

THE ANNALS OF PETRONIUS JABLONSKI: AN ODYSSEY OF HISTORIC
PROPORTIONS AND PRICELESS TREASURE OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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Acknowledgements

Happy are they, in my opinion, to whom it is given either to do something worth writing about, or to write something worth reading; most happy, of course, are those who do both.

Pliny the Younger

Preamble

I, Petronius Jablonski, here set forth a chronicle of a perilous and momentous journey. Though conclusive understanding of it eludes my grasp, by withholding all judgments I shall furnish my narrative with the goal of historians throughout the ages: a clear and spacious window overlooking great events, free from the blemishes deposited by careless scholars who forget their proper role is to describe, not decipher.

As a consequence, I vouchsafe the Reader no small responsibility. The purity of this vantage confers upon his shoulders a noble yoke: interpreting the meaning of this wondrous quest by his own lights. It is possible that one who has not witnessed the marvels that bedazzled me will be in a superior position to untangle and assess their significance, as my heart and mind remain too inflamed for temperate discernment.

In Defense of My Preamble

Eager to begin the fantastic voyage, the Reader finds himself restive, the hesitant vessel of dissenting inquiries. He is to be commended on his scrutinous nature. The surest gauge of a student's health is inquisitiveness; the first symptom of illness, apathy. Neither presumption nor the antennae of prudence attune me to his enviable perplexities, but an extrasensory third ear pressed against the wall separating present and future, permitting me to anticipate his questions and respond before he needs to raise them. Be not jealous, for this prescience, the gift of foreknowledge, is more often a curse than a blessing.

“Scholar,” he says, “no doubt it was an intoxicating side-effect of your divine prose, but it is all one can do to desist the impression that you promise pure objectivity. While the symphonic splendor of your preamble is above all praise, it induces the vision of a mythic creature. Such declarations are as mislaid in serious scholarship as the story of a unicorn. Furthermore, given the authority you convey it is easy to ignore the implied denigration of past historians, but should you not at least explain yourself?”

I avow nothing short of Objectivity and with this question I am more than a little concerned with the caliber of the man bumbling through my annals. Dear Reader, I mean no offense. Each man is, to no small degree, raised by his culture. After suckling at the withered teats of folly and nihilism, a child's preconceptions are skewed, his worldview a

jagged montage. Do not despair, for great is he who pulls himself from this sewer. In the melancholy dusk of civilization we forget that Truth is not a harlot whose favors can be purchased by every Johnny-come-lately waving a degree. Rather, she is a chaste maiden who must be wooed. Come, let us woo her together.

The Reader needs to differentiate metaphorical promises from actual ones. A “threesome with a chaste maiden” is not what I had in mind. And his comparison of Objectivity to unicorns cries out to the gods for reproof. What does it insinuate about my intentions? Does he suggest that my preamble is a sonorous formality, that since I could not clash cymbals when he opened the book I had to *settle* for one? Make no mistake: out of the 250,000 words in common usage, and the additional 50,000 I use, I painstakingly selected those. In the same key, out of the innumerable combinations I could have formed with my lovingly selected words, I chose the precise order presented, not even tempted by others.

Regarding the belittlement of my peers: despite their innumerable shortcomings, Herodotus, Plutarch, Tacitus, Gibbon, Spengler, Wells, and Ferguson represent stages in the perfection of a science. I had hoped to avoid the threadbare expression, “standing on the shoulders of giants,” but it seems the Reader has forced my hand. (If it gratifies his vanity, he may highlight the following sentence.)

While composing my annals, I, Petronius Jablonski, stood atop the shoulders of giants.

Now, with these disagreeable accounts settled we can proceed. Ever solicitous of his welfare, I fear the Reader’s approach lacks the requisite gravitas. His informality is scarcely appropriate for the task at hand. A suit and tie would attune his attention far

better than a mustard-splattered undershirt. Likewise, a seated posture in a sturdy chair is preferable to sprawling across a soiled and dilapidated mattress. I beseech him to close the book now and not reopen it until he has enjoyed a full night of rest (the contents of Part I are rather heady). He may wish to read my preamble again, reverently, in a suit and tie, before proceeding.

I: The Commencement of My Odyssey, a Commentary on the Point of Life, and the Attainment of Quietude

An authentic voodoo doll prowled the dashboard, glaring at me with bulbous eyes as I took the helm. Ferocious claws ensured his adhesion and an ear-to-ear grin revealed shark-like teeth. I summoned the engine, its silent presence conspicuous like a warm body in a dark room, and drove into the fog.

Out of necessity, the designers had positioned tiny lights on the far corners of the hood. Without them, most occupants would be powerless to determine where the car ended and the world began. Simple notes became a melody for the eyes. Between the twinkling stars on the horizon stood the surrogate hood ornament, Shiva, god with a thousand-and-four names, guardian of the threshold separating the great orange plane from the emptiness beyond.

In the parking lot at Sandy's dormitory my thoughts assailed me like wasps. I closed my eyes and embraced the certainty that my future would suffer from a dearth of precedents. After she threw her bags in back, the tons on my back felt a few ounces lighter and I entered the wet lint that had settled over everything. Our paths first crossed in an algebra class two semesters earlier. Thirsting only for Truth, not the chicanery of juggling abstractions, I abstained from the odious sessions and spent the time in the student union discussing eternal questions with like-minded men of intellect. During the

final exam, a beguiling vixen permitted my eyes to meander across her paper. After class I offered to buy her dinner, quid pro quo. From this simple meal all manner of carnal delights soon blossomed.

The intersection we crept through before vanishing into the labyrinth of the highway, was it not a silver passage connecting the fabled kingdom of eternity past to the prophesied land of eternity yet to come? A sign for the on-ramp materialized out of the static. Having defied time's attrition, my car handled the severe curve with ease. Out of the turn I tapped the gas, burying us in the depths of Corinthian leather.

My view consisted of nothing save the little stars on the hood and Shiva charging through a curtain of gauze. Though initially troubled by this, I bested the urge to decelerate and the fear of a collision evolved into exhilaration. My spirits ascended, freeing me from the servitude of my apprehensions, exorcising the specters of what lay ahead. But soon the boarders in the rooming house of my mind returned. Second, third, and fourth guesses came and went, slamming doors and stomping their feet, their discourteous tumult the only motion in the misty stillness of the night.

After we stopped for gas, adversity beset our path. Crossing a bridge over the highway, I felt like a mountain climber gazing at a layer of clouds from a summit, or Dante before his descent. I followed the taillights of a semi down the ramp until they disappeared. When the location of the road became subject to interpretation I hit the brakes. The speedometer said zero. I knew better. In our cherished time together, my car and I had traveled tens of thousands of miles, down each and every highway, in good times and bad. The bond between us, forged in the crucible of danger, sealed by the stamp of luxury, was deep and strong and true.

I pumped the brakes and spun the steering wheel. Neither measure subdued my withdrawal symptoms from the opiate of normalcy. I buzzed the window down, plunged my head into the gray vortex, and saw only the uppermost portion of the tires. I sat back as though nothing were wrong and hypothesized a lack of contact with the road, tentatively conceding the validity of inferences to the best explanation. Feeling uncommonly visible, I prayed that Sandy had not noticed our difficulties. Her closed eyes and open mouth bespoke the oblivion of sleep.

Perhaps this idiosyncrasy will abate, I hoped, and spare her from jumping to any hasty conclusions. Although wistful, this reflection was not bereft of rational elements. With the exception of a mild rising sensation, no differences earmarked our surroundings. My car normally drove with remarkable surreption and the wool fog abided. The only thing that will disclose our quandary, I thought, is my vexations becoming manifest, the dissolution of my calm demeanor. There could be only one priority: the attainment of Quietude. To fill the car with an atmosphere of normalcy and congeniality, the way one would pump oxygen into a strange and uninhabitable environment to make it safe for living creatures, I placed a CD in the deck, lit an English Oval, and reflected on the greatness of my fellow Stoic, Epictetus.

“This is no tragedy,” said the voice of Reason. “Leaning back in this heavenly seat and listening to Sinatra while my Cadillac glides through the fog: as with all things misconstrued as hardships, it is simply a matter of becoming inured to it.”

The Rat Pack always served as a potent tonic, infused with the ability to bandage my exposed nerves from even the most corrosive stimuli. My sanguine bearing, due in no small part to their curative styling, enabled the impeccable analysis to proceed.

“In time this will seem no stranger than driving down the street in the fog. The only reason no one questions the latter is due to its attainment of the humdrum status of familiarity, which hardly renders it comprehensible. According to Zeno of Elea motion is not even possible. (To travel from X to Y, one must first arrive at a point halfway between them; to reach that point one must first reach a halfway point, *ad infinitum*.) Unless I am prepared to refute him and provide a full discourse explicating the nature of motion I have no reason to disparage our present state.”

From the starry dome of Reason I gazed into the valley of Quietude, basking in my soothing meditations. I assessed the prudence of putting the car in park, but rejected the idea. If it returned to the ground while moving (assuming the existence, comprehensibility, and occurrence of “motion”), the transmission could be injured. Though my faithful mechanic had informed me that my Fleetwood contained the finest one ever made, risks without recompense are foolish.

I flicked my cigarette out the window, lit another, raised the volume a notch, and sat back so my eyes were level with the dash. Midway through the fourth song, Sandy awoke. I turned to her with the guileless conviction that my unperturbed state would prove contagious.

“How can you possibly drive in this?” she said, jerking her head like a rotary sprinkler. Quizzical furrows scarred her soft Asian features.

“After a while you become inured to it.”

“How fast are we going?” After checking the speedometer, she disemboweled me with her eyes, rupturing my precious Quietude and initiating an investigation I had to terminate posthaste. It was crucial that she remain sequestered from the Gordian theory

regarding my tires and their relationship to the road. A few trifling details about our journey were not shared with her. Preoccupied during the elaborate preparations, I awaited a more sedate period for briefing.

