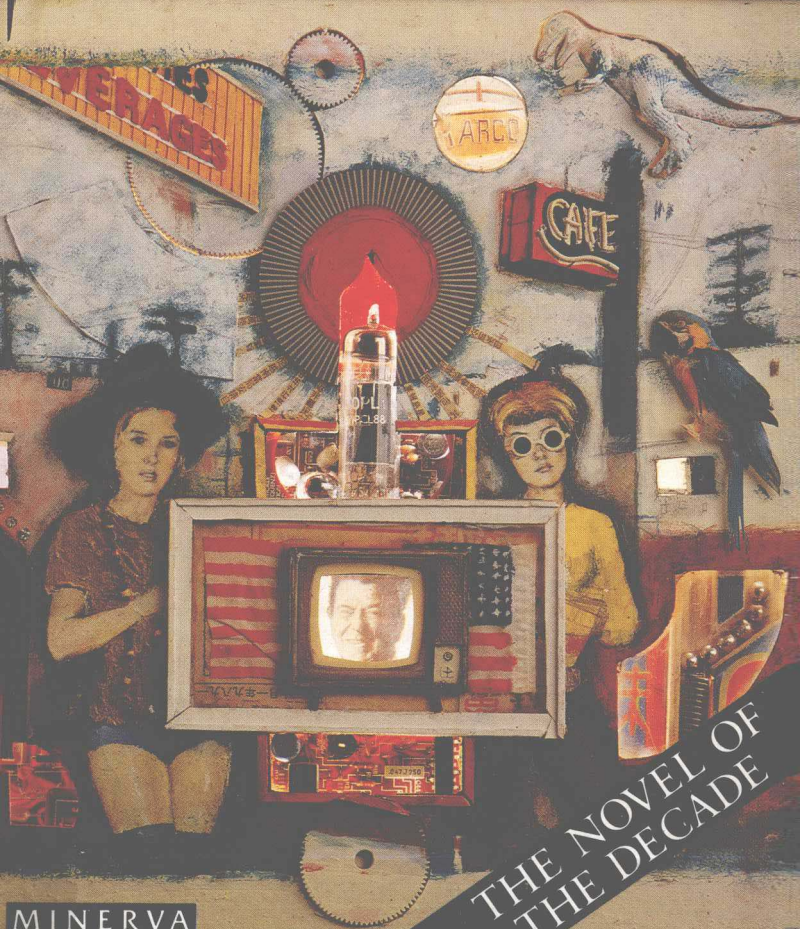


THOMAS

BYNCHON

VINELAND



THE NOVEL OF
THE DECADE

MINERVA

Thomas Pynchon

VINELAND

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Minerva

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VINELAND

LATER than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof. In his dream these had been carrier pigeons from someplace far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time. He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with the letter that had come along with his latest mental-disability check, reminding him that unless he did something publicly crazy before a date now less than a week away, he would no longer qualify for benefits. He groaned out of bed. Somewhere down the hill hammers and saws were busy and country music was playing out of somebody's truck radio. Zoyd was out of smokes.

On the table in the kitchen, next to the Count Chocula box, which turned out to be empty, he found a note from Prairie. "Dad, they changed my shift again, so I rode in with Thapsia. You got a call from Channel 86, they said urgent, I said, you try waking him up sometime. Love anyway, Prairie."

"Froot Loops again I guess," he muttered at the note. With enough Nestle's Quik on top, they weren't all that bad, and various ashtrays yielded half a dozen smokable butts. After taking as much time as he could in the bathroom, he finally got around to locating the phone and calling the local TV station to recite to them this year's press release. But — "You'd better check again, Mr. Wheeler. Word we have is that you've been rescheduled."

"Check with who, I'm the one's doin' it, ain't I?"

"We're all supposed to be at the Cucumber Lounge."

"Well I won't, I'll be up at the Log Jam in Del Norte." What was the matter with these people? Zoyd had been planning this for weeks.

Desmond was out on the porch, hanging around his dish, which was always empty because of the blue jays who came screaming down out of the redwoods and carried off the food in it piece by piece. After a while this dog-food diet had begun to give the birds an attitude, some being known to chase cars and pickups for miles down the road and bite anybody who didn't like it. As Zoyd came out, Desmond gave him an inquiring look. "Just dig yourself," shaking his head at the chocolate crumbs on the dog's face, "I know she fed you, Desmond, and I know *what* she fed you too." Desmond followed him as far as the firewood, tail going back and forth to show no hard feelings, and watched Zoyd backing all the way down to the lane before he turned and got on with his day.

