

Forever and the Earth, Ray Bradbury

Forever and the Earth

After seventy years of writing short stories that never sold, Mr. Henry William Field arose one night at eleven-thirty and burned ten million words. He carried the manuscripts downstairs through his dark old mansion and threw them into the furnace.

“That’s that,” he said, and thinking about his lost art and his misspent life, he put himself to bed, among his rich antiques. “My mistake was in ever trying to picture this wild world of A.D. 2257. The rockets, the atom wonders, the travels to planets and double suns. Nobody can do it. Everyone’s tried. All of our modern authors have failed.”

Space was too big for them, and rockets too swift, and atomic science too instantaneous, he thought. But at least the other writers, while failing, had been published, while he, in his idle wealth, had used the years of his life for nothing.

After an hour of feeling this way, he fumbled through the night rooms to his library and switched on a green hurricane lamp. At random, from a collection untouched in fifty years, he selected a book. It was a book three centuries yellow and three centuries brittle, but he settled into it and read hungrily until dawn. . . .

At nine the next morning, Henry William Field staggered from his library, called his servants, televised lawyers, scientists, litterateurs. “Come at once!” he cried.

By noon, a dozen people had stepped into the study where Henry William Field sat, very disreputable and hysterical with an odd, feeding joy, unshaven and feverish. He clutched a thick book in his brittle arms and laughed if anyone even said good morning.

“Here you see a book,” he said at last, holding it out, “written by a giant, a man born in Asheville, North Carolina, in the year 1900. Long gone to dust, he published four huge novels. He was a whirlwind. He lifted up mountains and collected winds.

He left a trunk of penciled manuscripts behind when he lay in bed at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore in the year 1938, on September fifteenth, and died of pneumonia, an ancient and awful disease.”

They looked at the book.
Look Homeward, Angel.

He drew forth three more. Of Time and the River. The Web and the Rock. You Can't Go Home Again.

“By Thomas Wolfe,” said the old man. “Three centuries cold in the North Carolina earth.”

“You mean you've called us simply to see four books by a dead man?” his friends protested.

“More than that! I've called you because I feel Tom Wolfe's the man, the necessary man, to write of space, of time, huge things like nebulae and galactic war, meteors and planets, all the dark things he loved and put on paper were like this. He was born out of his time. He needed really big things to play with and never found them on Earth. He should have been born this afternoon instead of one hundred thousand mornings ago.”

“I'm afraid you're a bit late,” said Professor Bolton.

“I don't intend to be late!” snapped the old man. “I will not be frustrated by reality. You, professor, have experimented with time travel. I expect you to finish your time machine as soon as possible. Here's a check, a blank check, fill it in. If you need more money, ask for it. You've done some traveling already, haven't you?”

“A few years, yes, but nothing like centuries—”

“We’ll make it centuries! You others”—he swept them with a fierce and shining glance—“will work with Bolton. I must have Thomas Wolfe.”
“What!” They fell back before him.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s the plan. Wolfe is to be brought to me. We will collaborate in the task of describing the flight from Earth to Mars, as only he could describe it!”

They left him in his library with his books, turning the dry pages, nodding to himself. “Yes. Oh, dear Lord yes, Tom’s the boy, Tom is the very boy for this.”

The months passed slowly. Days showed a maddening reluctance to leave the calendar, and weeks lingered on until Mr. Henry William Field began to scream silently.

At the end of four months, Mr. Field awoke one midnight. The phone was ringing. He put his hand out in the darkness.

“Yes?”

“This is Professor Bolton calling.”

“Yes, Bolton?”

“I’ll be leaving in an hour,” said the voice.

“Leaving? Leaving where? Are you quitting? You can’t do that!”

“Please, Mr. Field, leaving means leaving.”

“You mean, you’re actually going?”

“Within the hour.”

“To 1938? To September fifteenth?”

“Yes!”

“You’re sure you’ve the date fixed correctly? You’ll arrive before he dies? Be sure of it! Good Lord, you’d better get there a good hour before his death, don’t you think?”

“Two hours. On the way back, we’ll mark time in Bermuda, borrow ten days of free floating continuum, inject him, tan him, swim him, vitaminize him, make him well.”