Before I could respond, she put on her seatbelt: a resounding vote of no confidence, a damning indictment. Something inside me died. I turned the music down and fortified myself against the indignities that might charge. “The sheer density of the fog poses unique challenges to even the greatest driver,” I said. “Are you familiar with the teachings of Zeno?”

“What’s happening?” she said, digging her fingers into the armrest and clutching the door.

“I am waiting for it to clear.”

“Why does it feel like we’re moving?” Her words tore into me like harpoons.

“As the fog whisks past it departs an unsettling illusion, and you should not forget that a real car feels different in repose. This is not a Honda.”

I buzzed the window down and dipped my head in the mothball soup. Assuming a disengagement between my tires and the road, the extent of the rift foiled visual estimates. I conceived an experiment to resolve this question. By dropping Sandy’s CDs out of the window I would not only escape the agony of listening to them, the clarity of their union with the road would allow me to gauge the distance. The possibility of hearing nothing, which would block all paths to Quietude, hindered my research.

The density of the fog seemed greater at this altitude. Only Shiva’s outline could be discerned in the ethereal haze. While smoky tentacles floated over the windshield, I distracted myself by discerning shapes in them, the way one might amuse himself on a

cloudy day. Soon it was no diversion. The Rorschach looked back. Faces formed, existed for an instant, and returned to a blur. Their expressions bespoke unbearable sorrow, as though grieving the oblivion stolen from them.

Centipedes of panic crawled up and down my back. “This is serious,” I said, my voice not rising above a marvelous duet between Sammy Davis Jr. and Dean Martin. I prayed that Sandy had not witnessed this dreadful procession and turned to her. She continued to brace herself, eyes closed. Seeking fortitude, I focused on the sublime crest of Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac (1658-1730) and imagined brandishing the steering wheel as a talisman, running out on the hood to smite the ghastly faces.

“Like all things, they will eventually be buried by the sands of time,” said Reason, healing my wounded spirit with the inimitable balm of wisdom.

I studied the *merlettes* on the shield beneath the crown and Sinatra started “My Way,” a Stoic hymn to the virtue of constancy in the face of adversity. When the brilliant star of Quietude shone its gracious face upon me, I renounced my cowering posture and looked up: nothing but fuzz, amorphous and inert. As I exhaled, a mammoth face appeared and emitted a moan that shook the car.

“What was that?”

“What was what?” I said, awaiting salvation from my steadfast muse. “Oh, that? The bass on this stereo reverberates. The woofers cannot handle the lower end of equivocal frequencies.”

Another of the doomed beings groaned before returning to vapor. While a fleeting but ominous cloud separated me from the golden rays of Quietude, I reminded myself that it was not the faces that disturbed me but the opinions I formed of them.

“Can’t you do something about that noise?” said Sandy, more irritated than scared. “It ruins the song.”

I increased the volume and gave it some bass as well, hoping this would prove sufficient to muffle the next horrible wail. I disliked hiding things from her, but justified it through a quick series of calculations revealing how a greater good would be achieved. Lacking my forbearance and analytic detachment, she would have experienced considerable hardship while becoming accustomed to this novel aspect of our surroundings. If one of them infiltrates the car, I vowed, then I will brief her. Paternalism is not bad *per se*.

Just as another of the frightful apparitions appeared, the heavens discarded us. The dolesome ghost appeared to shoot up like a rocket as we fell.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“We are merging. Having assessed the visibility, I think it is safe to join the traffic,” I said, gripping the wheel. Our gradient lessened, but hypotheses other than our continued plunge were not forthcoming. It felt like the descent on a Ferris wheel. Relieved as I was to be away from the meteorological monsters and grateful Sandy had not seen them, the prospect of landing a car for the first time concerned me.

“A natural driver, one born -- nay, destined to drive -- can always triumph,” Reason assured me. “The uncompromising union of instinct and courage trumps all misfortune. It is a matter of driving conformably to nature.”

Despite the gallant assurance derived from doing what you were created to, I felt as though I were parallel parking before an audience. The discomfiture peaked with hideous thoughts of potential injuries to my car’s magnificent suspension.

I closed my eyes and listened in awe to the perspective described in “September of My Years”: a meditation on the ephemeral nature of life, a celebration of the moment, and a forthright recognition of the inevitability of death -- sans gloom or doom. Truly it is rare for a single piece of music to express such a laudable outlook, and unheard of today. The solipsistic haze of ignorance, rage, and lust inflicted on us by the purveyors of contemporary noise may constitute a common vision of life, but it is scarcely a commendable one. Can today’s “music” do no more than howl and grunt about how its hapless victims misconstrue the world? Could it not set the bar a millimeter higher with some expectation of how they ought to?

Even in my deplorable state, the inherent Stoicism of the song could not fail to edify me. In life I seek contentment through an enlightened indifference to the vicissitudes of Fate. But not when driving. There my very soul rebels against all tyrants and I will not suffer shackles of any kind. From the harshest of teachers, Experience and Reason, I learned there are pitifully few things worth seeking.

Fame, a function of the opinions of other men, is obviously worth less than nothing. A skillful concubine can bring joy to a man, but they are as plentiful as the stars and essentially as different from each other as Tuesdays from Wednesdays. The best that can be said for the pursuit of riches is that it serves to distract a man from the grievous uncertainties of his existence, assuming, as you should, that most would crumble if confronted with the ultimate puzzle. Posthumous glory, dependent on the beliefs of those yet to be born, is the most senseless of all. If the imbecilic estimations of the herd currently wandering the earth are to be ignored, how much more so the ravings of the

brutes who will follow? Indeed, a wise man will shun renown like death itself. In this world of flux and woe, does anything warrant pursuit? Is anything intrinsically good?

Quietude, of course: a state of mind tranquil and serene, yet confident and affirmative of life despite its precarious nature. The courtship of Truth is long and austere, but it spares one from countless delusional allurements. Despite a paucity of honorable men, the pursuit of honor may seem a fool's errand, but aren't ideals unattainable by definition? Are they not the stairway from the swamp of our beastly nature? Dignity and heroism certainly merit striving, but intertwined with them, inseparable from them, is a man's car. But not any car will suffice.

If a wise man were asked to demarcate the epoch when the automobiles were most magnificent, he would name the golden age between the decease of Johnson and the inauguration of Carter. The cars were colossal and solid, forged from the purest sheet metal. Powered by the blast furnaces of the gods -- the grandest V-8 engines -- they had no peers in strength. In homage to Euclid, all the great four-doored ones exemplified rectangularity: the Cadillac Fleetwood and Sedan DeVille, the Lincoln Continental, the Pontiac Bonneville and Catalina, the Buick Electra and Chrysler New Yorker. These glorious bricks blessed the concrete seas with their majestic bearing. And in 1977, darkness fell. The Great Ones were desecrated ("downsized" was the coarse euphemism) with puny bodies and feeble engines. What is there for a man to do but cover his eyes and weep as he beholds the degradation of what was once mighty and proud?

Few mourn their passage. Few know what has been lost. Perhaps the Truth swims too deep and fast to be caught in the flimsy nets of most men. What ennobled this period in history was neither our knowledge nor the opulence some enjoyed. When the next

great historian writes of the decline and fall of our empire, I will have no difficulty in pinpointing the zenith. What bestowed upon this epoch its only grandeur and greatness were the sedans of the late sixties and early seventies. And when a man possesses one and something afflicts it he is scarcely unjustified in thinking the world is coming to an end, for it is.

“What the hell was going on?” said Sandy with a nasty tone of exasperation, perched on the edge of her seat with the frazzled comportment of someone awakened from a deep sleep by a fire alarm. “What *was* that?”

I adjusted to the obedient gas, brake, and steering, casually switching from the emergency grip to the natural stance with one hand dangling over the wheel and eyes level with the dash. “That you can drive at all is nothing short of miraculous, given your hypersensitive nerves. A little fog whisks you straight to bedlam. No doubt that malformed dwarf of a car you drive is equipped with cyanide capsules for such an event.”

Her exasperation begot irritation, which begot pestiferous curiosity, which begot accusatory insolence, the first four generations of an affective lineage that would endure throughout our journey and could fill its own *Book of Chronicles*. Her vacant blue eyes probed me. “No Petronius, there was something weird about that.”

“Any experienced driver will tell you how dense fog has a bewitching, pixie dust nature. Consign this to your little book of lessons. Title: Dense Fog. Entry: do not drive in. Filed next to entry titled: Second-guess the Driver. Entry: do not.”

Although my car drove splendidly, our discussions could not break free from the gravity of the troubles experienced earlier. My dignity befouled, I would tolerate no

further ignominies and banished the baneful topic from all conversation. When we needed gas, I departed from the highway and drove down a narrow road drowning in wild grass. A shining cloud appeared and I entered it cautiously, discovering a little station entombed by the fog. I filled the tank while Sandy stretched.

The light inside hurt my eyes and I had to squint. The floor, either freshly waxed or treated with a mysterious coating, gave off a disorienting glare. Behind the counter, adorned in an immaculate white uniform, stood a young man with dark curly hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His confident smile gave his face a gentle intensity. I felt the warmth from his eyes as I approached. Even in the brightness of the station they seemed to shine.

The Anticipation of Questions Pertaining to Part I with Answers and Analysis

A historical document can in one respect be likened to a building. A poor foundation bodes ill for its intended height. To embed my base so what follows may touch the stars, some clarification is essential. I adjure the student to go no further until he masters the material presented here, for it is his safety I have in mind whilst I secure the bedrock of this tower to the empyrean.

However enthralled by the mellifluous grandeur of the prose, the vigilant student must nonetheless be pleasantly agitated with questions. Dear Reader, do not consider yourself the prisoner of your inquisitive nature, but rather the house guest of a noble and restless spirit. As Detritus of Ileum observed, “Truth cannot be found in the shadows of silent acceptance, but only on the open plains of philosophic discourse.”