Zoyd headed down to Vineland Mall and rolled around the lot there for a while, smoking up half a joint he'd found in his pocket, before parking the rig and going into More Is Less, a discount store for larger-size women, where he bought a party dress in a number of colors that would look good on television, paying with a check both he and the saleslady shared a premonition would end up taped to this very cash register after failing to clear, and proceeded to the men's room of the Breez-Thru gas station, where he shifted into the dress and with a small hairbrush tried to rat what was on his head and face into a snarl he hoped would register as insane-looking enough for the mental-health folks. Back at the pump he put in five dollars' worth of gas, went in the back seat, got a quart of oil out of the case he kept there, found his spout, punched it in the can, put most of the oil in his engine, except for a little he saved to mix in the can with some gas, and poured this into the tank of an elegant little imported-looking chain saw, about the size of a Mini-Mac, which he then stashed in a canvas beach bag. Prairie's friend Slide came wandering out of the office to have a look.

"Uh-oh, is it that time again already?"

"This year it snuck up on me, hate to think I'm gettin' too old for this."

"Know the feeling," Slide nodded.

"You're fifteen, Slide."

"And seen it all. Whose front window you doin' it to this year?"

"Nobody's. I'm givin' that all up, window jumping's in my past, this year I'm gonna just take this little chain saw into the Log Jam and see what develops from there."

"Um, maybe not, Mr. Wheeler, you been up there lately?"

"Oh I know there's some heavy-duty hombres, badasses, spend all day narrowly escaping death by tree, not too much patience with anything out of the ordinary, but I've got the element of surprise. Don't I?"

"You'll see," weary Slide advised.

He sure would, but only after spending more time out on 101 than his already fragile sense of humor could take, owing to a convoy of out-of-state Winnebagos on some leisurely tour of the redwoods, in among whom, on the two-lane stretches, he was obliged to gear down and put up with a lot of attention, not all friendly. "Gimme a break," he yelled over the engine noise, "it's, uh, a Calvin Klein original!"

"Calvin doesn't cut nothin' bigger than a 14," a girl younger than his daughter screamed at him out her window, "and you ought to be locked up."

It was well into lunchtime when he got to the Log Jam, and he was disappointed to find nobody at all from the media, just a collection of upscale machinery parked in the lot, itself newly blacktopped. These were to be the first of several rude updates. Trying to think cheerful thoughts — like assuming the television crews were only late — Zoyd collected the bag with the saw in it, checked his hair one more time, and went storming into the Log Jam, where right away he noticed that everything, from the cooking to the clientele, smelled different.

Uh-oh. Wasn't there supposed to be some loggers' bar around here someplace? Everybody knew it was high times for the stiffies in the woods — though not for those in the mills, with the Japanese buying up unprocessed logs as fast as the forests could be clear-cut — but even so, the scene in here was peculiar. Dangerous men with coarsened attitudes, especially toward death, were perched around lightly on designer barstools, sipping kiwi mimosas. The jukebox once famous for hundreds of freeway exits up and down the coast for its gigantic country-and-western collection, including

half a dozen covers of "So Lonesome I Could Cry," was reformatted to light classical and New Age music that gently peeped at the edges of audibility, slowing, lulling this roomful of choppers and choker setters who now all looked like models in Father's Day ads. One of the larger of these, being among the first to notice Zoyd, had chosen to deal with the situation. He wore sunglasses with stylish frames, a Turnbull & Asser shirt in some pastel plaid, three-figure-price-tag jeans by Mme. Gris, and après-logging shoes of a subdued, but incontestably blue, suede.

"Well good afternoon pretty lady and how fine you're looking, I'm sure in another setting and mood we'd all like to know you as a person with your many fine points and so on like that, but from your fashion message I can tell that you are a sensitive type person who'll appreciate the problem we have here in terms of orientational vibes, if you follow —"

The already confused Zoyd, whose survival instincts may not have been working all the way up to spec, decided to produce the chain saw from his bag. "Buster," he called plaintively to the owner behind the bar, "where's the media?" The implement attracted immediate attention from everyone in the room, not all of it technical curiosity. It was a tailor-made lady's chain saw, "tough enough for timber," as the commercials said, "but petite enough for a purse." The guide bar, handle grips, and housing were faced in genuine mother-of-pearl, and spelled out in rhinestones on the bar, surrounded by sawteeth ready to buzz, was the name of the young woman he'd borrowed it from, which onlookers took to be Zoyd's drag name, CHERYL.