“I’m so excited I can’t hold the phone. Good luck, Bolton. Bring him through safely!”

“Thank you, sir. Good-bye.”

The phone clicked.

Mr. Henry William Field lay through the ticking night. He thought of Tom Wolfe as a lost brother to be lifted intact from under a cold, chiseled stone, to be restored to blood and fire and speaking. He trembled each time he thought of Bolton whirling on the time wind back to other calendars and other days, bearing medicines to change flesh and save souls.

Tom, he thought, faintly, in the half-awake warmth of an old man calling after his favorite and long-gone child, Tom, where are you tonight, Tom? Come along now, we’ll help you through, you’ve got to come, there’s need for you.

I couldn’t do it, Tom, none of us here can. So the next best thing to doing it myself, Tom, is helping you to do it. You can play with rockets like jackstraws, Tom, and you can have the stars, like a handful of crystals.

Anything your heart asks, it’s here. You’d like the fire and the travel, Tom, it was made for you. Oh, we’ve a pale lot of writers today, I’ve read them all, Tom, and they’re not like you. I’ve waded in libraries of their stuff and they’ve never touched space, Tom; we need you for that! Give an old man his wish then, for God knows I’ve waited all my life for myself or some other to write the really great book about the stars, and I’ve waited in vain.

So, wherever you are tonight, Tom Wolfe, make yourself tall. It’s that book you were going to write. It’s that good book the critics said was in you when you stopped breathing. Here’s your chance, will you do it, Tom? Will you listen and come through to us, will you do that tonight, and be here in the morning when I wake? Will you, Tom?

His eyelids closed down over the fever and the demand. His tongue stopped quivering in his sleeping mouth.
The clock struck four.

Awakening to the white coolness of morning, he felt the excitement rising and welling in himself. He did not wish to blink, for fear that the thing which awaited him somewhere in the house might run off and slam a door, gone forever. His hands reached up to clutch his thin chest.

Far away . . . footsteps . . .

A series of doors opened and shut. Two men entered the bedroom. Field could hear them breathe. Their footsteps took on identities. The first steps were those of a spider, small and precise: Bolton. The second steps were those of a big man, a large man, a heavy man.

“Tom?” cried the old man. He did not open his eyes.

“Yes,” said a voice, at last.

Tom Wolfe burst the seams of Field’s imagination, as a huge child bursts the lining of a too-small coat.

“Tom Wolfe, let me look at you!” If Field said it once he said it a dozen times as he fumbled from bed, shaking violently. “Put up the blinds, for God’s sake, I want to see this! Tom Wolfe, is that you?”

Tom Wolfe looked down from his tall thick body, with big hands out to balance himself in a world that was strange. He looked at the old man and the room and his mouth was trembling.

“You’re just as they said you were, Tom!”

Thomas Wolfe began to laugh and the laughing was huge, for he must have thought himself insane or in a nightmare, and he came to the old man and touched him and he looked at Professor Bolton and felt of himself, his arms and legs, he coughed experimentally and touched his own brow. “My fever’s gone,” he said. “I’m not sick anymore.”

“Of course not, Tom.”

“What a night,” said Tom Wolfe. “It hasn’t been easy. I thought I was sicker than any man ever was. I felt myself floating and I thought, This is fever. I felt myself traveling, and thought, I’m dying fast.

A man came to me. I thought, This is the Lord’s messenger. He took my hands. I smelled electricity. I flew up and over, and I saw a brass city. I thought, I’ve arrived. This is the city of heaven, there is the Gate! I’m numb from head to toe, like someone left in the snow to freeze. I’ve got to laugh and do things or I might think myself insane. You’re not God, are you? You don’t look like Him.”

The old man laughed. “No, no, Tom, not God, but playing at it. I’m Field.” He laughed again. “Lord, listen to me. I said it as if you should know who Field is. Field, the financier, Tom, bow low, kiss my ring finger. I’m Henry Field. I like your work, I brought you here. Come along.”

The old man drew him to an immense crystal window.

“Do you see those lights in the sky, Tom?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Those fireworks?”

“Yes.”