“Scholar,” the Reader whispers into my third ear, my link between his present and my own, “after hitting the ground running, one is unable to look away for the duration, but doesn’t Objectivity command you to begin in the beginning, not the midst of things?”

This adroit query vouches for the Reader’s potential, but he fails to recognize that a “beginning” in the temporal sense is but one of many. It is the philosopher’s task to determine which type is most important. I stand by my decision just as Galileo stood by his discovery of the planets orbiting the sun.

“Scholar, given the breakneck pace and dizzying assemblage of events it is understandable that no more than a glimpse of Sandy is provided. But in the name of Objectivity, is your heroine not worthy of more than a one-dimensional sketch?”

Mired in the squalor of contemporary “literature,” the Reader is possessed by the delusion that I am condemned to pace my annals with the discordant velocity of the latest thriller he has read. Infuriating as it is to have inferior standards inflicted on me, I empathize with his plight. By this point in most of the books he whores around with he is already cognizant of the precise shade of the heroine’s pubic hair. Her height, eye color, “heart-shaped face,” and a whole constellation of minutiae have been carelessly tossed into a paragraph early in the first chapter. Note well: an FBI profile is not character development. This is one of the least pardonable crimes of lazy and ignorant scribblers and full proof of their disregard for Objectivity. In life one learns about another a little at a time. He is not blasted in the face with extrinsic details concerning her “small hometown,” her “characteristic spunk,” her “petite but perky bosom,” her “stern but doting father,” and so on. Axiomatically, the introduction of characters in my text will not occur via literary gimcracks. The Reader will make their acquaintance as he would in actuality.

Besides, where did I write that Sandy is the heroine? If a female is mentioned in Part I she must, of absolute necessity, on pain of twenty years hard labor, be The Heroine? On what tablet is this carved? What lawgiver decrees this? To what obdurate judge will the Reader turn if I transgress this sacred maxim? As a matter of fact, Sandy’s

role is peripheral -- at best. I only mention her at all because she accompanied me and to omit her would be a crime against Objectivity. And I serve no higher master.

“Scholar, your descriptions of Quietude and the solace it brought you are fascinating. Is it an Eastern or Western conception?”

Just as Aristotle gave philosophy his Golden Mean, I hereby contribute my Blender, by means of which the profoundest ideas can be mixed and pureed to produce original and superior recipes. This watershed, which the steely eyes of history may very well deem superior to Aristotle’s much-ballyhooed scale, will be elucidated in graspable increments. Regarding Quietude: while the precise recipe shall remain a secret, it contains ingredients from Buddhism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Monadology. The name is from the ancient Sceptics (who should have chosen a more accurate description of their uncertain comforts). Through the use of my ingenious, innovatory Blender, these constituents have been combined to create a bold new flavor. Quietude, as I am using the term, is both an original and significant contribution to philosophy.

“Scholar, is Quietude a trance-like state?”

My Cadillac is not an opium den. I was neither “nodding off,” nor “grooving,” nor “getting down,” nor succumbing to whichever degenerate state is sought by beatniks, hippies, slackers, and generations X, Y, and Z. It is indicative of our age that any pursuit of an enlightened conditioned is associated with intoxication. The sublime nature of Quietude will be presented in a manner befitting an otherworldly phenomenon. Meanwhile, I caution the Reader not to form base preconceptions.

“Scholar, is the description of Quietude in Part I exhaustive?”

A messenger with joyous tidings, I unveiled a concept onion-like in its manifold layers, yet sweet in its succor. Quietude is not akin to a two-by-four. I cannot pummel the Reader into understanding it. A good philosopher relies on the time-tested methods of gradual exposure and the use of context clues. My approach shall be as halcyon as Quietude herself.

“Scholar, a question regarding the interior of your Cadillac as it relates to the essence of Objectivity: Was it essential that you described, in no small detail, the voodoo doll on your dashboard? How are such details more relevant than a detailed introduction to the human companion who will be accompanying you on your journey?”

The Reader is clearly smitten by Sandy, delivered from the divine captivity of my annals by the mercenary of lust. But how can he be infatuated by a woman whose existence is scarcely hinted at? Will his jealousy not blind him to the countless virtues of my scholarship? I deliberately refrained from providing an abundance of details to forfend this very possibility. Now he has left the gravity of my odyssey and drifts through space, an intellectual vagrant, a philosophic hobo. I ask him: Is she worth it? How does he know her shortcomings do not outweigh whatever charms have ensnared him? On my honor, the fleeting thrills of her company do not compare to the abiding joy he will find in my annals. Come to your senses, man. If not, I am left with no choice.

To ensure that the Reader remains spellbound throughout the following section, I must posit a hypothetical feature: Sandy suffers from an advanced stage of leprosy.

Patches of jade moss cover her “soft Asian features” and a putrefying stench emanates from her. This condition shall remain in effect until the closing pages of Part II. (This temporary contravention of Objectivity is necessitated on pragmatic grounds.)

Is the Reader pleased with what his heedless appetite has wrought, with what he has scourged Sandy? In Stoic magnanimity, I harbor no enmity toward him. He is, after all, a man like myself, a hapless rider on the wild horse of passion. But we must continue. I insist he cosset himself with a good night of sleep before proceeding. Then, during an ice-cold bath he should contemplate the gruesome condition of poor, wretched Sandy: mossy and fetid. This should etiolate his childish infatuation. He should then fortify himself with a substantial breakfast consisting of scrambled eggs, bacon, sausages, pancakes, hash browns, toast, milk, and orange juice. Requisite then is a brisk walk. Finally, he is advised to sip a caffeinated drink while he braces himself for a rapid ascent into the supernal regions of Part II.

II: My Bonneville is Cherished, I Discover a Box, Compose a Letter of Critique to a Hack, Introduce Petronius' First Sensation and Petronius' Shovel, Encounter an Enormous Bird after My Bonneville is Abducted, Dream the First of Eleven Dreams, Strike a Dubious Bargain with a Sea God, and Select the Chosen Chariot

In the days before the Cadillac there was a massive and exquisite Pontiac, a Bonneville as old as the mountains, metallic blue, and equipped with rear wheel-skirts. Whereas its theft set everything in motion, this segment of my annals commands rigorous study.

The days of the Bonneville found me posted as a watchman at an abandoned factory on the edge of Lake Michigan. An empty warehouse, the skeleton of a foundry, a shanty of an office, and an old laboratory sprawled across a dense forest, connected via a network of gravel roads. Only the most gifted driver could navigate the stretch of potholes intersecting with the entrance. The sign, perhaps a proud beacon in ages past, had long since fallen prey to the insatiable appetite of rust. A waterfall of vines submerged the fence so that even the inquisitive sun could uncover few flecks of metal amidst the leaves. Though the office stood less than a quarter mile behind the gate, a serpentine road conspired with redwood-sized weeds to convey the isolation of an Alpine village.

After completing a tour of the complex I often walked to the edge of a cliff to reflect on the nature of things. It proved more propitious to this quest than any other place, as though the questions feared to follow, frightened by the spheroid ghost above and the tempestuous waters below.

Prior to my initial inspection, I would push an ancient leather chair onto the patio outside the office. There I could elevate my feet atop a planter and behold the splendor of my five-ton sapphire, the contemplation of which bleached the landscape, leaving a Vargas print of a bewitching harlot reclining across the hood (to minimize the possibility of dents, a petite harlot with the elfin proportions of a gymnast). Such meditations revealed Plato's Form of Beauty, diminishing the workload from my summer class and sending a cool breeze across the scorched terrain of my spirit, taming the fires within.

Obligated to survey the premises six times per shift, I began with the warehouse. From a distance the entrance looked like a mousehole but grew to a drawbridge as I approached. Opening it strained every muscle in my back, as though the occupants resisted until finally ceding territory to lay in wait. The air inside, dank and foul, was it not the necrotic tissue of a once mighty creature? Sparsely distributed over the center aisle, dangling bulbs cast little light on the dusty concrete. A few feet to either side, darkness reigned. Less valorous sentries lamented their gloomy plight. Two had ignominiously abandoned their posts. Their piteous supplications did not tempt the insolvent gods, whose impotent hands could not procure any items not "absolutely necessary."

One terrible night, so that I might gratify a swelling curiosity, I brought a flashlight to inspect the dark recesses, hoping something lay hidden, something not meant for my eyes, something forbidden. I could scarcely have foreseen how this innocuous inspection would uncover a fiendish plot, one that would rend the very texture of my being.

That night I walked slowly down the center aisle, uncertain where to begin my excursion. When I finally set off, abandoning the token security of the firefly bulbs, I flashed my light across a desert of dust and piles of rotting lumber. Like toys scattered by the offspring of a monstrous alien or the exoskeletons of insects destined to rule the earth, huge casting molds littered the area. Similar to a spelunker exploring an abominable chasm, a balance of powers guided my steps: apprehension and prudence stalemated curiosity.

As I prepared to head to the opposite side, my light conjured something from the darkness. I jumped back and bested the urge to flee. Almost hidden between a haphazardly stacked pile of boards and an enormous polyhedral mold sat a wooden crate wrapped in a dense veil of cobwebs. Its carvings, too elaborate for a piano box, bespoke a treasure chest from the orient. After slashing through the silken wrap, I pushed the top an eighth of the way off. It had the warmth, the unmistakable tactility of a living being. I brandished my light, prepared for whatever secrets it contained.

Before I could investigate, a remembrance struck my head like an arrow. In the bottom drawer of the guards' desk was a book titled *The Year's Best Horror Stories*. One featured a watchman in an analogous predicament. Per the traditional disparagement, he spent his working hours in a schnapps-induced stupor. After becoming lost on one of his rounds he found a mysterious box and opened it. Human heads with "kiwi-green skin" opened their eyes when he screamed. In a breathtaking twist, he dropped his flashlight. Their eyes, however, "glowed like creatures from the deep." The heads floated out of the box "wailing and snarling." Per another wicked stereotype vilifying his brave calling, the watchman "waddled" down a long corridor with dozens of little lights in fast pursuit.

