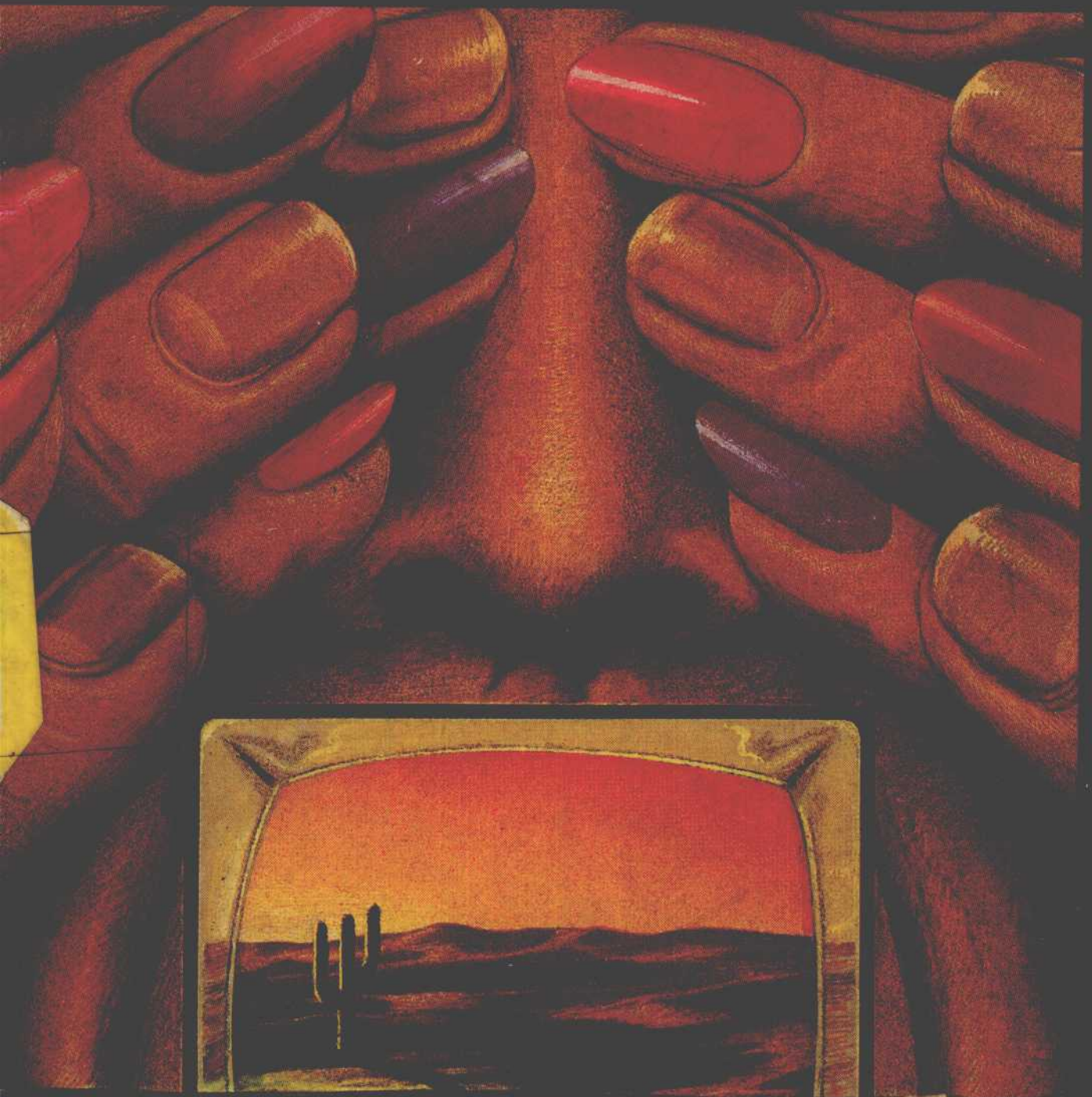
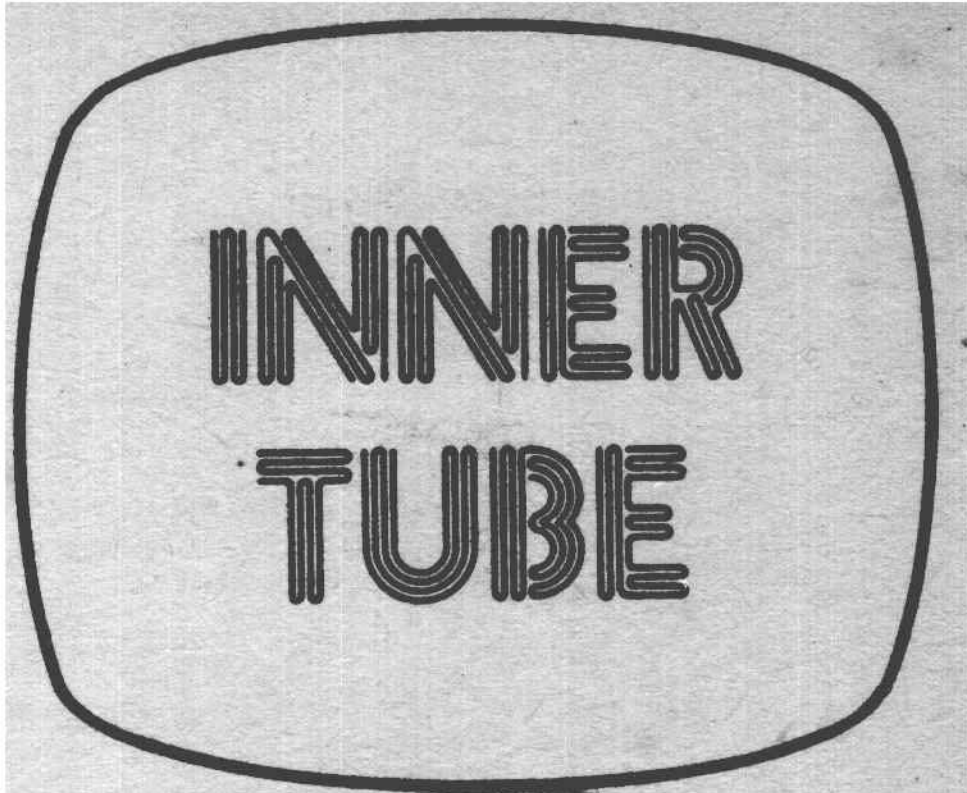