“They’re not what you think, son. It’s not July Fourth, Tom. Not in the usual way. Every day’s Independence Day now. Man has declared his Freedom from Earth. Gravitation without representation has been overthrown. The Revolt has long since been successful. That green Roman Candle’s going to Mars. That red fire, that’s the Venus rocket. And the others, you see the yellow and the blue? Rockets, all of them!”

Thomas Wolfe gazed up like an immense child caught amid the colorized glories of a July evening when the set-pieces are awhirl with phosphorous and glitter and barking explosion.

“What year is this?”

“The year of the rocket. Look here.” And the old man touched some flowers that bloomed at his touch. The blossoms were like blue and

white fire. They burned and sparkled their cold, long petals. The blooms were two feet wide, and they were the color of an autumn moon.

“Moon-flowers,” said the old man. “From the other side of the Moon.” He brushed them and they dripped away into a silver rain, a shower of white sparks on the air. “The year of the rocket. That’s a title for you, Tom. That’s why we brought you here, we’ve need of you.

You’re the only man could handle the sun without being burned to a ridiculous cinder. We want you to juggle the sun, Tom, and the stars, and whatever else you see on your trip to Mars.”

“Mars?” Thomas Wolfe turned to seize the old man’s arm, bending down to him, searching his face in unbelief.

“Tonight. You leave at six o’clock.”

The old man held a fluttering pink ticket on the air, waiting for Tom to think to take it.

It was five in the afternoon. “Of course, of course I appreciate what you’ve done,” cried Thomas Wolfe.

“Sit down, Tom. Stop walking around.”

“Let me finish, Mr. Field, let me get through with this, I’ve got to say it.”

“We’ve been arguing for hours,” pleaded Mr. Field, exhaustedly.

They had talked from breakfast until lunch until tea, they had wandered through a dozen rooms and ten dozen arguments, they had perspired and grown cold and perspired again.

“It all comes down to this,” said Thomas Wolfe, at last. “I can’t stay here, Mr. Field. I’ve got to go back. This isn’t my time. You’ve no right to interfere—”

“But, I—”

“I was deep in my work, my best yet to come, and now you run me off three centuries. Mr. Field, I want you to call Mr. Bolton back. I want you

to have him put me in his machine, whatever it is, and return me to 1938, my rightful place and year. That's all I ask of you."

"But, don't you want to see Mars?"

"With all my heart. But I know it isn't for me. It would throw my writing off. I'd have a huge handful of experience that I couldn't fit into my other writing when I went home."

"You don't understand, Tom, you don't understand at all."

"I understand that you're selfish."

"Selfish? Yes," said the old man. "For myself, and for others, very selfish."

"I want to go home."

"Listen to me, Tom."

"Call Mr. Bolton."

"Tom, I don't want to have to tell you this. I thought I wouldn't have to, that it wouldn't be necessary. Now, you leave me only this alternative." The old man's right hand fetched hold of a curtained wall, swept back the drapes, revealing a large white screen, and dialed a number, a series of numbers. The screen flickered into vivid color, the lights of the room darkened, darkened, and a graveyard took line before their eyes.

"What are you doing?" demanded Wolfe, striding forward, staring at the screen.

"I don't like this at all," said the old man. "Look there."

The graveyard lay in midafternoon light, the light of summer. From the screen drifted the smell of summer earth, granite, and the odor of a nearby creek. From the trees, a bird called.

Red and yellow flowers nodded among the stones, and the screen moved, the sky rotated, the old man twisted a dial for emphasis, and in the center of the screen, growing large, coming closer, yet larger, and

now filling their senses, was a dark granite mass; and Thomas Wolfe, looking up in the dim room, ran his eyes over the chiseled words, once, twice, three times, gasped, and read again, for there was his name: THOMAS WOLFE.

And the date of his birth and the date of his death, and the flowers and green ferns smelling sweetly on the air of the cold room.

"Turn it off," he said.

"I'm sorry, Tom."

"Turn it off, turn it off! I don't believe it."

"It's there."

The screen went black and now the entire room was a midnight vault, a tomb, with the last faint odor of flowers.

"I didn't wake up again," said Thomas Wolfe.

"No. You died that September of 1938. So, you see. O God, the ironies, it's like the title of your book. Tom, you can't go home again."

