

Chapter I

Regarding an erasure of the rash errata of a life written down, penned up, bled forth from upset inkwells: Sometimes a lie can set you free; sometimes truth is the caustic solution...Now now, let us dispense with the platitudes; before we attack that lumbering colossus of yesterday but before we close the book on the future, let us hunch together over my crystal ball of bald, crystalline barbs...See here how embalmed among the swirling murk there floats the homunculus of tomorrow; preserved in its vitreous sphere of formalin, its formless eyes reject the imprecations and deflect the impetrations lodged by an interminable train of interrogators apoplectic and aghast, who demand of my forfeited ghost more than mere moral recompense for the tranquil qualia I was able—given the proximity of this so-called venereal workspace—to channel, as though I revel here in the sprawling palatial spires of pseudology or delirium or turpitude—or worse. I will at once address these nit-picking criticisms and let down your uptight upbraiding, whereupon I will sheathe my oracular orb, tightly cinch the braided drawstring of its velvet purse and hurl it with Davidian volition Goliathward.

(As succoring aside, might I suggest early, earnestly, particularly for the summertime poolside peeper of provincial or proletarian provenance already wrinkled-of-brow and bleary-eyed at the once-mentioned but integral integrants of hermeneutic homunculi or suggestive pseudology to hold fast as vade mecum to his most favored and dependable dictionary before he finds himself sunken by the wise crack of this veering screwball cue ball rolling roughshod over the deck with right proper English.) The source of my requisite and synthetic serenity lies on the table, and in the respites she grants me, my pen moils furiously across these pages, obliquely filling one fastigiated swale of mahogany between Barb's outstretched limbs. But Barb? you prudently prod with the justified airs of sanctimony and indignation. Yes, it is Barb that I've brought home to partake in this ultimate bacchanal, an occasion for which I am permitting myself this illicit yet ephemeral dalliance for the express purpose of recording this manuscript. Spare her your scorn. She dutifully tends to her vocation while in my employ, and she will likely, despite my gravest conservational concerns, have vanished before I've gouted my final period.

Allow me to quickly bemoan what chilling revelation has recently made itself known: That They—yes, *that* ubiquitous, ineffable They—have descended from crow's nest outlook, have declared that we are beyond the realm of wild-eyed prediction and can already clearly descry sans-telescope over

the gunwales the insidious, ebbless advance of a fearsome flotilla heralding the coming of a graceless epoch, flying the flag of a ruthless regime with which there may be no entente, importing an era that will be marked by the marauding crew of Artificial Intelligence, aiming to usurp the heretofore thoroughly human throne of the Art of novel-writing. That the Novel's construction might one day be reduced to the simple input of arbitrary key plot points and the coup de grace depression of a finalizing button from which there may be no return...To coax or wrangle a nouveau logo-photography from our old-fashioned picture-making. And I ask: Who could bear to endure such a future, where our greatest pursuit could be trivialized so in the cold binary of computer programs, the gross application of formulaic processing, heartless logo-rhythms funneled into artless algorithms, opting forevermore for the evil moiety of a Manichaeian divide, all the while portending a preterite practice of this holy tactile connection, this very communion where the fleshy pinkie C of one's pen-clutching half-fist meets, glances, connects laterally and quite literally with the burgeoning Word perfect, incarnate below? Not that any in my position will have been spared witness of this craven phenomenon, what with the ubiquity of self-correcting, voice- and print-homogenizing machinery promising always to keep fragile little fingers from pricking the page spiculed with the letters of their own bestowal, from sacrificing any blood. But even with that said, I only wish I could economize for my poor reader these vignettes with the milliverbiage of pictures—alas, I was cursed with the heart of an artist but the hands of a lummoX, to which this rushed cacographic mess can well attest. If I'd the time and wherewithal, I'd commission some beastly bohemian to illustrate the triangular pith and pull of my present state. For it I've imagined at opposite ends two argent and charging imps clutching at their torsos thin shoulder-furrowing chains, tautened and threaded through tiny eyelets connected to opposing ends of the opening triptych between them, where splashed across the three panels would stretch the mulberry mulch of my viscera in all its trifold splendor: the center panel a depiction of Genevieve as the shape of my heart; Starla on another swirling the sinuous sulci of my exposed brain; and upon the crack of my final swing, Barb pulsing in my veins. Although I understand her inclusion in this trinity seems dubious at best, perfidious at worst, it is to Barb that I'm wholly indebted for allaying my anxiety and allowing this composition. If not for her, the script before you would be naught but a soundless series of anacoluthic fulminations, a mad jeremiad of exposé to exposee, a spluttered farrago of expiatory fragments of no use to anyone. Least of all the fugitive it aims to exonerate. I only hope that the pounding heartache metronome that beats ceaselessly against my excoriated exterior at every penned sentence fails to vitally vitiate its veracity.

No more than eight feet to my left, a wall partitions from this that very room where my baby

Genevieve, supine atop gossamer sheets, used to serenade me, and in halcyon hallucinations I'd whimsically hop the Archipelago of Echolalia that dribbled from her tongued palate as she stammered, "Dada dada dadadadada..." while Dadadada pulled the hem of her blanket tucked up under her arms. Still along the wall in her room there congregates in foxed stickers the cartoon merchchildren whom in her youth she so amorously emulated whenever they gyred and crooned on the television screen. On this side of the wall a crossed Christ, convalescently enlaced with the wind-purled purple ribbon of regal appointment, royal anointment, bears silent witness to my infidelity. And the locus of this crucifix is the very crux of contention, where the aura of despair that emanates from my heart osculates that walled omphalos of innocence. I beg my detractors—and I acknowledge the validity of their ire—to trust that this knowledge is penance enough for a million tortured perdition-denizens circumambulating the innermost ring of Hell that gnaws eternally at their forsaken and perforated souls.

Oh but the very mention of osculation brings me inevitably, irrevocably to Starla—oh my toothsome Starla, how I still feel you in my lonesome underlip once wrought numb by the nibbles and tugs of your passionate kisses! I'd toss to the street this barbarous imposter in a hundred unseemly pieces at the mere intimation your moistened lips would return to anesthetize my jittery soul. To be sure, my druthers would place my convulsing head in your hands, pressed tightly against your breast to dissolve in torrents of scalding tears of joyful deliverance over your lap, funneling finally into a perineal puddle that would ossify as a brittle hopeful simulacrum of the key to that empyreal gateway it never deserved to breach, worked in and broken off inside forever.

But Barb? you re-administer—facilely doubling the dose as if a more direct move toward our dead-heat finish (yes, we shall cross that line simultaneously) would serve any of us—with the same inquisitive inflection of clinical superiority. Forgive the banality of it, but I cannot deny that with Barb, there exists some—in lieu of a more appropriate lexemic link—ahem, undeniable chemistry. Perhaps, I might even posit, deific alchemy. And via the ichor with which she has replaced my boring blood, I perceive the whole of my existence through the prism of a timeless, divine parallax—albeit one that still deprives me the azimuth to glimpse which new, wayward constellation my Starla has hitched herself. This is not the time to fret over the past (that time will come), however; Barb is here now. Let us probe her varicolored vibrancy with a curious finger or two.

But first: How I came to procure her services is a dark side road we'll swiftly navigate before merging onto the main drag of this tale. In recent years, with Genevieve safely under the watchful eye of hired help, when I'd more often than I'd wish to admit been begrudgingly engaged in bouts with a nearly ataxic anxiety that left my right hand utterly inutile with writing utensil, I used to enjoy some modicum

of success drowning that scrabbling ribcaged rat with fervent cascades of spirited drink, though in the process distilling my own literary spirits to naught but a paucity of pellucidity. On one such occasion of experimental barroom medication I found myself inconspicuously confiding my secret quasi-Burroughs-esque desires—that by quelling my trembling insides by some alternate means I might restart or recharge my literary battery’s power to chronicle or conjure or whatever electric pursuit I’d been failing to pursue—to the bulbous gin blossom below which bloomed the pustulate flower of the scabrous face of a complete stranger suddenly seated at my side. Swiveling languidly in the barstool from which he’d accreted, he relayed, completely unsolicited, to me an unsettling adumbration of the flanking doxies he’d observed in my past, continuing to detail the squirming manner of their wiggly, giggling bodies, mere hand-puppet tepees tee-heeing tipsily at acerbic insights and ribald bravado, roiling about my toiling drinkless hand curiously concealed by the corner table’s corner under the dim-light cone of seedy incandescence. At that trenchant recapitulation, in my addled stupor, I was suddenly able to recall or possibly I admit concoct with a clueless mixology a vaguely dipsomaniacal memory of him, of the neon of familiar backlighting beer signs glinting red and blue upon the staggered panoply of variegated bar-stocked philters, diffracting out to the fuzzy rainbow periphery of this once faceless figure hunched unremarkably at the bar. Of that shapeless, ubiquitous mound I had registered only in passing glances but now in an enlivened mosaic: Who could have supposed what in all these years it had been cataloguing with that sloshing noggin? I assured him those prurient proclivities to which he was privy were long past; still he offered surreptitiously in the loud *voco sotto* such milieu required the services of one Barb—his finest worker, he assured with the glowing visage of proud patriarch—to assuage my travails...waving a hand to stunt my protestations, he suffixed his offer with this fatherly, fishermanly axiom: “Be careful dangling your worm in strange waters; you never know what you might catch”—Barb was after all strenuously tested, vetted and when she came she came in hues intense, intoxicating, life-rattling—I responded with the slow, furtive smirk of one buying time to drunkenly process the levels of levity or austerity necessitated by these sorts of indiscreet encounters before continuing my stunted refusal, at which he stolidly turned away in what would turn out to be a savvy sort of show of respect for the callow customer. For since that first offer I had resisted his every consistent insistence to “give ‘her’ (imbuing Barb by its wink-wink intimation with more of a fem-chattel than the humanizing femme fatale characteristic that I would suggest her spirit deserves) a try” until this dire culmination of tragic events, when my pre-schoolish reservations about accepting the saccharine offerings of strange men were forced progerically beyond the demarcations of adult decision-making into the geriatric desperation of moribundity, when my despair at last buckled to the synergy of present circumstance and the

infelicitous felinity that has finally pawed free my once-kenneled curiosity.

From the offered curves of her posable repose did I first sample Barb. Her myriad tips of stimulation hard upon my tongue. Snapping a synaptic Gatling report. Exsanguinating with chilled euphoria in her exhilarating sweep of my veins. In her ichorous wake, I see her before me how I imagine a detached god must: stripped of any short-sighted semblance of humanity, reduced to an amalgam of solid cells, deconcentrated patches of primary colors. She lies prone and sprawled across the table like some pointillist seascape at sunset, teasing to splash my lap at the slightest tectonic shift or pull of the biding moon. So limpid is her limp and contorted curvature strewn over the tabletop that through her I can distinguish a hint of the table's wavy grain, an almost tessellated pattern of nebulous tildes suggestive of her hypnotic fluidity, like a fractured web of sunlight dancing shallowly upon the sea's shoal. Somewhere beyond my scope the horizon is swallowing the sun, and bunched before me in a callipygian mound, she bares her secret sunburns, specking like scarlet crests along a crashing tide. And it is in this barbed morass that I cast these vermian wrigglers, these word-worming appendages writhing her insides as she unraveled in a clattering heap, sending that placid tide into a comely lapping.

Perhaps I was misleading earlier in regards to the manner of our comotation. In fact, despite the twin flutes—identical in their cognatic nature but fraternal in their dichromatic repletion of agnatic nurture—found at the ready at the table's edge, things—as they so often are in these salacious instances of door-storming discovery—are not as they appear. It will be I who quaffs each in time. I will tipple; Barb will stipple. By then my conniving convive'll be but a patch on her current self—assuming she remains at all—so reduced to a pathetic pile by my voracious appetite that no manner of sustenance will appeal to her parched spirit save lonesome rest. Besides, there exists an understanding implicit in such illicit dealings, and if any bacchanalian cravings were to magically arise, Barb will have to satisfy them solely with the draff she can cull from my throat. The irony is that my reasons for the drink—firstly, to enhance her effects, and finally, to wash from my mouth the remorseful aftertaste she will inevitably leave—will anyway preclude her from any such imbibition.

Before our tale unfurls from this shameful exordium, I demand of its finders that if these words miraculously find their way to Starla that she be spared the sight of me. Save for the masses the apocrypha that suits your agenda, but spare her. Allow her to parse these words on her own. The clouded and precipitous vista I look down upon is after all not of the towering spires alluded to earlier, though the musty garret of obscurantism may easily be confused as such.

Chapter II

I finished reading the morning's letter, walked back with renewed vigor into Genevieve's room, where my pajamaed progeny lay curled around her pillow, where the pinkish pads of her feet peeked out from under the wrinkled sheet that ballooned and deflated with her every whispery expiration. "Wake up," I said, tucking behind her ear the tress that fluttered over her dulcet snores. She snuffled and startled, half-smiled with half-open eyes and turned over to reveal her other half, entangled in the cocoon of her sheet. Unlike Baby Wake-Up, who stared madly from her slumped repose on the vanity, my Genevieve's eyes didn't gape wide like vain, scintillating emeralds when I righted her. I pulled pajama sleeves over her automaton arms. Auburn strands drained like slurped angel hair through the elastic collar I stretched to pass over her nose and over her head. "We must be going. I have a surprise."

As her head emerged through the hole of her new shirt, she stretched and yawned. She leaned back, the black and yellow shirt I hand-picked flanging about her neck, and the perceptive child, concluding her yawn with a breathy "Another letter?" spied with drowsy eyes the cryptic connotation in my rousing guise.

"I have reason to believe this is the one," said I, zeroing her arm in on a sleeve she blithely ignored. "Quite specific." She sort of shrugged, the sail of one black and one white shoulder rising in mutinous unison, and my exiled heart sank a little within the drifting life raft to which I clung. In vain this captain tried to attenuate the disheartening effect of her sleepy indifference by controlling the lift of her naked shoulder, as though the gesture was all a misinterpreted waking stretch, until the next sleeve dropped. "Please," and I silently propitiated her spirit lovingly pinching the sleeve off her newly covered shoulder. Obviously she snatched the folded pants I placed beside her, swung her feet over the edge of the bed and hopped onto the floor, dragging the pants along the carpet as she nautically zombied past her paternal castoff toward the bathroom. She flashed no radiant gaze as she passed; no, my Genevieve rose like the obdurate sun I would never have.

A moment after rounding the corner she reappeared, her head tilted past the door jamb, "Daddy?" I had been standing dumbly paralyzed in the ghost of her disappearing childhood.

"Yes?"

"Could you hear me piss(these parentheses like the stretched dimples around her mouth)ing?"

Twas a hypnopompic lapse, perhaps, that allowed such ugliness to excrete through her lips—please assign to this phrasing no terribly inappropriate homography. I shook my head—a Pavlovian response to her scurrilous query—I know my head shook, I know she slipped behind the wall, but somewhere in the onomatopoeically sibilant syllable of that jarring gerund, time halted again when her mouth contracted within that cursed malediction to a flattened and gritty grin, an incidental gesture redolent of the first picture I ever took of her.

From an epistle I intended to bequeath to Genevieve at her emancipation into adulthood, I'll swiftly stitch into this brocaded and sartorial narrative the excerpt this momentary visage now evokes. It originally concluded a since-disposed screed in which I sought an apt cognomen to ascribe to my quadrupedal Genevieve as she crawled about my home and my heart. Like Adam before me I exhaustively fondled the faunal folds of nature's drapery, a menagerie ménage-a-many, if you will: I fawned all over my little deer—she had kept me from going stag, after all—with her iridescent eyes glimmering in the glare of my high-beaming gaze; she was the porcelain-complected ermine of mine, with nary a nevus or blemish to be found along her precious pelt; my torpid tortoise before she learned to turn over, my hying hare when she did; and so on, until I concluded (this snippet as near verbatim as I can conjure):

...Please find the enclosed photograph. It is my absolute favorite and your first. Looking upon it now, I realize my endeavors above have focused on far too hopelessly small, too infinitesimally meager a target, when the metaphor I've been seeking had already manifested itself from the start photographically: the genesis of Genevieve, an émigré mere moments from the warm cocoon of mother's womb. Surrounded by nothing, attired by nothing save the intimation of agony—your mouth a deflated ellipse, tremulous and hauntingly silent, stretched across your face.

Blame inexperienced hands with inadequate equipment or marvel at the prodigious prescience of an unwitting eye, but the chiaroscuro effected by the combination of the camera's flash and my trembling hand in that dark delivery room cast you as a luminiferous and heavenly monarch—note the gleaming corona radiating from your face—in the foreground of a black vacuum. Glorious glimpse of a universe inchoate. The anguished expression of tender lungs rent from comfortable to alien atmosphere. Your infantile form a stellar gathering, a glimmering phalanx, radiating out from the dimpled nexus of your solar plexus down asterismic limbs to twinkling star-toes and sterling sun-fingers. Bent elbows and curved lobes bear hints of galactic

spirals and the smeared beatitude of aurora borealis arcs in each of your diminutive nails.

While even the fecundating fleck of your fallen eyelash could provide eternal inspiration to me, a ringless and saturnine satellite, I'm firmly nestled in the lineal satellitium at your thumb, now basking in the warm quint-helian luminance of the spatial recess in your stellated and half-clenched hand, now orbiting your daintiest fingertip-sun, now and forever tilting and rotating to face you, as you are my universe.

I know this snippet's inclusion reeks with the effluvium of desperation, but of my love for Genevieve, which hovers high above the stench of human pomp, I have nothing, absolutely nothing to prove. I only offer Exhibit A as a glimpse into the makeup of my own cosmogony. Unfortunately, I seem to have misplaced the photograph; it's nowhere to be found. But as I work through my riffled papers I am certain it will turn up.

Let us return to Genevieve's crass lexical selection—doubtless the toxic residue of television programs to which she's exposed outside my watch, their vulgar scripts perpetually flapping against her slumberous mind like a folded parchment lodged in the spokes of her REM cycles. While most likely little more than innocuous anecdote to the more boorish of my readers, it underscored the detrimental environs of her motherless matrix and specifically my failings in regards to that shared quandary. With Genevieve at her ablutions, I telephoned her sitter. I listened to the pre-recorded greeting and after the beep, I requested from her a complete list of all media to which she exposed my child, implied that a clearer monitor would henceforth be a requisite for this newly strained partnership. As I cradled the receiver I looked out at the dun morning. An arboreal sun, slivered like a stained picture glass by a welter of black boughs, zebraed the pale pea lea and its webby integument of glistening dew. And it dawned on me: the eminently punctual mail should not yet have arrived at that hour. I never even heard the stridulant whine of our pried box, the sudden pant accompanying an inserted mail piece—woe to the deprived mourner who cannot escape even in recapitulations of innocent endeavors the suggestions of such salacious heterography!—in fact. I had awoken hours earlier, plotting the coordinates of our peregrination by the legend detailed therein ever since. And in retrospect I cannot even recall pulling it from the box—again with these salacious colloquialisms! Nevertheless, our ambitious courier, armed with this incandescent envelope and agile digits, had flipped a switch, illuminating for us the course our day would follow by outpacing the methodical rise of coy Sol. I know the patient reader by now is beside himself with curiosity over the contents of this letter, the letter, the letter, whose presence echoes like a

light refrain. To avoid repeating myself later, I will share it at a time organic to the narrative, which will arrive shortly, I promise.

Chapter III

My stellate Genevieve, rapt already by the sandman, overflowed from her car seat—dangling legs and twitching feet hovered over the dainty sneakers she'd worked over her heels and let tumble to the floorboard, her elbows pointed out over armrests, within which lay upon her lap a plastic baggie of snack mix that was covered immediately by her hands and further above by her intemperate, sleepy head—where she jostled in the snug X of canvas belts and plastic buckle ever so slightly within a throng of dreams. Dreams of what, though? Her premier utterance that morning might suggest to some a fey kinchin, enchanted by incubi with a conferment of clairvoyance—and in fits of superstitious desperation I don't dismiss the possibility—but as is so often the case it is the more cynical who infer the truth, that this is in fact not the first such letter. This was not the first time a little correspondence from Starla had us crisscrossing a sporadic lattice of backroads hopefully hot on the spoor of our lost sojourner. This, the fourth in a series of such leads, each more promising than the previous, appeared the most propitious due to the geographical clues included. The sparkling lake, the tawny-lichened rocky and hillocky terrain, the hovering cumulus of an apple blossom. They pealed with the clarion reverberations of thrummed heartstrings, they rocked the bells of remembrance in my batty belfry.

However: That delightful tinkling of tintinnabula suddenly crashed, clappers expelled and scattered into twinkling dust when our chassis abruptly hiccupped, skidded and started on the dirt road. I instinctively decelerated, hunched over to fisheye the rearview to my left, and I waited out the distant dissipation of dust, to spot the small dark mound that emerged in it the setting's resettling. It was apparent some stray had found with its inattentive head the well-worn jag of our rear tread, running headlong toward the mesmerizing iridescence of a snaking hubcap that subsequently flung the gorgonized jaywalker aside, and I watched as the supine feline, with its rigid paws skyward, teetered at the road's edge before toppling into the ditch as though a coercive wind blew in to upset the invisible spit from which it only momentarily hung.

I'm loath to appear so cavalier over the fate of the abolished cat. In the aftermath, I viewed it as the unfortunate collateral of our crusade—didn't their fervid executions almost require it?—but had I noticed the poor thing caroming like a portentous wraith through the goldenrod crowding the edge of the road, I assure you I would not have hesitated in applying the brake to allow its unscathed passage. Yes, we'd have suffered a slight setback of time, to be ameliorated at once with my heavy right foot, but

at least we would have avoided any deviation.

Before stopping the car completely I attempted to glimpse the time in my radio display panel, so glossy that in lieu of the fragmented digits I sought, its specular shield reflected inscrutably the rise and careen of fuzzy yellow and black stripes. In the mirror above I saw a newly-liberated Genevieve's back straighten as she righted herself and stood upright upon the back seat, investigating the scene behind. I reached back and bunched the loose fabric at the back of her shirt in a fist as my obedient foot transferred the proper pressure back to the brake pedal so that the car obsequiously decelerated just as she cast with a sullen sigh an anchor towards that charnel confluence. Whereas I had diminished it, hoping to once again ditch the kitty, she had always been able to cathect in the smallest creature an agglomeration of all the world's sympathy, the arduous weight under which the protruding underlip of her turned head now swelled and strained.

Her back rocked gently against my hand balled up in her shirt as the car halted in the middle of the road, sloughing a cloak of dust from under our tired tires. I could still, even in the ergonomic nightmare of my precarious position, lift her toddler-sized figure by shouldering the corner of my seat and perching her bottom atop my other forearm. I pulled the snuffling sympathizer through the valley between the front seats and placed her there on the passenger chair, where she attempted to stifle her sobs, rubbed her eyes.

As I imagine it must be with all fathers, my daughter's journey from gilded ovum down Fallopian chute—only the first slide under which the rapacious dregs of Daddy would anxiously await her debouchment—later to distend the belly of her beloved mother—in a sense we each gestated those thirty-odd weeks within her—culminated in a frightening sterile delivery-room silence before infusing the expectant vacuum into which she escaped with the euphoric wash of her paroxysmal, vivacious wail. I recall the wait more vividly than the wail. Her crowning was a coronation in which I placed upon her supple, martian head an honorary tiara encrusted with the precious diamonds of sovereignty. But here, in the turbulence of our near hit-and-run, it seemed that diaphanous diadem had tilted and fallen, caught on the bridge of her nose. I could see those diamonds glistening again, this time in the moist lashes before reddened eyes. I raised a finger to remove a tear, perhaps right her crown. She beat me to it, collecting with two rapid swipes of a bent index the salty gems, which my bumblebee babe unceremoniously smeared out of existence into the annulus of black cotton that crossed at her navel.