*'A beat Philip Marlowe, a dazed Sam Spade, whose drink is spiked with MTV.'* —*New York Times*

# DINNER TUBE

HOB BROUN





a novel by

**HOB BROUN**

**McGRAW-HILL BOOK COMPANY**  
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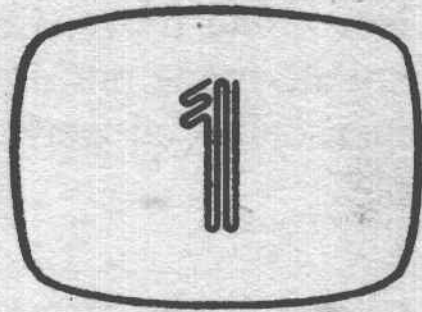
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IN MEMORY  
OF  
QUINCAS BORBA  
*quincas Borba*  
"TO THE VICTOR, THE POTATOES!"

INNER TUBE







You're not going to like this, but some years ago, in the family room of the house where I grew up in Lake Success, New York, my mother cancelled an unrelenting life by plunging her head through the twenty-six-inch screen of a Motorola color television.

Sadly, she was alone at the time, this being a suicidal method surely designed for an audience, she a woman who had played Broadway opposite David Wayne, had for several seasons been something of an attraction at the summer playhouses of Cape Cod. But we were all gone that night—my father at a political banquet, my sister in the dark solitude of northern woods, me on the job, vigilant in the newsroom of a major network—and I guess she just couldn't wait. Still, that someone so corroded by the defeat of her acting career should play to an empty house—this really fit.