"I never finished my book."

"It was edited for you, by others who went over it, carefully."

"I didn't finish my work, I didn't finish my work."

"Don't take it so badly, Tom."

"How else can I take it?"

The old man didn't turn on the lights. He didn't want to see Tom there.

"Sit down, boy." No reply. "Tom?" No answer. "Sit down, son; will you have something to drink?" For answer there was only a sigh and a kind of brutal mourning.

"Good Lord," said Tom, "it's not fair. I had so much left to do, it's not fair." He began to weep quietly.

"Don't do that," said the old man. "Listen. Listen to me. You're still alive, aren't you? Here? Now? You still feel, don't you?"

Thomas Wolfe waited for a minute and then he said, "Yes."

“All right, then.” The old man pressed forward on the dark air. “I’ve brought you here, I’ve given you another chance, Tom. An extra month or so. Do you think I haven’t grieved for you? When I read your books and saw your gravestone there, three centuries worn by rains and wind, boy, don’t you imagine how it killed me to think of your talent gone away? Well, it did! It killed me, Tom.

And I spent my money to find a way to you. You’ve got a respite, not long, not long at all. Professor Bolton says that, with luck, he can hold the channels open through time for eight weeks.

He can keep you here that long, and only that long. In that interval, Tom, you must write the book you’ve wanted to write—no, not the book you were working on for them, son, no, for they’re dead and gone and it can’t be changed. No, this time it’s a book for us, Tom, for us the living, that’s the book we want.

A book you can leave with us, for you, a book bigger and better in every way than anything you ever wrote; say you’ll do it, Tom, say you’ll forget about that stone and that hospital for eight weeks and start to work for us, will you, Tom, will you?”

The lights came slowly on. Tom Wolfe stood tall at the window, looking out, his face huge and tired and pale. He watched the rockets on the sky of early evening. “I imagine I don’t realize what you’ve done for me,” he said.

“You’ve given me a little more time, and time is the thing I love most and need, the thing I always hated and fought against, and the only way I can show my appreciation is by doing as you say.” He hesitated. “And when I’m finished, then what?”

“Back to your hospital in 1938, Tom.”

“Must I?”

“We can’t change time. We borrowed you for five minutes. We’ll return you to your hospital cot five minutes after you left it. That way, we upset nothing. It’s all been written. You can’t hurt us in the future by

living here now with us, but, if you refused to go back, you could hurt the past, and resultantly, the future, make it into some sort of chaos.”

“Eight weeks,” said Thomas Wolfe.

“Eight weeks.”

“And the Mars rocket leaves in an hour?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll need pencils and paper.”

“Here they are.”

“I’d better go get ready. Good-bye, Mr. Field.”

“Good luck, Tom.”

Six o’clock. The sun setting. The sky turning to wine. The big house quiet. The old man shivering in the heat until Professor Bolton entered.

“Bolton, how is he getting on, how was he at the port; tell me?”

Bolton smiled. “What a monster he is, so big they had to make a special uniform for him! You should’ve seen him, walking around, lifting up everything, sniffing like a great hound, talking, his eyes looking at everyone, excited as a ten-year-old!”

“God bless him, oh, God bless him! Bolton, can you keep him here as long as you say?”

Bolton frowned. “He doesn’t belong here, you know. If our power should falter, he’d be snapped back to his own time, like a puppet on a rubber band. We’ll try and keep him, I assure you.”

“You’ve got to, you understand, you can’t let him go back until he’s finished with his book. You’ve—”

“Look,” said Bolton. He pointed to the sky. On it was a silver rocket.

“Is that him?” asked the old man.

“That’s Tom Wolfe,” replied Bolton. “Going to Mars.”

“Give ’em hell, Tom, give ’em hell!” shouted the old man, lifting both fists.

They watched the rocket fire into space.
By midnight, the story was coming through.

Henry William Field sat in his library. On his desk was a machine that hummed. It repeated words that were being written out beyond the Moon. It scrawled them in black pencil, in facsimile of Tom Wolfe's fevered hand a million miles away.