“They cast a shadow of his head on the door while he sought the right key.” The story ended with “blunt bites from cold mouths.”

An original thesis of mine is that the storage space of the mind is finite. A man should always be on guard not to clutter his head with nonsense, or, if he cannot abstain, he should force himself to forget it soon afterwards. The theoretical framework of this wretched story offended me on so many levels I tried to banish it before an entire floor of my brain became cluttered with objections and criticisms. As it clung to my mental dumpster like a mound of dog excrement, a tremendous urge swelled up within me to return to the office and lash off a letter to the author posthaste, as though this could purge my fury and nullify the malign spell of the book. Perhaps all critiques are thus. Glaring at the dark opening, I composed a draft in seconds.

Sir,

If you were banking on your readers being too horrified by “Rent-a-Cop and the Mystery Box” to notice its incoherencies and defamation, your judgment was grievously flawed. I noticed. The following objections were written in the order in which they provoked a rational mind. They could perhaps be written in a different order. Re-arrange them if you like.

Your story ended with the implication that the floating heads devoured the watchman. Question: *How on earth does a disembodied head digest its food?* The secondary disadvantage to being a disembodied head (the primary being death) is the lack of a body and the deprivations this absence entails. Before you commit

any further scribbling I suggest you observe an autopsy. Ask the coroner for a quick tour of the digestive system and make a note of its proximity to the head. In the same key, your story had the heads making all sorts of noises -- in the absence of a respiratory system. Again, have the coroner explain the relationship between lungs and wailing.

Your rebuttal fails -- miserably. You maintain that these disembodied heads can transgress the laws of biology (apparently physics too, given that they were floating). They are obviously endowed with evil supernatural powers. Very well, how could “supernaturally endowed” heads be constrained by a mere box? Could they not have conspired to hover together and lift the lid? Your story says nothing about any locks. Could they not have gnawed their way out? What were they doing for food prior to the watchman? Did they come out at night to hunt for insects? Was someone feeding them? Was someone keeping them as pets? *Who would want such pets?*

Your portrayal of the watchman as a bumbling, overweight dipsomaniac is unforgivable. As a practitioner of this noble calling I take personal offense. (Should you ever suffer from the suicidal melancholy so common to writers of fiction, I recommend you attempt to trespass on the property I defend.) In case you were not aware, this portrayal is known as a *cliché*: writers are supposed to avoid them. Likewise, having the watchman fumble with his keys was simply masterful. I suggest, for a future story, a nubile girl whose car will not start.

In conclusion, “Rent-a-Cop and the Mystery Box” is, beyond certainty, the most incongruous and preposterous horror story since Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

Stylistically it is atrocious. Do not listen to the inbred parrots in your creative writing program. If I want “gritty realism” I will defecate or watch my brother feed goldfish to his Piranha. Readers turn to books for Beauty. In the tragic event that you paid \$250,000 for a degree that taught you otherwise you should retain the services of an attorney who specializes in fraud.

Wrathfully,

Petronius Jablonski

This summed things up rather well, but in an instant I conceived of two new and even more damning objections. I decided against returning to the office. A proper refutation and healthful disposal would require nothing short of a Kantian critique and would have to wait. With a vow to abstain from all horror fiction, I returned to the edge of the cobweb-veiled crate, prepared to plunge my light into the darkness of the baroque chest like a saber.

The light flickered and died. It was second shift’s responsibility to check the batteries. Judging from the lascivious periodicals polluting the desk, he had become enslaved by the merciless tyrant of onanism. (Does the suicide of our culture not vindicate Plato? Sanctifying freedom of speech is akin to extolling small pox: “I do not

approve of the pestilence you spread, but I shall defend to the death your right to spread it.”)

Upon my return to the warehouse I must have chosen a different spot to digress from the center aisle. My light revealed a staircase against the wall. Amber with rust like some remnant of the Titanic, it wound its way into the darkness above. Without making any conscious decision, I found myself on the steps, the metal groaning beneath my feet. I climbed and climbed but progress eluded me as though I were pulling some great chain out of a void. When I made the dubious choice of assessing my progress by shining the light at the ground, I found myself above an abyss whose evil gravity clawed at me, in the middle of outer space with no constellations for guidance or comfort. I clutched the railings and the flashlight hurtled away like a comet, making a crunching sound as it disappeared.

With an application of my excellent lessons in Quietude, I exiled all fears of my predicament. “It is not being trapped high upon a jagged staircase in the dark that disturbs me, but the opinions I form about it.” I then exchanged the toxic opinion for a salubrious one. “Indeed, this is a marvelous turn of events.”

Tiny lights twinkled in the distance, their parallelism demonstrating the propinquity of the ceiling. Reasoning from the inevitability of my return to earth, I approached the summit. My primary concern was striking the door and tumbling backward. Spurious concerns of sticking my hand into a silky web and struggling helplessly as a giant spider scurried down from the ceiling did not plague me. Nor was this scenario frightening when I read it in that execrable book.

A cool breeze whispered promises of liberation and my hand quickened its probe. The door had no handle and flapped open to another world. Anthills of rock rose and fell up to the edge of the cliff, beyond which the velvet blanket of the lake rustled beneath the nightlight in the sky. “No one is seeing this but me,” I said in awe, succumbing to a philosophic spasm, overwhelmed by the inexpressibility of things. Even if I exhaustively described what I saw, smelled, heard, and thought, something frustratingly integral would remain untouched. Standing on the edge of a warehouse looking out at the lake, I experienced something I could never communicate to another. Maddeningly more than the sum of my senses, it yearned to escape but could not be freed.

I chided myself. To some degree all experiences are like this; one simply does not notice or care most of the time. Yet the provocative contemplation persisted. I suspect a few of the major philosophers may have experienced something not unlike it. Whereas I have not encountered a proper label for it in the course of my prodigious studies, I hereby name it the Petronius Sensation (“Jablonski,” regrettably, does not have the ring or singularity of my first name). When a great philosopher (or a phenomenally gifted common man) experiences the Petronius Sensation, the natural inclination is to preserve and validate the intangible feature by sharing it, the way a scientist independently confirms his findings. And when its essence slips through all verbal nets, he begins to question its reality, to wonder if it ever happened at all.

With the regularity of the tide, another profound reflection supplanted the first. “Is my Bonneville the sum of its individual features or the base upon which they stand, the canvass where their beauty is displayed?”

By investing the time and cogitation proportionate to the prominence of this question, I expected a definite conclusion before the end of the summer, in time for my term paper. Realizing an analysis of the subject from a height could clinch things, I walked to the other side of the roof. Joyously prominent were my car's length and rectangularity, displayed by the selective glare of the moon beaming down like the spotlight from a watchtower.

"I should have parked in front of the office in total darkness," I whispered.

"Nonsense," scolded Reason. "Who is going to see your car out here?"

My return to earth was time consuming but not as disagreeable as I had feared. My meditations elutriated my mind and I attained secure possession of the poise required when climbing down a long staircase in the dark, wholly exempt from vacuous fears of big claws grasping me by the ankles and ripping me away from my tenuous moorings.

Exhausted and looking forward to some edifying diversions, I returned to the office. Flanking the remains of a desk and an iron coat tree, two windows covered with plastic insulation served as an interminable reminder of the nightmarish landscapes that must have haunted Monet. On summer, fall, and spring nights I spent my free time outside in the company of a beloved friend.

When I stepped onto the patio my heart lodged in the back of my throat. On the windshield glared an eerie orb like the headlight of a locomotive or the cataractal eye of some superannuated deity or a pearl the size of a beach-ball. The moon's reflection, rendered convex by the curvature of the glass, shone as though it were the cause and not the effect, as though it were a light casting an illusion in the heavens. (A serious author of fiction could deftly convert this into a fine story, wherein a protagonist in ancient times

stumbles upon a wizard's garden and discovers how the moon and stars are projections. His conflict: Should he destroy the bewitching devices in the name of Truth or tolerate their deceit out of empathy for his deluded fellow man?)

An expatriate of Time, I could have watched the birth and death of galaxies or placed winning bets at glacier races. Had the windshield been a millimeter less in width, had my car been parked at an angle one ten-thousandth of a degree differently, the giant celestial snail would have deviated from its trajectory. But with the determinism of a planetary alignment or like cross-thatched strands in the weave of Fate, the fit and crossing were perfect, as though they belonged together.

When it left the windshield I staggered inside, catatonic from my curious encounter. "What an astounding series of coincidences," I said, reeling from the incredulity of a man who wins fifty coin tosses in a row. I gained repose by means of Lucretius' sobering teaching regarding the far stranger feats performed by atoms swirling aimlessly in the void (the creation of the world, among others), compared to which the synchronisms I just experienced seemed modest indeed.

My return to the patio discharged all notions of coincidences like bullets from a gun. I ran to my car but stopped several feet away to maintain a safe distance. A rectangle of white light perfectly circumscribed its shape, suspended about two feet above the roof.

"The moon did this," I said in awe and trembling. "But why?"

Engrossed by the halo, I skipped the rest of my rounds. Its light made the blue of my car come alive like the raging waters of an Amazon stream. Imposing and mystifying, it shone brighter than the fiery clouds billowing up from the aluminum recycling plant beyond the trees, and it attracted no bugs.

Toward the end of my shift I went to the edge of the cliff. The night's proceedings afflicted me with uncertainties and trepidation, diminishing the likelihood of Quietude. The water splashed against the shore far below, bruising itself black and blue. For a blissful moment the cool breeze and the gentle applause from the waves overthrew the tyranny of my thoughts and I faded away, glimpsing the Eden from whence man was banished, the nullity to which he is destined to return.

On the way back I rehearsed a response to the next sentry. "The halo is an experimental accessory that will not be commercially available until my brother, Hieronymus, perfects and patents it." Given that other guards had expressed rube-like awe at my stereo's ability to shake the office long before my car appeared on the gravel road, an appeal to the inscrutable nature of technology could scarcely fail.