"Easy there cowgirl, now things're just fine," the logger stepping back as Zoyd, he hoped demurely, yanked at a silk cord on a dainty starter pulley, and the lady's pearl-handled chain saw spun into action.

"Listen to that li'l honey purr."

"Zoyd, what th' heck you doin' this all the way up here for," Buster deciding it was time to intervene, "no channel's gonna send no crew this far out of town, why are you not down in Eureka or Arcata someplace?"

The logger stared. "This person is known to you?"

"Played together in the old Six Rivers Conference," Buster all smiles, "those were the days, huh Zoyd?"

"Can't hear you," hollered Zoyd, trying to maintain a quickly fading image of dangerousness. He throttled the nacreous pretty saw reluctantly back first to a ladylike bass line and then to silence. Into the echo, "See you did some redecorating."

"If you would've come around last month, you 'n' 'at little saw, could've helped us gut the place."

"Sorry, Buster, guess I did come to the wrong bar, I sure can't saw any of this stuff, not with the money you must've put in . . . only reason I'm up here is is 'at the gentrification of South Spooner, Two Street, and other more familiar hellraisin' locales has upped the ante way outa my bracket, these are all folks now who like to sue, and for big bucks, with hotshot PI lawyers up from the City, I so much as blot my nose on one of their designer napkins I'm in deep shit anymore."

"Well, we're no longer as low-rent as people remember us here either Zoyd, in fact since George Lucas and all his crew came and went there's been a real change of consciousness."

"Yep, I noticed . . . say, you want to draw me a, just a lady's-size beer there . . . you know I still haven't even got around to that picture?"

They were talking about *Return of the Jedi* (1983), parts of which had been filmed in the area and in Buster's view changed life there forever. He put his massive elbows on about the only thing in here that hadn't been replaced, the original bar, carved back at the turn of the century from one giant redwood log. "But underneath, we're still just country fellas."

"From the looks of your parking lot, the country must be Germany."

"You and me Zoyd, we're like Bigfoot. Times go on, we never change, now, you're no bar fighter, I can see the thirst for new experiences, but a man's better off sticking to a specialty, your own basically being transfenestration."

"Mm yes, I could tell," commented another logger, his voice almost inaudible, sidling in and laying a hand on Zoyd's leg.

"Besides which," continued Buster, imperturbable, though his

eyes were now fixed on the hand on the leg, "it's become your MO, diving through windows, you start in with other stuff at this late date, forcing the state to replace what's in your computer file with something else, this is not gunno endear you to them, 'Aha, rebellious ain't he?' they'll say, and soon you'll find those checks are gettin' slower, even lost, in the mail and say there Lemay! my good man and good sport, let's have a look at the palm of that hand up here on the bar a minute? 'Cz I'm gonna read your fortune for you, how about that," guiding by strange jovial magnetism a logger's hand that would just as happily have been a fist up off of the leg of by now mentally paralyzed Zoyd, or as the (it seemed) smitten Lemay kept calling him, Cheryl. "You will have a long life," Buster looking Lemay in the face, not the hand, "because of your common sense and grasp on reality. Five bucks."

"Huh?"

"Well — maybe just buy us a round, then. Zoyd here does look a little strange right now, but he's out on governmental business."

"I knew it!" cried Lemay. "Undercover agent!"

"Nut case," confided Zoyd.

"Oh. Well . . . that sounds like interesting work too. . . ."

Just then the phone rang, and it was for Zoyd. His partner, Van Meter, was calling from the Cucumber Lounge, a notorious Vineland County roadhouse, in high agitation. "Got six mobile TV units waiting, network up from the City, plus paramedics and a snack truck, all wonderin' where you are."

"Here. You just called me, remember?"

"Aha. Good point. But you were supposed to be jumping through the front window at the Cuke today."

"No! I called everybody and told 'm it was up here. What happened?"

"Somebody said it got rescheduled."

"Shit. I knew someday this act would get bigger than me."

"Better come on back," said Van Meter.

Zoyd hung up, put the saw back in the bag, finished his beer, and made his exit, blowing broad show-biz kisses and reminding everybody to watch the evening news.

•

The Cucumber Lounge property extended back from the disreputable neon roadhouse itself into a few acres of virgin redwood grove. Dwarfed and overshadowed by the towering dim red trees were two dozen motel cabins, with woodstoves, porches, barbecues, waterbeds, and cable TV. During the brief North Coast summers they were for tourists and travelers, but through the rainy remainder of the year, occupants tended to be local, and paying by the week. The woodstoves were good for boiling, frying, even some baking, and some of the cabins had butane burners as well, so that along with woodsmoke and the austere fragrance of the trees, there was an all-day neighborhood smell of cooking in the air.