The old man waited for a pile of them to collect and then he seized them and read them aloud to the room where Bolton and the servants stood listening. He read the words about space and time and travel, about a large man and a large journey and how it was in the long midnight and coldness of space, and how a man could be hungry enough to take all of it and ask for more. He read the words that were full of fire and thunder and mystery.

Space was like October, wrote Thomas Wolfe. He said things about its darkness and its loneliness and man so small in it. The eternal and timeless October, was one of the things he said.

And then he told of the rocket itself, the smell and the feel of the metal of the rocket, and the sense of destiny and wild exultancy to at last leave Earth behind, all problems and all sadnesses, and go seeking a bigger problem and a bigger sadness. Oh, it was fine writing, and it said what had to be said about space and man and his small rockets out there alone.

The old man read until he was hoarse, and then Bolton read, and then the others, far into the night, when the machine stopped transcribing words and they knew that Tom Wolfe was in bed, then, on the rocket, flying to Mars, probably not asleep, no, he wouldn't sleep for hours yet, no, lying awake, like a boy the night before a circus, not believing the big jeweled black tent is up and the circus is on, with ten billion blazing performers on the high wires and the invisible trapezes of space.

"There," breathed the old man, gentling aside the last pages of the first chapter. "What do you think of that, Bolton?"

“It’s good.”

“Good hell!” shouted Field. “It’s wonderful! Read it again, sit down, read it again, damn you!”

It kept coming through, one day following another, for ten hours at a time. The stack of yellow papers on the floor, scribbled on, grew immense in a week, unbelievable in two weeks, absolutely impossible in a month.

“Listen to this!” cried the old man, and read.

“And this!” he said.

“And this chapter here, and this little novel here, it just came through, Bolton, titled *The Space War*, a complete novel on how it feels to fight a space war. Tom’s been talking to people, soldiers, officers, men, veterans of space.

He’s got it all here. And here’s a chapter called ‘*The Long Midnight*,’ and here’s one on the Negro colonization of Mars, and here’s a character sketch of a Martian, absolutely priceless!”

Bolton cleared his throat. “Mr. Field?”

“Yes, yes, don’t bother me.”

“I’ve some bad news, sir.”

Field jerked his gray head up. “What? The time element?”

“You’d better tell Wolfe to hurry his work. The connection may break sometime this week,” said Bolton, softly.

“I’ll give you anything, anything if you keep it going!”

“It’s not money, Mr. Field. It’s just plain physics right now. I’ll do everything I can. But you’d better warn him.”

The old man shriveled in his chair and was small. “But you can’t take him away from me now, not when he’s doing so well. You should see the outline he sent through an hour ago, the stories, the sketches.

Here, here's one on spatial tides, another on meteors. Here's a short novel begun, called Thistledown and Fire—"

"I'm sorry."

"If we lose him now, can we get him again?"

"I'd be afraid to tamper too much."

The old man was frozen. "Only one thing to do then. Arrange to have Wolfe type his work, if possible, or dictate it, to save time; rather than have him use pencil and paper, he's got to use a machine of some sort. See to it!"

The machine ticked away by the hour into the night and into the dawn and through the day. The old man slept only in faint dozes, blinking awake when the machine stuttered to life, and all of space and travel and existence came to him through the mind of another:

". . . the great starred meadows of space..."

The machine jumped.

"Keep at it, Tom, show them!" The old man waited.

The phone rang.

It was Bolton.

"We can't keep it up, Mr. Field. The continuum device will absolute out within the hour."

"Do something!"

"I can't."

The teletype chattered. In a cold fascination, in a horror, the old man watched the black lines form.

". . . the Martian cities, immense and unbelievable, as numerous as stones thrown from some great mountain in a rushing and incredible avalanche, resting at last in shining mounds..."

"Tom!" cried the old man.

"Now," said Bolton, on the phone.

The teletype hesitated, typed a word, and fell silent.

“Tom!” screamed the old man.
He shook the teletype.

“It’s no use,” said the telephone voice. “He’s gone. I’m shutting off the time machine.”

“No! Leave it on!”

“But—”

“You heard me—leave it! We’re not sure he’s gone.”

“He is. It’s no use, we’re wasting energy.”

“Waste it, then!”

He slammed the phone down.

He turned to the teletype, to the unfinished sentence.