To my relief and surprise, the halo had vanished. As crimson guts spilled from the belly of the night, first shift approached, his 1974 Buick Electra stirring up clouds of dust like some chariot riding out of a whirlwind. Watchmen, sentinels of the remorseless hinterland between dusk and morn, priests of the rosary beading all the days, keepers of the promise that renewal comes with dawn, are we not warriors?

In subsequent weeks I discovered the halo only returned during a full moon when I was on duty. On those nights as I watched it bathe my car in its sparkling mist, a baritone of foreboding vanquished the lilting soprano of Reason. Fascinated yet apprehensive, I could not desist the impression that some predaceous force had designs on my car, designs I was powerless to foil.

Throughout the summer I spent all the time vouchsafed to me by Fate at the helm of my stately yacht. Our rudderless voyages, free from the dictates of a compass and map,

where the sails were fanned by whims and the destinations existed only in retrospect, were in perfect conformity with Nature, whose pointless journey ought to be celebrated, not denied with vulgar myths.

Disquieting moments arose after the parade of a cruise. I parked in front of my house and emerged triumphant. Before leaving for work I went on the porch to fortify myself with a cigarette. After all the fantastic adventures on the concrete seas, the magnificent thunder of Beethoven, and the paralysis suffered by other drivers from sheer humility, there remained a big blue car parked on a quiet street and a man sitting in the dark. If there be gods, will they not feel the same haunting contrast when our world becomes vapor? Should they not be pitied?

Summer dissolved, leaving the skeletal remains of fall. At work I remained in the office between rounds, eschewing the lascivious periodicals hidden in the desk and listening to a transistor radio tuned to easy listening (opposed to the “agonizing listening” of most stations). It is a rancid scrap of conventional wisdom that no man is an island. Such nonsense stems from modernity’s ignorance of the path to wisdom, for which solitude is essential. In the dwindling twilight of civilization we forget that philosophy is a way of life, not an idle game to be performed over cappuccino. The muscles of the mind, far more important than those this vain age is obsessed with, require steady and progressive exercise to adapt and survive in their inhospitable environment.

In the days of the Stoics men of wisdom and decency graced our foolish planet with indefectible teachings and superlative examples. When their noble breed perished, when their doctrines were kidnapped and prostituted by a noxious cult, a dreadful night consumed the earth. Rather than using the lantern of solitude to tread the narrow

switchback of wisdom, to explore the humbling vastness above and the void within, modern man lobotomizes himself with an odious bric-a-brac of gadgets. As his mind atrophies, the ever-intrusive enemy, thought, is conquered. Darkness prevails.

Alone on third shift I was an island, hidden in an ocean of deep thoughts and surrounded by a steady rotation of sharks. From this I did not recoil. Quietude was not merely an acquaintance, but a mistress (with the exception of Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and occasionally Fridays when Sandy snuck in to visit). My spirit soared as I sought the Truth, a fearless explorer armed only with a map whose legend read HERE THERE BE MONSTERS.

And the halo? Though unable to study it with the detachment of a scientist, I gradually became inured to it. How? How could a man become *inured* to so extraordinary a phenomenon, to something so breathtakingly strange? With the shield of philosophy, of course. But this is too general an answer. For the particulars I must now unveil my *pièce de résistance*, the crown jewel of my contributions to philosophy: Petronius' Shovel.

(The Reader is advised to bookmark this section, if not for purposes of edification then simply for monetary ones. This concept alone is worth his \$10. He will soon recall the use of my Shovel in Part I. He should then return and study that section. Given our expeditious pace, I could not make a formal introduction.)

Just as William of Occam gave philosophy his Razor (undeniably useful but somewhat overrated), I hereby contribute my Shovel. This tool will prove to be as easy to use as its namesake. An example of it in action will serve as a good first approach to understanding it.

Now, by what criterion are things considered strange or normal? According to the regularity by which they occur, one might respond. Unfortunately, by this standard a halo above a car is quite peculiar and the strangeness vs. normalcy of a great many things becomes a relativistic mishmash. But this is the mere surface of this issue. A true philosopher feels instinctively that the line separating them is, to an enormous extent (if not altogether), arbitrary or illusory. But how can he dig straight to the root of this quandary, to penetrate the imaginary surface and demonstrate the chimerical nature of the distinction for the common man to see?

“Is the halo stranger than the existence of life itself?” the philosopher asks.

“Certainly not. What can be stranger than that?” comes the reply from any man with the barest semblance of cognition. “Explanations of life, its origin and purpose, always seem inadequate, as though nothing could feasibly constitute an answer, as though the question is a gasp of dismay, not a serious inquiry. I’d rather not think about it. Isn’t there a ballgame on?”

“Is the halo stranger than the fact that Something exists instead of Nothing?” the philosopher asks.

“Absolutely not,” comes the reply from even a business student. “That’s the most peculiar and disturbing fact there is.” Rubbing his temples he cries, “My mind is awlirl. Bring me a video game. I beg you.”

“And so,” the philosopher concludes, washing off my faithful Shovel, his labor at an end, “the halo is not really strange. Compared to the existence of life, which we see every day, it is perfectly banal. Compared to the existence of everything, it is more akin

to a sleeping pill than a mystery. Rather than giving it a pejorative label and running about in a tizzy, it is simply a matter of getting used to it.”

“Agreed,” chime the man with the barest semblance of cognition and his comrade, the business student. “Let’s all compare cell phones.”

Now, far from being a mere principle or abstract utility (like Occam’s much-ballyhooed Razor), my Shovel has the unlimited potential for practical, everyday applications. In fact, as the Reader is about to behold, it saved my life, holding my wits together in the face of what a non-philosophic mind would have deemed unbearably strange.

At the abandoned factory the melting snow blended with the earth to create quicksand. On the last night of my former life I sloped through my first round, returned to the office, and decided that taking the chair outside would be a grand way to ritualistically mark the dawn of spring and defy the failing bulwark of winter.

A moonbeam illuminated my car like the searchlight from a distant helicopter and the halo throbbled with an unprecedented glare. As it flickered with greater rapidity, the flashes became painful and I averted my eyes. “Perhaps it is being recharged,” I said. I should have known better, but naiveté, not cynicism, is the good man’s weakness.

Before my next round, a frost of apprehension covered me. My heart drove down a flexuous road of all the wonderful times we had shared. I could scarcely pry myself away and walk back inside. I set out, not stopping at the side door for one last look, as I often did. Even now this stings. Regret, is it not a species of mourning, grieving the loss of what could have been?

Throughout the round my trepidation mounted. Though inured to the garden-variety “strangeness,” I was daunted by the prospect of teaching a tow-truck driver how to use my Shovel in the event of halo-related mechanical difficulties. I returned and approached the side door, a condemned man on his last walk.

It was gone as though erased from the guestbook of Existence. There were not even tracks in the mud. The predacious moonbeam persisted, little more than a ghostly Roman column, as if sated. I fell to my knees and shook my fists at the sky while lightning bolts of anguish struck me. To escape their furious energy I pounded the soupy earth, battering a hollow in the mud. But nothing could hide from me what I had lost. Verily, the value of what we love is best estimated by the agony its absence instills.

Heading to the cliff, my only hope for the clarity of Quietude, I ran beside the warehouse. At the edge, swords slashed my sides. (My robust health was a function of manly anaerobic vigor, not the effete aerobic conditioning common to rabbits and roadrunners. Clearly, when the choice of fight or flight confronted my ancestors, the latter was nary a consideration.)

I bent over with my hands on my hips, gasping for air, my mind astir with fury. A cold rain shimmered the sheets of the lake. The nightlight above fetched my eyes. I rubbed them, not trusting their wild testimony. In the center of the moon sparkled a rectangular sapphire, brighter than any star. I swooned, inhaled for a minute, and from the depths of my being roared, “Return it at once!”

I did not think my voice could carry that far, but when a man is bereft of reasonable options he defers to the guide of instinct. The twinkling sapphire rent my heart, sending me into convulsions of longing and rage. However, through the use of my

Shovel I preserved my wits. Whereas the common man (assuming he maintained consciousness) would have phoned the police or an astronomer, I, realizing the proceedings were no stranger than life itself, took matters into my own firm and capable hands.

“Damn you,” I howled into a waterfall of rain. “Insolent satellite. The torrent of my wrath shall flood the valleys of --”

Reason interrupted me with the reminder that the distance separating us rendered threats idle. “When action is not possible, the groveling cowardice of diplomacy becomes necessary.”

“What is it you want from me? I will give you anything.”

The rain lessened. The lake became smooth and taught. An unseasonably warm breeze wafted up the cliff.

“Fool,” said Reason. “Always begin the bidding with a lowball.”

The breeze abated. I prepared to repeat my offer, with fingers crossed behind my back, when a voice whispered from below, “Petronius Jablonski, Child of the Four Winds, return on the morrow when the sun is highest and your grievance will be addressed.”

I knelt down and grasped the edge of the cliff. On the beach, in the light of the moon and the sparkle of my Bonneville, stood a dark figure, a tremendous hulking mass. I could not make out its features, only its vast outline. It spread great wings and with a single flap took off, hoisting its colossal bulk into the air and up the cliff. I pulled my head back and lay prostrate, terrified the creature was coming to carry me away. It flew past like a jet while I probed the mud for a rock to brain it.

“No. This is the only link to your car,” said Reason.

The bird’s body was the length of a man’s, only broader and red like a cardinal. Padded with dark and mangy feathers, its wings gave it the forbidding aura of enormity.

“Return here on the morrow when the sun is highest and the terms of your compensation will be explained,” came a voice from above.

That voice is coming from the bird, I realized. Though my car had been abducted and taken to the moon, the existence of a giant talking bird struck me as far more incredible. (I had, of course, temporarily dropped my Shovel before making this callow judgment. Given the separation from my beloved, surely this lapse is pardonable. In actuality, as Petronius’ Shovel will reveal, neither the bird nor the abduction are any “stranger” than the fact that dirt + water = mud. The ambitious student is encouraged to check the calculations for himself.) The creature circled me thrice before ascending toward the moon, diminishing until only the ivory plate with the sparkling blue crystal remained.

