time, and what concerned her was primarily Christabel LaMotte. Roland agreed, since the time constraint was indeed crucial. So they worked for some time in silence, interrupted only by Lady Bailey bearing a thermos of coffee, and the odd request for information.

'Tell me,' said Roland, 'did Blanche wear glasses?'

'I don't know.'

'There's a reference here to the glittering surfaces of her gaze. I'm sure it says surfaces in the plural.'

'She could have had glasses, or he could have been comparing her to a dragonfly or some other insect. He seems to have read Christabel's insect poems. People were obsessed with insects at that time.'

'What did she really look like, Blanche?'

'No one really knows for certain. I imagine her very pale, but that's only because of her name.'

At first Roland worked with the kind of concentrated curiosity with which he read anything at all by Randolph Ash. This curiosity was a kind of predictive familiarity; he knew the workings of the other man's mind, he had read what he had read, he was possessed of his characteristic habits of syntax and stress. His mind could leap ahead and hear the rhythm of the unread as though he were the writer, hearing in his brain the ghost-rhythms of the as yet unwritten.

But with this reading, after a time – a very short time – the habitual pleasures of recognition and foresight gave way to a mounting sense of stress. This was primarily because the writer of the letters was himself under stress, confused by the object and recipient of his attentions. He found it difficult to fix this creature in his scheme of things. He asked for clarification and was answered, it appeared, with riddles. Roland, not in possession of the other side of the correspondence, could not even tell what riddles, and looked up increasingly at the perplexing woman on the other side of the table, who with silent industry and irritating deliberation was making minutely neat notes on her little fans of cards, pinning them together with silver hooks and pins, frowning.

Letters, Roland discovered, are a form of narrative that envis-

ages no outcome, no closure. His time was a time of the dominance of narrative theories. Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going. If Maud had been less coldly hostile he would have pointed this out to her – as a matter of general interest – but she did not look up or meet his eye.

Letters, finally, exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader, they are written, if they are true letters, for *a* reader. Roland had another thought; none of Randolph Henry Ash's other correspondence had this quality. All was urbane, considerate, often witty, sometimes wise – but written wholly without *urgent* interest in the recipients, whether they were his publisher, his literary allies and rivals, or even – in the notes which survived – his wife. Who had destroyed much. She had written:

> Who can endure to think of greedy hands furrowing through Dickens's desk for his private papers, for these records of personal sentiment that were his and his only – not meant for public consumption – though now those who will not reread his marvellous books with true care will *sup up* his *so-called* Life in his Letters.

The truth was, Roland thought uneasily, these letters, these busy passionate letters, had never been written for him to read – as *Ragnarök* had, as *Mummy Possest* had, as the Lazarus poem had. They had been written for Christabel LaMotte.

. . . your intelligence, your marvellous quick wit, – so that I may write to you as I write when I am alone, when I write my true writing, which is for everyone and no one – so that in me which has never addressed any private creature, feels at home with you. I say 'at home' – what extraordinary folly – when you take pleasure in making me feel most unheimlich, *as the Germans have it, least of all* at home, *but always on edge, always apprehensive of failure, always certain that I cannot appreciate your next* striking *thought or* glancing *shaft of wit. But poets don't want homes, – do they? – they are not creatures of hearths and firedogs, but of heaths and ranging hounds. Now tell me – do you suppose what I just wrote is the truth or a lie? You know, all poetry may be a cry of generalised love, for this, or that, or the universe – which must be loved in its particularity, not its generality, but for its universal*

life in every minute particular. I have always supposed it to be a cry of unsatisfied love *– my dear – and so it may be indeed – for satisfaction may surfeit it and so it may die. I know many poets who write only when in an exalted state of mind which they compare to* being in love, *when they do not simply state, that they are in love, that they seek love – for this fresh damsel, or that lively young woman – in order to find a fresh metaphor, or a new bright vision of things in themselves. And to tell you the truth, I have always believed I cd diagnose this state of* being in love, *which they regard as* most particular, *as inspired by* item, *one pair of black eyes or indifferent blue,* item, *one graceful attitude of body or mind,* item, *one female history of some twenty-two years from, shall we say, 1821–1844 – I have always believed this* in love *to be something of the* most abstract *masking itself under the particular forms of both lover and beloved. And Poet, who assumes and informs both. I wd have told you – no, I do tell you – friendship is rarer, more idiosyncratic, more individual and in every way more durable than this Love.*

Without this excitement they cannot have their Lyric Verse, and so they get it by any convenient means – and with absolute sincerity – but the Poems are not for the young lady, the young lady is for the Poems.

You see the fork I have impaled myself on – Nevertheless I reiterate – because you will not bridle at my strictures on either manly devotion to a female ideal – or on the duplicity of Poets – but will look at it with your own Poet's eye – askance and most wisely – I write to you as I write when I am alone, with that *in me – how else to put it? you will know, I trust* you *you know, – with* that *which makes, which is the Maker.*

I should add, that my poems do not, I think, spring from the Lyric Impulse – but from something restless and myriad-minded and partial and observing and analytic and curious, *my dear, which is more like the mind of the prose master, Balzac, whom, being a Frenchwoman, and blessedly less hedged about with virtuous prohibitions than English female gentility, you know and understand. What makes me a Poet, and not a novelist – is to do with the singing of the Language itself. For the difference between poets and novelists is this – that the former write for the life of the language – and the latter write for the betterment of the world.*

And you for the revelation to mere humans of some strange unguessed-at other *world, is that not so? The City of Is, the reverse of Par-is, the towers in the water not the air, the drowned roses and flying fish and other paradoxical elementals – you see – I come to know you – I shall feel my way into your thought – as a hand into a glove – to steal your own metaphor and torture it cruelly. But if you wish – you may keep your gloves clean and scented and*

folded away – you may – only write to me, write to me, I love to see the hop and skip and sudden starts of your ink – . . .

Roland looked up at his partner or opponent. She seemed to be getting on with an enviable certainty and speed. Fine frown-lines fanned her brow.

The stained glass worked to defamiliarise her. It divided her into cold, brightly coloured fires. One cheek moved in and out of a pool of grape-violet as she worked. Her brow flowered green and gold. Rose-red and berry-red stained her pale neck and chin and mouth. Eyelids were purple-shadowed. The green silk of her scarf glittered with turreted purple ridges. Dust danced in a shadowy halo round her shifting head, black motes in straw gold, invisible solid matter appearing like pinholes in a sheet of solid colour. He spoke and she turned through a rainbow, her pale skin threading the various lights.

'I'm sorry to interrupt – I just wondered – do you know about the City of Is? I.S. I.S?'

She shook off her concentration as a dog shakes off water.

'It's a Breton legend. It was drowned in the sea for its wickedness. It was ruled by Queen Dahud, the sorceress, daughter of King Gradlond. The women there were transparent, according to some versions. Christabel wrote a poem.'

'May I look?'

'A quick glance. I'm using this book.'

She pushed it across the table.

Tallahassee Women Poets. Christabel LaMotte: a Selection of Narrative and Lyric Poems, ed. Leonora Stern. The Sapphic Press, Boston. The purple cover bore a white linear image of two mediaeval women, bending to embrace each other across a fountain in a square basin. They both wore veiled headdresses, heavy girdles and long plaits.

He scanned *The Drowned City*. This had a prefatory note by Leonora Stern.

> In this poem, as in 'The Standing Stones', LaMotte drew on her native Breton mythology, which she had known from childhood. The theme was of particular interest to a woman writer, as it might be said to reflect a cultural conflict between two types of