I recoiled at the sting only I could perceive by the gesture, ready to wipe the zirconia that threatened to burn my own eyes when she spoke, burred: "Somebody is going to go to bed, tonight, not knowing the kitty they love, will never, come, home." Forget that the cat was likely feral. Forget that

we hadn't passed a house in miles. But forget not the aforementioned dust cloak that billowed about the loping car; in the window it framed Genevieve among an undulating crepe of gold dust, mirroring with its pulsations the golden lilt of her words—entangled in a metaphysical embrace with that nebulous haze—a condescence that crescendoed to an apotheosis of sympathy, a maize diapason to shuck to the floorboard any contrarian appeals I'd deign to harvest, boil and serve up. For obvious reasons, her appeal pinned the very corpuscle that floated along my rete like a buoyed switch, ready to ignite a frenetic deflagration, and with that flame eviscerating me of my blood lines that pulsed madly with myopic fervor, to transplant into her mummy daddy a veiny filigree of sympathy to match her own. "We have to find his family. Please," pleaded the suddenly composed Genevieve.

"Sit down." I protested.

"Here?"

"And seatbelt."

She lowered into the seat, triumphantly clicked the buckle at her side. I plucked the tensile belt that crossed at her shoulder so that it tightened. "Hot damn," she let out.

"Darling."

"Yes?"

"Fifteen minutes. If we are unable to locate the cat's home, we will turn around in fifteen minutes and you must return to your car seat."

"Oh hell," she said. "I just know we'll find it by then."

As I backed the car into a flat patch off the road, "We really need to address these insouciant malisons."

"My what, now?"

"The casual cursing. It's rather unbecoming." We rolled again catward, and I postured myself up against the steering wheel so that when the ghostly reflection of the cat on my hood converged for a moment with the rigid limbs of the figure in the ditch, the conglomerate formed for one instant an asterisk, a symbolic scintilla that should have served only to mark a negligible annotation, a forgettable footnote in our tale to be callously overlooked by the nimble-fingered reader dutifully on his and our inexorable charges toward Starla. But then through Genevieve's window there lay in lieu of symbol the undeniable, concrete reality of the dirt-road-killed thing—you might never notice it if you didn't already know it was there. She didn't bother to look. It lay in the ditch half-enshrouded by an overgrowth of leaves cordate and grassblades ensiform, each caked with a dust fondant. Blood-matted fur already glinted like an ensign both macabre and star-spangled. To lighten the mood I attempted, and apparently

botched, a jocular distraction: “That is three strikes. Were I a baseball referee, I’d have already marked you out,” which prompted a tittering Genevieve rather than the one of feigned indignation my silly wordplay usually elicited.

We rounded but one corner and she perked up with a pointed finger to indicate a yawning and overstuffed mailbox, hunched over and ready to expel its contents onto the road. I stopped the car. Barely distinguishable from the shaggy landscape, I made out beside the emetic receptacle that I had somehow overlooked just minutes prior the deceptive spectacle of an ersatz driveway paved in snaking swaths of matted grass.

“Well,” she plied to the dumbstruck driver, “are you waiting for an invitation?”

I RSVP’d her trenchant invite Oui, easing off the brake and into the opening. She clutched her seatbelt, lifted her chin to study over the dashboard the dimmed and oncoming concourse before us. We nudged aside with our headlights the bowering boughs of dead trees whose fingers querulously groped and screeched along the length of the car as we passed. We slid the fuzzy caterpillars of flattened catkins—a nasty little pun, forsooth too soon, one judiciously secreted from my navigator within the watery reservoir of my mind until now, as I begin tapping those obsolete reserves—up the slow slope of a creeping windshield, coasting almost blindly through the canopied and sparsely-graveled path. The suckling sounds of our tires cleaving new tracks through mud. Finally out from the umbrage, before us leaned a rust-frilled pickup, a mangled bolus, of metal and rubber and glass, paralyzed, moribund, seemingly preserved in a snapshot of its methodical descent toward earthbound digestion. We were suddenly made privy to the perverse, penological realm of some sort of panopticon-in-reverse, where there squatted among the overgrown and windblown grass a stodgy house sentineled by a circular arboretum of monolithic oaks. The mossy roof of the domicile-on-trial sagged like a burdened and checkered tarpaulin, connecting walls where parched wood peeked out between jagged lines of crackled paint.

“This is the place, it must be. Look,” she decreed, letting zip against the door her unlatched and swishing seatbelt. A cat lazing upon the porch rail stretched its splotchy forepaws, yawned and tongued its jowls. It sat up with an oblivious air, as though the arrival of strange visitors was no queer occurrence, unfurling over the ledge a free-swaying tail flicking to and fro.

“Stay with me,” I told to an empty seat bearing evanescent impressions of the tiny hands that had sprung her from the car. Through the open door, I watched as she saltated about looking-glass puddles—sepiaed wickets revealing in flashes her chthonic doppelganger, who, in glorious, wistful mimicry, wove effortlessly against gravity about her own stalactite-toothed ceiling—and pleaded with

her until she stopped. I popped open the glove box's door, flopped onto the seat now bereft of any evidence of her handprints, and I pulled out a stack of forgotten documents and ruffled manuals and placed them aside. From a clandestine compartment I delicately fingered inside, I exhumed my gravid revolver, thumbed open its eversible womb and counted the circle of incubating sextuplets in utero, replaced the papers, pocketing alongside Starla's letter the folded note from the top of the stack.

Genevieve had evoked in her first serious writing attempts outside Daddy's purview something of the atavistic, exhibiting a charming natural inclination to the boustrophedon, flowing down the page in this primitive serpentine pattern. It was the first letter she wrote to me, scrawled in swaying crayon like a lightning bolt to my heart: "Daddy, I love you. Will you catch for me a Star("la," the glaring implication so obviously guided by the hand of her original tutor, a former highschool classmate of Starla's, that I hastily relieved her of her pedagogic duties.)? Will you love me forever? Genevieve".

Yes. Yes, of course I will, said my heart with a plangent thump each time that bolt struck, particularly so today in this blind transcription—this memento, more evocative even than the photo, too, apparently lost.

The gun prodded me, elling my lower back at each step from the nestling of its makeshift holster. I neared my crouched daughter, who had impatiently bent to clutch a sympathetic bouquet of pathetic impatiens at a house-flanking and fallow flowerbed, but when she grabbed the stem the flowers erupted in an anarchic cyclone of moths fluttering jerkily like white and off-white petals tossed into a violent updraft. In her grip: dead brush, a brittle little wrist under some splayed waifish hand of the undead. She rose under my waiting palm. With my hand gentle upon her nuque, she looked up at me. "I just thought it would be nicer if we had some flowers."

"I know," I said, swatting at the directionless confetti of moths. "We're going to go ring the bell and tell them what happened. I doubt digging up their flowerbed would have made a difference."

"And if no one's home?"

"Well then, we tried."

She turned it over in her head. "Okay." And we climbed the steps together, in the irreducible unison of her two quick, conscientious steps to my every one. "Ew," she suddenly squeaked, lifting her right foot, under which lay the Q of a lifeless and eyeless mouse, iridescently eyed and ringed by flies that shimmered prismatically within a rare patch of sunlight like lively baguettes festering around a dull gemstone. They angrily dispersed when I dismissed with a sweeping kick the vermin, and the inscrutable feline eyes upon the ledge narrowed, followed the plopping end of its sharp trajectory, where the clouded congregation of flies quickly reconvened in terse communion.

Oh, were we but players in an Aristotelian allegory! I might not have been so obtuse, in regards to the prickly monitions so conveniently planted, the ominous cues so blatantly laid out that even the novice novelist, cave-blind and suckling still at the teats of Symbol and Foreshadow, would relegate the crumpled drafts that bore them to the spewing volcano of his bustling waistbasket. When no one beckoned after I rang the doorbell, I should have taken the opportunity to tuck my baby underarm and whisked her away, back to the road and the peripatetic life to which we now belonged. This, of course, was real life, and so compelled was I by Genevieve's pleading gaze, so oblivious that I never granted a mote of credence to such omens, raising my marionette fist when she gestured to finally knock at the door. Even the fatuous two-line sign taped to the door:

These premises protected by an
(sandwiched here by the text there stared the stock image of a facetiously ferocious feline face)
ATTACK CAT

the sort of the gimcrackery peddled at flea markets and novelty shops as knowingly precious, kittenish kitsch, registered particularly in its curt alpha-pictorial third to me as the incondite work of a hurried palindromist, eager to capitalize on the murine fear of his meek audience's meek audience. And this sign, too, a warning I should have heeded. The door, anticipating my inevitable third act, acceded by opening under my fist, and at the slightest crack of daylight a mewling clamor clambered, fumbled through and scattered at my feet. An agape-filled and agape Genevieve gasped and clasped her hands at her chest as the mingling hangers-on, a stragglng smorgasbord of taupe, tabby, calicos—mottled, matted and emaciated all—littered the porch. Cats stiff-legged, hind-raised, rib-rubbing our legs in a graceless display of slovenly salespitches of tawdry companionship. And to Genevieve I preempted, "They already have a home," and pushed open the door. "You stay right here."

Inside the door, standing upon a revolte peninsula of dingy-shored linoleum tattooed by fur clumps, I called out to no response. Upon the sea of shag there floated the flotsam of sparse living room amenities one would expect—mismatched davenport and recliner set facing a coffee table, television, bookshelf, endtables, antennaed all by rogue fur or pimped by dust and dander—but upon a central coffee table there spread a kaleidoscopic disarray of scattered photographs.

Everything in between the modest furnishings was heat, an unrelenting heat, but also when I stopped to listen a drone rose, emanating from somewhere at the end of the hallway. A low moan joined the drone, getting louder as I advanced through the corridor. Louder and hotter, the stimuli swelling in concert. I neared the noisome doorway, eased the revolver from between my back and

waistband, and as though I was relieved of some pinching linchpin, I suddenly sensed the slightest unraveling upon its removal. I sidled woodenly up to the doorjamb, I raised the gun, tight now at my chest. A whinny, a splutter, an agonized groan from within osmosed through the paneling and at my back, into me. My pulse quickened, my heart cockled like butcherpaper an embossed map of my twitching breast around the handle in my grip, and I eased the hammer back with my thumb. The chamber ratcheted, its grooves tugging at my shirt like the fabric had been ensnared by a toothed gear turning, spinning, pulling me involuntarily forward...before I continue, I'm going to vouchsafe that I have long known the vagary to madness as a bloated organ swinging overhead, so suspended by a tenuous, stinking ligament. And the threat always looms that the passing glance of Death's scythe will sever the grotesque pendulum, raining upon my head like a ruptured piñata the detritus of delirium.

Among my earliest lucidity, I recall when as a pale-shinned lad wading through a blueberry thicket, I happened upon a small burrow under brambly cover wherein there yin-yanged a duo of rabbit kits, purblind and mute and abandoned. They instinctively huddled and quivered as I pushed aside their cover. Without thinking I snatched the darker of the two; it pumped in my closing palm like some clonic human heart. I had no desire to harm it, but by the palpitant palpation I felt an inexplicable compulsion to make a fist...my grip slowly tightened...the bunny disappearing, swallowed up in my palm, reduced finally to four heaving tufts of black lanugo sprouting between my fingers before the rabbit's silent fright bestowed unto prepubescent me some perverse intumescence. And so engorged with this feeling of divine power was I that had there been an actual precipice at my feet, I'd have been blind to the abyss under my own bloat. In retrospect I've come to realize that had I yielded then to the prodding winds of impulse at my back I might still be clawing my way back up from that deranged nadir. Thankfully a vicarious claustrophobia struck me when I felt meek paws scrunched up and scrabbling against my hand, and I immediately replaced the kit next to its brother and mercifully dropped a few overripe berries at their mouths.

I silently pleaded with the universe as I ran home to forgive my idle meddling with the unspeakable curiosity of power. To atone for my haughty transgression against nature, I returned hours later with a bottle of warm milk, but the burrow was empty, save the mucous buttons of quashed blueberries.

Now in the spirit of parallelism I place this bulbous little berry at the mouth of the reader who mayhap thinks me a spot dotty. Counsel! Ready the defense! I've just with this brief recapitulation erected the plinth upon which carousels the "motive" you think you seek. Cease the riffling of documents in that dossier of juvenile records, psychological reports, journal entries, essays, my

curriculum vitae, etc., quibbling for the quiddity of my behavior; the raconteur hath provided for your convenience a heretofore unreported, undocumented rural episode to satisfy your feral queries. The apercu of my summery offense: It is the plenary power that comes with authoring another's fate, the propinquity of death to my ungloved hands, that has for as long as I can recall has threatened to loose my hold on sanity. I've long felt that to colleague with Death, even tangentially, unwillingly, would send me stumbling into some sort of pit of delirium, and I posit that as I entered that house I unwittingly eloped into just such a marriage whose consummation was a matter of marital obligation once I had floated over the threshold into the bedroom cradled in the arms of my morbid debaucher.

In the far corner there oscillated a space heater beside two frameless stacked mattresses that proffered like a burnt offering to the portable heater the desiccant body of a woman lying on her side. Both her hands hung limply over the mattress edge as though in petition to the disinterested heater god that in response only sputtered and shook its blazed grille the grim finality of its merciless verdict, No, no, no.

With leveled gun I neared the hapless scene. Upon the exsanguine specimen clung what could be presumed to have been a once-nacreous nightgown—apt apparel for this late-in-life honeymoon rendezvous—now bereft of its sheen, having sopped and later dried of her sweat, as a miasmatic bodice whose only suggestion of the passion with which it once burned was in its pale reflection of the heater's muted orange. Her shoulders were striped with the spaghetti straps of dehydrated oyster strips. And zigzags of indigo streaked along her legs in varicose deltas like gloppy childish renderings of sullen thunderstorms. As I got closer I noticed the gout-stippled mattress between her forearms smudged pink, streaked russet, and the linear glyptic spring carved below her left palm where blood had dried in the form of a sloppy suture. Her eyes, cloudy marbles cupped by blood-red crescents, stared lifelessly at her outstretched hands. From her mouth a rasped moan raggedly escaped at each exhalation.

I knelt before the resigned figure. She made no motion, betrayed no clue in what catatonic state she lay, but a calm washed over me as I surveyed the room to confirm that we were alone. I perspired madly, so I raised my shirtsleeve to sop the beads on my brow. Suddenly I felt the swag of the gun still in my hand as I unconsciously twisted it turning my forearm across my forehead. I quickly reset the hammer while the steel-rimmed, jet black and eyeless socket of the revolver shot a glare directly at her glistening eyes. I tucked the gun away. With the room free of eavesdropping busybodies, I flicked the switch of the sibilating white-hot-noise machine to interrogate my analysand in silence.

Her picayune eyes bobbed and blinked; beyond that she made no movement. Maybe a reflexive twitch of her hands. A few feet past them there ballooned the dun threadbare linen of a translucent

curtain where the window ajar allowed the influx of some slight cooling breeze to keep the thermostatic makeup of the heater to run in perpetuity, and in the undulating arc of light the billowing curtain authored upon the floor, there glinted a knife, serrated by a spattered parabola of blood. A surprising uprising of detective instinct seemed to take hold. A blotted trail on the carpet of perforated gills that marked the caroming bounce and twirl of the knife that had squirmed from her deathlike grip like a wounded, flopping fish expelling tiny droplets of blood. I picked up the knife and now my fatherly instinct kicked in. I cut a strip from the curtain and dipped the swath into the half-empty glass of water keeping vigil on her nightstand and turned to her with my dripping washcloth. With the inside of her wrist turned up in my hand, I revealed with a damp dabbing the almost superficial slit whose shallow rift echoed—despite an evidently towering mental fortitude—the depths of her physical infirmity.

The pitiful sight did not engender in me an empathetic sense of pity, however. This shamefully apparent attempt at ineffectual auto-abandonment perhaps predictably, given my predicament, elicited another response: “It’s a shame the metaphor will be lost on you,” I started, “but, you see, even though the curious cat, despite her improvident velleity, may just meet her end cutting across the road...” I flamboyantly walked my middle and index fingers parallel to the slit. Now came a demented grin, and a rictus that I couldn’t help contorted my face; I wiped away, perpendicularly from the slit, slowly following the major vein that halved her forearm. The damp cloth left a trailing pink smear behind as though I rived with it the subdermal bluish rill I traced. “...The surest path to the other side is unquestionably straight down the middle.” Still no response—tough crowd—and another wipe, this more disarming, erased most of the blood from her arms.

“Okay,” I restarted. “A stranger walks into your room and points a gun in your face...no joke...and works from your arms the dregs of a shoddy slicing to return some of your peaked luster, and still you remain soundless but for the impudent wheezing.” I wrung the slapdash cloth, letting its titian expulsion splatter upon the floor, and with the damp thing I veiled her hands like some extemporaneous and absurd funeral rite. Her darting eyes for the first time exhibited signs of life, if not the spark of survival. “I know you want to ask of me a favor. A request verboten by any arbiter of decorum,” I said. At that I leaned in, hovered over her. Along with the sweat from my brow I let fall from my lips through the geriatric stench a whispered peccadillo that spiraled into the vertical auricle unpinned to the bed, “But perhaps the provident stranger before you hovers above such arbitrary pretenses. Maybe,” I said, “all you have to do is ask.” I leaned backward, looked for the first time with some incipient sympathy into her eyes. “But then, maybe you can’t—“

“Daddy!” buzzed my little bumblebee, frozen mid-flight at the doorway, fingers splayed outward

at her hips, appearing in the hazy periphery over my shoulder as a quasi-Faustian dilemma—just what would I have to give up to taste that forbidden fruit? Oh, Death, do you see how you forgot that your bridegroom carries with him his invaluable valise, a baggage whose weight and influence supersede your own? I rose to intercept her, lest she catch sight of the moribund and mat-bound slugabed: a scene I feared would have inevitably made for the indelible image that would one day rob from her the very childish innocence that had enabled her to so obliviously brandish the handful of apple blossoms she had just plucked for the mourning news.

“From where did these come?” The air of my curt reaction still suffused with the stuffy quasi-Victorian bravado of my heartless tete a tete performance, I lost grip of the last bit of composure onto which I’d been clinging, for one moment, at the sight of the roseate petals, the flattened flora she held out, as I remembered their place in Starla’s letter but forgot just how common they are in such rural environs.

She rose on tiptoe. Circumflexed eyebrows pointed toward a ruffled finial of curiosity above widened eyes attempting to catch a glimpse. “Is she okay?”

“I need you outside.”

“Sorry,” with which she followed with ostentatious volubility, “did you tell her?”

“That’s enough of that.” I gave the shushing gesture with one hand and collected the flowers with the other. “I’ll give her these. Now let’s go.”

After a series of pleading “buts,” she assented, “Alright.” She turned around and we walked down the hall together. I stopped under the lintel of the front door and knelt to her level.

“Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“Is that what death smells like?”

“What do you mean?”

“It smells like hell in there.”

“Now, Genevieve, that’s enough. I’ll be out soon.”

Instead of returning immediately to the bedroom, I sat upon the davenport in the living room to pore over the aforementioned photographs laid out across the table. Pictured were the woman down the hall—I recognized immediately the dour eyes even in the countenance of a younger iteration—and her apparent innamorato, in most pictures scrunched happily against her bosom with his hand in hers, the two of them forming a cordiform link. The photos covered a significant span of time, and via the desultorily disjointed timeline of tesserae I witnessed the couple age and grow young and age again

throughout the scattered mosaic. I gleaned from them that this house was perhaps a second, or, and I shudder, a reclusive vacation escape—hence the scant furnishings—and, somewhat charmingly, the sunken truck in the drive had begun its methodical descent ages prior.

A little handwritten epistle made for the middle handmade pistil in the effluvial flora of this funerary arrangement. A final farewell and explanation I failed to glom, but as this is no encomium to a suicide (stifle your snickers), I'll simply recapitulate that as penance she had holed herself up in the room to suffer some sort of penitential exposure (the heater, I suppose; these post-mortem goodbye messages are notoriously difficult reading for the living) over the guilt she felt over this John's passing. Survivor's guilt. I conjecture that she found the knife at some point in the insufferable interim before entering that great blinding light but lacked the physical strength to sufficiently incise the intaglio paraph upon her wrist that would effectively punctuate her otherwise anonymous letter.

I looked up from the touching tract, and through a forsaken and fuliginous pane, cordoned from the world by a mullion and transoms lichenous with tiny cracks in their blasé glaze of beige paint peeled, fallen, heaped in myriad curled flecks along the sill, I watched my generous Genevieve, the benevolent hegemony seated in the shaded throne of her bosky realm, the bowered bole of a towering oak, as she extended a handful of masticated snack mix to one malnourished kitten and then another. The bucolic scene, silent and bathed in a grimy near-sepia, brought a tear to my eye, recalling a halcyon vintage, of clattering projectors strobing images onto tattered screens, of ancient rustic photographs, of a platitudinous daguerreotype—contended kitten lazing in her lap, the cat's meow, the bee's knees—just ripe for pithy kindergarten-poster captions about caring and sharing.

Infused with this sentiment—whipsawed now by the assiduous pull of a reaper grim and gentle tug of my seraphim—I re-entered the room, unholstered my gun, and I lowered myself into a chair I spun toward her and placed the gun atop my knee. The bloody cloth now lay in a heap on the floor below the detail I somehow missed during our first go-round. She eyed at the end of her outstretched limb a single annulate finger, a lone branch crooked just above the others, where below the knot of a knuckle there cinched a ring, elegantly austere but worn to a cement-gray that might under expert scrutiny betray her age. She averted her ringward gaze as if to petition the gun for mercy.

—A prolepsis: “No. The answer is no, and now you know why.”

—The paralipsis: “I will not be bringing up the gun.”

—The paralyzed ellipses of her reply: ...

I leaned over the arm of the chair and dropped the petals before her nose. “My Genevieve offers these as sympathies for a life cut short...” and from before her pleading eyes, upon my patella, I slyly crafted a

turnstile of dexterous fingers to rotate the revolver away from her face; I continued, "...but I cannot offer this," to her ghastly visage.

I eased back into the chair after exhuming from my pocket the letter from Starla. "I received this this morning. Our now entwined plights are not so unlike.

Ckol,

The walls here are drab. I have nothing to do but think. And there is no one to save me from my thoughts. Thoughts that maybe you were right after all. About everything. The last time I saw your face...I should have the most precious muse in my arms. I should be writing odes. I know I will see her again one day. But will she be older? Will she recognize me? Do I deserve to know? I don't know. I allowed this. I strayed. Yes, I do deserve the pain and darkness of this imprisonment.