Perhaps she satisfied herself by anticipating the impact our hideous discovery would have. But a neighbor got there first, a retired petrochemicals executive dropping by to return a belt sander. Official vehicles had gathered by the time I got home, and the mopping up was nearly over. I did not see her face charred by implosion, haloed with bright drainage from jugular and carotid.

I saw my father in his tuxedo, a fifth of vodka in one hand, talking to the room as though it were empty.

"I didn't know," he said many times. And then: "We were talking about a trip to Venice."



A man in a black raincoat, some functionary, took his arm. "Sir, you just can't predict these things like the weather."

My father snarled, turned, broke that vodka bottle over the man's head, and there was a fresh confusion of blood all over. I remember thinking: Not a bad move, Gordo. Not bad at all.

Her note, though explicit, made nothing clear. In green ink on monogrammed paper centered perfectly on the mantelpiece, it went like this:

*Darlings—*

*Must go, must go. It's (I'm) all so ugly. Can't we please be rid of it. Nothing more, nothing less. Darlings.*

Right there by the note was a bottle of sleeping pills. Did this mean she'd meant to go out sweet and calm? That the dive through the picture tube had been a mad impulse? So the others concluded, but I knew better. I recognized her lumbering irony; I understood that the pills, with a mother's infuriating thoroughness, had been left for the consoling sedation of her survivors.

But nothing could have quelled the noise of the next few days: surmises, recriminations, regrets, all the worthless usual. I tried to stay out of it. I felt miserable, all right, but it wasn't a matter of pride. My stance was she knew what she was doing. She had so many reasons to leave the world, enough to fill a Chinese menu, what difference did it make which one she'd finally chosen?

I was curious about something else, though. Chances are you'll like this even less, but I really had to know. The coroner's office had placed the time of my mother's death between 8 and 9 p.m. Hauling out the busted set, I'd noticed it was tuned to channel four. I snouted through old newspapers in the garage, traced the information down.

Minutes before her death, my mother was watching a Bob Hope Special.

It had been a brusque and stormy spring.





I watch, my attention paid like a war tax. I float obediently on waves that travel at the speed of light. Electromagnetic tides. A boiling mass of ocean miniaturized, tightened in a square. Color-coded, like the iodopsin-secreting cone cells of the human retina, 900,000 phosphor dots twitch and fluoresce on the aluminized screen. And I watch, under siege. Electron guns, red, blue, and green, fire information particles, their inexhaustible ammunition, at 167 million miles an hour. Weaponry controls and commands. So I watch.

But when I place my hand against the screen, feel its warmth, the static charge is a caress, a whisper that outlines my fingers with the tenderness of a perfect lover. Is this part of the menace, or the reason for it? Is it jealousy? That every living image is a rival? I lay my cheek now on the glass behind which guns are camouflaged, and listen to the gentle inside hiss. Vigilance, a song of the guts. Red gun. Blue gun. Green gun. Light sieves through the patterned bullet holes, each nine one-hundredths of an inch across, and cloaks my face like a woman's breath pushed slowly through clenched teeth.

Like all the others, I have prescribed patterns of work. Alert at my viewing station, I review an old Hope broadcast, Bob entertaining the troops at Da Nang or somewhere, all these kids hunkered down around the stage with their lawnmower haircuts and bared teeth. Boys will be boys is the order of the day. Hope fingers the shaft of his three wood and promises flesh:

Majorettes of the Big Sky Conference, like that. I switch to single-frame advance, dissecting the famous Hope sneer, observing each interval as he looks into the wings. I feel the tension of assassination film, of Hope turning toward the pop sounds.

Every animal society requires means of recognition: gestures, signs, insignia. The ant, which sees little and hears less, distinguishes the scent uniforms worn by others with the olfactory organs located in its antennae. Each ant nest, in turn, has its definitive aroma. Separate a colony into two groups, reunite them three months later, and they will go to war, unable to bear each other's smell.

