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**AFTERBURNER, THE ENEMY (LONG ARMED SUN)
AND SKINSUIT AT THE CASTLE**

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It was always easy for men to come and tell her who to be. Other girls of her generation grew up asking, “Who am I?” For them it was a question full of pain and struggle. For Gretel it was hardly even a question. She had more identities than she knew what to do with. Some of these Gretels have been only the sketchiest of surfaces—others are deeper. Many have incredible gifts, antigravity, dreams of prophecy . . . comatic images surround their faces, glowing in the air: the light itself is actually crying tears, weeping in this stylized way, as she is borne along through the mechanical cities, the meteorite walls draped in midair, every hollow and socket empty as a bone, and the failing shadow that shines black all around it . . . or is held in staring postures, long gowns, fringe and alchemical symbol, veils flowing from leather skullcaps padded concentric as a bike-racer’s helmet, with crackling-tower and obsidian helix, with drive belts and rollers, with strange airship passages that thread underneath arches, solemnly, past louvers and giant fins in the city mist. . . .

It’s so dark that things glow. We have flight. There’s no sex. But there are fantasies, even many of those we used to attach to sex—that we once modulated its energy with. . . .

Great curtains of styrene or vinyl, in all colors, opaque and transparent, hung row after row from overhead. They flared like the northern lights. I felt that somewhere beyond them was an audience, waiting for something to begin. . . . Someone said ‘butadiene,’ and I heard beauty dying. . . .

There was an abyss between my feet. Things, memories, no way to distinguish them any more, went tumbling downward through my head. A torrent. I was evacuating all these, out into some void . . . from my vertex, curling, bright-colored hallucinations went streaming . . . baubles, amusing lines of dialogue, objets d’art . . . I was letting them all go. Holding none. Was this ‘submission,’ then—letting all these go?

- Compiled from excerpts of *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Thomas Pynchon, 1973)