I need to tell you. And I don't even know if you've received any of these letters or calls. I pray that I did right by her in this. It's all I can do now. Pray. To pray I did my best in my condition to find the right spot. It's such a beautiful plot. I just know you would agree. It is secluded from the rest of the world. There is a lake behind that will positively shimmer in the summer. A young apple tree right there. I can see it blossoming like a fountain for centuries where the golden path starts. Damn this impulse to poetry. Poetry has died. What can it hold for me now? Anyway, you should know. You should have helped. But I could not wait any longer. I tried. No matter what else happens, I do hope we can meet there one day. I've begun to give up hope that you are coming. I have begun to fear the worst.

Mom will be over later. Maybe tomorrow. She thinks she will take me away, but the doctors say I am not ready. Not yet. Perish the thought, but do you suppose this could be what divine intervention looks like? Do you think that together we might have avoided...

(On a second page) Of course I am a fool to wonder such things. Please delay no longer,

Starla"

(Despite the crushingly elegiac tone of domestic failure, its most disconcerting element was the letter's conspicuous abridgement, the jarring foam-wash non sequitur of the sudden second page (Starla neglected a clear method of pagination, though by the relative brevity of its forebears one could infer that what I held as the second page was probably penned at least as a third, though likely no more) after the rising philosophical tide at the end of the first. It was immediately obvious that someone had tampered. But the unwarranted effort of her unwanted editor had succeeded in the redoubling of my

troubled tracking, in dividing a singular focus into the duality of love and hate. What message had she meant to impart with the missing middle? And what of the implied message that was floated by the craven expurgator caught dipping his filthy hands in the pristine mail stream? Had the answers forever eluded me, I can at least assure you, Starla, and you, Reader, that from following the remaining clues did we all uncover the beautiful plots of our longing.)

“I sit here before you a humbled man, both blessed and burdened with a resplendent child who, despite my best efforts, has begun to exhibit a troubling inclination to impropriety in her mother’s absence. I trust that I needn’t explain to you its effects on me. Not that most of this is of concern to you,” I paused for the reflective effect of sympathy, picked back up for the sobering business before us: “So here is the deal. You will save us the time we’ve lost in this crumbling abode by intimating in some manner leads toward any halfway homes, sanctuaries, asylums in the vicinity, anything, and I’ll do what I can to arrange the reunion with your Dear John.”

Blinking once for yes, twice for no, she gestured that if we continue in the direction we came we will soon happen upon some such facility. I rose and nodded solemnly and stolidly slipped the revolver back under my belt while watching her plainly plaintive eyes, for the moment watered with supplication. A moment baccate with empathetic possibility, each unbearable choice leaving a bitter taste in anticipation, and I attempted to pick the most palatable—I just wanted the issue buried. I stood before her and lowered the dynamometer duo of my conjoined fore- and middle fingers, finished with their flouncy bounce of pedestrian predestination and now laid down as a loosely braided rescue rope flung haplessly into the parlous and clammy water about her resigned right hand. “Take it. Please.” The gravitas of the grim scene crushed out from my lungs a heavy gasp to match the genuine lachrymal leak that had started when I read the letter. “I don’t know the particulars of the covenant you’ve made with God while here...now I need to you squeeze...but I believe that with Starla as my John you can see we are in similar straits. That all we have left is prayer. All we can do is pray. Please. Now let me feel the depths of your despair. Show me the grip loss has on you. Harder.” And while her grip on my fingers tightened, I prayed aloud, she silently, each for some divine intervention of mercy, until finally her grip loosened, fingers fell by the wayside, and her eyes, petulant under a brow furrowed in exasperated incredulity at the beginning of the prayer, had closed under the debilitating exertion of her anguish made manifest. And her head shook in the land of Nod.

From the cut to the chase, as they say, with Genevieve again fastened to her safety seat, we were set to evacuate the premises. To the reader, familiar with and clamoring for the application of Chekhov’s principle concerning the introduction of murderous weaponry into a narrative, let it be

known that the marauding cat killer into which Genevieve and I reloaded ourselves did in fact go off when I attempted to gun it. It cracked loudly with one sudden and sonorous backfire, to which I as driver was bemusedly impervious, after which we thankfully hopped from the gulping divots undertire and rocketed in retreat, right into the thick of things that constituted the driveway.

Minutes later, amid a sparse collection of cottages, among a checkerboard of farmed fields, with that troublesome warning symptom of automotive ailment fresh in my mind, before us there sprang up a rustic little service station, where an amicable attendant decked in denim overalls performed gratis an examination in search of the cause of that awful racket while Genevieve perused the colorful racks of bauble beside the register inside. My examiner studied inside the car's gaping mouth, illumined by the uvula of a lantern he had hooked to the hood, turned with the aid of a grease-stained rag this knob and wiggled that protrusion, then sliding on his back to gauge the underworkings, finally played the proctologist with his hands and one brave eye at my muffler. He stood and wrung his hands with the rag before tucking it into his front pouch. Akimbo now. I initiated the inquisition, paraphrased here in a heterodox back-and-forth format, with something like:

And? I inquired as the car's guilt-racked father over some oversight or negligence.

—Well shoot, he couldn't seem to find what mighta made 'er kick like that.

Was the vehicle at least serviceable?

—Let's see here, to replace this doohickey would run me a couple hunnerd or so, plus labor, that doodad was in a purdy bad way, but he could get 'er into the garage right quick.

(Fearing perhaps that in the diglossia of our correspondence, some discrepancy over the meaning of "serviceable" may have arisen,) I clarified, was the car drivable?

—Oh, sure, he s'pposed t'wernt nothing to worry over for quite a bit yet.

How much would he take for his services?

—Shucks, he didn't even do nothing really.

Would he at least allow me to at least replenish my fuel supply...and what for the bibelot hanging from my waltzing daughter's fingers?

—Oh he guessed a quarter'd do.

A quarter? Cramming a fifty-dollar bill into his hand, I wondered, by any chance, might he be familiar with the location of a nearby residential building of some dubious repute? I was uncertain of its exact nature or appellation, but...

—Apples? Why yes, yes, there were apple trees close by to the place, he confirmed, but also he didn't know the name. I must of meant the infirmary.

I supposed that I did.

—It was just over yonder in fact, 'bout five-minute drive or so.

Over yonder, I pondered.

—Yessir.

Infirmiry? I must confess that I started at its mention. In my initial employ as paperboy, the local infirmiry served as housing specifically for the likes of battered wives and abused mothers, who, like vampires secluded from alfresco excursions, roamed the halls of their communal mansion, for all practical purposes invisible to outsiders. Forbidden even to a harmless, bicycling youth, attempting to collect his meager subscription fees, to approach for fear of upsetting the fragile balance of their sanctum. What could have caused Starla to seek asylum in such safespace environs? The mechanic's winsome old-timey demeanor certainly did its part to assuage my crazed lapse into dementia, and despite this unwelcome tidbit, sans-elucidation, he had shared, I sincerely expected in the near future a return to his shop, when I, Starlinked at last, would allow him finally to complete his greasy rounds, to ply his surgeon's charade, before bidding him a fond farewell—appropriating with sincere reverence his charming patois via the simultaneous psychosomatic gesture of a "Take care, now," punctuated by the staccato ballast of a firm and vigorous handshake—before skidding joyfully away on the wheels of my convalescent transport, its triumphant trio in tow.

Back on the road. I had stopped when through my tilted mirror I caught glimpses of Genevieve in the back as she yanked out from a mangled plastic case the entrails of her purchase—according to the cardboard backing I picked up from the floorboard, some sham skeleton key with a dotted chain threaded through the professionally awled oculus of its anodyne skull. What I suddenly realize now that I have unintentionally withheld from the reader is that after consciousness had slipped from our recent acquaintance of resigned repose, I foolishly took the liberty of procuring for Genevieve, as meed for her resolute compassion, a small, ornate lockbox from atop the woman's vanity. Foolish because it forced me to equivocate to my daughter that the old lady had agreed to gift it—truth be told, a proposal to which she offered no dissent, vocal or otherwise, when, after searching in vain for some loose key that might open the rattling box by rummaging through sparsely jewelried drawers, scanning the marble top, I looked into the mirror to ask the marmoreal supplicant lying among smatterings of sympathetic flora if she'd any objections to such reciprocation. Now as bent over as she could manage within a web of seatbelts, Genevieve worked away mangling, forcefully inserting into the keyhole a pinchbeck trinket of silver that later exited arched and disfigured. She sighed and let the quondam key drop as a useless pendant swaying at the bottom of the chevroned chain balanced across the chasm of her frustrated and

upturned palms.

I readjusted my mirror, set with a flick of my wrist the car a-rumbling, and told her we could pry it open when we returned home. “Okay,” she replied, dropping the keychain onto the backseat and the box into her lap, where it duteously lay like a precious pet under her hand. I pulled back onto a paved road, which bore over budding cracks countless squiggled lines of tar that blazed in reflection of the still-low sun something like golden hieroglyphs, divined there by some eager deity and translatable by only me. I dropped my visor and basked for a moment in the trite sentimentality that our course was guided and sanctioned by a higher being who splashed along the path before us an irrefragable message of hope, pulling by its promise a nascent driver and his reticent passenger.

Poor Genevieve had borne the weight of disappointment in these matters as often as I, so she betrayed little of her feelings about uncovering Mom and rejected the role of astrologer in our vacuum. I didn’t dare inquire. She had no memory of Starla, and I was hesitant to describe her in any detail for fear that when we did find her, the years adrift would have eroded her so, that the moiety we lassoed would only render my stories of Starla a naïve mythology, constellated for eternity in a vesperal firmament but crashed as smoldering and scattered meteorite upon our earth. What pained me the most was that Genevieve had already learned to adopt a philosophy of cynicism, that the easiest way to avoid disappointment was to temper her expectations. And this I could not rectify alone.

Oh, but it wasn’t long before those contented feelings about our crusade gave way to fatalistic malaise, which returned into me a scintilla of apostasy when the sun, enveloped by a swarm of clouds, ceased incandescing my tarry, Starry cipher. We had just come upon some sort of outskirts village when Genevieve suggested I stop to beg for directions. This penumbral road we traveled was hatched by the striae of cul-de-sacs and graveled driveways, each marked by eponymous street signs—Jack Placard Place; Lanes John Goodson, Rodney Longfellow, J. Baddad, Richard Quick; Don Le Nard Blvd...I cannot guarantee the accuracy of all these names—and at the behest of Genevieve, we took a curious left onto a sinuous strip to beseech the brain of a Mr. or Mrs. Moebius (she found the name “loopy”), but after myriad ogeed turns with nary a door to rap, we mysteriously found ourselves back before the very signpost at which we started...the reader has of course suspected correctly that I’m having a bit of fun, projecting my frustrations, when in reality no helpful denizen answered the doorbell at the stately Moebius residence.

Fortunately the need for any assistance subsided and the clouds relented; I was struck suddenly by an afflatus in the gleaming letters of a sign that sang in lexical iridescence: Luther Place. I turned in immediately, and we entered through an open gateway just as a station wagon, capped by a blinking

amber light whose cord snaked through the opening of a window ajar, trundled ceaselessly toward us. I reluctantly ceded onto the grass to permit its passage, dutifully reciprocating the oppugnant, opposing driver's salutation by turning up my palm like sprigs atop the turnip of my steering wheel. As soon as he had passed, however, I gripped with my greens that dirigible taproot and spun us directly back on course, watching in my mirror the letters in the U.S. MAIL decal adhered to the wagon's rear meld in a compacting rectangle, vanishing as the car disappeared behind a parapet of towering shrubbery.

Gripped once again by a sweltering swivet, even the rote task of parking vexed me within these purlieus of fruition. I embarrassingly brought the car to rest at such a shameful slant that I nuzzled with the corner of my fender the rectilinear block of screeching hedgework that guarded the lattice under a portico. Turning my head to reverse out from the bush, I caught in my periphery the distension of two horizontal slats in a nearby window, a crooked opening that had smoothed closed by the time I parked the gearshift. Was this dismal display of driveway incompetence so conspicuous? Had my arrival been announced by some surveilled force of tele-transmitted security? Or even long before?

I fumbled with the radio dial, less a turning than a convulsing upon it, in search of some agreeable music channel to entertain Genevieve while I left her alone in the car—given two options: to require either Genevieve, to one, inside a locked door ignore some wayward, skittish busybody who might meander too close, or, two, to openly weather the potentially crushing rejection of a sedated and wayward mother who had wandered too far, what choice did I have? The vertical marker jerked along a spectrum of polyphonic dreck, sponsored messages and crackling static before it caught some caterwauling prepubescent, replete with androgynous wail—likely to my baby some coeval glamour boy crooner, based on the celerity with which he elicited from my backseat a “this one, this one”—to which I, again, had little choice but relinquish. Just one more reminder that my little girl, who used to defer at every turn to the sagacity of Daddy in matters of arbitrary taste and artful decorum, was beginning to unfurl her pinions upon the winds of individuality. Oh how she used to spider out, feet atop my feet, hands buried in my hands, and contract in giggling hysterics—if a benevolent God ever deigned to reveal himself, I daresay he fluttered out as the butterfly of her unabashed laughter, free of the scourges of pretense and self-consciousness, and gracefully careened into these hands, the desperate, fragile hands of a leprous lepidopterist—while we waltzed and bebopped as my gramophone's stylus navigated the dust-free, lustrous grooves of Starla's forsaken records.

I watched through the passenger-side window, trying to again catch some movement in the blinds. “Darling,” I said. “May I ask you something?”

“Okay.”

“What is your favorite color?”

“Favorite color?”

“I am going to be right back. This is important: keep the doors locked until then. No matter what.” The blinds snapped shut, jiggled. I pulled my door handle slowly until the door finally unlatched and gave way. I counted the windows from the door at the portico.

“Be quick, Daddy. Please.”

I wobbled around the back of the car and opened her door, kissed her forehead and unbuckled her belts. “This is getting small,” I said, stretching them over her shoulders and the vees of her nearly-freed arms and finally over their distal armrests.

She, nervously pawing at the lockbox, told me: “Green. Daddy.”

My little girl was coddling me.

I kissed her again, this time on her precious fingers, one emptied hand at a time, before depressing the lock on her door, recalling those cue-bearing fingers as they impressed ripplelessly into the pool of verdant baize that filled her miniature billiards table. It was then that I, having never given the matter any consideration, impetuously impawned at her request that very same chromatic preference just before she, effortlessly torpedoing with the crude implements of stick and ball, had dislodged and scattered from the Pangean triangle a clacking, varicolored rack of rondures rolling in an eminent display of ephemeral cartography. That our subsequent games had devolved into rollicking contests of Sink-the-Six was merely a memory; she had by then shelved the cue and developed a fatuous, although not wholly unpredictable, infatuation with all things pink—catalyzed no doubt by ubiquitous toy dollies with their hot convertibles parked in the stalls flanking swank beach houses, all effects trimmed or washed in various gradations of blanched red, save curiously for the merkin-free, slitless mounds they’d concealed with frilly, pink culottes and the airy O-less tips of their mounded chests pink-blouse-shrouded—and she was aware that I was aware of it.

I firmly closed her door and gripped the handrail as I ascended—my jagged spirit seemed to mirror the staired path underfoot; I gathered a little more of myself at each step, intuiting, internalizing Starla’s presence, which now had an opposite effect from the anxiety with which it had come to infuse me, attaining at the top some sense of a planate demeanor to match the level planks. I raised my hand to the doorbell, but before I rang, a buzz trilled out from some nebulous spot between the door handle and the grated face of an intercom satellite. The door opened. Once inside I beseeched the bespectacled sitter at the other side for the whereabouts of the central office. The hunched geriatric slowly raised her head until she could regard me through the bottoms of her bifocals with what seemed twin swelling

pieces of wet onyx, in the methodical, mechanical process stretching taut the threads, I'd mistaken as a lanyard, of saliva that bridged the corners of her mouth to her tweed jacket lapels. A strange déjà vu of obligation struck when I instinctively dropped to a knee in search of something with which I could depurate her cheeks of the spittle splashed upon her crumpled face once those tensile threads thinned and split. Wordlessly she labored the pen from the book draping her lap, and with an upward crane of the wrist, pointed the nib with such a tremulous hand that she had just as likely traced the orbit of some chimerical indoor planet as she had presented to me an office door.

A wadded cloth lay under the halo of a lampshade beside her divan, but when I reached for it, it evaporated, swallowed up by another's handy sleight. I looked up to simultaneously catch sight of that cloth falling into one of two hods at our magician's feet and the prestige of a pristine cloth, plucked seemingly from thin air, with which he made an ostentatious spectacle dabbing the woman's mouth and wiping her neck. The other hod had "US Mail" emblazoned on its side, and I unthinkingly leaned toward it with my outstretched hand—I glimpsed at once within the shuffled sea of letters the breaching dorsal quarter of an envelope bearing an obscured return address but the unmistakably effeminate penmanship of Starla's apparent confidante Greta, with her oblong, unconnected tittle hovering haplessly above the spongy exaggerated curls of her esses (of course I'm familiar with her handwriting) that addressed her letter, "To Miss St..." (these ellipses trail off in imitation of the edged slope of an intrusive envelope that obstructed the remainder)—but that too: swooped up by his damned fingers. From my vantage under his nose, I detected in his twisted face equal parts pity and contempt as he tucked the letter-saturated hod tightly at his side and pulled the lamp string to illumine the word-find box of letters spread across the woman's lap. I lowered my head, cursing him under my fiery breath, and for his final trick (or perhaps the result of some phenomenon explained best with the teleology of my imposed will), he too vanished, taking his leave in that shroud of smoke billowing out from under my tongue. The silhouette that had phoenixed from my metaphorical conflagration of invective was propped with one arm against the jamb of the opened door behind where the disappearing man stood, and from that new, nebulous figure came the declamatory edict, "Do not touch the residents," and, "come in."

I descended into the velour cushion of an office chair while she moseyed slowly behind in a transparent attempt to assert a supercilious air, to project an unassailable specter of authority moving around her desk, garishly riffling papers on a clipboard, and she said, "As far as I can see I have no outstanding applications."

"Applications?"

“Forgive me, but after those maladroitness exhibitions both outside and in,” she, now a pixelated outline against the sun-lined slatted blinds, paused, “I don’t know if you are seeking residency or employment. Either case, there are no openings.”

“I’ve come to initiate the release of one of your captives.”

“Pardon?” she crossed with a curled finger her pursed labra as if to retard her laughter, seating herself, leaning haughtily back in a brazen, compunctionless show. “On what grounds?”

“From these grounds.”

Leaning in, forearms folded upon her desk, “You do realize, Mr...? No? Very well, then. Our residents, the, ahem, captives, as you have so eloquently deemed them, are all here of either their own will or of course the Law’s.” She leaned back. “If I might be so bold, how has she...a she I presume...abused? Of course not...and how has she reached out to you? How has she cried for release under the great weight of her shackles?” This time she sniggered a little.

I slid only the final—the dubitably second—page of Starla’s letter across her desk, under the unflinching weight of my fingers. She scabbled at its corners, but I shook my head.

“I see,” she conceded. “But I don’t even have your name. Here,” sliding an index card she plucked from the metal tooth of the clipboard toward me, “why don’t you write it down, your address, phone number, any salient contact. E-mail.” I shuddered. “Protocol shall from here determine the whens and ifs of her calling for our new Prince Charming, if she is in fact a resident. Of course I cannot say for sure.”

“Where is she now?”

“Please,” she sighed, steepled fingers at her chin. “Surely you know my response. You must. Even immediate family has to abide protocol. There is not even a ring on your finger. Even if there was, how would I know the reason that this, this Starla, is it? Oh yes, that the escape from which she sought refuge here is not from your hand? No. You must go. I can’t have you riling up any more of our residents.”

I weighed the consequences of bringing Genevieve into the equation, but opted instead to simply submit to her my request for contact information. Lifting my pen from the card, “I shall return.”

“I’ll ready the shrubbery.” She snapped the card into the grip of her clip. “You should not have made it this far anyway.”

Although I suspect she referred to my unauthorized entry into Luther Place, I had not considered until that moment the possibility that the powers of the universe, a consortium to which she’d tried her best to exude the pretense of membership, had colluded to stay my quest. It was no matter, of course;

the consideration had immolated like a spent matchstick in my intestinal flames of ire, so stoked by the quean of this castle. And I was in fine form when, closing the office door, I again spotted through hallway windows the fleeing prestidigitator, the silent jester, the inimical knave, the fool, carelessly toting through a transparent backstage passage against one hip his stacked deck of cards.

As he walked through the door, returning to the lobby, I arrested him with restrained request: "I apologize but I need to retrieve my letter from your stack. The matter could not be more urgent. I accidentally dropped it into a public mail receptacle but there is a dire error within."

The feckless factotum, a mime now, continued to amble away, miming his indifference.

"I can describe the envelope. I neglected to include a return address. Please, my good fellow."

He neared a door brandishing some sort of futuristic key-card pulled from his sleeve (I am not making this up)—the time for courtesies had expired. He quickly swiped the card through the cleavage of a reader mounted beside the door handle. I stopped the door, slamming it closed, as he started to pull it open. "It reads 'To Miss Starla.' Now in your postal parlance: Return to sender."

The door handle in his grip slowly twisted back into place; his brows arched. "Starla, you say?" slithered out over his forked tongue. A furtive, toothy grin crept across his face; skin stretched over the lunar hemisphere of his chin, but it was the defiant, provocative sheen with which his widened eyes glistened that made clear this was the epistolary culprit standing before me, that I had stumbled fortuitously upon my grotesque Bowdler. This was whose untoward disappearance act I had unwittingly played the reluctant volunteer.

I recoiled. I stepped back, he in, scuttling through the re-opened door. I grasped at my pockets, my back—I only intended to impress upon him with a flash of steel the gravity of matter his own nature seemed fit to deprive him—however, greeting my groping hand was naught but the familiar trench down my back slicked with perspiration. In the interim he intimated, by flashing a dark contraption of his own that dangled from his beltloop, that his expanding repertoire included at the ready an ability to conjure with a simple push of the button a cavalcade of law enforcers.

"What would they tell the pretty little thing in the car," he said from his position of safety through the narrowing interstice of the closing door, "about Daddy getting dragged OUT from a loony bin?" Click went the door, almost muting the sick laughter.

I stood sort of dumbstruck as the smug smile from the other side of the glass stretched his nasty pulsing nostrils. Inside my guts expanded, whipping and flailing, lashing and licking the meat of me like a squid enraged, inflamed, but I had steeled myself against this burning efflorescence and did not attempt the door. That he had developed some puerile puppy-love feelings for Starla—that I can forgive; how

could I expect otherwise? But of the litany of offenses for which he needed to account—firstly to his employer: for the protocol that must exist regarding attempted fraternization with “residents” that he so brazenly flouted; to the law: tampering with mail, obstruction of justice, among others—the charge least likely to stick, that of inciting the riot of my mind, might just have proven the most pressing had I not left my revolver on the nightstand beside the old woman’s bed that morning—a fortuitous peripeteia for which I was later most grateful. If the prehensile tentacle I swung backward had somehow suctioned its handle, there is no doubt I would have splattered across the mural behind him whatever viscous fluids sloshed about his vicious larynx.