Instead of walking all the way to my home in Cudahy, I doubled back to the laboratory after my shift. With the insinuation of peril, it was off limits to all sentries. According to an oral tradition passed down through generations of guards, the whole perimeter had been sealed due to a mishap involving noxious potions. One night when I undid the lock, I noticed a distinct but not unpleasant ether-like fragrance, but I did not perish from any baneful concoctions.

With my lighter I lit the candles Sandy had spread around the couch in the reception room. Apparently fleshly unions are impossible in the absence of burning wax, which acts as an offering to some melting deity of Eros known only to women. I removed

my filthy uniform and began a search for warmth and comfort in the fetal position. The calmate vapor teased me with hazy remembrances of salacious times as I closed my eyes and the couch began to fall ...

I sat up at the foot of a marble altar carved to resemble a skull, upon which sat a glass bowl filled with coins of many colors. Behind it stood two bald men in green robes. A giant prism looked out on a garden where swordfish flew from a pond and beached themselves. They bounced ten feet and higher but none perished. In lieu of a ceiling, a purple cloud remained fixed by unseen forces.

Both men put their heads down as though taking naps. I scooped up some coins and threw them across the room. They transmogrified into a buzzing swarm of gold and silver insects. Coalescing in the center, they returned to their native form and landed on their sides. I tiptoed a zigzag path until I found one on its face. Before I could read it, the strange votaries chanted, "The coin is not for sale. Time creeps on, no faster than your snail." Honey dripped off their faces, a milky film covered their eyes, and their bright robes billowed from a breeze I could not feel. Metal bricks composed the wall behind them, reflecting a thousand twisted images of me.

On the coin an armadillo stood back to back with a zebra above the inscription UNITED IN THE DRIVE TOWARD PERFECT EQUILIBRIUM. I turned it over and examined a Latin inscription beneath a pterodactyl when a swarm of coins blasted me in the head. I looked up and another iron fist struck. The votaries were pitching them at me. I covered my face and growled, "Stop." The voice, not my own, echoed across the room, slowing with each enunciation.

They raised their hands and looked to the cloud and grinned. A hole appeared and grew as they chanted, “What is perfect does not come from practice. The time has come, now, embrace the cactus.” The coin scalded me. When I dropped it, tiny hands pierced the floor and grabbed my feet and I began to sink.

I sat up on the couch and slapped my cheeks. Thinking the two eccentrics were in the next room, I looked about for a sharp object. “It was just a dream,” I said. “Perhaps this place *is* contaminated.”

On the cliff I sought Quietude, affirming the course of events rather than beseeching the inexorable arrow of Time to make a U-turn on my behalf. But even my excellent lessons failed to bridle my foreboding and despair.

“Fret not Petronius Jablonski, the Venerable Horned One of the Lake has heard your lamentations and has deigned to grant you council,” said a voice. A feathery arm plopped down on my shoulder. It was the bird, only he did not seem ominous in the light of day. His baggy red overalls were obviously intended to disguise his corpulent state, but it could scarcely be concealed. That he could fly at all thrust a damning accusation of inequality at gravity: If a beast in that condition is permitted to transgress aerodynamic mores, then why not I?

“Prepare to be comforted,” he said, making pecking motions with his yellow beak, which, in conjunction with his button eyes, brought me the opposite of solace.

A gale-force wind swept the cliff, ambushing us. I clung to the sanctuary of the bird’s stalwart belly. The earth trembled and the sun split in two, amoeba-style. My comforter pushed me away and let out a frightful shriek, “Brace yourself Petronius, and

behold the Venerable Horned One of the Lake,” before launching himself with a flap of his wings.

Half of the sun remained in place; the other half slid down and stopped above the lake. The water bubbled as millions of knives arose: a rack of colossal antlers. I recoiled at the thought of what monstrous creature from the deep they preceded.

A figure one-hundred times the size of a man took shape behind a wall of steam. In one hand he held a golden scepter with a red tip, in the other a stone tablet. The dense brume shrouding the surface of the lake coalesced with the hem of his vaporous robe. He glided to the edge of the shore, his robe undulating hypnotically, his hair and beard flowing like tentacles. He navigated the scepter around his antlers, raised it over his head, and looked upon me with eyes like wells of fathomlessly deep water. In awe I held my breath.

“*Ahhchooo!*” His sneeze knocked me to the ground, uprooted trees, and sent avalanches of sand hurtling down the cliff. He looked at his tablet and cleared his throat. “Petronius Jablonski, Son of Cudahy, Third Cousin of the Four Elements, Potator of Pabst, Student of Silenus, *ahchoo!*”

Emerald meteorites exploded all around. I covered my head from the gelatinous shrapnel and clung to the cliff amidst hurricane winds. It must have been the chilly lake air. I, too, suffered from a bit of a cold.

“Master of Sheepshead, Heir to Porphyry,” he continued, reading from the tablet and waving the scepter to punctuate his declarations. “Apprentice of Sisyphus ...”

Be done with it already, I thought. The histrionic address became monotonous, especially given my unfamiliarity with the strange titles, but I said nothing for fear of

offending him. As he prattled on, I stole a glimpse of the half-sun above. Something whirled within. Though obscured by the orange haze, it looked like a huge brick of gold.

“Summon your courage. You will need it.”

The imperious gaze from his ancient face filled me with a haunting sense of my insignificance. His permanence mocked the brevity of my existence. I summoned what little bravery I could in the presence of such a being.

“I, The Venerable Horned One of the Lake, have summoned you so I may offer my condolence and recompense an injustice.” He pointed the scepter at me and stifled a sneeze. “My impudent nephew, Lunis, abducted your car. As you may have noticed, he has been coveting it. I am prepared to return it, absent the stereo. Or, hear me, Petronius Jablonski, I am prepared to make you an offer, one a chary man would long ponder.”

I moved my lips and tongue in an earnest attempt at speech but the words failed to congeal.

“In exchange for your Bonneville you will be sent on a journey. Many times I have seen you pace the edge of this cliff in earnest perplexity. You fervently scour the heavens for answers, fretful of not finding them. The answers you want come from the lake. I am prepared to grant you the understanding you seek.”

The gold bar slowed its rotations and I discerned its nature. I beheld a car, a great and glorious car, an enormous Cadillac, shining like the sun from whence it came.

“You will make this journey in the Chocolate Chariot,” he said.

“You mean a black Cadillac?”

He checked the tablet. “Not chocolate, I meant *chosen*. You will make the journey in the Chosen Chariot, a chariot of gold, as bright and powerful as the sun.”

“Oh most Horned One of the Lake, is that the Chosen Chariot?”

“That’s the showroom model. You will have to supply the car. But it must be a great and noble Cadillac, and it must be colored gold. On your journey you will see many signs. Some will guide you. Some will confuse you. You must summon your wisdom to tell them apart.”

“What kind of signs?”

“Stop signs. What kind do you think? Visions, dreams, aberrances in general. If you focus on the guiding ones the journey will teach you all that a man needs to know and your arrival at the Point of Percipience will consummate that enlightenment.”

“The Point of Percipience?”

“The Point of Percipience.”

“Is it on a mountain?”

“No.”

“Is it high upon a hill?”

He scowled.

“When must I begin the journey? Many grains of sand must pass through the hourglass before the reins of a new chariot feel natural,” I said, knowing he did not hear such dialect from any mortals in this feeble age.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“The car and I will need some time to become acquainted before we embark on any journeys.”

“Yes of course,” he said, nodding his head and antlers thoughtfully. “You’ll be given plenty of time to -- *ahchoooooo!*”

A vast section of the cliff fell to the shore in crumbs. Dazed and prostrate, I stared longingly at the heavenly brick. I could have watched it spin forever.

“Where was I? Oh yes, on your journey you must pay close attention. For this there are two reasons. Carve them on the picnic table of your heart. First, I am spending a fortune on special effects and I do not want it wasted. Second, not all of the signs are important, only some will lead you to enlightenment. You must be very careful about which ones you attribute importance to.”

The rotations of the Chosen Chariot had nearly ceased, permitting me to ascertain how its rectangularity surpassed that of my Bonneville. Contrary to nonsense inflicted on the Reader by geometry teachers, this property admits of degrees. Whereas it is the primary criterion for automobile greatness, such a car inflamed me in the way finches inflamed Darwin.

“Petronius Jablonski, do you understand?”

“And if I choose the right signs?” I said, returning to my feet.

“You will obtain the deepest wisdom a mortal can possess.”

Wind lashed the cliff and the Cadillac quickened its rotations. I knew the Venerable Horned One of the Lake would soon depart and there were many things I needed to clarify. In all the furor I could only articulate a few. “How will I know when to leave? How will I know where to go? How will I know if I am paying heed to the right signs?”

“When the fruit of the mind is ripe, it’s time to go. You’ll receive a map in the mail.”

The wind blew furiously and the brick returned to a blur. With a terrible crash of thunder the Horned One entangled the scepter in his antlers. “Damn this thing,” he bellowed. He raised the tablet and threw back his head. The half-sun replaced the brick and the water bubbled and made an earsplitting hiss.

“But how do I know if I am interpreting them correctly?” I said, silenced by the wind and steam.

“I, the Venerable Horned One of the Lake, bid you, Petronius Jablonski, an enlightening journey.” A funnel engulfed him until only his fearsome antlers remained. He and the ball of fire descended beneath the boiling surface. A subaquatic glow moved to the horizon and disappeared.

Brooding, I paced the edge of the cliff until Reason surrendered to the outrageous demands of my senses. In such a position a man may either fret over what he cannot control and torment himself with frivolous regrets, or he can embrace and affirm the unexpected (but, as per my wondrous Shovel, not strange) turn of events.

