Tichborne and Valda came back laden with books. The baskets on their bicycle handlebars bulged with books and swung them on erratic courses. They arrived in excitement, Valda screaming with delight as the bicycles crashed into the Embassy walls and they carried their parcels inside. She was about to rush upstairs with the books but Laszlo called her back.

‘What have you got?’
‘Just books,’ said Tichborne. He spoke uneasily, as if he detected the edge of haunted suspicion in Laszlo’s voice.


‘Let’s have a look,’ said Laszlo.
Valda ripped open the parcels on the hall table. Scores of slim volumes spilled out.

‘Poetry,’ said Wendel and Laszlo.
‘They didn’t have anything else.’

‘I thought you went to buy books on geodisic domes,’ Wendel said.
‘How did you know that?’ Tichborne asked, feeling for his pipe and tobacco.

‘What’s wrong with poetry anyway?’ Valda asked.
‘You know you’re not permitted to write it here..’

‘I’m not writing it, I’m reading it. Look,’ she said, holding the books open for Wendel and Laszlo, ‘They’re already written, the pages have got words on them, they’ve been used. See?’

Tichborne was untying his own parcel to show them the book on geodisic domes.

‘We’ll let that one through,’ Wendel told him, stamping a visa on its back fly leaf.

‘Why didn’t you get one on tents?’ Laszlo asked. ‘They’re much less destructive to the environment.’

Tichborne went off towards the stairs.
Wendel called him back. ‘What about the rest of this stuff?’
‘They’re just magazines and things,’ Tichborne said.
‘Magazines,’ said Wendel and Laszlo. ‘Bring them here,’ they told him.
He brought them.

‘My god,’ said Wendel. ‘I thought we’d made that clear. I thought I’d said I wouldn’t have that name mentioned in the Embassy.’ He pointed to a quarterly from Melbourne.
‘What, ‘ said Tichborne in surprise.
‘Don’t say it,’ said Wendel. ‘Don’t ever mention its name inside these walls.’

‘Within these environs,’ Laszlo added.
‘Oh, but...’ Tichborne began.
‘He’s got an article in it,’ Valda said.
‘An article,’ Wendel and Laszlo said. ‘What sort of article?’
‘Just an article,’ Tichborne said; ‘a review article.’
‘A literary article.’ they said.
‘It’s about the state of new writing,’ he said.
‘What do you know about the State of New Writing?’ Wendel asked.
‘This is its Embassy and we are its Ambassadors. Any pronouncement comes through our press officers.’

Tichborne smiled. He softened no hearts.
‘Fortunately whatever you write in that magazine is automatically discredited.’ Wendel said. ‘Your major offence is trying to import it.’
‘Do you want to burn it?’ Tichborne asked.
‘You’ve obviously had too much to do with that publication,’ Laszlo said. ‘We do not burn books. Not even that. We just prohibit its entry.’

They checked through the other volumes. Wendel gave the poetry 6 month tourist visas. ‘You can always apply for renewal,’ he told Valda and Tichborne.

‘We don’t like doing this,’ Laszlo said, ‘but it’s been forced on us. Valda, will you take this outside.’ He gave her the journal.

‘Where to?’
‘Throw it over the fence,’ Wendel said.
‘It doesn’t matter where as long as its not beneath this roof,’ Laszlo said. ‘Within these walls.’
‘The Earlier Brautigan potting shed,’ said Valda.
‘Fine,’ said Laszlo. ‘Take it now.’
‘I’ll take it,’ Tichborne offered, ‘I bought it.’
‘I don’t mind taking it,’ Valda said.
‘No no,’ said Tichborne.
‘We’ll both take it then,’ she said.

They went outside and got on their bicycles.

‘That’s the last you’ll see of them for a while,’ Wendel said. ‘The binoculars are upstairs if you want to use them. Or you could go and read his journal while they’re occupied. Then you could find out what’s really going on.’

‘You seem very eager I should read his journal. Have you been writing it or something?’

‘Who knows,’ said Wendel; ‘certainly not Tichborne.’

He picked up the book on geodisic domes and moved to leave.

‘What are you going to do with that?’ Laszlo asked.

‘You’ll see in due course,’ Wendel said. ‘When my work on Tichborne is ready.’

* * *

In the extraordinarily bright light of dawn Valda was marched naked from the Embassy. The low sun cast a metallic glow over her body. Her breasts reflected it as if they were polished gold. Her lips were bright red. Her mouth writhed in pain. Wendel and Laszlo marched each side of her, dragging her along when her legs would not move. Her feet scraped across the gravel and left drops of blood on the pathway. The deep green canopy of the laurel spread above the golden glow of her body as they lashed her with whips, first one, then the other. They were beating
her for reading poetry, for bringing poetry books into the Embassy, for secretly composing poems in her head. He wanted to rush up and save her, stop them, drag them off her, but he could not move, it was as if he were paralyzed or strapped down, his arms bonded against his sides, his legs constricted against each other. He could see nothing, he couldn’t see what it was that held him back, held him down. He tried to call out, to put them off their stroke, to warn them that he watched, but he couldn’t make any sound. They lit a fire of her poetry books. They ripped out pages which they folded into spills and lit and held against her. They laughed at her suffering.

*     *     *

Wendel closed the shutter on the spyhole. Wendel wasn’t given to metaphysical speculations. He did not believe in attempting the search for the impossible. Yet he would have liked to have been able to videotape Tichborne’s dreams. He wondered about a synthesiser that could reconstruct them from observing the external reactions and eeg of the dreamer, and then irritatedly threw away the idea; that was Laszlo’s sort of story.