Oh Starla, why did I relent so quickly? Even in that moment so rapt with rage was I, I simply could not deny the truth of his warning. Of course I schemed, I machinated, I plotted scenarios of hoisting against him the reciprocal petard of his own expurgation and then considered the possibility that you weren’t actually even there, that these two buffoons had conspired to play tricksters to the poor wayward schmuck. But carrying these roiling innards, I walked by the word-finder, with her cheek pinned by angular digits pen-laced, stormed out the egressed doorway through which I’d entered and down the stairs, passed our car, rounded the sandstone quoin to glimpse in the back a golden parquetry jutting out from the edifice toward a lush dell, but not before forking around the bole of a tree fountainous with a pendulous gush of the delicate, pink-white flora with which it littered the pomed promenade and only partially obscured the glimmering sprawl of a distant lake.

Chapter IV

Believe me when I tell you that the net gain of metacognition is but a cheap replacement for the perspective gained in reflection. If only you could see my rubicund wrinkles, the wan fingers that wring from my pen this inky imbroglio of my ping-ponging exchanges of mental faculty that day! The rhythmless bouncing back and forth of madness to sanity. The conductor in me would like to think that at each occurrence my Jekyll was Hydden—and vice versa—at each clangorous caprice, leaving in its atonal wake a tiny fragmented note of me, Barb had accreted piecemeal in a perverse sort of symphonic accumulation of superfluous movements. That it is only through a stoic consumption of her that I may restore a sense of totality, of harmony. Before the reader infers incorrectly any ideations of perfidy: no, my opened window has not let in with the night sky some intractable love bug—Barb is no substitute for Starla, after all—but perhaps it allowed some quixotic mosquito to needle me, inject my memory with the big life of Starla rather than *les petites morts* of Barb, whose coming, much like my transformations, was hammered in with a cacophonous staccato upon the table, under palms of desperation rather than love.

I did, in fact, open the window against the chill of the outside. Sometimes on nights like these, when the air sees fit to rush in, I deign to the simple, bucolic poetry of letting it tousle my hair, press my shirt tightly against the neglect of my formless physique. However, my visitor finds the ceaseless wind—no matter how gently it blows—unsettling; I can see a sparse dimpling like goose pimples where her bluish figure bends to its tickling chill. Parts of her contract, others spill and dangle provocatively over the edge of my table. So, although she didn't ask, I have just returned from nearly shutting the window, leaving ample interstitial space to cool the room. And while there I spied across the way, below us, near ground level and seemingly cut out from a vacuum there hovered a single, soft trapezoid of amber, a phantasmagoric polygon of life from a neighboring house I'd presumed long dead before Genevieve and I settled into these cramped quarters. I could make out shuffling feet, linoleum squares and the helical cluster of a telephone cord, bunched up at its nadir and suspended under its stretching slack. It rose jerkily as its controller cloaked him- or herself in the blackness of wall and meteorically dropped below a streamlining coma when the dark figure darted back. She, as I could then see, peered through the window, leaning against the pane with a makeshift visor of flattened fingers pressed at her brow,

holding the receiver vacantly at her cheek. I couldn't see her eyes for the hand, but in her mannerisms, the nebulous figure, the endearing strands that cowlicked the spread of her salty hand, I detected something hallucinatory, a Starla-like apparition...the window now the missing-child quarter of a milk carton, though its simulated visage rendered an aged Starla far longer in the tooth than this concerned countenance bared tonight. Could it have possibly been her mother?—a woman whose post-Genevieve life so mirrors her daughter's that she's been conspicuously absent since we parted at the hospital—no, it mustn't have been.

I've tranced the possibilities into three discrete options. Were it Starla's mother...to call her attention, to offer salutations, to aspirate a Barb-tinctured halitosis at each grief-ridden syllable as I inquired what she knew of her daughter—no, I couldn't, and there would be no reason anyway for her to investigate such an alien neighborhood at this questionable hour. More likely some ruffian had usurped an abandoned island to conduct transactions of an illicit nature—narcotics, harlotry, etc. of which it is best to steer clear—and perhaps the cord I spotted was actually the hawser intended to moor to the floor some unsuspecting voyager who'd heeded the Siren's call. Surely that was a cellular telephone device in her grasp, surely the light emanated from a planted lantern or fixed flashlight; there cannot be scintilla one of electricity sparking that place, from which I've not seen evidence of any life since moving in next door, save the potential criminal activity that I see now it might nocturnally house. Most likely she was simply an illusory projection prodded by a guilty conscience, a failing of my own illicit aide and a frightening reason to question my current mental state. I backed out of view, watched the light and life extinguish, disappear, disintegrate into the black fold of night. I sit here again, stirring a more balanced color back into Barb's chillingly squamous complex, returning to my extemporary retelling; I apologize for what must amount to incendiary and fruitless aside.

So then where was I? Oh yes, Barb, about whose origins you know quite enough, and probably quite honestly as much as I. So allow me finally to touch on sidereal Starla—oh I beg thee!—about whose celestial body so many planets in this lexical orrery revolve but yet so little has been divulged. I've left the poor reader to nibble what romanticized orts have flecked from my lips, to glean what he can from an excerpted billet-doux just to get any sort of read on her. My pen will inevitably fail in such heavenly pursuit, but if I don't attempt to construct the celestial light of her likeness, this whole composition will disperse in the reader's mind as cratered and aimless planets untethered by the gravitational pull of their central desideratum. In considering the heavy years between Starla and Barbara, however, I invariably return for a moment to recall the once-mentioned, now-remunerated bar patron at my side with the salacious listing of his mnemonic regalement and his admonishment of

piscine pith, reminding me that while I have time, I need to take this opportunity to get my affairs in order.

Chapter V

(But first: Why have I so blithely glossed over such a detail as the location of my gun? Certainly I had known since we left her house that my return was inevitable, but it wasn't until the oppugnant behavior I endured at the hands of the infirmary's lackey, when I impulsively reached for and came away with no weapon, that I so distinctly recognized the imminence of my second visit. Even with a temperament leveled by time and the company of Genevieve, who was now seated comfortably in the passenger seat, I had vengeful designs of complementing his legerdemain with my own heavy handful of steel.

I keep coming back to palindromize, to right the left sign. Maybe:

BAT. TACK. CAT. TAB

(Battalion o'tacking cats, tabbified)...

Though when we again crossed our lone ebon victim, rent from his fine feline cavalry, he lay inert, gradationally mottled, entrenched as a dustgray, single pet balancing over the parapet of the trench something akin to a quartet of bayonet limbs. But I think, despite its pedantic adherence to the implied syntax-strictures of its diminutive universe, this would be too much a stretch.

I looked over, where Genevieve sat turning the lockbox over in her hands, investigating the confounding dimensions of its tiny keyhole. A certain unease took hold of me under the synergy of the deceased kitty to my far right and between us, Genevieve—studying the mainour bequeathed to her by the codicil I authored—who had remained, since I tapped at the car window to let me in, and placed at my side, mum about Mom.

At that very spot—or perhaps some other—long after the cat has hardened and then softened, pummeled by rain into the earth, decomposed to aspic, its flesh deliquesced about those thin bones until they too have crumbled and flown away as wind-borne dust, there should stand the emended warning sign, now obedient to its palindromic paradigm, which I've replaced and, to my satisfaction, reimagined thusly in morbid majuscule:

“DEAD ATTACK CAT,” TA-DAED

Merciful Death.

Genevieve peeked out through the window, unwittingly looking upon the future site of my satisfactory marker but consciously noting of the dust-stripped deceased: “It almost looks like a tiger now.” Somewhere on the other side of the globe there skulks about the trunk of its treed quarry a hungry Bengal, utterly oblivious to this loss of its distant stripeless cousin. I decided that this obliviousness, too, should be my Genevieve’s level of concern for the harried youth in Asia—oh Ckol, will you never tire of these silly equivoques?

Which brings me to my diligent artist: if you’ve completed the triptych (or even if you still toil at it, relieve yourself at once), I’ve for you the onerous but ambitious task of capturing with your pencil that precise instant when Genevieve’s recognition of one of my idiotic puns cascades down her face with an exasperated force, when those obdurate strands of auburn, that budding would-be ringlet that corkscrews defiantly away from the rest and flips below her left eye and accentuates one of those dimples that bracket her mouth, begin to sway within that parenthetical sigh so delicate, so sublime, that the gesture could not possibly be mistaken for insolence. To Myshkin, his prisoner on the scaffold; to Ckol, a limn from which his soul may hang. Take great care in rendering her rumpled brow; it has just lowered, shading her eyes. But don’t shy away, don’t obscure them with your eager, flattened lead. They are opaline and cosmic, twin crystalline supernovae; they are exotically floral, with radial flecks of violet, of hyacinth, of periwinkle stamens bursting out from pistils of onyx. Snap not the pencil between your frustrated fingers; it won’t be easy, persist, do your best. The gentle slope of her adorably porcine nub of a nose has crinkled ever so softly. Her pursed lips, a shade darker than her skin, protrude just a touch in a feigned indignation to retain a rabid chuckle plotting its break from the immurement of her cheeks. Make sure the sunlight catches the scintillating plush of angelic down upon at least one of her soft jawlines. And don’t forget the faint ocher constellation upon her left cheek of freckles, seemingly spattered like watercolors splashed there by that caudal brush of hair swinging with that sigh, that dulcet aspiration, the inspiration with which this description commenced. Use one of my photographs of her as a model. Unfortunately I have none of this exact gesture, so feel free to take some liberties. I would love to look down at your creation and see that it is good.)

Chapter VI

Ahem. There was barmaid Brynn, of whom I remember as the nether regions of innerthigh she coquettishly exposed in fleshy flashes—her skirt flitting about her pirouetting waist—espied in secretive, smoky glances over the moist elliptical tori of emptied beerbottle lips. I remember Ursula P. with her crazed jungle-gaze, a piercing pair of jasper conflagrations carnally inflamed while back-pinned against the balustrade below a bedroom door we never even breached. Of Richelle, those limber and labyrinthine legs obliquely flanking my heaving diaphragm. Zelda in the contrails of broken blood vessels that marked the trajectory of my fingerpaths, racing from under her shoulders, strumming the chords of her ribs, converging at the small of her back and diverging onto her suppliant and supple gluteal pillows, dimpled and writhen gelatinously under my manipulative palms. Mona, in the Siren wail that seeped from her lips when my entangled fingers tousled her sculpted coiffure, tilting her chin skyward. The oral history of the fluttering hummingbird that coursed my insides under the coarse nib of Frieda's tongue, tickling a rigid pubis, at her behest, during her monthly periods of sanguinary self-consciousness.

My indelible image of Starla, however, remains to this day, of dainty, red shoes below a peacoat wrapped tightly against the wind as she tiptoed to earth. This is not to suggest that the tale of Starla and Ckol is not enlaced with similar concupiscent delight, but rather because the lucid image of her I have impressed like refulgent phosphenes upon the insides of my eyelids is of such a different, transcendent nature that I've no longer the desire to accumulate the prurient ephemera of others. I curse those careless nictations and untimely rousings that shunt her, though only momentarily, to encephalonic backrooms, the blind-mind concourses to which I must inevitably course when I lose her.

The scene: I had only just seated myself upon a park bench outside the university. I was slumped in the excogitation of didactic responses to hoary and hackneyed freshman fiction—it seems anymore there are but two avenues into incipient drafts: one, in the same manner the author invariably began his day, stamping out a screaming alarm clock (unsurprisingly set incorrectly the night prior by a presumably pitiable protagonist) before waxing polemical on the tedium of daily routine, or two, by exhausting one's lexical reserves in the detailing of scenic minutiae, burying the *in media res* lede that would render the preceding super-floridity superfluous—and embroiled in a blustery battle with a wind that insisted on crumpling a pyramid into the unbraced length of student paper between my hands. It was one such

instance when a paper in my hands bowed, or, I rather fancy, curtsied toward me in deft deference, that it happened. I was at once awestruck and stuck, although the only evidence I have of Cupid's judicious missile having pierced and shot through me, caroming and skittering end-over-end across pavement, is the momentary glimpse of it that I caught as it came to rest, when it appeared as an amorphous silhouette, a soft arrowy shadow adjacent to a sleek shin that dissolved quickly in the quiver of a flexed calf, melted in the heat of a translucent ivory limb descending the steps of a freshly stopped bus.

Step by step she ambled earthward on vermilion shoes—demure kitten heels that demanded the caress of a petting hand—that arched and cupped the soles of her feet but exposed the delectably shallow scallops above, like two delicate madeleines dipped in raspberry glaze to awaken me from the torpor of those pedagogic dolors. Creeping with my eyes up the white hosiery that enveloped her legs, in that short stretch between red strap buckled below her ankle to the sliding hem of her woolen peacoat, I glimpsed not one molecule of naked flesh, only the nacreous suggestion of it, but enough still to enrapture, to capture my fluttering heart in the iridescent net, the flashy flexion of an erumpent knee peeping out after each footfall, brief flashes allowed by the hem flirting at the evanescent cornices—scintillating and lambent bends ablating within her internal heat, hinting at net-sheen freshets of whitewater cascades before emerging again, accreting in the frigidity of the external world we luckily shared—of secret thighs until, when at last she landed, did she tamp and smooth the hem with immutably sensual downward caresses. I had yet to take the rest of her in, and already I found myself scanning in vain for some run, some loose string, a papilla hung from that tight white surrogate skin I could pluck—I throbbed in my once-painless wound; I ached with gape to fill—and at once I felt no desire more pressing than that of getting inside of her to retrieve that arrow.

And I wasn't alone in my rapacious caprices: the same wind that so befuddled my primaveral workspace clutched and whipped the tail of the belt, stitched into her coat, that she had loosely slipped through a loop at the opposite side to clasp the coat just below her breast. It dog-eared the corners of her coat and flailed strands of hair she struggled to tuck behind an ear. Against her side nestled a fashionable tote bag whose strap draped her opposing shoulder, diagonally halving hidden breasts—breasts for which I confess I yearned, by ineffectual machinations, in failed telepathic evocations, via vain appeals to omnipotent lookers-on, that some blessed vagary of warmer weather could seduce the disrobing of at minimum the overcoat to expose just a shirted hint of their hypnotic trajectory.

But how, Reader prudely protests, does this description differ from those above? I hear you, I do; the fault, as I see it now, is mine, of course. I see in rereading that I have oversexualized the moment. Please bear in mind that what I am giving you is an account filtered through a million replays

and infused with a lace of unbridled carnality I can no longer untwine. If you yearn for an objective picture of Starla that day, rather than the fecund feting with which I've impregnated her coming, perhaps there was preserved by one of the ubiquitous security recorders on university grounds celluloid-strip recapitulations of this aleatoric confluence (simple research along with the clues provided should suffice in determining a crude time- and videoframe with which to begin your search—I am not doing all the legwork for you). You'll see there was nothing at all indecorous or rakish or unbecomingly provocative in her attire, and that all these hypersexualizations are entirely contrivances of my own reimagining or projecting, such as is the wont and want of the virile voyeur presented with the apotheosis incarnate of his every idealization so serendipitously. Starla stood out to me then and now as an anachronism, a primordial beauty, a singular glint of understated sex amid the ostentatious galaxy of dismissed nubility—showy, eager beavers all, raccooned eyes, bared and bejeweled midriffs, vampiric labra, pectoral pendants dangling in the ever-expanding valleys of their low-collared rebellions, flush in the atomized sheen of eaux de toilette avec noms de plume like *Midnight Decadence*, par exemple—that piled out of the bus around her to vie in dim scintillation for wayward, sundry attentions.

Perchance your red-handed footage has caught her arrested, pulled from the throng by the call of a wee bonny colleen—not that I've taken to name-calling—plaid-clad with her dahlia 'do done up in the pull of pony-tail and whose legs swung in carefree concert under her too-tall seat at a lemonade-stand styled storefront, from which she helped peddle individually bagged confections and wind-riffled pamphlets. Watch, as did I, or watch me, watching her, as Starla slid a hand into that tote. She produced a billfold from which she pulled some denomination large enough to prompt a wimpled nun—in the habit, I'd noticed in previous observations, of lording over the budding but diminutive entrepreneur her motherly superior salesmanship—to loose her hands from the pious pose the canvas muff hugging her waist afforded her to count out at least four paper bills in change. But when she tried to force the money and one of those pamphlets onto their gracious benefactor, Starla simply raised the hand whose wrist continued to battle the fluttering peacoat corners against her thighs to wave the offering away, saying (because I would later have some experience with these exact words from these exact lips I feel my lip-reading can be trusted), “Oh, no. Please.”

But instead of immediately parting, the two exhibited a disheartening repartee, exchanging more than brief pleasantries. Starla continued to comb her hair and coat ends, almost nervously, as she talked to the both of them, finally clasping the wee one's hands, nodding and imparting perhaps some cheery encouraging valediction, before bending tantalizingly away from me—for a fleeting moment I noticed in the reflection of that full moon in apogee, a sight for which I'd been silently howling, the first

slight ebbing in a tide that had until then unceasingly swollen my insides—to moisten with her lips the octopus of Sister's hands she had gathered up in the pearly seashell of her own. However, by the time she had departed from that table of trinkets and neared me, when she blithely let her purchase drop into the tote that revolved, like my mind did, about her hip, when she then dipped a fishing hand inside, I quickly neared high tide. My interest piqued, my Everest peaked. The tensile fabric of her bag stretched and danced over her scrabbling fingers within. She stood right before me—both of us erect in the proximity of our provocative positions—raised up on slightly inturned tiptoe now and seemingly oblivious to the benched lecher before her. She worked a corner of her bag as though she reached over the rim of a carnival game, sloshing the water inside to grasp a slippery gold fish. Unbeknownst to her, however, the taut but invisible fishline she yanked had tethered her wriggling reelers to a hook ensnarled within the denticulate grin of my convexed zipper.

My heart and mind raced to keep up with my eyes, hopefully darting for a glimpse of what sort of gilded fish she had hooked. Depending on the vantage granted by your camera angle, keep in mind when judging my demeanor that you may be able to distinguish the exhumed article before I. As you studiously watch her satellite hands ascend their transcendent torso, turned slightly away from me—the wind at such altitudes erased the fleshy crevasse that halved her hair, emitting wild strands in a crazed dance straight out above her peek, to shadow her downward, vexed eyes—forgive my unabashed gaze its foolish hope that she'd, with an exhumed notepad and pen (Heart, be still), submit to the ineffable impulse of jotting down for her adulating audience-of-one a phone number, address, coordinates to some remote hollow where a rapturous amour could blossom—even a slapdash restraining order would have seemed a divine edict...Her face was for a second literally alight in concentration above her cupped hands, and although I felt an immediate tinge of aversion when I finally distinguished that the mouth-obnubilating wisp filling the space between her divaricated hands had linked her tulipped tongue to the embered scepter of a cigarette dangling betwixt two fingers, a raging conflagration beneath my loins curiously paralleled the flame-as-contagion of the match as it passed a spark from its fiery tip to the hitherto unburned phallus she carefully balanced between lips, sheltered with hands. And it was, I believe, this duplicitous nature: black lungs in white breast, a church mouse who'd soon after patronizing that holy institution so insouciantly strike a Lucifer in Sister's proximity, from which was born my enigmatic but ignominious fixation in eternal earnest. Zoom your camera in on my lap. Do you see the pale fig leaf that shields the toothy hillock of my Edenic garden? It is no trim of sprouting toadstool to be trimmed, nor is it an invasive cropping of weeds in need of cropping—it is in fact no fatuous series of silly antilogies nor some epistolically endemic contranymic equivoque at all—it is a cleaving origami

bouquet of hydrangea, an involuntary crinkling of one doddering and useless student's paper concealing the involuntary offering of a ruthless teacher's priapism.

She leveled the gasper between her lips; she sucked in with an exasperated air. At this point, if you can, snail the reel, zoom to the cigarette in her mouth: The packed circle of tobacco fibers at the end orange, individually at first, the filling in of stained glass fractals into one homogenous hue, the lighting one by one like incandescent bulbs before coalescing suddenly as a red-hot chandelier collapsed upon itself, and she dragged through that paper cylinder the entirety of burning little me as a vicarious accumulation of glowing atoms. Oh, could I have caught the crepitating riot, the slight drumroll crackle of my bits ablaze that preceded my smoky waltz within her, which was, unfortunately, but a transient temptation, an ephemeral, billowy bliss, curtly interrupted by a light cough when she sputtered in spotting me—the physical, immanent and benched me, now—entranced by the nebulous me tumbling from her mouth in the expanding concentric rings of a cloudy apparition that she pierced with a perfected steam engine blast of smoke.

Pause, pan down her lapel until your monitor frames her left hand. See the spent matchstick that hangs suspended by a curled middle finger against the arch of her thumb? Now play in slow motion: watch her fillip the blackened matchstick, propelling it as a wind-weaving and somersaulting comet leaving in its wake a faint coma to commemorate its erratic arc. Has ever there been captured in the history of film a more graceful exhibition, such gymnastic prowess, as was displayed by that smoldering stick so effortlessly flicked? Do you see where it made its soft landing, sunning its charred and frail remains in the grass between two nodding dandelion heads? You may flag this point, my good gentlereader, but only as a reference, a footnote; do not to return to it later, lest your voyeuristic declivities thirst so voraciously that the utter debasement of a grown man desperately pattering on hands and knees upon chlorophyllous shag like a frantic husband over a lost wedding band beckons irresistibly. Because that is precisely what you'll find, minutes later, after the crowd had dispersed, along with a (possibly inaudible) cantankerous snipe I hissed at Sister—successfully cutting short the sanctimonious segue she attempted (unquestionably inaudible) by bridging my literal search for a perfect match into a spiritual search without one—of which the verbatim exchange remains an unpreserved lapidary gem for which I will eternally regret not transcribing the moment I returned to my then manifold and folded and bent and slat-clung paper-laden bench. Like I imagine of the proverbial relieved husband, hunched in contorted victory at his redemptive nadir, I carefully plucked my delicate desideratum from the ground, studied the symmetry of the thing as though I was looking upon its alien and sublime likeness for the first time, forgave its imperfections (the flame had scorched a bit farther

down one edge) and adored its anomalies (the manufactural errata of a red-ink smudge, a microscopic sliver missing from its untouched tail), kissed it, toyed with the notion of letting its nearly emancipated carbon fleck off and dissolve onto my tongue, before I thought better about such crass desecration and folded around it one of those useless, loose pages I had to peel from the bench and then tucked the dialectical partnership into my pocket.

Let us make use of your techno-memory capability and my photo-memory capacity and return to the moment she launched the match...to the barely discernable, cough-induced convulsion that twitched just once the plush isosceles in her neck when she finally looked directly at me...For the first time, I caught of Starla-guardant's two eyes just one in full, though microcosmically: a contracting pupil radiating in refulgent blue and floating within an off-white purgatory with a slight twitch barely perceptible under the study of an avuncular ogler. It exhibited two successive movements. The first was an ineffable animation of its overall ovality, as one would see in another conversing, smiling or frowning, emoting, framed by the faint reflexive jerks of her brow, lashes, the alluring flash of a wrinkle that cracked from the outer corner and suggested—as a dutiful waiter tending to my famished palate—the saccharine crust of a temporal crème brûlée upon which I could sample, beginning with the delectable swirl of a sugary pinna, nibbling my way back to the mouth-watering glacé of her eye. Second was its instantaneous desert (take note, my orthographic slackers, of the singular S of the homonymous intimation), whereupon it was replaced by a waving mane, itself out of sight before I had time to react, before my gourmand eyes had made their languorous trip to the main course of her lips, whose silent pleas I might have read (so deafening was the bubble of infatuation she imposed!), to respond when she called out, referring to me, as I would later discover, by name, no less (We'll get back to this.).

