneath them.

Pelicans flock in their wake. What looks like a whale races to keep pace with their shadow.

In New Jersey they circle over miles of stunted pines and bogs, their shadow running along the ground like a big fish on the surface.

It's time for them to take their landing stations.

Sauter passes them on their way to the catwalk and says that they should give the bracing wires near Ladder #4 another quick check and that he'd noticed a little bit of hum.

By the time they reach the base of #4, it's more than a little bit of a hum. Gnüss volunteers to go, anxious to do something concrete for his disconsolate beloved. He wipes his eyes and climbs swiftly while Meinert waits below on the catwalk.

Meinert's grandfather's pocket watch bumps and tumbles about his testicles while he climbs. Once or twice he has to stop to rearrange himself. The hum is up near the top, hard to locate. At their favorite perch, he stops and hooks on his harness. His weight supported, he turns his head slightly to try and make his ears direction-finders. The hum is hard to locate. He runs a thumb and forefinger along nearby cables to test for vibration. The cables are covered in graphite to sup-

press sparks. The slickness seems sexual to him. He's dismayed by his single-mindedness.

On impulse, he takes the watch, pleasingly warm, from his pants. He loops it around one of the cable bolts just so he can look at it. The short chain keeps slipping from the weight. He wraps it once around the nut on the other side of the beam. The nut feels loose to him. He removes and pockets the watch, finds the adjustable wrench on his tool belt, fits it snugly over the nut, and tightens it, and then, uncertain, tightens it again. There's a short, high-pitched sound of metal under stress or tearing.

BELOW HIM, HIS lover, tremendously resourceful in all sorts of chameleonlike self-renovations, and suffused with what he understands to be an unprecedented feeling for his young young boy, has been thinking, *Imagine instead that you were perfectly happy*. Shivering, with his coat collar turned up as though he were sitting around a big cold aerodrome, he leans against a cradle of wires and stays and reexperiences unimaginable views, unearthly lightness, the hull starlit at altitude, electrical storms and the incandescence of clouds, and Gnüss' lips on his throat. He remembers his younger brother's iridescent fingers after having blown soap bubbles as a child.

Below the ship, frightened horses spook like flying fish discharged from seas of yellow grass. Miles away, necklaces of lightning drop and fork.

Inside the hangarlike hull, they can feel the gravitational forces as Captain Pruss brings the ship up to the docking mast in a tight turn. The sharpness of the turn overstresses the after-hull structure, and the bracing wire bolt that Gnüss overtightened snaps like a rifle shot. The recoiling wire slashes open the gas cell opposite. Seven or eight feet above Gnüss' alarmed head, the escaping hydrogen encounters the prevailing St. Elmo's fire playing atop the ship.

From the ground, in Lakehurst, New Jersey, the *Hindenburg* malingers in a last wide circle, uneasy in the uneasy air.

The fireball explodes outwards and upwards, annihilating Gnüss at its center. More than a hundred feet below on the axial catwalk, as the blinding light envelops everything below it, Meinert knows that whatever time has come is theirs, and won't be like anything else.

Four hundred and eighty feet away, loitering on the windblown and sandy flats weedy with dune grass, Gerhard Fichte, chief American representative of Luftschiffbau Zeppelin and senior liaison to Goodyear, hears a sound like surf in a cavern and sees the hull interior blooming orange, lit from within like a Japanese lantern, and understands the catastrophe to his company even before the ship fully explodes. He thinks: *Life, motion, everything was untrammled and without limitation, pathless, ours.*

 Behind the Story

“LOVE AND HYDROGEN” began when I was stuck for somewhat longer than I wanted to be in the children’s book section of my local bookstore. I’d been trailing back and forth through it in the company of my four-year-old son, and he’d been not much interested in his father’s conceptions of what constituted adequate browsing time. The afternoon came and went. Sometimes he wanted to show me what he’d found; sometimes he wanted to poke through discoveries on his own. During one of the latter periods I came across a children’s book about the *Hindenburg*. The oversized illustrations seemed startlingly evocative, though evocative of what, I wasn’t sure. I was struck by the immensity of the ship’s scale, which I’d known about intellectually but hadn’t experienced viscerally. A sense of the hubris of the thing—building a lighter-than-air machine *that* immense, and then filling it with *hydrogen*—and then building into its belly a *smoking* room—touched off in me a sense of the apocalyptic, which, it’s been recently pointed out, has been a long-standing fascination of mine in my fiction.

So I did what I always do in such situations: I started researching, and hoped that all of that reading would start setting off bells somewhere, would generate that vaguely excited feeling of a possible story beginning to coalesce. I forged through books with titles like *The Complete History of Lighter-Than-Air Aircraft*. (My bookshelf is often studded with spines that seem stunningly dull or nerdy.)

All that research hugely enlarged my sense of just how bizarrely

compelling that now-lost world of zeppelins was. All sorts of wonderful and evocative details began to accrue.

The crucial step, though, was still to follow. Arcana without some sort of emotional stake in the arcana was just trivia. I still needed something to lift the project beyond your average small boy’s absorption with big things that blew up. And that something was provided when, surprising myself, I wrote, a page or so after having introduced my two protagonists, “Meinert and Gnüss are in love. This complicates just about everything.” Which, I discovered happily, turned out to be the case.

In one quasi-intuitive stroke, I’d provided myself with a way of thinking in more individual and personal terms about the apocalyptic hubris involved in building and flying a sixteen-story-high aircraft filled with explosively inflammable hydrogen. Now one relationship would illuminate the other; one would instruct me about the other. The personal and the political would again begin their usual intricate interpenetration.

Had this been a departure from other stories I’d been working on? Yes and no. “Love and Hydrogen” was produced in the middle of that rarest thing, at least for me—a creative roll—during which I’d generated a series of stories all of which had necessitated a lot of research, and then some hard thinking about why these subjects had fascinated me in the first place: one about the movie monster the Creature from the Black Lagoon; one about a young couple who found themselves in the middle of the Charge of the Light Brigade; one about the rock group The Who; one about John Ashcroft’s early days as a politician; one about cryptozoologists and one of their obsessions: *Carcharodon megalodon*, the prehistoric precursor to the great white shark. And so on. The librarian at my college library finally looked up from one of the piles I’d lugged to her station and said, “Can I ask: what is your field, anyway?” It’s a question my parents and relatives have wondered about more than once, as well.

Where do these stories come from? They come from fascinations I've cultivated; obsessions I might have had; intrigued curiosities I've allowed myself the luxury of pursuing. In all such ways and others, I've tried to expand that horrifyingly narrow bandwidth we call autobiographical experience, while still engaging those issues and emotions which most matter to me.

Peter Turchi

NIGHT, TRUCK, TWO LIGHTS
BURNING

LATE NIGHT IN early winter. The last hour of the long drive home. I tend to the thermostat, keeping the car warm enough for my sleeping family, but not so warm that my focus turns dull. Beyond the chilled glass to my left, green dashboard lights angle up toward the stars.

Distance defines our relations. My wife's parents live five hundred miles away, what we have come to think of as a day's drive.

When we arrive, she will hoist our son high against her chest and take him, murmuring his dreams, into the house. I will carry our long-legged daughter from our car to her room, where I will lay her gently on the bed we have made for her.

I REMEMBER BEING proud that I hadn't fallen asleep.

"You go ahead and rest," my father told me. "I'll let you know when we get there."

But I had promised my mother I would help him stay awake, so sat