The recirculated air here at the facility smells like cold styrene. My personal fume is an amalgam of nicotine, dry-cleaning fluid, and the shrimp salad I had for lunch. Also, spring-clipped to my shirt is a magstrip security badge with my photo in the upper lefthand corner.

So here I am, eighty-five feet underground, all tipped in with my keyboard and my liquid crystal displays. The hard contours and absence of reverberation can dull reflexes. People take vitamin D tablets and make uneasy jokes about "the bunker mentality." Nature sounds are piped into the lounge areas—birdsong, gentle rain, like that. And every thirty minutes a white strip moves across the bottom of my screen, reminding me to stop and rest my optic muscles.

I suppose what this is is a part of the new service economy. We serve the overdeveloped appetites; we chop, form, cook, and garnish the databurgers that they're all so hungry for. Record, observe, analyze. Amour-propre, the love that cannot speak its name. One of the things I like best about this place is I don't know who I'm working for.

The phone makes its bleating noise and I pick up. Delvino, one of the suit people with an up-there office he can see out of.

"How goes it?"

"Round and round."

"Reeling under the workload? If it's too much, I wish you'd let me know."



In his wallet Delvino carries a picture of General Sarnoff, that visionary of the steppes, that great broadcaster, a fisher of men casting wide his net.

"You take things too seriously," Delvino says. "That's my sense."

Then he tells me the Agronomists' Working Group of Ontario has telexed a request for some 4-H Club show off a station in Des Moines. *Farm, Home & Garden*. He throws a few numbers at me and I ask why he's wasting my time when he should be talking to someone in Dubbing. Office banter, a war of small moves.

"I don't know, I'm just loose. Such a day out there."

He must be looking at the wide lawn maintained by water piped from an underground reservoir forty miles away.

Got to rest more than my optics. I move down the corridor, past the cells of other workers, and into the elevator. Very peaceful. I pump myself up and down in the tube for a while, finally step off at Demographics and Profile. The walls are Caribbean blue with a continuous white stripe at eye level. The halls slant diagonally toward a hub, the hermetic domain of the mainframe computer. Empty halls, not a cyberneticist in sight. But I am close enough to hear the whirring tape drives, cooling fans, the nasality of printers printing. My superstitions are prodded: bad medicine in this place. Backtracking, I pass a door that was closed before, is open now. Two men with paper boutonnières confer on a black Naugahyde couch.

"Remember that thing last year, those Alsatian separatists who blew up the daycare center?"

"Sure, sure."

"So I just heard ABC is planning to do it as a Movie of the Week."

I am back at my station in a darkness decorated by red indicator lights and soft glowing control buttons. I am once more in front of the guns, but mounting an assault of my own. In violent concentration, the synapses of my brain are flame-throwers. I fire neuron after neuron—chemical warfare, all-

out bombardment. But these war machines are sealed away, one inside a console, one inside a skull; and now, between the two containers, waves begin to pass—magnetic waves, sine waves, alpha waves—that tangle and intertwine like the slippery arms and legs of lovers in a horizontal hold.

I feel buffered down here, safe. I feel as comfortably obsolete as the vacuum tube or the scanning raster. Have you ever visited a place, an old hotel, let's say, and felt yourself spliced into some powerful continuity? Like there's something just at your back but you can't turn fast enough to catch it? That's how it is for me, burrowed away with stacks and stacks of old TV shows. I am transformed in communion with the past. Like to see some fucking ant try that.



The town where I'm staying has just lost its post office to federal austerity. This is fine with the postmistress, who can now keep a better watch on her barroom, Boot Hill, where she suspects her nephew has been fudging the receipts. There is a gas station and convenience store, a gun shop, a Rosicrucian optometrist who works out of his home. And there's the Golconda Motel & Cafe, where I occupy unit #6. I am the only permanent resident, permanence being a relative thing out here. After my second month, Opatowski offered me my choice of paintings. I went from room to room and finally chose one called, according to a label on the back, "Fishing Village Morn."