“The confetti of fugitive passions cannot influence the purchase of a car,” said Reason. “To select the proper chariot your will must have the strength of Hercules, your mind the clarity of vodka. You must prepare, cleansing your heart of every iniquity, your armor of every tarnish. In solitude, digest the implications of the past and nourish your spirit for the journey ahead. Become a thread woven into the lush tapestry of nature, away from all remnants of civilized life and the illusions of security they bring. Like a general camped out before a battle, listen to your soul and organize the scattered notes of your thoughts into a cohesive plan.”

When my spiritual mentor, Marcus Aurelius, defended the Roman Empire against barbarian hordes, he often sought solitude in his encampment to fortify himself with Stoic philosophy. As a testament to this practice, the fruit of his reflections represents, beyond certainty, the greatest gift ever bequeathed to mankind: his *Meditations*. Surely my situation demanded the same approach.

Submerged in the living waters of nature, I could check the compass of my heart and trust its reading. In a city, the shacks and shanties and all the abscesses of humanity distort the guiding forces of Beauty and Truth, pummeling the sensitive needle. But in the woods, the maternity ward of life, when a man sits beneath tall trees like a child in his mother's lap, it does not waver. He can listen to the sad song of his soul and comfort it by wading through a virgin stream. The fragments of his thoughts become sonnets and the gentle forest breeze blows away the dust accumulated on the mirror of his mind. As the sunlight speckles the ground beneath the trees his troubles become a comedy, and the sparks from his campfire kindle the flames of long-forgotten dreams.

Upon returning home I awakened Zeus from a nap and removed my family's six-man tent from the attic. An extended porch with mosquito netting made it ideal for quiet meditations. Deprived of any prolonged access to a car, I pitched it in the backyard between our two pines. Unfortunately, I had to position it facing the house for the extension chord to reach my stereo. While I assessed my progress, Zeus frolicked through the remaining piles of snow, covering his black and gold coat with slush. A recent haircut revealed the unmistakable carriage of a tiny yak. (Though the popular legend contends that Shi Tzu were bred by Tibetan Buddhists to resemble lions, they in fact resemble

yaks. This matter, including an innovatory thesis explaining it, will be addressed later at some length when it will not disrupt the euphony of my narrative.)

Wearing only a housecoat and slippers, my mother walked across the yard and stood beside me. “What are you doing?”

“I am becoming a thread woven into the lush tapestry of nature.”

“Sandy’s not talking to you again, is she? Now what have you done? This is no way to --”

“This has nothing to do with her. I am faced with a decision that will have consequences of epic proportions and I must be secluded while I prepare myself to make it.”

I hoped she would hear the pathos in my voice and leave me to my solitude to check the compass of my heart. My bearing was stern but respectful. The decision to remain at home was entirely a function of her culinary genius. While my “peers” subsisted on scraps the Donner Party would have refused, I dined on masterpieces that could drive any chef mad with envy.

“What’s going on?” she said, fixing me with a frightened stare.

Obviously I could not share all of the proceedings. “I am poised to purchase a car, a Cadillac,” I announced, revealing a glimpse of my inner turbulence. “My Bonneville has already changed hands.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to check the classifieds in tonight’s paper? If you’re looking for a car that’s the best --”

“I am familiar with the broad outlines of the procedure,” I said, brushing the snow off of Zeus. “But I need to steady myself before I check them. I do not wish to peruse them until I am on the porch of my tent, woven into the lush blanket of --”

“Okay, okay,” she sang, heading back to the house. She paused. “Are you sure this has nothing to do with Sandy?”

“Yes,” I gasped, my composure forsaking me.

“I think it will be too cold for Zeus to spend the night out here.”

“I will check the globe in my study, but as I recall Tibet is not a tropical region.”

“Look at little Zeus. He’s shivering now.”

I rubbed his giraffe-spotted belly. “Though his rugged constitution is more than a match for this weather, the task at hand demands solitude.”

“Dinner will be ready in an hour. Two of Hieronymus’ friends will be joining us.”

I winced at the thought of my obstreperous brother and his oafish cronies. “I shall have my dinner here.”

Zeus followed my mother inside and I finished stocking the tent with supplies.

Giant pines swayed beside me, bedposts supporting a speckled canopy. Atop my stereo, a kerosene lantern shed its humble light. Beside my adjustable lawn chair, the warmth from a propane heater rose to my hands. In my mouth, a big black cigar from the Dominican Republic supplied incense for my meditations while a sad, sad opera by Puccini filled the darkness with the sorrow inside me. The paper was crumpled up in a corner. Nada Fleetwood, nada Sedan DeVille. The classifieds were a nothing and a man in a tent was too and all he needed was a canteen full of bourbon and a porch with mosquito netting.

The opera's peak loomed, a mountain of woe so harrowing the night itself seemed to weep. A raccoon lumbered toward the tent, eclipsing the house and stopping no more than three feet from the unzipped flap. He looked into my eyes; I into his. I saw, not some wild garden-raiding beast, but a fellow traveler on the anfractuous road of life.

Madame Butterfly's voice climbed the jagged peaks of despair and the raccoon, as if to surmount the anguish flooding the forest, stood upon its hind legs. The light next door came on and the door flew open. Mr. Burzinski stuck his brutish head out.

"Jablonski! You turn that damn opera-shit down or I'm calling the cops," he hollered, rupturing the delicate veil of tragedy.

I struggled to remember that the insolence of fools is the wise man's burden. "On what possible pretext will you seek an intercession from your infernal god, the State?" He predicated the last totalitarian atrocity upon an absurd and wicked law which arbitrarily restricts the hours when a man may play Frisbee with his own dog on a public street.

"It's three o'clock in the morning," he said, jowls flapping. "I'm not gonna tell you again."

"And I shall not tell *you* again. Each time you invoke your dark lord as a mercenary you diminish the liberty of all free men. Your supplications nourish this Moloch, this Baal, this --"

He slammed the door. The climax ceased. The raccoon had vanished, absorbed by whatever dense thickets could contain it. My faithful canteen provided little comfort, its contents bitter in the wake of Mr. Burzinski's savage penetration of the operatic hymen.

I awoke early the next afternoon and sought sustenance, hunting and gathering some leftover casserole. I spent the rest of the day in meditation, nourishing the dauntlessness needed to select the chariot, suspended in the crystal aether of Bruckner's symphonies, freed from the isolation cell of Time. When darkness tinged the forest, the stealth Burmese cat stalked the encampment, carrying the evening paper.

"This is necessary before buying a car?" Sandy said, entering the flap to my porch, her feral eyes illuminating the shaded enclave.

"It is different from ordering a pizza. I suppose I could stumble onto a used-car lot plastered with twenty-dollar bills, trusting in the inherent mercy of vultures."

"Your mom sounded surprised to hear from me," she said. By default, she seated herself Indian-style and began wrapping a strand of her long hair around a finger. "We can't believe you sold the blue bomber."

I groaned at the epithet. "You had the finest moments of your life in that *blue bomber*. Maslow would have characterized them as peak experiences. You should be wailing in torment."

Predictably, she giggled and offered a revisionist account. "Getting laid in a backseat listening to Mozart is not what he had in mind."

"Beethoven. And if those were not peak experiences then that concept has no meaning. Your derogation of those transcendent encounters is understandable. When man encounters the eternal he is humbled. The cheap comfort of denial is more tolerable than the anguish of uncertainty."

“So who’d you sell it to?” she asked, studying my encampment: cats’ eyes widening with perplexity on the emanation from my speakers; cats’ eyes narrowing on my canteen, detecting the forbidden liquid within.

“Mr. Horn is an upstanding but somewhat eccentric acquaintance from work. His generous offer was clearly the child of impulse. Consequently, I had no time for lengthy deliberations.”

“Cash on the spot?”

“Something not unlike that. But more interesting is how his offer was part of an extraordinary coincidence. At exactly the same time I arrived at the conclusion that a car superior to my Bonneville existed.”

“Your mom’s concerned about the price of a Cadillac. She thinks you should wait until you graduate before rewarding yourself with anything extravagant.”

“Rewarding myself? This car is my inalienable birthright. Does she think I am contemplating the acquisition of a new Cadillac? I would crawl through broken glass before driving any of the abominations excreted from Detroit after 1977. Is she equating perfection with extravagance?”

Zeus scampered through the porch flap onto Sandy’s lap and displayed his exquisite belly for rubbing. “Puppy Zeus, how do you run so fast with those little mushroom stumps?”

“He could just as well ask how you can walk at all on those ungainly celery stalks. If Mother Nature has ever graced creation with a more harmoniously designed creature, I have yet to see it.”

Before inflicting a veritable fit of baby talk on him, Sandy told me to look at the paper. One ad in particular had fetched her eye. The heading read, “Huey Tozotli’s Smoking Mirror Special. We’ve got the Boats. Cadillacs & Lincolns. Huey’s got the Wind. The Sale is up to You.”

Like something from a dream, one of the models advertised was from the mid-seventies. I would not be able to afford a full load the following semester, but I reasoned that possession of the greatest wisdom possible for a mortal mitigated the urgency of such hoop-jumping. (In candor, dismay characterized my impressions of university. Home-schooled by my father, his exemplar cultivation my beacon, I had acclimatized to excellence in all things. The question I struggled with daily: What had everyone else been doing for the past twenty years? Was I the sole survivor of a generation of feral children?)

“After I acquire my car, we shall make an excursion to facilitate the bonding process.”

“I pretty much assumed we’d be doing little else for the next few years.”

Though she did not understand the meaning of cars (hers, stitched together in some back alley of the world, contained only two doors and could have fit in the trunk of my Bonneville), Sandy lacked the *tabula rasa* quality I sought when selecting a concubine. I often marveled at how she took for granted precious gems of wisdom that I had only procured after grueling episodes of cogitation. Given her gender’s feeble deliberative faculty, this could only be explained by the indulgence of Fate.