“Come on, Tom, they can’t get rid of you that way, you won’t let them, will you, boy, come on. Tom, show them, you’re big, you’re bigger than time or space or their damned machines, you’re strong and you’ve a will like iron, Tom, show them, don’t let them send you back!”

The teletype snapped one key.

The old man bleated. “Tom! You are there, aren’t you? Can you still write? Write, Tom, keep it coming, as long as you keep it rolling, Tom, they can’t send you back!”

The, typed the machine.

“More, Tom, more!”

Odors of, clacked the machine.

“Yes?”

Mars, typed the machine, and paused. A minute’s silence. The machine spaced, skipped a paragraph, and began:

The odors of Mars, the cinnamons and cold spice winds, the winds of cloudy dust and winds of powerful bone and ancient pollen—

“Tom, you’re still alive!”

For answer the machine, in the next ten hours, slammed out six chapters of Flight Before Fury in a series of fevered explosions.

“Today makes six weeks, Bolton, six whole weeks, Tom gone, on Mars, through the Asteroids. Look here, the manuscripts. Ten thousand words a day, he’s driving himself, I don’t know when he sleeps, or if he eats, I don’t care, he doesn’t either, he only wants to get it done, because he knows the time is short.”

“I can’t understand it,” said Bolton. “The power failed because our relays wore out. It took us three days to manufacture and replace the particular channel relays necessary to keep the Time Element steady, and yet Wolfe hung on. There’s a personal factor here, Lord knows what, we didn’t take into account. Wolfe lives here, in this time, when he is here, and can’t be snapped back, after all.

Time isn’t as flexible as we imagined. We used the wrong simile. It’s not like a rubber band. More like osmosis; the penetration of membranes by liquids, from Past to Present, but we’ve got to send him back, can’t keep him here, there’d be a void there, a derangement. The one thing that really keeps him here now is himself, his drive, his desire, his work. After it’s over he’ll go back as naturally as pouring water from a glass.”

“I don’t care about reasons, all I know is Tom is finishing it. He has the old fire and description, and something else, something more, a searching of values that supersede time and space.

He’s done a study of a woman left behind on Earth while the damn rocket heroes leap into space that’s beautiful, objective, and subtle; he calls it ‘Day of the Rocket,’ and it is nothing more than an afternoon of a typical suburban housewife who lives as her ancestral mothers lived, in a house, raising her children, her life not much different from a cavewoman’s, in the midst of the splendor of science and the trumpeting of space projectiles; a true and steady and subtle study of her wishes and frustrations.

Here’s another manuscript, called ‘The Indians,’ in which he refers to the Martians as Cherokees and Iroquois and Blackfoots, the Indian nations of space, destroyed and driven back. Have a drink, Bolton, have a drink!”

Tom Wolfe returned to Earth at the end of eight weeks.

He arrived in fire as he had left in fire, and his huge steps were burned across space, and in the library of Henry William Field's house were towers of yellow paper, with lines of black scribble and type on them, and these were to be separated out into the six sections of a masterwork that, through endurance, and a knowing that the sands were dwindling from the glass, had mushroomed day after day.

Tom Wolfe came back to Earth and stood in the library of Henry William Field's house and looked at the massive outpourings of his heart and his hand and when the old man said, "Do you want to read it, Tom?" he shook his great head and replied, putting back his thick mane of dark hair with his big pale hand, "No. I don't dare start on it. If I did, I'd want to take it home with me. And I can't do that, can I?"

"No, Tom, you can't."

"No matter how much I wanted to?"

"No, that's the way it is. You never wrote another novel in that year, Tom. What was written here must stay here, what was written there must stay there. There's no touching it."

"I see." Tom sank down into a chair with a great sigh. "I'm tired. I'm mightily tired. It's been hard, but it's been good. What day is it?"

"This is the fifty-sixth day."

"The last day?"

The old man nodded and they were both silent awhile.

"Back to 1938 in the stone cemetery," said Tom Wolfe, eyes shut. "I don't like that. I wish I didn't know about that, it's a horrible thing to know." His voice faded and he put his big hands over his face and held them tightly there.

The door opened. Bolton let himself in and stood behind Tom Wolfe's chair, a small vial in his hand.