The lot Zoyd tried to find a parking space in had never been paved, and the local weather had been writing gullies across it for years. Today it was enjoying a visit from the media, plus a task force of cop vehicles, state and county, flashing their lights and playing the "Jeopardy" theme on their sirens. Mobile units, lights, cable, crews everywhere, even a couple of Bay Area stations. Zoyd began to feel nervous. "Maybe I should've found something cheap at Buster's to saw on anyway," he muttered. He finally had to pull around back and park in one of Van Meter's spaces. His old bass player and troublemaking companion had been living here for years, in what he still described as a commune, with an astounding number of current and ex-old ladies, ex-old ladies' boyfriends, children of parent combinations present and absent, plus miscellaneous folks in out of the night. Zoyd had watched television shows about Japan, showing places such as Tokyo where people got into incredibly crowded situations but, because over the course of history they'd all learned to act civil, everybody got along fine despite the congestion. So when Van Meter, a lifetime searcher for meaning, moved into this Cucumber Lounge bungalow, Zoyd had hoped for some Japanese-style serenity as a side effect, but no such luck. Instead of a quiescent solution to all the overpop, the "commune" chose an energetic one — bickering. Unrelenting and high-decibel, it was bickering raised to the level of ceremony, bickering that soon generated its own house newsletter, the *Blind-Side Gazette*, bickering that could be heard even out on the

freeway by the drivers of hurtling eighteen-wheelers, some of whom thought it was radio malfunction, others unquiet ghosts.

Here came Van Meter now, around the corner of the Cuke, wearing his trademark face, Wounded Righteousness. "Are you ready? We'll be losin' the light, fog's gonna come in any minute, what were you doin' all the hell the way up to the Log Jam?"

"No, Van Meter — why is everybody here instead?"

They went in the back way, Van Meter furrowing and unfurrowing his forehead. "Guess I can tell you now you're here, is there's this old buddy of yours, just showed up?"

Zoyd went sweaty and had one of those gotta-shit throbs of fear. Was it ESP, was he only reacting to something in his friend's voice? Somehow he knew who it would be. Here when he needed all his concentration for getting through another window, instead he had to worry about this visitor from out of the olden days. Sure enough, it turned out to be Zoyd's longtime pursuer, DEA field agent Hector Zuñiga, back once again, the erratic federal comet who brought, each visit in to Zoyd's orbit, new forms of bad luck and baleful influence. This time, though, it had been a while, long enough that Zoyd had begun to hope the man might've found other meat and be gone for good. Dream on, Zoyd. Hector stood over by the toilets pretending to play a Zaxxon machine, but in reality waiting to be reintroduced, this honor apparently falling to the manager of the Cuke, Ralph Wayvone, Jr., a remittance man from San Francisco, where his father was a figure of some substance, having grown successful in business areas where transactions are overwhelmingly in the form of cash. Today Ralph Jr. was all dolled up in a Cerruti suit, white shirt with cuff links, touch-them-you-die double-soled shoes from someplace offshore, the works. Like everybody else around here, he looked unusually anxious.

"Say Ralph, lighten up, it's me's gotta do all the work."

"Ahhh . . . my sister's wedding next weekend, the band just canceled, I'm the social coordinator, supposed to find a replacement, right? You know of anybody?"

"Yeah, maybe . . . you better not fuck up this one Ralph, you know what'll happen."

"Always kidding, huh. Here, let me show you the window you'll be using. Can I have them get you a drink or anything? Oh by the way Zoyd, here's an old friend of yours, come all this way to wish you luck."

"Uh-huh." He and Hector exchanged the briefest of thumb-grips.

"Love your outfit, Wheeler."

Zoyd reached, bomb-squad careful, to pat Hector's stomach. "Look like you been 'moving the mustache' there a little, old amigo."

"Bigger, not softer, *ése*. And speaking of lunch, how about tomorrow at Vineland Lanes?"

"Can't do it, tryin' to make the rent and I'm already late."

"It's im-por-tan'," Hector making a little melody out of it. "Think of it this way. If I can prove to you, that I'm as bad of a desperado as I ever was, will you allow me to spring for your lunch?"

"As bad as . . ." As what? Why did Zoyd keep going, time after time, for these oily Hectorial setups? The best it had ever turned out for him was uncomfortable. "Hector, we're too old for this."