So gutted was I, so butted by that fortunate filter, the slavish captive of her fingers and brushed by the lush velour of her tongue, that I could have only tripped upon my words had I attempted to employ the rough-hewn finish of my own tongue. Instead I sat unconsciously pumping the stem of my bent bouquet, and I watched her confetti the ground with the scepter waving next to and in concert with the irrepressible, inveterate sensuality of her swaying hip. And a world sprawled between us, ever growing at each stride. With each flick of the wrist she cited the map below from the transcendent firmament she traversed; ashes fluttered to the ground like mercurial obeli to mark the ruinous and pillaged towns—there lay forsaken Brynnton, there the forgotten Village of Richelle, there buried the high-rule legend of Zelda, here coruscated in the course of its fluttering fall the bloody invasive dot of Friedania—I'd dutifully trample one more time if only to erase the callous cartography laid between us.

Now, if you'll be so kind to finger the button with the solid square.

Chapter VII

Now I have been a protean sinner, but accomplished murderer is not among the hats I've donned or doffed—I ask that the reader leave the game of semantics to the author—so you can imagine the conundrum presented when I entered the horrific scene greeting me when I reentered the old woman's room. Allow me to reiterate that I was fully aware that my merciful choice—literally a choice of mercy, lest the reader suppose due to the prevaricating nature of the author that my daughter's attempted transfusion of sympathy in the unorthodox operating room of our stalled automobile had been rejected—from earlier would require a return visit, but by the incisive farewell warning spewed forth from that infirm(ary) troglodyte thief, RE: guarding my vulnerable Genevieve, along with a pang of compunction that addled me as I lay to sleep that night with fits of insomnia—I turned to my side, and into my curled pillow below pushed the pulse of my neck, so that all I could hear or feel was its rhythmic crunch like a clock ticking down or the footfalls of an arctic regiment marching off to some nefarious undertaking—I was cajoled to hasten my plans.

Allow me to backtrack a moment to apprise the reader of the few relevant happenings from where we left off and picked back up in regards to the benevolent assisted suicide:

—A message from Genevieve's babysitter impatiently beckoned in our absence with a flashing red dot on the telephone set base—a blubbery, burbling, maundering combination of apology and alibi peppered with stuttered blips as she wily attempted to exposition herself as one in possession of desperate backstory in order to negotiate for a continuation of the modest stipend I would offer for her continued services.

—When I returned to the dinner table brandishing a hammer and flathead screwdriver, Genevieve pulled toward herself and cradled the lockbox she'd set beside her milk glass. She told me she had decided to keep the box, and thus the mystery, intact. In case our precarious path ever brushed up against the precipitous fall of Sue's side (I'm paraphrasing here; remember that she had been spared the messy details of the whole euthanasia contretemps.), she thought it best that we could present the “damn thing in one piece” (note the quotes).

—I began to construct a letter to captive Starla, begging that she approach the head mistress to appoint a time for our conference. I considered from the outset attempting to cloak from mendacious mailboy my identity with an approximation of Greta’s affective duality of puerile penmanship and jejune genteelism—“To Lady Starla of Luther Place,” I inscribed upon the envelope—but realizing midway through that now, thanks in part to the suggestion of truculence I exuded in his presence, that not a single missive sent her way could hope to elude his kleptomaniacal hands, so I balled up and tossed the letter, compounding the scree of crumpled lapilli littering my volcanic receptacle.

—As last resort I began to phone Greta but terminated the call when prompted to record a message; the lines of communication between us could be construed as tenuous at best. Therefore not only could I not count on a forthcoming exegesis regarding the method of her successfully transmitted epistle, but, given her distaste over Starla’s and my relations, I could not trust that she would refrain from in some way plying my pleas of desperation against it.

—At the onset of the aforementioned insomnia, I finally returned the babysitter’s call. At the end of this call, though, I did leave a message, stating that in order to reenter my good graces she must be at my door by four in the morning—to manufacture some necessary custodial me-time to deal with the presumed mess that awaited my cleansing touch at Sue’s, I’d fabricated the auspice of a lucrative prospect of employment, with an inflected wink-wink implication that her compliance just might necessitate an increase in her pay—or the search for a new sitter would invariably commence.

Now when plying your judgmental mores in regards to my manipulation of the poor thing, consider the consequences of the alternatives—of again leaving snoring Genevieve unattended by naught but some misplaced faith that nothing would rouse her before I could return, of hesitating in the retrieval of the gun (I had forsaken any possibility that it lay still untouched upon the table), or worse yet, of requiring that she play accomplice in Daddy’s noir mission—and certainly you can see I had no choice.

Of course the sitter, drowsy and frowzy, arrived at a timely quarter to the hour, a light-knuckled rap with one hand and a few advertisements she’d torn from various catalogs clenched in the other. She held them out, tried forcing them onto me, apologizing for some transgression or another, going on unsolicited about pixel quality and surrounding sound among other putative television selling points for which I’d no use at such an hour—if any hour at all—before I brusquely rent the pages from her hands and laid them demonstrably down. I drew back a chair and invited her to sit and calm herself with some chamomile from the pantry, told her I hadn’t the time nor interest to discuss matters of such flippant

frippery. That she merely had to await my instructive call and to allow Genevieve to slumber unperturbed, an AM deadline I'd honestly expected to meet. I daresay the poor thing, in some fanciful sycophancy that had somehow gone unnoticed until then, audaciously insisted that I should select for her the brand and proportions of the television box (with which she would corrupt my baby's fallow mind, she conspicuously omitted). And I would be remiss if I neglected to add that if I allowed her strange sales pitch to continue unabated, I sincerely believe she'd have worked up the gall to ask me to compensate such frivolity. I interpolated her gauche series of requests with the instruction that though I expected to be home before Genevieve rose, she was to work on her reading, plainly laid out for her convenience, if and when she awoke. And that about my absence she be informed simply that I was tending to urgent business unexpectedly arisen, in the dark of night, as if the inherent gravitas lent by those contiguous prepositions would make more clearly severe the urgency of a matter I knew Genevieve would have perspicaciously attributed to some peremptory peregrination of my Star-led crusade anyway.

Even under the temporary camouflage of darkness, I was thankful that the inchoate mausoleum of her dilapidated house lay unseen from road-borne busybodies, that my shaking car might enjoy the anonymity provided by thick woods, had dawn soon begun its accusatory ascent during the presumably odious proceedings. Now when I earlier opined with rueful air about my status as accomplished murderer, the operative was "accomplished" as much as it was "murderer," for I'd arrived clueless about how to beguile even a callow team of forensics, whenever it would inevitably arrive to scour the scene, that mine was a tangential role, a bit part, less than deuteragonist in a scene with two players, that my off-stage cameo was merely that of the gopher, quietly placing the requested prop between scenes at the behest of the silent actor/director before stealing away to more noble quests.

The loyal audience member recalls that a previous cutaway episode concluded with our pre-adolescent hero in flashback at the metaphorical cusp of madness and the literal cusp of an emptied burrow with a chilling discovery, where noble intentions were thwarted...but by what, by whom? Did the rabbit kits survive? How had they disappeared? And what manner of beast sent those blueberry innards ripping through their rubbery skins with its careless and cavalier step?

But with the advent of our current episode were such mysteries denied their well-meaning discoverer. The fate of the old hare was bare, irrevocably connected to the burst mulberry mush of her own doing, splattered along the wall in a grotesque rusty claret plumage, and in a queer sense, wondrously pavonine in the fine guilloche of its feathery intricacy. It was the moment I tasted the acidic cockroach of marmaladed English muffin—the tasty yet hasty sustenance with which I had broken my

sleepless fast—ascending as scuttling bolus the esophageal peak at the back of my tongue, that I realized how misguided my ambitions were to dabble lightly in the dark and euthanasiac arts.

I was exceedingly careful in exhuming the revolver from her mouth, first removing her cold grip—still as robust as when I first measured it—from the handle, and then, while attempting to avert my eyes, sliding from its burrow the swallowed barrel like an Arthurian heir of authorial air skillfully plucking his embedded sword from an unyielding stone. I worked as hunchback—in order to keep from inadvertently touching anything with my other hand, I kept it hovering instinctively above the operation, bobbing and flinching, to grasp the slippery rope of centered gravity that would not hesitate to vex my balance if I'd lost it—removing this seemingly mile-long tube of steel at which—I chanced an unbidden glance—her empurpled lips rooted woodenly like a starving infant. Suddenly, however, at what should have been the crowning dislodgement of my royal triumph, the gun's foresight hooked on a canine—a curious defense mechanism inherited perhaps from some ancient bestial ancestry—and I reflexively looked downward, at her rubbery lip that had draped the barrel and peaked over the snagged foresight, at her unflinching and vacuously ghastly eyes as I yanked free both her hold on the revolver and my hold on balance. I compensated with a thoughtless forward thrust and braced myself with an open palm that grazed the sickly stick of her newly died, freshly dyed hair, a blood-drenched snarl, snaring with my fingers a glutinous mass of matted strands connected to, ripping open the exit wound that had erupted on her shattered cranium.

(I shall spare my chaste readership the vivid visual and refrain from expatiating on the fetid fragrance of the gruesome rose that had suddenly blossomed before me—though I've been unable to either prune it or remove its stuck thorns from my own memory—and assume that a breathy intonation of a gasped gape-mawed appreciation has twice passed your lips.)

With the benefit of distance you probably waver along the spectrum that ends at one extreme in morbidity and at the other jocularity as you envision my graceless face-first fall onto her bloody corpse as some irreverent brand of black slapstick—in hindsight even I might be cajoled to confess to a bitter titter when recounting the scene—but I immediately snapped up from the bed, the lolled head nodding once stiffly, brusquely at the unintentional marionette yank of reflexive escape before falling back against the dried muck of a pillow's cracking pellicle case, eliciting with its thud an unnerving liquid-squish, and I rushed to the bathroom feeling that the internecine battle waged in my mind had at once tilted decidedly toward a demented abyss. In my attuned state the gun crumpled upon the porcelain edge of the sink counter. I turned the hot knob, and the water gushed forth first as frigid needles against my hands, against my arms that I soaped and scrubbed frantically until the cascade warmed and

warmed and finally scalded. I allowed it to punish, to numb my ruddied arms until their vein-ridged integuments clung rubberly like piebald wetsuit sleeves below which an effervescent pink wash eddied and gulped drainward. I let the sting fester along, let the steam billow up from my tender, harlequin forearms.

My revolver, that uncouth and forward French kisser, appeared miraculously unmottled by the overlong and twisted kiss that only by the forceful intervention of its disgusted father had it concluded. I picked it up and sat down upon the rim of the tub—as if to impart some twisted wisdom, to kibitz paternally on the fine-line distinction demarking consented penetration and assault, all the while wondering on which side of the divide I had allowed myself to legally fall—below the cloud of steam, turning the gun in my hand, gauging the weight of the thing for what seemed the first time. Could I in my mania detect the puerperal avoidupois difference issued by the bulleted stillborn delivery? Oh but how, if anything, I swear it felt heavier than before! I breathed directly onto it: Ghosts of identification emerged as sinuous smudges, dissolved into the argent perimeter around the grip, the gestational cylinder, the cervical barrel of this androgynous tool, as they would upon each of the chambered agnate fetuses, infused with the microscopic and genetic traces they'd inherited from their father, that they would invariably carry even after they'd long gone, flying headlong into the far corners of the world.

Let us wax philosophical: From every incidental contact, every passing glance, light pat, impatient drum of the fingers, at least one of the two abutting players will have transferred something of itself onto the other—in most instances a seemingly incalculable mass—and that other will, sans-scrubbing, bear obliviously the spoils of its innocuous filching. Everything has a weight. A matter that has been born. A balance that must be borne. My palm bore the revolver; the revolver bore the greasy residue of fingerprints, each a swirled mass—of a virtually undetectable, infinitesimal weight, yes, but weight just the same. Not all weight can be measured in ounces. My mind raced around the house, taking stock of all my careless contacts—the light switches flicked, the riven curtain, the hot water handle—identifiers I could never completely eradicate, if I could even identify then all—of the myriad cerebellar specks she'd so liberally sprinkled, of the emetic purge of an orange-tinctured puddle spilled from my inculpable insides and onto prehensile shirt and carpet fibers just begging to be frisked, interrogated, put through the wringer. The blood I just dropped into the drain had fallen as millions of tiny do-si-doing helices—some unfit pairings had doubtless partnered with intrusively rapacious crags of might-I-steal-this-dance gunk accumulated along the inner walls of pipework, butting in to disrupt the swift exodus. Investigators these days will leave no abetting stone unturned in their pursuit of damning evidence! And in the end there was the Atlantean weight my Genevieve would be forced to bear if one

sullied cotton swab in the grasp of some importunate detective could tenuously link me to the tenebrous scene.

So this then was my dilemma: how to best calibrate the Libran scales of an intractable distribution of immeasurable weight, so that even blind Justice could not detect my imbalance. I was not completely forsaken by Fortune, however. I ratiocinated, or rather rationalized, that I'd been afforded some time to contemplate the dealing with my mess. And Fortune had shone a fleeting light in that the house was so secluded, so forgotten that its exterior cover of foliage should stay any pestering eyes for at least the months before an autumnal crumbling would allow from the road a slatted view of the grilled domicile served up on a varicolored pilaf of seasoned leaves. Required would be at least weekly trips to empty the mailbox in order to quell any suspicions a congested receptacle might arouse in a dutiful mail carrier. But what of the bill collectors? To compensate for the added burden of the uninterrupted payment of her utilities, I might be forced to sever ties with the sitter to whom I, oft-afflicted by a parlous parsimony, just that morning implied the promise of a rather, well, relatively, lucrative windfall. But what then of the business of the suicide note left in the living room? Certainly she foresaw someone happening upon it; the possibility impended that she had ostensibly scheduled a loose appointment or neighborly visitor to install some contraption or repair another, inadvertently foisting instead upon me both a snap decision and its swift execution, for which it was becoming abundantly clear I hadn't the expertise to conduct.

I stood, I swiped the steamed medicine cabinet mirror, and into the cleared pennant I peered: at my shoulder, an epaulet of blood; upon my breast, a speckled badge of vomit—was it by my treasonous orders, had I in fact directed the insidious infantry that had imperiously marched within to scupper my sleep the night prior?—and in the tapered end there lay beside my foot what seemed a two-toned sphinx—off-white top, red-matted belly and limbs below—with its tail curled behind, rounded at the tip like a bloody eroteme that encapsulated both my riddled compunction and addled confusion. But it issued no enigmatic query when beseeched, demanded no answers; it purred some but prodded none. My visitor was simply one of her feline final-days attendees whose lower half radiated with sanguine tufts to contrast its fluffy white top. A blithesome monster affecting regality via austere posture, tonguing a blood-stained forepaw, offering by its eerie presence no free passage.

I'd no time for such territorial frivolity, however, and before my second foot had cleared the passively obstructive thug, I elbowed madly in the tangle of my sullied shirt pulled now up over my head. When I reached the bedroom, I tossed the incriminating garment into a corner and rifled through the drawers of her stained vanity for a neutral top, finally settling on an oversized, athletic gray tee

emblazoned by a lettering faded and cracked and illegible, most likely repurposed in retirement as casual nightwear. From a lax abeyance a-bedding to moonlight abetting, not even the stowed and lowly linen is immune to life's caprices, and as such must it heed the call to fulfill its duty: in this case, to cover (for) me. And for my part, I'd deign to apologize for the obstruction of justice into which I coerced the heretofore law-abiding and presumably conscientiously-objecting garment, but I cannot help but believe that, if privy to the alternative fate that awaited, the shirt would not have hesitated to spring up from the opened drawer, wrap itself around my torso, tuck itself in snugly under my waiting waistband.

I had resolved to erase the house and my problems by way of inferno. But because I could not risk a charred femur; a perspicuous, spidered dome; or blabbing, maundering mandible, with its mouthy lineup of cuspids and molars, inconspicuously presenting to some haunch-squatted and finicky fire marshal his cause for eureka, what had I to do but eviscerate from the evidence the most salient panoply of inculpatory tattlers: the tatters of the body. Forgive me the embarrassment of detailing the rigors I endured attempting to envelop it first within the creased sheet beneath her, and afterward with a black blanket to conceal the blood smears, and I shall forgo for the reader an account of her wooden limbs as they clacked and contorted like a swaddled and stowed marionette before I—half-bellhop, half-candy-striper, all-concierge—dragged the overstuffed valise through the lobby of her home, all the while calculating the time we had to take in a quick trip, perhaps a refreshing dip in one of the secluded, luxurious lakes that accompanied those bucolic and downright picturesque surroundings. On the way out I was arrested at the sight of the cradled telephone, a loaded image that at once reminded me to call Genevieve. I fingered the digits with the digits wrapped around the receiver—I had to keep the mouth of the suffocating blanket cinched with the other hand—but after one ring I hung up; it was still dark outside. The entire episode that mercilessly added years to my visage must have mercifully spanned, at most, a half-hour.

My baggage was of petite stature, and even with the corpse-concentric covering blankets she fit comfortably in my trunk—at least I heard no complaints. I'm somewhat ashamed to admit that the visual and tactile distance the blanket afforded had almost completely eradicated any sense in me that what I had dragged through the house and over the soggy, bumpy front yard, eventually heaving into the rear of my miniature hearse, was not so far removed from the state of sovereign being, perhaps not long before that even a vibrant dynamo, brimming with a vivacity snuffed out by a resignation to which, upon reflection, I probably should have been more empathetic. Did I mention when I found her that from the fist of her free hand snaked the string of browning blossoms Genevieve had plucked? And there they remained, or perhaps remain—what can I rightfully conjecture of their destiny?—wherever

she rests. I was more conscious of leaving them intact, despite that a thick layer of cotton and down concealed them, than I was of preserving her corporeal dignity as I positioned her stiff limbs like obstinate pipe cleaners about the circular protrusion of a spare tire but mindfully left the area over that hand—barely transitioned from senescence to putrescence but already engaged in a faux-fertilizing fusion with nature—to the best of my compromised abilities, untouched and undisturbed.

What a poor concierge was I! In my haste, I neglected to anchor the bag, and she leapt wildly like a planked perch, fished out but not yet plunged by the gutting knife, at each rock or divot my tires nicked or evaded—I just needed to find her a more welcoming watery home. While she was pounding about her cramped quarters, compounding my thoughtless travel arrangements was the fact that while I madly raced against a ceaseless moon there brewed within me an anxiety, owing to the fact I hadn't a clue where a suitably secluded dipping pond might be hidden. And still that aplanatic moon mocked me with its gleaming indifference, charging through tree tops, bounding effortlessly from telephone pole to pole, keeping ahead no matter how hard I mashed the accelerator.

A bit of solicited eloquence was once imparted unto me by a well-intentioned buffoon of the cloth (with whom we shall meet up later): The unenlightened tendency of certain defunct peoples' attributing to the sun's radiance the countenance of God was not, at least figuratively, misguided, because God is like the sun in that even in darkness His warmth sustains us; when He feels furthest away we are still illumined by His light reflected. This is of course paraphrased and I don't know if it was an apothegm of his own fabrication or something purloined from a pastoral manual of trite truisms, but (of course its origin is of little consequence, but I prefer to think he stole it, because) I was rather queerly warmed its quaint and atavistic brand of logic. And since, I've not been able to look at the moon without the queer consortium of awe, contempt and paranoia, all convening within in a compacted maze of cortical dissonance. I pulled off onto a small grassy parcel allowed by a curvature in the forest line, and the moon immediately halted, treading lightly in natatorial pose within a pocket of night carved out from the wall of shadowed treetops, like some jettisoned mutineer among the glinting crests of a starred sea, defying me haughtily to find by its silvery light a pool of my own. Out of desperation, curiosity, or even in search of some apostatical affirmation, I petitioned Sol's lunar excipient through the windshield shielding my sublunary plot, pleaded aloud to that catoptric apostle, my distant Gabriel, if it would deign to cast its merciful and refulgent light upon lowly me, so that I could spare Genevieve an orphaned childhood.

I can't imagine I need to confirm for the rapt reader that I received no epiphany, there arose no numinous symphony nor angelically supplied directive, no burning bush; but I thought: Why not double

down, commit fully to this pretense if I was to play the game at all? I stepped out, made certain each keyable entry to my car was locked, and followed through the woods a thin, illuminated path bullied by fronds and overreaching leaves whose venation collected in glistening rivulets the moon's soft glow that I blithely spilled on my way to a small clearing. I tell you I nearly collapsed—penitently, at that—when I realized that before me edged an ideally secluded, sizeable body of water. Here I collected both myself—just before a knee kissed the ground—and a stone before rising to study the rippleless black surface. Ominous like a collected mass of obsidian reflecting now the low fog so that instead of a pool I saw a gaping abyss, the monstrous mouth of a massive flue from which escaped plumes of hellfire below. Spang in the center, unobscured by the fog, smiled a parchment facsimile of moon—God's light twice removed now—attempting to wile from me with its delicate luminance a budding of blind faith, like a desert oasis to parched eyes. But I set aside the sudden propitiatory pangs I was suffering and heaved the stone toward the floating bulls-eye. The stone breached the surface—an abbreviated splash, a suckling gulp. Its descent halted suddenly, and it stood upright, only half submerged amid the concentric turbulence of radiating turpitude from where it gator-eyed the alien, pudgy milieu into which it had charged headlong with apparently misplaced faith. My spirit slumped with my shoulders, sunken lower than had my hopeful stone. I cursed as the Lilly pad of moon convulsed in silent mocking—doubled-, tripled-, quadrupled-over into wavering slivers of laughter—as the murky ripples of ridicule shredded its cruel countenance.

The moon again began to congeal as the puddle calmed. Suffice it to say, I was not quite in complete control of my faculties, and I drew my revolver and vengefully punctured the reflected veneer floating blissfully, arrogantly. Did I expect that it would wildly wheeze along the surface like a contracting balloon? That it might pop, expand? Do you believe that were I able to give a rational accounting for my every irrational action, my claims of momentary madness would bear even a smidge of verisimilitude? The shot roared through the silence like the sudden splintering crackle that announces a conquered tree's imminent fall. The plop of the bullet was drowned out in the sonorous echo, which resonated for an excruciatingly long while like the groping descent of such a tree. My missile mars, but my target emulated mercury: the circle of light I'd hatefully dispersed had indifferently mended itself by the time the faint smoke coughed up by my revolver had disappeared.

This terrorized tellurian returned to the car, castigating that pernicious satellite, the charlatan, lackey imposter who, I reminded myself—just as the reverend who so fiercely espoused its catoptric sheen—might emit a godly glare, but still does it revolve about the earth. I opted to wait out the remainder of its pernoctation, to let the day's events unfold under the adjudicative gaze of the definite

and genuine article: the sun. Perhaps I've indulged in a bit of revisionist history there in regards to my choice to wait, for the next point in this absurd series that I can recall was that the sun had suddenly popped up, blasting through the rear windshield to illuminate my front panel. The radio read a white-hot 6:38, or thereabouts. I snapped up, from a slumped repose where I myself had spilled onto the passenger seat just as had an embarrassing, dampened gout of drool. My left temple pounded. Through the trees before me I could just distinguish a jaundiced brick building, a storefront it seemed, as if in a dream. The pounding continued; arrested was I by the staccato knuckling of a police officer's hirsute paw upon my window. It foregrounded the gaunt, jutting butt of his prognathous protrusion and the twin argent lenses of sunglasses, specular specs concealing his eyes, deflecting the world's protestations for mercy by bouncing that whole aggrieved world back against itself.