“Well yes, but those will be normal trips. I am speaking about a special excursion.

With the thoughtfulness that often accompanies eccentricity, Mr. Horn spoke favorably of a destination of interest. The Point of Percipience, as I recall.”

“What is it?”

“He was vague, but it sounds akin to the Cadillac Ranch, or at least not completely unlike it.”

“Cool. Where is it?”

“He promised to send me a map.”

Per my instinctive disdain for dramatics, I severed the ostentatious dross from my explanation. One can scarcely be faulted for such a beneficent trait. Before her inquiry gained momentum or specificity, I led her into the tent and zipped it shut. Zeus stood solemn guard.

“Your mom’s home,” she said, displaying a rare moment of disinterest, which passed quickly.

“So how much were you lookin’ to spend?” Huey asked while I analyzed the rectangularity of my betrothed. The problem was twofold: it was green and priced over twice what I could afford.

I turned to inspect the ground behind me. “Do you see a placenta? Did the nurse not remove it when I emerged this morning? Why else would you ask such a question?”

“Gross,” said Sandy.

The human wall of flesh, unimpressed by my jest, continued his estimations of me, not yet certain if Barnum had prophesized my arrival. “I’m firm on this one,” he said, slapping a doughy mitt onto the hood. “This car is like brand new.”

“The only tiny, insignificant difference is that it was made in 1976. But aside from that irrelevant consideration, brand new. Has it been traveling at the speed of light?”

“Odometer ain’t even been turned over.”

“Is this a car dealership or a revival? Is there a tent where your customers gather to further demonstrate their faith by dancing with rattlesnakes? What flavor is your Kool-Aid? I hereby offer you twenty-five. Reject it at your peril.”

At a third the asking price, this constituted a major lowball: tactically bold but strategically reckless. If wise, Huey would have spit on the ground and returned to his office, forcing me to grovel with a more generous offer and establishing his regnant role in the interrelation of salesman and buyer, a position best likened to the alpha male in a pack of dogs.

He blundered thus: “Hell, I got a fella comin’ this afternoon with five in cash.”

“Ah yes, the Man with Cash,” I said triumphantly. “I shall finally meet this legend. Clad in black with a stovepipe hat and waxed mustache, he roams the earth with a suitcase of bills, eternally in transit to close deals at just below the sticker price, making intermittent stops to tie damsels to train tracks. Sandy, remember when this villain almost bought your car out from under you? He has returned to --”

“Forty-five” Huey grunted, finally recognizing that I was not among Barnum’s majority.

“Am I covered with bruises? Does it look as though I recently fell from a turnip truck? My terminating, unappeasable offer is thirty-five.”

“Mine’s forty. Take it or leave it.”

“Like Caligula, I pride myself on my inflexibility. Come along Sandy. That dealership down the street had a newer Fleetwood that caught my eye.” My historical reference was based on the celebrated Madman Theory. In any dispute, it profits one if his adversary thinks him less than fully stable. Sandy watched in adoration as I took her hand and led us away.

“Alright, alright,” Huey called.

With the pride of the victor I turned to Sandy and put my hand on her forearm. “You do know that you are the luckiest girl in the world?”

At the body shop, I based my decision on solar considerations. “The sun is more orange than gold, is it not?” I asked the technician. After a long pause, he looked into my eyes and nodded in silent agreement.

Part II: Addendum

If the Reader's understanding of the occurrences and ideas in Part II are in any way imperfect we have reached an impasse. Like an injured hiker attempting a perilous passage, he will struggle to remain abreast of me. Soon he will hobble behind, calling for clarifications with each painful step, begging me to lessen my pace. Inevitably, he will collapse and watch in despair as I vanish beyond the horizon. For a corrective we must turn to an old Russian proverb: repetition is the mother of learning. Solicitous of his welfare, I beseech him to return to the beginning of Part II.

Ideally, the second reading should be performed aloud. Of necessity, it must be performed at the time of day when the Reader's mind is at its zenith. I fear we have grown accustomed to collocate reading with the basest means of relaxation. No doubt other books he whores around with are tantamount to sedatives and television, but make no mistake: the reading of Part II is neither. Like a swim upstream in a cold river, it demands strength, precision, courage, cunning, and endurance.

Dear Reader, if you do not feel invigorated and stronger, how will you bear the weight of what is to come? As a historian and philosopher my role is not to carry the load, but, like a trainer in a gymnasium, to ensure that your muscles are capable of

sustaining it. After you re-read Part II, I will perfect your physique by addressing the obvious questions sparked by a fastidious reading.

At this point the student must be aflame with one primary question and at least one auxiliary question.

“Scholar, regarding the first breathtaking appearance of your mighty tool and your subsequent handling of it: there exists a discrepancy, possibly a logical contradiction. When you introduced your Shovel, you demonstrated how it penetrates the illusory surface and digs straight to the root of Reality to reveal the primordial strangeness of all things. This was not given as an example of a particular act, but as a general antecedent of all penetrations performed by your invincible tool. Yet posterior to your demonstration, you cite several examples of particular penetrations, one which occurred anterior to your demonstration. Have you not blurred the critical line betwixt a *general anterior* and a *particular posterior*?”

The student was not sent to forage through Part II like a ravening bear, but to perfect his comprehension of its essential concepts and occurrences. Nonetheless, a fair point is raised. Aristotle first warned of the hazards inherent in confounding these concepts, and if I have done so I am guilty of nothing less than a logical felony. My defense will consist of two parts. First, a brief comment on the possibility that a misperception of ambiguity occurred -- understandable given the enthralling nature of the text.

It is conceivable that the Reader, shattered from his initial brush with Part II, became overwhelmed with dread by the grave warning at the beginning of this addendum

and slipped into a delirium. I implored him to attempt Part II again when his mind was at its zenith. In the course of a day, this period usually corresponds to a time subsequent to the consumption of a caffeinated beverage. Apparently some men do not differentiate between one such drink and twelve. Consequently, no distinction is drawn between a state of enhanced cognitive agility and a pathologic condition where the mind paces a cage like a tiger. Students, far from being an exception to this tendency, are more likely to succumb to it. I insist the Reader again attempt the glorious summit tomorrow with a clear head, having consumed only one. He should perform his next reading standing. During the more intense passages, pacing is advised: book in one hand, chin in the other.

At this point the Reader might accuse me of avoiding the singular thrust of his objection. Patience is advised. I have been limbering up before entering the ring with Aristotle. My philosophic muscles supple, I am prepared to grapple with him. Now, as both he and Thomas Aquinas conceived of the concept, a *particular posterior* is distinct from --

A bitter and melancholy dagger pierces my heart. The Reader used his *prima facie* intelligent question to stage a crude burlesque, hoping that I, entangled in nets of logic, would remain oblivious to the coming pratfall. And where had he hoped to go with this? To Sandy, no doubt. Fast approaching was some utterly craven punch line about how “he’d love to penetrate *that* particular posterior.” The poor girl has been free of her terminal disfigurement for all of a few pages and the Reader cannot abstain? If such was his intention he has succeeded magnificently -- in making a *particular posterior* of himself. Metaphysical jokes work on many levels, dear Reader, many levels.

After hours of skeptical brooding, a vigorous walk with Zeus, and several fermented elixirs, I have reluctantly come to recognize the necessity of bestowing the gracious benefit of the doubt to the Reader's intentions. With this unpleasantness behind us, we shall turn to the auxiliary question.

“Scholar, regarding the brevity of your mother's appearance in the text: Are we to assume her role is peripheral?”

Gorged on sci-fi trilogies, vampire novels, and worse, the Reader expects another FBI profile, that lazy contrivance of modern scribblers. Does he perchance want to subject me to the obtuse instruments of Freudian analysis? And now, absent any details regarding my mother, his analysis is arrested? Dear Reader, your reverence for Freud is most disconcerting. His plagiarism from Schopenhauer is opprobrious. The following comparison has the dual virtues of putting their relationship in its correct perspective and being easily accessible to the common man. The Reader is urged to underline or highlight this illuminating passage and, as soon as he is able, make use of his internet to confirm and study it.

Freud's “originality” compared to Schopenhauer is analogous to Burger King's “originality” compared to McDonald's.

An even darker crime can be laid at the clay feet of Freud. He and mystical doodlers like Jung distracted generations of earnest students from the work of men who deserve emulation. Instead of revering the rigorous scientific approach of Emil Kraepelin and his noble quest to help those truly ill, they have been wheedled by debauched ravings concerning archetypes, anuses, incest, and complexes.

I do not mean to scold, but I simply will not be the subject of any Freudian butchering. My mother's significance vis-à-vis my annals can be summarized -- nay, exhausted -- thus:

- 1) My mother came outside.
- 2) She wore a housecoat and slippers.
- 3) She asked me several questions and made a suggestion.
- 4) She informed me that dinner would soon be ready.
- 5) She returned to the house.
- 6) She informed Sandy of my intentions and shared a misgiving regarding them.

And that is all there is to it. There is nothing to analyze, deconstruct, read into, or fathom here. Intellectual flavors-of-the-day need not apply. A logical mind, instinctively recognizing that no deductions or inferences are possible, moves on.

This is one of the cardinal virtues of an Objective narrative. Given its timeless nature, there is no need to assemble it with rackets and ruses. With the envy of eunuchs and ingenuity fanned by resentment, men incapable of profound insights deny the Objective nature of the written word in the despairing hope of dissuading those who know the Truth and have the courage to write it.

After I make it official, we shall proceed.

I, Petronius Jablonski, hereby forbid any and all Freudian, structural, post-structural, post-post-structural, post-colonial, post-*anything* analysis or deconstruction of my annals and condemn any and all such enterprises. All theorizing based on class, gender, and ethnicity is strictly prohibited.

An Objective narrative is not a Rorschach blot for one to project his pathologies and sundry whines. If the Reader insists on “reading into” the narrative, he should fill the margins with sketches of penises, vaginas, and stick-figures engaged in coitus.