"After all the smiles, and all the tears —"

"All right, stop, it's a deal — you be bad, I come to lunch, but please, I have to jump through this window right now? is it OK, can I have just a few seconds —"

Production staff murmured into walkie-talkies, technicians could be seen through the fateful window, waving light meters and checking sound levels outside as Zoyd, breathing steady, silently repeated a mantra that Van Meter, claiming it'd cost him \$100, had toward the end of his yoga phase last year hustled Zoyd into buying for a twenty that Zoyd hadn't really enjoyed discretionary use of. At last all was set. Van Meter flashed Mr. Spock's Vulcan hand salute. "Ready when you are, Z Dubya!"

Zoyd eyeballed himself in the mirror behind the bar, gave his hair a shake, turned, poised, then screaming ran empty-minded at the window and went crashing through. He knew the instant he hit that something was funny. There was hardly any impact, and

it all felt and sounded different, no spring or resonance, no volume, only a sort of fine, dulled splintering.

After obligingly charging at each of the news cameras while making insane faces, and after the police had finished their paperwork, Zoyd caught sight of Hector squatting in front of the destroyed window, among the glittering debris, holding a bright jagged polygon of plate glass. "Time for the bad," he called, grinning in a nasty way long familiar to Zoyd. "Are you ready?" Like a snake he lunged his head forward and took a giant bite out of the glass. *Holyshit*, Zoyd frozen, *he's lost it* — no, actually now, instead Hector was chewing away, crunching and slobbering, with the same evil grin, going "Mmm-mm!" and "*¡Qué rico, qué sabroso!*" Van Meter went running after a departing paramedic truck hollering "Corpsman!" but Zoyd had tumbled, he was no media innocent, he read *TV Guide* and had just remembered an article about stunt windows made of clear sheet candy, which would break but not cut. That's why this one had felt so funny — young Wayvone had taken out the normal window and put in one of these sugar types. "Euchred again, Hector, thanks."

But Hector had already vanished into a large gray sedan with government plates. News-crew stragglers were picking up a few last location shots of the Cuke and its famous rotating sign, which Ralph Jr. was happy to light up early, a huge green neon cucumber with blinking warts, cocked at an angle that approached, within a degree or two, a certain vulgarity. Did Zoyd have to show up next day at the bowling alley? Technically, no. But in the federale's eyes there'd been a glint that Zoyd could still see, behind the one-way auto glass, even as the nightly fog rolled up over the great berm and on toward 101 and Hector was driven away into it. Zoyd could feel another hustle on the way. Hector had been trying over and over for years to develop him as a resource, and so far — technically — Zoyd had hung on to his virginity. But the li'l fucker would not quit. He kept coming back, each time with a new and more demented plan, and Zoyd knew that one day, just to have some peace, he'd say forget it, and go over. Question was, would it be this time, or one of the next few times? Should he wait for another spin? It was like being on "Wheel of Fortune,"

only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel, to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn't want to read anyway.

ZOYD made it home in time to view himself on the Tube, though he had to wait till Prairie finished watching the 4:30 Movie, Pia Zadora in *The Clara Bow Story*. She fingered the material of the lurid print dress. "Crazy about this, Dad. Fresh, rilly. Can I have it when you're done? Use it to cover my futon."

"Hey, do you ever date logger types, fallers, choker setters, that sort of fellow?"

"Zoy-oyd. . . ."

"Don't get offended, is it's only that a couple of these guys slipped me their phone number, see? along with bills in different denominations?"

"What for?"

He did a take, squinted closely at his daughter. Was this a trick question here? "Let's see, 1984, that'd make you . . . fourteen?"

"Nice going, like to try for the car?"

"Nothin' personal, jeez." Zoyd had been removing the large and colorful dress. The girl shied away in mock alarm, covering her mouth and making her eyes round. He was wearing ancient surfer baggies underneath, and a dilapidated Hussong's T-shirt. "Here you go, it's all yours, mind if I check myself out on the news?"

They sat together on the floor in front of the Tube, with a chair-high bag of Chee-tos and a sixpack of grapefruit soda from the health-food store, watching baseball highlights, commercials, and weather — no rain again — till it was time for the kissoff story. "Well," chuckled news anchor Skip Tromblay, "an annual Vine-land event was repeated today, as local laughing-academy outpatient Zoyd Wheeler performed his now familiar yearly leap through another area plate-glass window. This time the lucky establishment was the infamous Cucumber Lounge, seen here in its usual location, just off Highway 101. Alerted by a mystery caller,