"I understand," he said. "You need some water to look at."

Opatowski is fond of me, and not just as a steady source of revenue. There is a regional affinity. Opatowski was an electrician in Pottstown, Pa., before migrating. He laments the absence of pizza and the presence of crummy sports coverage in the papers, but he loves the weather. His wife, though suffering from lung disease, has taken up fossil-hunting.

"The woman has a need to know," Opatowski says admiringly.

Telephones are unreliable, the water is briny. No one asks me what I do. It's easy to be as small as the Golconda's comforts in this slim town, where in no time I have learned the common faces, brown and dug with squint lines from the sun. They teach me to be plain, to expect only what has already happened. I've sat in the cafe on Sunday afternoon with every table full and the only sounds coming from fork and plate and cup. I've been wrapped in anecdote like a mile-long bandage by amateur historians. Distinctions as dry as the air. Last week there was a fistfight at the gas station. The women were friends; each had witnessed at the wedding of the other. They fought over a pack of cigarettes and people stopped their cars to watch until someone crossed over from Boot Hill to pull the friends apart. Everything is easy here.

I pay one hundred thirty dollars a week for my room with a view: red rock dust, weary cottonwoods, a couple of rotten molar buttes. The bed is firm and the water pressure is good. I have lived in half a hundred rooms like this, but this is the first to be personalized. There are photos all around, production stills from shows like *My Friend Irma* and *Johnny Staccato* and *Broadway Open House*. I have the driving gloves my sister sent last Christmas tacked to the back of the door, my library in fruit crates beside the bed, a crucifix that glows in the dark.

Last night I went out back by the propane tanks and slid into one of the unreliable lawn chairs Opatowski puts out. The air had an unusual flavor to it, something like water from a corroded, mossy pipe. I shifted in the chair, tilted, drank warm beers. Past blotches of shadow—things half-repaired, empty

boxes along the fence—the ground went out gray and flat, moving away from me like a conveyor belt. As absently as you might list baseball players, I thought up sexual extremities to pass the time.

“Night like this, I can barely keep my eyes open.”

Opatowski took a chair. I waited for the plastic webbing to tear under him.

“First customer in two days and I have to run him off. He’s got Siamese cats he won’t leave in the car.”

“Why be such a tough guy?”

“No animals means no animals. Hairs in the rug, little black turds. How’s Heidi going to like that?”

“She’s seen worse.”

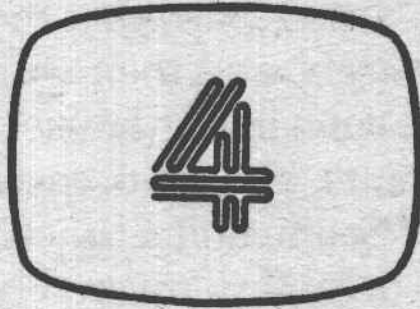
Then I changed the subject by handing Opatowski one of his own beers.

“Jesus,” he said. “Take them, okay, but take them out of the cooler.”

He wasn’t kidding. A few minutes’ silent sipping and he was fast asleep, dreaming maybe about capacitors or icy streets. I went by the office to lock up and turn off the neon. Early to bed, that was easy too.

I poured raisin bran into my magpie feeder—a plastic ash-tray nailed to the outside sill—showered, and, burning every light, lay on the bed to dry. Home again. All the rooms I’d been in, like a hermit crab assuming empty shells. Home again and again. I’d paced in paper shower shoes, stared into empty medicine cabinets, at cigarette burns on a tabletop. And never have I failed to find what there is to find. Possibility. The imminence of leaving.