How did I evade the prying imposition of my querist's chin? Why, by that dubious and time-worn tradition of a *deus ex machina*, of course, taking in this iteration the mercurial form of quicksilver wit, swooping in over the cop's shoulder, through the window I labored downward at his gestured insistence. And before he'd the opportunity to launch his own accusatory assault, my parry reflected back, directed at the authoritative interlocutor, slid off of my tongue into a series of preemptive, maiming thrusts: I demanded to know from whence came that plangent gunshot that had sent me into a trembling heap, afraid to raise my head, communing into sleep with the seat under the bunker of a dashboard. And why had it taken so long for someone of his detective ilk to canvass the area?

He withdrew some, dialed back the tough cop routine, apologized with some tepid warmth of credulity, and cannily wondered if I had been witness to any suspicious goings-on from my roadside vantage. While he coddled, I collected the crystalized sleep-spittle that clung to one corner of my stoic lip with a cocking thumb. Across my chin stretched my pointed index and below coiled the tapering cylinder formed by the remaining trio of curled fingers. The officer crouched enough to lean an elbow of his loosely crossed arms—my lord were they beastly!—over the fissure that had swallowed my window and I attempted to get a read on those eyes of his underneath the caterpillars that inched and teetered over the tightwire rims of his lenses. But of the disarming charm I'd hoped to find there, I instead observed its obverse twice reflected: my hand, in twin skeletal imitations of my revolver, silently fired away *pshoo! pshoo!* with every thumb swipe employed in the flaking off of the squamous crust of my slovenly sleep—I was suddenly conscious that I hadn't a clue where the meat of my fingerless peashooter incarnate lingered. And was my car sinking at the rear? Stinking?

To circumvent the lapse of judgment he'd hoped, with his calming demeanor, to cajole, I remained on the offensive. Had the store across the way been robbed? Had someone been killed? I

hinted that if this was the sort of lawless rampancy that marked the zeitgeist of this town, I would not hesitate to withhold the not insignificant fortune entrusted to me by my passed father (a trifling equivocation of relations, really, when one considers that I would not have shrunk from the unwadding for some bailish ransom any number of founding fathers, the colloquially current currency-synecdochic “Ben Franklins”—here I assume the argot of The Street, where such sublegal commerce with dubious keepers of the law is commonplace—at my discretionary disposal any expedient ombudsperson of Luther Place’s deployment might implicitly request to illicitly facilitate Starla’s immediate release, money which would presumably funnel into, trickle down to the community’s entrepreneurs unquestioningly unaware of this new money-injection’s unsavory etiology), a philanthropist with strong ties to the area, to be sprinkled about the community at my discretion.

Over the window, he seemed unmoved and asked how I knew what I had heard was in fact a gunshot.

I responded severely that this intimation of his that a mere trifling thunderclap or whatever else could have possibly produced such a resounding boom besides the familiar crack of the firearm—I WAS an American, blue-blooded, replete with cells of red and white and all that jazz, citizen after all!, oh my with these thespian histrionics—could have sent me to such an ataxic state was a gravely offensive affront. And that he’d be best served to save for his suspicions any person in the area who would suggest, at his exhortations, otherwise. And finally, would he please fulfill the promise of his civic duties by directing me to the nearest fueling station, preferably away from the strip clubs and brothels that were certain to thrive in such a seedy district, so that a spirit-sullied gentleman and his carriage might freshen up.

The officer peeled his shades methodically from one ear to the other, let them dangle from his fingers, over the window, beside my steering wheel. He’d malicious eyes. He patronizingly assented whilst those brazen eyes darted conspicuously about the interior. We both knew the only possible response with which I could have offered any inquiry regarding a lawful search of the vehicle. For reasons obvious to the reader, I could not consent. That he didn’t inquire, however, was no less concerting. He folded and pocketed his glasses and erected himself, curtly directing me through the village with a quick series of lefts and rights, whereupon I would find myself within the replenishing confines of a “fill-up station,” whose proprietor, he assured, could be most accommodating to vetting outsiders. I lawfully pulled away with a clicking signal and fastidious, fenestrated study of the road, watching all the while my statuesque interrogator shrink in my rearview; he stood imposingly in my lane, burning a hole through my license plate he’d internalized with his gorilla gaze until I’d stopped at

an intersection. I began my first right turn, watching as he sauntered into the woodsy patch I'd so recently terrorized with my revolver, the very same revolver that had then, under the auspice of centrifugal force, tumbled clumsily, caroming sonorously with what I hoped would be interpreted as appreciative-adieu off of the horn-centric web of my spidered steering wheel and into my lap, when it was inadvertently loosed from its stowed compartment above my ceilinged visor.

Chapter VIII

The pragmatist in me was able to overlook the university-perpetrated slight—over what transgression, I cannot imagine—in that the classroom I’d inherited for a secondary trivium, Writing Workshop (201), in which I essentially played final gatekeeper before the official channel of the Writing Program proper, was scarcely more than a sparsely-trod velodrome, a series of progressively raised tracks at the center of which sat my desk, in large part because that voyeuristic vantage afforded me chance glimpses of the golden, melliferous limbs—proffered, unconsciously or not—of the floundering female scribes who cycled in and out each semester. Legs in overdrive, as they diagonally slid and rubbed, crossed and uncrossed below thighs clamped tightly together, still-taut thighs that hovered over slumped bookbags, duffels, purses guarded loosely by the diagonal spread of calves out from the vertex of conjoined knees scraping against the wooden ceiling of the cramped space underdesk. I daresay there must exist, at least for pedagogues of comparable pluck, some theurgical force at work in the coming of spring: the vernal confluence of thawed inhibitions and mid-term warnings of plummeting grades, whose amelioration is most often naturally foisted upon the more carnally-inclined among the student body. And it is—some may say fortuitously—incumbent upon us, we, who are charged with separating the wheat from the chaff, who at great risk to our own tenured employment, must forge onward unabated, tasked as we are to vet aspiring writers with the mindset that the punctilious tsk-tsking over venial transgressions against so-called academic integrity must never impede the path to literary integrity. After all, as has been proven time and again, a latent melliflence can be milked from the most turgid breasts of infantile prose if they be prepared to exhibit a bared propensity for rule-breaking exposure.

In the vast majority of cases, ‘tis true that nothing more can be gleaned of one’s literary prowess than what has manifested itself in ink. I’ve found, though, that the fewer inhibitions has a writer with her sex, the more likely it is that a lexical offering of paroxysmic poetry will one day secrete under the massaging of her nubile and pensile fingers. A perfunctory fellating in an abandoned room, the rote and rhythmic undulations allowed into the lifelessly supine, even the acrid symbiosis of a sweaty soixante neuf—artless nods to functionality without the thrills of true abandon—would generally suffice for a passing mark, freeing the damaged damsel to retreat below the raised portcullis at the rear, to pursue

other academic avenues—journalism and education, I found, to be popular alternatives—if she so chose, but I viewed these escapades as last-ditch auditions to salvage literary dreams—examinations for which I selflessly played both proctor and test—and even a passing grade in this prerequisite course could not guarantee entrance into the program proper without my expressed, written consent.

You may scoff at my methodology and its rationale as nothing more than the depraved mythopoeia of an unscrupulous empowered predator—the unmitigated results thus observed would suggest otherwise—but allow me to assure you I am sufficiently scrupled. And these once-crude scruples led to the construction of this rough, unspoken guideline, a list of vice principles if you will, in regards to this rising subset of aspiring authors whose interior constitution seemed better able to stomach any degrading evaluation over any commensurate D-grading valuation I might dare assign their respective submissions:

1. I'd not court or initiate any venereal contact with any student—in fact, the audacious nature of her robust volition was the surest measure of the exchange's successful consummation, making any such advance inappropriate, antithetical and downright inimical to the practicum's purported purpose. Please envision mine not as the position of predatory boss prepared to em- or brace with a fortuitously placed inguinal cushion at any and every chance pratfall of his underling factota but rather as the slightly elevated captain ready to dispense with the orifice of a figurative ring-buoy to any fallen shipmate humbled enough by the relentless rise-and-fall of the offing into which she's ambitiously dived to reach for and fill with her supplicating, suffocating diaphragm.
2. My involvement in any such consummation was at each instance subject to my own discretion, based primarily on literary promise or tendencies already displayed (progenitors of the romantic drivel destined to rot on supermarket endcaps, of cloying Bildungsromans and redemption pieces clearly informed by an overt spiritual predilection, of unimaginative whodunits, of tell-alls eager to divulge the minutest details of every lurid act or seedy locale into which the memoirist had been probed were categorically—in most every sense—denied, and not solely on the caliber of their work), but also on the basis of self-preservation—at times suppositions about one's proclivities and how the consequent bacteria might then raft the fluvial link of our umbilical but ephemeral entanglement must be made.

3. Once such a tryst had reached its singular, saturnalian climax, our relations outside the teacher-student paradigm must invariably plummet at the escarpment on the other side—it was never my intention to commence a grueling multitudinous interview process.
4. To dissuade rumblings throughout the student body...allow me to simmer in the absurdity of the phrase for a moment...that I wielded some sort of campus-wide omnipotence or influence, I refrained from engaging in extracurricular activity with any student under the tutelage of other professors.

(I feel the need here to proclaim this disclaimer: The names and intimations of the former dalliances that previously bookended Starla's introduction each existed outside the realm of Academia, free from the rigidity of university rules.)

I suspect the reader finds the greatest difficulty in wrapping her head around, swallowing the gist of dictum number two, that my primary function as molder of fertile minds precluded me from partaking in a purely hedonistic manner the devouring of nubile coeds, sating salaciously by my vested authority a vulgar animalism. Perhaps just a shade below professorial probity, mine was an esoteric endeavor: to displace my primal urges—and certainly did they swell and spill, spread out in onanistic splashes upon omphalic fields of downy goldenrod, along clavicle embankments, about riparian curves of spinal rills, into the shallow lordotic reservoirs of parched back-smalls—with a truly altruistic interest in the fate of Literature at my core, via a workmanlike approach to sex-as-litmus. You might not believe it, but I'd declined the opportunity to fondle more than one pair of would-be testees based on the criteria above (Now that the phonetic intimation has been writ, I'll state that in the spirit of propriety I treated those few bi-annual attempts to empederast me with the same decorum extended to the more portly, miasmatic, or otherwise undesirable of female suitors otherwise unable to get a rise out of teacher: with an immediate firm, but figurative, pat on the rear, staunchly avowing my requirement to uphold to the letter the strict university policies regarding academic standards and integrity. Comforting them that this solitary indiscretion would dissolve in the rarified air of that room, never to be reported, and duly reminding them that their grade would reflect after a diligent evaluation all aspects of the effort they'd expended.).

For instance: I recall the harrowing episode of one callow coed in particular, who, while scribbling away at her work, would squirm lasciviously, perhaps obliviously, upon the seated callipygian derriere she'd shimmied into her bottoms each morning. Under whose teeth birlled a plump and glossy underlip when her scrunched face pantomimed concentration. She absolutely dripped from the third tier with an undryable sensuality that drenched the floor-clinging towel of my own mind, sopped at

semester's inception with unsavory machinations of dishonestly grading her within the same locus I wished to tutor her, sliding in didactic aid below the curve, where with ample exertion we might still both attain the C, the Bs, perhaps even salvage the illustrious A upon which we'd each set our sights, back when the syllabi were as crisp as the stretched striae of denim painted upon her rump. The honest opportunity or need to enact any such devious schemes never arose; perhaps I prayed too hard, too early. Because in the trite and holey trinity of short stories she'd submitted by mid-point, in which she had shaven from a saccharine mountain of prose three mawkish sculptures of three indistinct heroines who sought redemption from their quirky romantic conflicts by the scraping of knees, not upon rocky forest floors or rough hotel shag before tumescent inamoratos, but as pious odalisques within the sacred and congested harem of swollen Abba, who in his grand omnipotence had seen fit to fortify each with the requisite will to remedy their trifles, I was able to share with her regretfully yet guiltlessly that the path to publication through which she hoped to gambol led to an inauspicious and dimly-lit ass, or rather, apse.

This imparted and communal knowledge, however informed by a Freudian faux-pas, was little aid in relief of the pressure crushing my loins when I had to, in the dusk of classless hours, peel from suddenly-exposed me the sublime caress she so deftly employed while bellied upon the swath of desk she'd just violently cleared...I plunged my hand around her pulsing wrist, cogged an aching moment in the mechanical efficiency, unable to force my prudent will to halt the rhythmic locomotion of a powerful piston. She raised with her free hand a finger to my lips when they opened to protest. She told me, Shhhhh, she said she knew how this worked, and then wormed her finger into my mouth. As the bracelet loosely dangling at her wrist kept tickling under my chin, I was somehow able to collect even more of myself than she had, and I removed her fishing finger and gasped with breathless, iambic lilt: "You've been misled. Pray about this." She reddened and withdrew immediately, rigidly. Still I vainly, naively hoped to distinguish in her eyes some indolent, furtive defiance, some latent impulse to suggest that I'd been too impetuous or obtuse to gauge the farcical nature of her work. But nope. She clutched to her breast the loose-fitting top that even with its bulging collar hadn't offered any more of her pneumatic aerie than a fleeting glimpse of an ebony-frill, a double-curve, an outline delicate and aquiline like some rara avis aloft, pinions splayed, gliding away, away, away, now far off in the distance—retreating by the monstrous crack of my incisive exhortation as either frightened prey or to frighteningly pray, I can't precisely say.

And it was at that very desk, perhaps a lustrum hence, while engaged in my own admittedly draconic line-by-line edits and critical scansions, that a stack of pages stapled at one corner—the top

page acned by a perverse rubrication I wouldn't inflict upon even the lowliest of my students—and clamped together at the opposite corner by tremulous fingers, had accosted me. In concert we, those delightful digits of a courier I'd yet to acknowledge and my word-weary paws, brought the brutalized manuscript closer to me: our hands, magically linked by the wounded duck of scarred lines she whimpered that she'd hoped to revive from the degrading animus of another professor. She asked if I could offer any reviving or revising assistance. My eyes started up the soft acclivity of her forearm...my progress was retarded when below the sleek aisles of chic lisle I spotted two red shoes, one of which tapped nervously under the evanescent and erratic flashes of a flexing calf rubbing against the Corinthian column of another...the thought of its manicured acanthus capital left me paralyzed for an instant before I snapped to, resumed the ascension of my appreciative eyes, up to and quickly from her masterfully sculpted visage back to the page, where out from the thin metallic slant of a mangled staple burgeoned the "Starla" with which I then audibly spluttered—bear in mind I had not yet known her name. I looked up again to be sure she wasn't some mirage, some concupiscent projection of the indefatigable, lustful yearnings that had afflicted my mind since our chance eolian rendezvous. I decided I didn't care. Her plaited hair this time obediently draped one shoulder; I envisaged my fingers weaving through the lustrous ménage a trois of enlaced strands whilst I repeated, "Starla," enunciating slowly each heavenly syllable. "Star la," again. Ostensibly, distractedly did I study each graffito defacing the first page—forsooth, it was black and white and red all over, but this is no joke: of what was read, I couldn't have shared a mote if prodded afterward. "There's nothing here that can't be rectified. Yes, I see potential here," and I carefully rolled the papers, pointed the acuminated phallus I made of them toward her hips, and she coyly—bless her heart—pawed almost playfully at it before yanking from my grip the pages she then clutched, twisting at both ends, ringing the raging textual analog of libidinous teacher into an origami tsunami within the calming storied expanse between her breasts. "Now," I frothed, "there exists what I, truth be told, consider somewhat archaic protocol designed to circumvent this sort of, what the university might call, fraternization between a student and a teacher that isn't hers." I eschewed any mention of my own wooden set of rules that I presciently saw splintering before my eyes, but to circumvent the flouting of all four of them, I produced from a desk drawer a single official form. "You need to take this to your advisor." I carefully applied my legible signature. "Tell him or her you wish to transfer at once."

Chapter IX

The nozzle penetrated; gasoline chugged in through the opening of a five-gallon plastic drum—still bearing its four-dollar adhesive—that I carried directly from the shelf inside the unmanned store to the gas pump outside. Crouched between my tire and the pump, I listened to the gasoline at first batter the insides, accumulate rapidly and finally gurgle to the top before I twisted along the grooves the thoughtfully-placed cap whose plastic stem strangled the grooved neck below the then unprobed mouth. I stumbled back into the store, dazed a bit by the ethereal swarm of fumes I'd huffed in my somnambulant state. I set the drum on the floor in front of the register and braced myself with palms spread out on the edge of the counter, with my head down, allowing all of the blurred polygons that constituted the space to come into focus. Still sharp in my mind, though, was the body in the trunk. I dinged the clerk-beckoning bell. I squeezed my eyes shut, shook my head, and forced my eyes open to peer back out through the open door to make sure no providential attendant had neared my car. I toddled toward the door to inspect more closely and tumbled over the unflinching drum I forgot that I'd planted there. In my fall I managed somehow to evade any abrasions but not the display case for which I reflexively reached, in the process dramatically body-slammng like some grappling thespian the clattering shuffle onto the floor under me. I started to rise; arrayed squares began to take shape on the floor: a spread of magnifying glasses, cheap binoculars, generic keys nestling within the dotted nests of their bunched chains, each swaddled up in transparent cases and backed by sheets of laminated cardboard vibrantly hued, had accreted and settled before me—from that tawdry heap of ostensible detective gadgetry it was a faux-compact, whose packaging boasted of “fool-proof” fingerprint detection, that sang out to desperate me in the irresistible singsong placement serendipity of product jingle necessity.

I'm sure the irony has not been lost: Though I haughtily hmmmphed at (most of) the obviously inefficacious tools of detection, it was not until a voice from behind suggested that he thought maybe my car'd quit on me some ways up the road that I realized I had failed to deduce what the reader must have elementarily concluded. I turned to spy again a recent acquaintance, familiarly wringing his hands under an oil-stained cloth—of course it was the same station, could it have been any other?

Understandably, the cordiality he exuded at our previous transaction had subsided to some

degree. Not only had I entered and brazenly exited his store toting merchandise for which he'd not been remunerated—though I should have been credited sufficient equity after the munificence of our last transaction—and now I had buttered his floor with an olio of spread trinkets, all the while exuding myself an off-putting etiolated pallor—owed to the concoction of sleeplessness and paranoia, seasoned with a pinch of guilt, I'd imbibed those previous two days—but it seemed the true impetus of his apprehension billowed from a disturbing concatenation to which he conversationally alluded: my arrival at his shop just happened to coincide twice now with a couple of anomalous gunshots. At the suggestion, I felt the rough grip of my replaced revolver pressing into the small of my back, nudging me to exonerate it and assuage the man's fears. I refused to advocate directly on the gun's behalf. Instead, to head off the inevitable cross-examinations of any pesky investigators, I planted seeds of corroboration by exclusively watering him with the exact sodden—the tears came genuinely as I considered the fates of Sue and, subsequently, Genevieve—account I shared with the trichomic officer about the morning's plangent transpiration, though I feigned some ignorance over the previous shot heard 'round the woods—only some, however, because although I figured it best to refrain from spinning excess yarns into which I might haphazardly entangle myself, the truth was that I did not know when the first shot had split—besides, presumably, directly after the skull—the placid silence of rural life.

I facilely reformed his labile demeanor with the universal sign of truce: a brandished wallet. I paid for the gas; the sloshing plastic drum; a terrestrial map whose blue blobs, I was assured, marked the coordinates of every conceivable "swimming hole" pond and lake in the vicinity; and also one of each of the detective bibelots, aside from the skeleton key, as "my baby already played with that one incessantly." If the olive branch that extended from my opened wallet merely tickled his exterior, it was the gesture of spoiling my little Genevieve that completely shattered the cuirass of suspicion he had donned. This advantageous shift imbued me with the gall to request my telephone call—to finally apprise the sitter of some fabricated situation that was holding me and especially to check in with Genevieve—to which he obliged, hospitably offering up the phone with its short helical leash stretched taut from behind the counter.

It seems my concierge duties extended further than expected: the groggy voice of my baby when she answered implied that I had rung a wake-up call around the house. I tried to engage her but in between yawns she mostly cleared her throat with a perfunctory, Yup, or brusque, Unnh-nnh, in response to my every question. I told her I loved her and smacked my lips in a phantom kiss, a little louder than normal to more completely disarm my audience of one, who nodded dumbly with his hands

cupped together in front of him, as though the sweaty palms he clapped had been cruelly basted with some superadhesive.

The phone-usurping sitter's apologetic voice followed in problematic propitiation, attempting to explain why sleepy Genevieve had had to play receptionist—or was it disgruntled guest?—but I curtly wedged in that she would need to stay for a while longer than expected. Under my own cupped hand I divulged into the receiver that the business that had drawn me out in the pre-dawn hours had been delayed by one of the players who was by that point dreadfully late—I opted for equivo- over fabrication—and ostentatiously bade her to remind Genevieve how loudly Daddy missed her, to the critical acclaim, I was suddenly aware, of absolutely no one. My head swiveled; my claqueur had vanished. Exeunt the coterie: the shopkeeper, the brimming drum, the frazzled concierge of the dead.

In my haste the fumbled receiver clanked and clunked back to pendulously swing and bounce below its base beyond the liminal counter. Outside I caught him more than doubling the dead weight that my car's posterior had had to endure by perching his own upon the fender. I raced toward the car, and through the front and rear windshields I saw that a slight breeze fluttered strands of his greasily pomaded pate, that he sopped with a handkerchief the deep furrows of his beaded forehead, that when he turned his head he squinted his eyes and scrunched his nose in frustration. When I rounded the pump bay he quickly rose and made an ersatz ascot of his sweatrag. He said he was real sorry and took his heel off'n the gas container I'd just bought'n; he was gonna put it inside the trunk there for me but found he couldn'open it.

It was locked and loaded, I said, and I thanked him for the help, but I really had to be on my way. I opened and shut a back door—Genevieve's car seat prevented loading the drum in that side—and lugged it around the trunk with him following until suddenly he stopped, sniffed madly at the air.

Something mighty ripe blowin' in, he noted.

Bent over the drum that I was working into place on the floorboard behind the driver's seat, I lifted my head in exasperation, eased myself out from the interior and agreed, that, yes, I smelled something too and maybe some critter had died close by. I thanked him again.

All squinty-eyed and akimbo with the wingtips of his fingers jutting out, he seemed to survey the surroundings, measure the wind. He guessed so, and he snuffled and started moseying away. He reassured me that he'd be right back so I'd better not go nowhere.

Paralyzed by uncertainty and strangled by akrasia, I turned the ignition but sat there in the idling car until he returned, prepared to dash off at any hint of trouble. When he returned, however, it was with the drop of a brand new skeleton key into my hand. He said they don't last too long, nothing much

did anymore. He then wondered if I ended up finding that place I was hunting over yonder.

I thanked him again. I told him Genevieve would absolutely appreciate it and dug into my pocket for a wallet, which he flamboyantly waved off.

He tossed another tether about me when he said he'd noticed my praying there at the counter, that I shouldn't take my immediate fall thereafter like some sort of sign that God weren't listening. I would also be leaving with the insurance, or assurance—cain't rightfully remember—of his prayer, too.