"What's that?" asked the old man.

“An extinct virus. Pneumonia. Very ancient and very evil,” said Bolton. “When Mr. Wolfe came through, I had to cure him of his illness, of course, which was immensely easy with the techniques we know today, in order to put him in working condition for his job, Mr. Field. I kept this pneumonia culture. Now that he’s going back, he’ll have to be reinoculated with the disease.”

“Otherwise?”

Tom Wolfe looked up.

“Otherwise, he’d get well, in 1938.”

Tom Wolfe arose from his chair. “You mean, get well, walk around, back there, be well, and cheat the mortician?”

“That’s what I mean.”

Tom Wolfe stared at the vial and one of his hands twitched. “What if I destroyed the virus and refused to let you inoculate me?”

“You can’t do that!”

“But—supposing?”

“You’d ruin things.”

“What things?”

“The pattern, life, the way things are and were, the things that can’t be changed. You can disrupt it. There’s only one sure thing, you’re to die, and I’m to see to it.”

Wolfe looked at the door. “I could run off.”

“We control the machine. You wouldn’t get out of the house. I’d have you back here, by force, and inoculated. I anticipated some such trouble when the time came; there are five men waiting down below. One shout from me—you see, it’s useless. There, that’s better. Here now.”

Wolfe had moved back and now had turned to look at the old man and the window and this huge house. “I’m afraid I must apologize. I don’t want to die. So very much I don’t want to die.”

The old man came to him and took his hand. "Think of it this way: you've had two more months than anyone could expect from life, and you've turned out another book, a last book, a fine book, think of that."

"I want to thank you for this," said Thomas Wolfe, gravely. "I want to thank both of you. I'm ready." He rolled up his sleeve. "The inoculation."

And while Bolton bent to his task, with his free hand Thomas Wolfe penciled two black lines across the top of the first manuscript and went on talking:

"There's a passage from one of my old books," he said, scowling to remember it. ". . . of wandering forever and the Earth... Who owns the Earth? Did we want the Earth? That we should wander on it?

Did we need the Earth that we were never still upon it? Whoever needs the Earth shall have the Earth; he shall be upon it, he shall rest within a little place, he shall dwell in one small room forever..."

Wolfe was finished with the remembering.

"Here's my last book," he said, and on the empty yellow paper facing the manuscript he blocked out vigorous huge black letters with pressures of the pencil:

FOREVER AND THE EARTH, by Thomas Wolfe.

He picked up a ream of it and held it tightly in his hands, against his chest, for a moment. "I wish I could take it back with me. It's like parting with my son." He gave it a slap and put it aside and immediately thereafter gave his quick hand into that of his employer, and strode across the room, Bolton after him, until he reached the door where he stood framed in the late-afternoon light, huge and magnificent. "Good-bye, good-bye!" he cried.

The door slammed. Tom Wolfe was gone.
They found him wandering in the hospital corridor.

“Mr. Wolfe!”

“What?”

“Mr. Wolfe, you gave us a scare, we thought you were gone!”

“Gone?”

“Where did you go?”

“Where? Where?” He let himself be led through the midnight corridors.

“Where? Oh, if I told you where, you’d never believe.”

“Here’s your bed, you shouldn’t have left it.”

Deep into the white death bed, which smelled of pale, clean mortality awaiting him, a mortality which had the hospital odor in it; the bed which, as he touched it, folded him into fumes and white starched coldness.

“Mars, Mars,” whispered the huge man, late at night. “My best, my very best, my really fine book, yet to be written, yet to be printed, in another year, three centuries away . . .”

“You’re tired.”

“Do you really think so?” murmured Thomas Wolfe. “Was it a dream? Perhaps. A good dream.”

His breathing faltered. Thomas Wolfe was dead.

In the passing years, flowers are found on Tom Wolfe’s grave. And this is not unusual, for many people travel to linger there. But these flowers appear each night. They seem to drop from the sky. They are the color of an autumn moon, their blossoms are immense, and they burn and sparkle their cold, long petals in a blue and white fire.

And when the dawn wind blows they drip away into a silver rain, a shower of white sparks on the air. Tom Wolfe has been dead many, many years, but these flowers never cease. . . .

The End