For children arrived since Hiroshima, television has provided first contact with the past, our first sense of a world larger than this one. In safe rooms, on the hard, sure glass of a light box, we observed ghosts without fear. Hitler, Dracula, Maid Marian, Red Ryder—all floated by us on the same low clouds. We found artifacts for the taking, jumbled and abundant, expendable as toys—chariots, fighter planes, crossbows, gold dust, igloos, plumes and spurs and buckskin, black glass floors and silk hats and white telephones, chivalry, palmistry, roulette, hanging—and from this disorder we let the past compose itself. Looking backward while staring straight ahead, we were not confused, as by the trim, sequential packages to come. History didn't need cunning or disguise; it strolled right on in. Adults adored the shape of indoctrination. "No TV on school nights," they would say.

I experienced third grade in a building of beige ceramic brick. We pledged allegiance ("one nation, invisible") under a portrait of Lincoln—or was it Henry Fonda? In November, we cut out paper pumpkins and heard all about the Pilgrims. Devout and intrepid men. Men with buckles on their hats.

"I know," flapping my arm, bursting with facts from *Witches of Salem*, which had bobbed up in the wake of Saturday cartoons. "I know something about the Pilgrims. They set fire to each other."

I was sent home with a note to my parents.

“Smart remarks don’t win friends,” Gordo said with his underlining tic, a short, sharp sniff.

“But it’s true what I said.”

“No allowance for two weeks.”

Not until much later did I learn that the Pilgrims fed lobster to their pigs, bathed rarely, and then with their clothes on.

We had three televisions in our house: the family-room Motorola with wood cabinet and gold speaker cloth, a smaller console in my parents’ room, and a tiny black-and-white portable in the kitchen—breakfast invariably meant *The Today Show*, crunching toast, “foaming cleanser,” grumbling about the Berlin Wall. No mere furniture, beyond any appliance, they had secrecy, these three. They seemed alive to me even when dark, vigilant behind blank gray faces, reaching into unimaginable distances, and sometimes I’d be scared of them in silent night, just for an instant, till I could say don’t be a baby. Obsolete qualms, so far have we moved in so short a time, incurious now, blending into our machines and tapping the power. The third-grader here, solemn in his programmable sensory helmet, plays 3-D Nova Wars with an invisible opponent, little-boy blips hopping from relay station to relay station, droplets in the data stream. And back there, thoughts of secrecy. Obsolete gestures from the past, as I once interpreted old film shot at twenty-eight frames per second and played back at standard twenty-four, custard pies flying, everyone hurried, a worried-stiff style of movement abandoned in our age of comfort. Obsolete even as memory itself, the mass attention span shortened into near-disappearance, here and gone, a blip. ✓

Carla would have been ten that fall. She was tense for her age, grim, an assemblage of bone rods threatening to snap. Dark things appealed to her, and she never wanted to watch what I wanted to. After a documentary on the Great Depression, she took to wearing a stained jumper and a sweater gone out at the elbows. She picked at her dinners, preferring white bread and soda pop, and afterward sat in the driveway gazing up into the sky. Arriving at school barefoot, she told a teacher her family was too poor to buy shoes.



Mother restrained Gordo in favor of reason. She said it wasn't at all fair to those who suffered through the Depression to make a game of it. And what about all the families who'd seen it all through? Carla's grandfather hadn't stopped treating patients just because they paid with popovers and baskets of eggs. Mother had new dresses whenever she needed them and went right on with her flute lessons. Out came the brown family photographs, but Carla slapped them away.

"Liar," she yelled. "I know what I saw."

But did we know what we saw, in the sense of recognizing a thing previously met? Were we innocent as farm animals and in danger of being misherded? Was there any use in lecturing Carla about "facts"?

For children arrived since Hiroshima, the lines have been fine. Nothing but clarity would do, while contradictions dropped all around like leaflets urging surrender. Nostalgia was forced on us. We learned not to learn by example.

Dictum: In our world, nothing would ever be simple. The very best methods were required, each of us a little project separated one from another by fine lines. Everything in the technique.

"When you wish upon a star . . ." And they said for us all to sing together.

We learned from the evidence: It was all a job. We had to imagine furiously, find room inside those lines. Even that was a job, to be somewhere else. And scary sometimes, like you might not come back around. But the clarity was there. We knew what we saw.