I held the shifter with one hand, the wheel with the other and nodded along, my head like a racer's heel maneuvering a trapped pebble to the side of his sneaker rather than stopping to dig within to simply fling the damned thing aside. He prattled, I rattled the shifter—so attuned to the gravity of all things that all I had to do was engage it with a slight tug, allow it to plink plink plink down into Drive and I could have been off—but he possessed this sort of gaumless charm that demanded simultaneously my sympathy and disdain, and I could not bring myself to start the shiftless descent against it, the charm. Disdain indeed, not vitriol—at least on my end—although the longer he detained us with his quaint countryboy monologue, the itchier my triggered-passenger became, prodding me to fire back until I finally leaned forward and started notching the shifter downward. The prodding against my back, the prick against my arched foot lessened but still made themselves known. I wondered how long the stench he'd noticed and noted would linger after we'd abandoned him...he said something about bringing the little gal by next time...yes, yes, of course, I concurred...I thanked him one last time, reached around to itch the small of my back and shot him—past him, I mean—when I noticed that his cadence shifted ever so slightly, as though to suggest adieu, or rather, See-ya, now.

I drove on with my grave navigator, the revolver I mean, lying on its belly on the passenger seat. The ghost of the attendant's final words, barely heard, swarmed about my head, echoed in a shapeless, susurrant cloud as we roamed aimlessly. It wasn't until we happened upon the familiar vanity streetsigns that the cacophonous cloud began to gradually dissolve, to sharpen into a thousand pricking raindrops and the elucidated words hovered, poking not with the colloquial "See ya" of my assumptions but instead the leading-question leading of his presumptions: "So ya...were needing that gas for what, then?"

I turned at once onto the cobbled drive of Madden Cobble, stopped; I needed space to think. In the Maddening picture window of the house before me, a misty oval spread and shrank around a young girl, doubtless my own angel's age, whose parchment face stared out from the cone formed by the parted damask curtains diametrically balled up in each fist. I instinctively reached over to my right, palpating the big-girl seat into which little Genevieve had just graduated—all the while watching the girl

in the window—imagining that at one stitched horizon I tucked behind her ear an intrusive cowlicking tress from Genevieve’s eye. Across the next fold down I felt the bend in her arms, which was not that long ago a more pronounced antecubital trench dividing the soft envelopment of her delicate forearms and biceps, so much softer than these coarse cushions. My hand continued down my phantom eidolon, where it found the seatbelt buckle; without looking, the worried father in me instinctively reached over, snatched the latch and worked the great tooth of the belt in until it clicked, and I sheepishly raised my hand above the dash, toward the window watcher, in an affirming attempt at a salubrious gesture—a gesture reciprocated after a moment’s study with a sudden collapse of the drapes where her disappeared face had been. Immediately I feared the inference of an unintentional yet inappropriate salacious suggestion—what with the quasi-coital link I hoisted (though I prayed her sheltered innocence incapable of making such a connection)—until I turned to see the metal buckle I thought was inexplicably clinging (How could I have raised the linked belt so?) to my salutatory hand metamorphose into the metal guard of my cocked revolver swinging menacingly from my thumb. I lowered my guard, stashed the gun. Oh, Madden child, how must I have befouled the transparency of your vitreous and pristine worldview! I wanted to rush into your home, exhume you from whatever nook into which you had scuttled, take you in my arms, reassure you I was no monster, that I had a baby girl not so unlike you at home, whose future I was at that moment sadly, similarly jeopardizing...but no, I shifted to Reverse and, looking back with my arm now braced against the empty passenger seat, nosed my trunk—congested with the contorted snot of a corpse—back onto the road. I needed to feel the actual Genevieve. I needed room to think.

I daresay I have brought you here to the brink, at last to the point that might pop the bubbles of lunacy with which my mind had been floating. I cannot fault you for your assumption that I raced home to cradle Genevieve after I’d cradled the Madden girl, but, alas, where we meet up with our protagonist is back at Sue’s idyllic and secluded driveway. To her home, now a petri dish of conspiring evidence—those residual, residential yet microscopic tattle-tales, however, would have to wait until nighttime to meet their eradication. I exposed the claustral effluvium festering in my trunk with a turn of the key. I dragged the deep-sleeping bag out, and it landed with a dull thud onto the ground. The bubbles plopping up up up like fresh champagne before my desperate toasting.

Revisiting that wretched malodor now reminds me: this was actually my second attempt at a return trip to her house. Before the first, as I neared the driveway I caught a glimpse of the trenched mound of cat still nudged up against the road, and out of respect (to self-preservation) I slowed and stopped. My capacious chariot clearly had room for one more, and the oft-passed passenger, armed

with perpetually hitchhiking paw, obligingly boarded my makeshift hearse, a stygian transport in which the dead for a few minutes outnumbered the living (I had utilized a couple heart-shaped leaves plucked roadside, girding by twos its dusty, softened limbs, to carry it with outstretched arms by the leafy cuffs, laying it onto the passenger-side floorboard atop some unfolded papers from the glovebox I'd spread there in a more prophylactic than obsequy-obsequious gesture). Only a few minutes: I'd envisioned a way to keep from the annals of vain death our feline's fate. At this point I was able to easily navigate the simple labyrinth of crosshair intersections and eponymous cul-de-sacs that constituted that cross-section patch of rural sprawl, and I quickly returned to the periphery of the gas station. I inconspicuously paced with my car its unpaved purlieus until certain my suspecting attendant had exited eyeshot, whereupon I performed from my window a catty drive-by shooting, firing the furry feline, which somersaulted—if I might be so bold—like a spent matchstick from Starla's fingers, through the air above my roof, within the thick grass of a sward close enough to hopefully, once discovered, sate the old boy's olfactory concerns regarding the "ripening something" that had, I imagine, mysteriously abated, or rather "blew out," so soon after I'd so insolently skittered away.

The assumed success I enjoyed in this gambit had almost immediately implanted in my mind a similar scheme to deal with the disposal of Sue's eider-clad body. Ckoi, if you'll recall the umbrage suffered at Luther Place, was at this juncture not made up of all sympathy and perspective. But rather than succumb to the murderous impulses percolating within, I wanted to employ for my story a framing device that could potentially erase each of my trifles. I pulled over at the first reasonable location, and upon scanning the map spread against my steering wheel I noticed an unnamed road that appeared to auspiciously grant a curious driver an unobscured view to the employee lot of Luther Place. All I needed to procure were the means and the opportunity, as I had satanic and botanic designs of planting my lifeless passenger into the fallow trunk of my Bowdler, letting the flower of criminality, currently spoiling the elevated enclave of my trunk, blossom and perfume to traceability, to culpability the debased echelon of humanity through which he slithered.

But even the best laid plans lie at the mercy of the worst laid remoras—for myriad reasons I abandoned that mad plan and brought Sue back to her place, like a nervous date shaking on the threshold for a goodnight kiss...I'm moving too quickly now.

She lay unceremoniously beside my bumper, and duteously I began to peel the blanket away at her face. The cover had congealed to the jagged edges of the gaping wound like a continental cicatrix on the lolling globe of her head, and I stopped pulling when a sickening susurrus warned of the tenuous suture's impending split. Exposed at the fold was a slice of xanthic cheek—and nothing more—into

which, like a curious child, I pushed my thumb until the dental shrapnel embedded inside her cheek elicited a dull and grisly clacking sound against the shards of gunshot-impacted molars within. While I vainly waited for the cheek to sponge out, I popped open the toy compact I'd recently, legally procured, in the process spreading a thin gray cloud about. I began to daub and brush with the soft delta of bristles stowed inside the "dusting kit" all around the thumbed divot.

Through the tremulous magnifying glass hovering over her cheek I studied that distorted dimple to make out my thumbprint, the sinuous swirls of fairy dust glommed onto my oiled marking. If the sprinkling presented a distinguishable print, I knew I would then have to dust every inch of her that I might have possibly compromised to determine the probability that I'd be able to purge from the body every scant remnant of my touch. As I dusted, at each suspicion-raising occurrence, I had resigned myself to the employment for their removal grisly means such as scorching; scouring with gasoline; or—and I vouchsafe this with apropos pudency and disgust—slicing with gloved hands the morbid cutlets of scaloppini, dredged with the powder that revealed their brandings of indictment, which would subsequently to be fried or charred along with the house. I blew and brushed, blew and brushed, inspected the powdering, steeling myself with the knowledge this grotesquerie was a mere pittance to be paid, a stepping stone on the path to liberating not only Genevieve's loving guardian from the threatening tentacles of the law but also his amorous companion from the treacherous grip of the infirmary. I eluded the burden of the toque, the weight of the butcher's apron, however, as the law-thwarting gains I had hoped to attain by this experiment were trumped by the haunting truth of an irrefragable maxim: Once you fall in love with your own, every other proffered female becomes to you not just a receptacle or conquest but also the culmination of some other Daddy's undying love and adoration (and even if that happens not to be the case, it is incumbent upon those who cultivate such a matrix to proceed as though it is). While the cooling drafts of such truisms are most often plied in the heat of prurient pursuits, it suddenly struck in a much more general sense, easily envisioned before me in this detached and concentrated swatch as Genevieve's cheek—as though brought to a bloodless, wizened pallor, yes, but her cheek still—one once stroked and pinched and kissed lovingly. Also: Was this sloped collection of random cells, this sample size of skin really so different than the shimmering constellation that cascaded from Starla's pinna?

I lowered myself, involuntarily, and though a wafting effluvium funneled into my charging nostrils, I innocently pecked her cheek. A platonic gesture toward a gender entire. The odor was then cloying. Was this in fact the perfume with which death reeked? No, my inquisitive Genevieve; that was the powder, clinging to my nose, transferred to my lips as some sort of sweet empathy via the sugary

imitation, the artificial weight bestowed me in our queer communion of malar osculation. Although it had started to feel otherwise, she reminded me in that kiss that it wasn't I who had snuffed out her flame. From her relaxed pores there oozed a silent sympathy over and forgiveness for the inculpations that my act of mercy—whose legal repercussions she had effectively evaded—would engender. I knew completely at the moment of cosmic transference that for any necessary disfigurement or desecration into which my reluctant hand would be forced that I was already absolved by the victim of any malfeasance. This ethereal understanding, I understood, would, in the court of jurisprudence, hold no water, but that did not change the fact that she and her absorbent cocoon would still be required to (I'll be here all week, folks.).

This epiphany thankfully skirted from me the logistical nightmare that would have arisen had I attempted to transplant my bud into the soiled planter of my antagonist: even if the fractured skeleton key I had to twist out from the keyhole of my own trunk had miraculously worked in backstage experiments of efficacy, Bowdler's car would have most certainly been up to date with the most current technology of criminal deterrence—keyless, remote entry; alarm system, replete with the springy deployment of a humorously large automaton hand to at once pluck and mercilessly fling any unrecognized assailant—certain to confound any dopey Luddite, who, despite ambitious drive, brandished between his fingers and thumb this sort of rudimentary implement that like some benign pike gored the cartoonish skull in his palm. No, the operation to finagle some means to open his trunk without detection would have required more sophisticated gadgetry or acumen than I had at my disposal, and was thusly abandoned.

I rose to a knee, from her cheek, to the sound of an alarmingly jangly beat behind me. I flapped the loose corner of the blanket back over her face and froze, with patulous and petrified arms rooted to the ground: a statue of a runner at the starting block who'd long missed the starting blast. I blurted out some hackneyed thing, "This isn't what it looks like," but behind me the jangling—perhaps, I feared, the clinking of handcuffs in the readying grip of the "Officer?" for whom I blindly called out—coldly replied with the increasing volume of progressive proximity. The stench below mixed with the sweetness at the corners of my mouth, and in this inimical vicissitude I could not hold back a sudden retch, an anxious convulsion that squeezed me on the inside. Whilst I hacked and coughed up the straggling bits of vomitus, along my raised thigh brushed a pensive cat, skulking gingerly upon its blood-red limbs and under the weight of its pendant-burdened collar. I spluttered in laughter, a maniacal cackle I couldn't stifle, despite the fact I reflexively tongued the contents of my stomach that hung like a pulpy mauve streamer, a barbed festoon to announce the sickening party spilling out from my parted lips.

Sympathetically, I observed what I considered some few due obsequies to the surviving mourner and again exposed the cheek, upon which the cat affectionately pawed before lapping up the candy dusting powder from the dimple—a dimple so unlike Genevieve’s after all. Yet still it harassed me with a sense of longing, a need to conclude this funerary business, to rush home. To allow for appropriate grieving, I excused myself, obligingly pulled the gasoline-filled drum from the car and dragged it, dropping, sloshing, over the bumpy terrain of her yard and into the house. While lugging it, I thought about the cat-cop creeping up behind me, the vaporous phantom of Genevieve in the still flesh of the cheek; the constant spitting—a dutiful wash of saliva flushed in under my tongue to gather in a gross acidic porridge the lagan of regurgitated chunks that clung to my gums, between my teeth—provided the only momentary cracks in the demented rictus I couldn’t otherwise flatten.

I returned to a fully exposed face—the mouth stonily agape, the eyes hauntingly dull—and the jingling-all-the-way cat, half-burrowed into the blanket, which was then folded over at its sanguine binding behind her head as though she sported the flowing faux-regality of an umbral biretta. I knelt in a clumsy appeal to entice the early-AM visitor-in-mourning, when from a bough overhead, a numinous cardinal cometed down, alighted, and with its sparse singsong cry drew the cat out from the cloak of the vestment, inveigling it with greater efficiency than any meek “Here, kitty kitty” I could have offered before I would have undertaken the unenviable task of reaching inside to usher forcefully out the disconsolate feline. I felt like Santa, (or maybe his vile anagrammatic counterpart, in) stripping both her and the occasion of religious adornment, gathering up the ends of the blanket and hefting the bulky sack into the trunk before I hurriedly dashed ho-ho-home to visit one very special little girl.

Chapter X

Rarely did more than twenty matriculates in any one semester fill the capacious chairing of my spacious classroom, and aside from workshop periods, seating was purposefully informal—for obvious reasons I wished to cultivate an atmosphere where the individuality of the writer could spread (to speak nothing of her legs) out—yet I assigned latecomer Starla to a second-row seat, from where I, erect at the central nadir of the classroom, would surreptitiously lecture directly into the central zenith between her oscillating knees. I had only to rely on the dependability of creatures of habit that the others would slink back to their familiar positions day after day without alerting Starla to the freedom granted them.

I did however, only somewhat languorously, enforce one particular seating edict, outlined explicitly both in the syllabus—the seed of seating precedent in writing, if needed—and briefly during our inaugural meeting and from that point left to the tacit understanding of good manners—I asked that a reasonable space of three seats of separation be maintained between my writers when bent at their work. Never had its absent-minded or insolent breaching raised my ire until one groggy mid-morning, after I had wended my way from the café into the classroom carrying a steaming Styrofoam of foaming coffee-drink, when I spotted at once the weasely, usually argyle-torsoed Patrick P., oft-spotted with pencil tucked behind one ear at the opposite side of the room, now curiously seated at Starla’s direct left. Toe-tapping, pencil-wringing, chortling awkwardly—doubtless at some terribly banal witticism (remember: I’d read his work) with which he’d hoped to regale her—in some sad courting display of woeful wooing.

I had arrived with three minutes remaining on the clock; sitting at the edge of my desk, gripping the scalding cup just under my chin, I ostensibly surveyed the room with a flitting back-and-forth mock attendance-taking glance. I steamed vicariously through that cup, whose ghost, I’d only half-hoped, had cloaked the minatory sneer I flashed at him every ten seconds or so when my darting eyes looked away from the palsied clockhands. To my dismay, underneath the desk Starla’s locked knees seemed to swivel vaguely argyleward in free-swinging unlockings, while above the desk crimson splotches dappled the neck she coyly revealed with the effortless seduction of an innocuous tucking of hair. She smiled. She nodded. Looked at Patrick, looked down. For three minutes I boiled in the sprawling pool of their tepid chemistry. Certainly I knew already that Starla was too sophisticated for such pubescent chicanery, yet

his behavior forced the pedant in me to invoke code, when at the moment the second hand mercifully passed its third twelve, when this collected coterie of secondary hands passed into the jurisdictional authority of teacher—I even augmented my silent stance, which should have signaled the beginning of class, and thus the circumambulating shuffle of sneakers upon their seatward paths of quasi-circadian familiarity, with a sonorous clearing of my throat—the child still prattled.

What else could a concerned pedagogue have presumed would necessitate such a flagrant flouting of one of the few laws in his otherwise lax rubric but the lassitude of plagiarism—an easy enough charge to lodge and, for an inspired overseer, to manufacture sufficient evidence—for which the scofflaw’s record would permanently bear the dubious scarlet P of disrepute, even if only the seeds of doubt had been planted? Did he not realize just how effortlessly—much like how he ravaged nightly the sprawling range of white-capped pustules about his porpoising jawline—I could have applied just a little finger to the grilled cowcatcher and halted forevermore the plodding train of his literary future (You ask how I could so flippantly tip the balance of one rather non-threatening student’s fate, but I assure you the immensity of the favor performed in dissuading early his prosodic pursuits cannot be overstated. Alas, I expected to savor the occasion of snuffing out his dreams the old-fashioned way, at semester’s end, at the robotically congenial crescendo of a keep-your-urchin-chin-up runner-up pep rally.)? He smartly relented, red-faced, when I growled at him to recite the “Rule of Three” (this imposing nomenclature, theretofore unnamed as such aloud but found in the syllabus, sprang propitiously from my lips). With a toggling of his memory via the teacher’s aide of a condescendingly mnemonic insistence—“The rule of *WHAT* is fair for you and good for me?”—the nigh-inspiringly pedantic Patrick stammered out the whole of the esoteric edict, reluctantly but rotely, impressively eschewing the iconoclastic indolence that so plagued his generation from which I would have expected in flippant, defiant response the perfunctory fill-in-the-blank of “Three.” And it was at this precise point that I broke the impending moments of either silent ignominy or vain mutiny with a curt “thank you,” lest he foolishly attempt to intrepidly tack on any addendum (that may have been found in certain but not all syllabi) about the relative legality of tandem seating if neither party opposed, while he stumbled back to the crosshair of his regular coordinates to the hushed din from the craning school of obstreperous piranhas predictably sanguine at the sight of the wayward and wounded, where he sat for the rest of our time together too embarrassed to approach Starla again for anything more than the collection of the cumbersome heft of his own work, lightened and enlightened by the lapidary scribbles of her thoughtful critiques in magnanimous marginalia.

Since its inception must appear both necessary and imminent, I suppose I needn’t divulge the

emergent practice then enacted of collecting all written critiques under the guise of evaluating each student on the tact and utility demonstrated—articulated for the coddling of delicate sensibilities as their “growth as lexical arbiters”—but in actuality utilized mostly to detect any ingenious or lazy ciphers (or even lazier: an outright proposal, which although I never happened upon one, I confess might have had a better chance to slip by professor, so rapt was he in punctilious cryptanalysis) some Star-dazed admirer might have gotten the gumption to sneakily use, but I shall anyway. Along the frill of marginalia I did decipher once next to her work an acrostic “MEET AT,” made up of the premier letters of six unusually truncated lines, whose mysterious conclusion—unless “TWOTW” abbreviated some confluent point outside my purview (Ignoring the obvious suggestion of some address 2 TW(?) Street, I briefly considered it a shorted cipher of an orthographically-challenged or incondite homonymic allusion to the university-subsidized dance theater, substituting for the venue of balletic pageantry in abridged numero-tautology the implied location of its fluttering TUTUs, before rejecting categorically any interpretation that would suggest the gauche boundary-testers with which I was dealing would willingly step foot upon such environs simply to stymy teacher’s efforts)—shall forever elude me, even though I eagled the remainder of those draftnotes and even (where I supposed the author might have attempted to outsmart teacher) future, seemingly unrelated, opportunities from all too-friendly classmates for such correspondence, with the same acuity I monitored curbside Starla’s circadian slumber schedule, studied by the light in her bedroom window until it extinguished, leaving a mullioned rectangle nigh indistinguishable from the bricked façade, at precisely 10:30 each school night (I will freely cop to the vexation suffered on those scurrilous weekend nights in which there never was any vesperal glow from those bedroom windows to be snuffed.).

I’ve drifted enough from my intention of crafting a seamless segue to the story—I’m talking about the rubricated pages she thrust unto me earlier—I’d requested from Starla. Or rather what the story told me. I could read between the heavy red lines defacing it that her previous professor, one Ferdinand Hershbeck—an ancillary colleague (securely sinecured in putative part by the munificence of direct forebears) who had some years prior gathered the slick moss of public acclaim rolling out a convolved and convoluted collection of romantic shorts, *The Unlocked Chambers of the Heart*, which I’d rather ignominiously shorn in a freelanced feuilleton lancing as “a maudlin compendium...precious filibuster of sentimental pleasantries...an overwrought and overripe liaison seemingly hand-picked for the callow literary set long engorged on the putrid windfalls of supermarket hedgerows rather than from the aromatic bushes of Bronte, of Austen...” —was far less principled than I with regards to the coaxing of young hands. For every legitimate gripe—a modest array of clichés; extraneous, well,

anthropomorphic dialogue; conflation of verb tenses; orthographic lapses—whose rectification merely hinged upon a keen eye and judicious eraser (or delete key, anymore), there floated among her words myriad mewling and catty clawmarks—adjudications over character names and font choice, even railing indefensibly against right justification—which made evident that the old tiger’s expressed inclination towards his powerless prey was in fact of a tenaciously rapacious nature. And that, with regards to my own safety, a vindictive ichor might boil within Hershbeck for the crafty predator bold enough to poach his wounded quarry.

Of that quarry: When I’d still yet to sink my teeth into her succulent flesh, to protect her from the pounce of her deposed pedagogue lying-in-wait I would often intercept and escort her down the corridors of the English department. For as vividly as those fiery kitten heels of hers had scorched my soul, could you grok that in those early days of our courtship, when moored to the tedium of my office desk, I would long for the aural pleasure of the sneakers (what a misnomer!) she’d a penchant for sporting—did I tell you she ran? Oh how she ran! But let us leave that matter for another time.

Let us go back to perhaps a day, the day preceding that whole Patrick P/Rule of Three rigmarole...Looped just so, the length of her laces would dance along either side of each shoe, just glancing the ground as she walked, and would you believe I was able to distinguish among a scuffing and squeaking throng the interplay of her linoleum-clicking aglets and the faint yet elegant footfalls of her treaded soles? From their rhythm came a cadence that rang with a musical lilt, playing in my head like a nursery rhyme. At that point, however, I knew little of Mother Goose; ‘twas rather the wayward, provocative progeny of that titular figure, presenting the opportunity to introduce herself in the precious moments Starla had bent to corral truculent laces on the lam, unlooped, loosed and disharmonious, dangerous even, that had summoned this world-wary denizen out from his word-weary lair extending in the alms-doling pose of eleemosynary palms.

The iniquitous codes of conduct under which we trudged forbade within these limpid hallways the sorts of brazen flesh-riven thrusts of a lycanthropic lapse afflicting the sublunary and lupine magnetically rapt by the pull of such an effulgent full moon, so I chained the erumpent beast, shackled hackles with a modicum of decorum, and I stopped beside her, stooping to surreptitiously inhale in excruciating restraint the waft of her floral phantom until she rose. She glanced with the thorn of her bare elbow my thigh, teasing to lacerate the pleat—a vain analog of the tumid conduit within, through which at that time rushed an indomitable deluge erecting a shrouded but pant-stunted nethertower—that halved my left leg. Her face when she coquettishly apologized flashed with an exotic yet fugacious crimson—trust that the complementary poles of our opposing bloodrushed hemispheres was not lost on

me—and the pungent odor of cigarette smoke sliced through her intoxicating perfume. I had to stunt the sudden urge to grab that elbow, to wolfishly back her into the wall. I desired to at once defile and protect her, to suck out every lingering carcinogen from the convulsing teardrops of her lungs, to wrest from her supple figure every malodorous fiber and explore every pore of her vulnerable dishabille in that peopled hallway. (Perhaps absurdly I recognize now that sometime, at some point in the midst in this one-sided exchange, of this unbidden obsession, that the latent proclivity for fatherhood—a state heretofore vigorously evaded—perhaps finally began to rouse from its lifelong winter of hibernation.) Meanwhile an altar—my paper-peppered desk—to the pursuit of consummation awaited within the enclave of my lockable office to be de-cluttered with frenetic hand-sweeps under a lowering Starla and consecrated by our unholy union. My roiling tadpoles below clustered and pulsed painfully to their biological bent, but with a lunkheaded pawing—hands of a lummox, indeed!—I instead gently spun her at that invasive elbow, ushered her down the hallway—she inquiring and I bloviating on the subject of her writing—to the relieving and revived rhythm of her clicking stride.

Since our every conversation hinged those days on the progress of her craft, in regards to our strolling badinage I feel comfortable divulging only that piece of generality, but with every bit save my strolling legs kicked into overdrive, I can't commit to any specific lines of dialogue uttered but for one exception, after we found ourselves just inches from embrace behind the silent-movie wicket of the broomcloset door into which she had forcefully, fortuitously shepherded her hopeful ram tout de suite: "What exactly happens to a teacher who has sex with a student?"

What had we here, what had she heard? Trammeled by both our confines and the demands of my battering head, its charging blasts of whorled shofroth, what else could I do but move in, with her oblique torso heaving noticeably parallel to mine, with her head craned away toward the window. From a strained funnel of flesh starting below her ear and tapering into the scintilla of collar bone that sloped into her blouse I brushed away tresses that seemed, per her styling, to claw up from her nape in concentric lunettes radiating out from her limber lobe. At once, from her lips slipped zephyrean sighs to fuel my turbines as I worked lip and tooth-tip downward, down the evanescent tornado of pleasure that disappeared when after the few moments of abandon she allowed herself, she rammed the storm-stopping impediment of her palm into my chest—a whirl of hyperactive vanes—and from the terrible armlength between us she slumped, sniffled, dejectedly sighed, "Oh Lord, is my writing that awful?" Hershbeck in a soundless flash of oblivious profile passed the window.

Within that suddenly clammy crucible—out from which should have presented to the world the pearl of our lustrous, realized carnality—rather than commence the concretion, she opted to audibly

invoke an absentee judge—oh lord?—who, predictably, reciprocated with no verdict. But it was I who would usurp the gavel and play judge! It was me to whom she should have directed her plaintive queries! Though I could see she now cradled with her hand the ribcage that protected her own bruised beater, I still felt that hand pressed deep into my chest, blithely rumpling the cuirass of ribs about my heart when I, reveling in, savoring the bittersweet tincture of blush my tongue had purloined, caught sight of the scarlet o I'd impetuously branded on the neck of Starla, progenitor of our aborted pearl, before her obsequiously fanned crescents of hair tumbled down to conceal it.

That she prevented that diminutive o from ballooning, like the seeping oh-oh-Ooooh!s that I had begun to educe, into a full-blown, bona fide "Big O"—what, do you suppose that because of my allegiance to Starla I load the supermarket conveyors with absolute impunity from the racks of covergirl sexpots who beckon provocatively amid avalanches of such droll, salacious colloquialism and dotty threads of threnody over the mortal transgressions of Your Man's abeyant attendance to the morphemic spot G or the periodic gouted spotting between those intrusively unreliable monthly sojourns with euphemistic Aunt Dot (Oh how it would seem that to the astronomical vexation of Ckol and woman alike does the female form gather loosely to coruscate as nebulous reseaux, a phalanx of augmented tittles, like those man-maddening and inchoate mythonymic constellations of confabulated connections where there in actuality exist only interminable vacua betwixt the intractable, esoteric, sidereal dots!)?—had so dampened my spirits seemed naught but a trifling speedbump on the expressway of passion when I recognized with a providential duende that it was precisely this aposematic square inch of skin I had witnessed her flash to ward off the impetuous advances of that impotent p.p. upon my steamy arrival that following fateful morning!

Chapter XI

Though it felt a lifetime had passed in the interim, I discovered via my dependable radio clock that the morning's ordeal had filched from me little more than ten hours of (which at least half would have granted me but a somnolent) Genevieve. Though I can tranche the day thusly, I cannot possibly quantify the losses suffered in units of time—those minute abstractions of ours, existing solely to demarcate events from the chasms of nothingness between them—but it is duly the plight of the preterist (who must by his nature shoulder a burden to which the doomsayer is exempt) that only through the dated gridwork of history can he chronicle the pestilent litany of atrocities befallen.

So let us begin with a safe, if unverifiable, estimate. Let's postulate, for posterity's sake, at 2:17, post meridian: The 'sitter (appropriate sobriquet, this one) labored up from her languor to meet the sneaker who caught her unawares, sniffing furtively at some opened tome of his...I brandished for her standing attention a crinkled ensign in the form of a one-hundred-dollar bill—noteworthy now as a suggested forefather of my potentially Starla-freeing arsenal. She attempted to commence an interrogation regarding my rogue attire, but I stayed her tongue by placing the folded bill into her hand and apologized that she would do well to make accommodations to sleep sometime soon, somewhere else, as circumstances required that she would return and pernoctate that night there in my stead—like the wide-open itinerary of a wild invitation to a party, starting at midnight and ending at a contiguous trio of question marks if not, to the vexation of the punctilious planner, perplexingly punctuationless—so I might meet again with my eccentric benefactor. While she hesitated, I reminded her that I hadn't asked, but if she refused to return I would require from her at the minimum some referral for an impecunious colleague, some needy nanny, a penurious au pair or two, someone who might be appreciative of such exorbitant wages. Okay, she agreed, pocketing the payment extempore.

At about 2:22, Genevieve strolled into the room balancing with one hand the foil bag of potato chips that swallowed her other. I knelt before her and succumbed to the elevational invitation, the elemental need to lift her, to hold her. She pulled out an arm streaked with the crystalized auburn of barbecue dust and hugged me; the bag crunched in the vice of our embrace. I brushed the hair from her face and lovingly pored over every pore of her cheek, as though I'd never before noticed the sprawling aureate peninsula of down down from her temple, that zygomatic island, the dimpled reef she flashed

when waves of laughter washed over her. Peeling the crepitating bag from between us, I told her, “Wash up. We’re going out for dinner. Daddy’s hungry.” She crinkled her nose, quizzically angled her lips. “Tell me you haven’t filled yourself up with these.”

She shook her head. “But Daddy, you need to wash up,” she said. “You smell like—”

“Genevieve!” interjected exasperated Sitter, who glozed that she’d been like that all morning.

Like what, exactly? No incongruity dammed the olfactory workings of my little stinker from the stench that flowed prodigiously from me. I knew, of course, of Genevieve’s inclination to pull from a potty-mouthed lexicon, so if all Sitter had to impart of the long morning by which she’d been blessed to spend with her was the rotten fruition of her own planting, her time would have been best served catching the sleep for which she was already indolently garbed. I dismissed her, reminding her to get her rest. When she’d gone, with Genevieve again to her ablutions, toiling to her toilette, prinking herself in the piebald clash of a pink-green ensemble, I carefully shut the hefty bare-faced volume that was spread upon the table. With a dusty thump I closed the book on wily Raskolnikov, ruminating openly upon my table. The binding righted. I pondered a moment if I’d absent-mindedly initiated and negligently abandoned a dubious study of conscientious crime and commensurate punishment or if Sitter had portended by some fey contrivance the destination to which my “eccentric benefactor” would lead.

I concluded that I must have left it there. I rose and reshelved it.

Circa 2:45: I decided after I completed the coming night’s work that my offer to Sitter, regarding her continued employment in the oversight of Genevieve, might need to be providently rescinded once I returned home. From the bookshelf I boomeranged back to the table, where those perfidious advertisements she’d brought were strewn about the table, and I couldn’t then aver either that from atop them I’d scooped the *Crime* (Had she designed this provocative rebus of suggestive title, either adjacent to or borne by, the advertised electronic doo-dads whose write-ups touted near-perfect picture clarity and playback after I’d left?) and *Punishment* (Would I be forced to sedulously scour the precarious path I had to then tread, mindful of yet another set of eyes, perhaps mechanical?) or if I’d absent-mindedly placed those torn pages that morning alongside the bound ones I’d been unconsciously reading.

Let’s just call it 2:47 when ripples of suspicion towards audacious Sitter began to throb in earnest. I should have called off the mission at 2:48.

On the table there also lay an envelope, whose corner bore a canceled perfin with an L and P cut out along one edge. I unfolded the letter inside and read:

Your presence has been requested and granted for a meeting with one of our tenants. Please bring as proof this letter to Luther Place. Ring the doorbell and present this letter to the staff member who lets you in. The security of our tenants is of utmost importance. Please be respectful, et cetera...

2:50: Hubris was not my hamartia—those ripples of suspicion quickly transmogrified to euphoric waves that subsequently leaked through the estuary of my mouth in a giddy, girlish gasp.

By 4:00, spaghetti whorled about the tines under the divine direction of Genevieve's twirling fingers. Over the tawdry centerpiece of a stout porcelain vase, from which sprouted a floral-Frankenstein of drooping violet trillium whose triform calyx hovered elegantly to drape an effervescent bed of hydrangea, all above the red and white checkered tablecloth, I watched each supple strand whip effortlessly about her fork, plashing orange-red specks along the edge of her plate, and glomming onto the costate spiral she willed into existence. Like the scepter of a wand with which she consecrated her palate, where it unwound unseen save for the undulating strands that disappeared in a glorious slurp through the saucy corners of her malapert mouth. Tonight though her mouth was anything but. It was enchanting, engaging, engrossing, as we emoted unabashedly in reminiscences, trembled uncontrollably in giggles. And each messy movement, I was suddenly aware, might stand as the final indelible image to conclude this capricious chapter—by turns sufferable suffix and priceless prefix—before I would commit to manumit Starla and she us. And unlike her untouched napkin I was determined to absorb them all.

After dinner we shared, at her behest, from a quaint roadside stand a brittle little cone brimming with a globe of chocolate chip mint ice cream, whose rumply nimbus threatened to ooze messily over the rim and down the waffled wall, and, if not for Genevieve's attentive, judicious tongue, onto my fingers. How long had it been since I had to right the pendulum of an ice cream cone that bobbed in her inattentive hand in order to prevent the cloying glop from blobbing her limbs and clothes? And now my wizened hand had naught but her tireless efforts to thank for the goo-less grip I could employ to keep our treat intact and upright between us.

Back home I awoke lying on my side on the floor. It was not yet midnight. Genevieve's forearm leaned upright against my chest, and her hand curled in from the zenith of her wrist toward the intemperate repose of her slumbering face nearly nuzzling my chest, a peaceful visage shielded by the relatively massive gobbet of my own repose from the strobing of a muted television, casting the furniture beyond in frantic and flitting phantasmagoria. I eased myself up, laid her hand gently at her hip and swaddled her in the blanket that lay pleading in a haphazard heap below her knees to envelope the rest of her. I carried her to her bed, where recollecting reveries of my cradled newborn collected in a

wispy cloud about my head while I auscultated the snoring and soothing vibrato of her diaphragm filtered through tremulous lips.

Despite the sublime company I enjoyed that evening, suspicions about Sitter did not dissipate; I wracked my brain throughout to decipher the clues she'd left. Before each instance helping Genevieve to her seat in the car, in a charade of structure-inspection I'd surreptitiously palpate the loose lacunae in the ceiling above it, slide my fingers over and into each imaginable interstice where I feared an opportunistic Sitter might have found a chance to slip some sort of microscopic camera—based upon the adverts she'd earlier thrust upon me, she had at the very least exhibited a ready knowledge of where one might procure such tompeeping gadgetry. Although I never found any evidence that she'd planted any recording device, I implore the reading authority to conduct his own search, employ one with a more intimate knowledge of the vehicle's crannies and nooks. Much like the omnipresent cameras that no doubt captured the initial parkbench encounter of a still-virile Ckol with unsterile Starla so many years prior, if found, the device may present him his best opportunity to notch along the leg of a timetable he so requires the events as they unfolded with a more accurate adumbration of exactitude. No doubt the observant reader has noticed: I am but a poor ambassador to this foreign convention of sexigesimal horology—I have lost track of the time. But to its credit my lack of diligence has fortuitously plowed clear a path for the authorial novelties I wish to employ that only the manipulation of chronology permits: dramatic segues and such that Nature and a faithful recapitulation would deign to thwart.

Thus, let us crawl back to the episode before we, Genevieve and Daddy, fell asleep—to what time would you have me commit?—when on the way home I spontaneously pulled to the side of the road, where I noticed from some distance that scant and flickering arcs glimmered a shallow lea on Genevieve's side of the road. When in the darkening twilight alfresco, she gamboled about the cropping of fireflies with their luminescent derrieres, popping up in incalculable numbers, ceaselessly emerging from vacuums of night to lure her further. She giggled and chased and captured; the fortunate prisoners would fervently redound to her cupped hands, illumine the pillowy bars of their own immurement before casting from her unclasped hands the chiaroscuro of Genevieve's features like a celestial face amid fugacious parhelia and a boundless expanse of distant stars, and they would suddenly extinguish one by one. The ground swelled in an inferno, chaotic with wild embers, dissolving each above the myriad others stoked and cooled, charged and disappeared in a seamless, infinite cycle.

The cutaway scene—I envision for the screen adaptation of these love letters and the subsequent excursions of their doing a subtle and thaumaturgic transmutation whose actualization may

unfortunately depend upon some artistic mercenary whose expertise lies outside the purview of our beloved bohemian, doubtlessly preoccupied still with Genevieve's portrait assigned her—takes us from the swirl of fireflies to the stygian corner of Sue's bedroom just moments after the flaming head of a scratched lucifer had spun and twirled through the still smokeless air in an elegant arc, hopefully approximating the effortless acrobatics by which Starla ignited a lawless love and littered our world, propelled from the springboard of my thumb to its trajectory's end—the bed in which I'd originally discovered desperate, taciturn Sue—where it sprawled at once with a sibilant whoof, in a crackling, nebulous, nacreous combustion, charging from the sopped puddle on her mattress down along the trail of gasoline I'd liberally spilled about the most conspicuous, tell-tale pieces of evidence: a topaz splash against the wall to cascade down the bloody plumage; a noxious, gulping regurgitation from the throat of the tipped drum to drench my dispensed shirt, the torn curtain, drubbing even the carpet-borne dapple of vomit so pathetically bequeathed; a random spillage about the room, finally exhausting the sloshing remainder upon that very mattress, implicated by the blood-mottled pennant that tapered morbidly toward the vacated headboard.

I withstood the initial heat of the conflagration long enough to witness the plastic drum blacken and crumple, secreting a flammable goo, napalm-like, that oozed in fiery blue gloops onto the clothes-heap underneath. The flames quickly scaled the walls, which seemed to squelch painfully out for mercy; the archipelagos of air pockets that pimped the sweating wallpaper bubbled and fissured and exhaled. And I evaded the gathering black net of smoke ducking and dashing down the hall and out the front door. The fire raged within: oblivious, ravenous and mute—vocalized only by the snapping, splintering, crepitating, the wheezing ululations, susurrations of its helpless sylvan victims, consumed voraciously, subsumed vociferously, in vain, plaintive protest.

Above the far end of the house's exterior, where the fire began to penetrate a blazing lattice of shingles with a rapacious series of knife-like licks, unwieldy boughs swayed in a slight fire-feeding breeze to reveal by their scaly undersides leafy clusters of reflected orange explosions, all veiled by a specter of smoke that pumped like an escaped soul, billowing toward the clouded purgatory beyond the mouth of that imposing flue of trees. Through the length of that arboreal shoot, what wistful eyes of lazing angels might dare sneak a peek from their darkening davenport upon these nefarious doings? How would they deign to judge the ersatz black upholstery that dared float up among their own? And of the moon, that lunar voyeur, were he able to predict the appropriate perspective to keep vigil over this villainous undertaking, I daresay still would it have hovered dumbly unaware for the black obnubilation between us.

I debouched from the driveway onto the road, and I could only rely on the insatiability of that inferno to devour those remaining—so named by my ancestral arsonists with whom I now communed in timeless kinship—phlogistons of implication. I'm going to forgo a detailed recap of my sojourn in the all-night café, steaming and cooling with an untouched coffee over the jejune journalism of the local newsrag—no mention in the blotter of suspiciously missing persons—to stay my ectopic heart while I awaited daybreak. Instead, let us leap back, back before I nearly herniated myself awkwardly shunting with an outstretched and unstable branch the securely-fastened blanket—stuffed with not only the body but the largest nearby stones I could dislodge without leaving any detectable divots—as far from the shore of the remotest pond I could locate, aided by my map but hindered by the swarthy complexion of a starless sky (Unsatisfied with the distance I could achieve from the safety of dry land, I was forced to wade out and then swim into the cold and murky soup, ottering and then dropping the corpus delicti of the corpse at the deepest spot I could find, waiting for the queerly effervescent lagan to cease its bubbly assault upon the surface before leaving the scene.); back before I welcomed Sitter upon her midnight return, gingerly accentuating the dedication she'd displayed without tipping an accusatory hand regarding the institution of her potential surveillance capabilities; before I'd providently packed an extra set of clothes (the attire in which I'd swum would eventually crisp and disintegrate below the melting gas drum); even before I'd injected the VCR with the cassette of encased reels, by whose uncoiling, apparently somniferous, projections I was able to share with my Genevieve the most recent, most revealing footage I have of Starla.

Let's depress the pause button and halt our rewinding trajectory here, because 1. I want to bask in the soft glow of this preserved episode, and 2. I won't likely feel up to returning later. On the screen, from a video camera I'd once maladroitly manned, a sitting Starla sort of pivoted around her bulged belly—studded curiously for a moment by our little fish's stretching fin before it squirmed away when I palmed its convex milieu from below the screen—busy at the alchemy of forming from discrete textiles and spooled thread the quilted layette with which we'd planned to swaddle newborn Genevieve at each night-night. Over my hand and forearm Stala draped her progress and asked directly to the camera eye, "What do you think?" to me, to unborn Genevieve (when we'd eventually play for her this tape, though we never envisaged such a scenario for its fulfillment), and I responded with a nodding of the contraption that caught on its downswings the gentle, layette-draped effleurage with which I crept the hem of her clinging gingham top (checked by an army of cute carapaces, stellated by peeking turtle heads and nubby feet) up over her distended navel. Starla set the blanket and implements aside, augmenting accidentally with the nudge of her arms her already swollen breasts, where at their peaks

two embossed and prolonged terrapins seemed to emerge diagonally from provocatively placed puddles of colostrum. She motioned with animated brow to abolish the movie-making (in Genevieve's and my viewing, however, it should have served as my cue to cut the playback) but the lunkheaded Luddite cameraman instead depressed some other button and placed the assiduous recorder down where it fortunately captured of our cautious love-making only the frantic curls and wiggles of my splay-footed toes and the blurred blob of Starla's knee as it periodically threatened the camera's focus. When I recognized to which taboo I risked subjecting my innocent girl (for the first time empathizing with Sitter over the fickle tribulations of utilizing such undependable methods to educate or entertain), I raised with celibate celerity my finger toward a stop button I'd failed to fondle the first time around, Genevieve was fast asleep, so I instead lowered the volume and lay back, deaf to the soft moans and giggles off-screen as well as the austere "Let's get this baby out," which facetiously escaped the lips of my carnal Starla, words which played plainly in my head as if I'd only just heard them days prior. I watched with a perverse sort of envy as the otherwise inert camerawork rocked and convulsed with rhythmic tremors of the barely-there lovers rapt in their crude arithmetic, conjoined below the gloriously gibbous product of their multiplication, their oblong division—how many times can a paynim one go into an empyrean infinity before a heap of heaven is forced out?—but I took solace cuddling with the prime remainder of their loving quotient.

Now let's slip back a bit further, finally, to the drive back from the ice cream stand. For reasons previously outlined, I'd taken a laconic tack regarding the optimistic pangs the letter from Luther Place had imbued—my loquacious Genevieve took another. Against the background of a violet gloaming she broke an unwonted silence: "You know, I picked that envelope out of the mailbox today. I wanted to throw it away." I slowed the motor and veered toward the once-referenced dewy sward, which I could see opened into that budding galaxy of fireflies. My face must have betrayed something of the mum hopefulness I felt. "I just don't want you to be disappointed," she said.

I clicked the shifter to P, my mouth furrowed to n. "A young lady should have her mother," I rationalized. "A father should have...oh I hate to sound trite with you, but the only disappointment left is in not trying." I turned the key and pulled it from the ignition. "Do you remember capturing fireflies? When you were younger?"

My door popped open against my forearm. Genevieve reached over and laid a hand on the other. "What I was gonna say," she started, "earlier, when you came home, was that you smelled, like the old woman's house."

"When the sitter stopped you?" Suddenly all I noticed was the ghastly effluvium choking the car,

wafting from the rear. “Have you talked to her about the old woman?” My eyes unconsciously lasered a halo about her head in search of the magical, invisible recording device I feared had eluded my earlier attempts to draw it out.

Genevieve looked down, studied the theretofore overlooked lockbox turning in her hand. “What I mean is that I wasn’t going to say, well...what you both thought.” A sigh. “Though everything seems like it anymore.”

“You mean everything smells like that?”

“I don’t want you to be disappointed, in me, or anything, is all.”

“Oh, my, Gen!” my mouth stuttered, my heart juddered. It suddenly became clear. When I realized that she was attempting to circumvent the need I had imposed for a reunion with a mother she’d no expectation of meeting, I melted inside, deliquesced under the indomitable heat—one no forthcoming conflagration could have matched—of her implication. I sat back, gathered up the gooey flux of my insides, and I managed, ameliorating the hypocorism: “...evieve, I couldn’t! If I show you something, will you promise the same?”

“Okay,” she said after a little idle contemplation.

I stepped out, rounded the perimeter of the car and popped open the trunk. Besieged by the swarming stench that escaped, I wobbled on still-liquid knees—no, the sepulchral trunk and all its heady implications were not my contribution to show-and-tell (though I’ve foolishly considered in the interim that full disclosure may have effected a preferable outcome)—I scooped out from beside the pupal lump, from which no knifing spoonerism of butterfly to flutter by such light splendor would ever emerge, one of the clear plastic casings from the play-detective set. I dropped the trunk door and tested the handle to be sure it wouldn’t impudently rise after I’d left. On the way to rouse Genevieve from her dolors I was able to deftly net two wayward, blinking bugs with the transparent case I then plopped as a makeshift beacon atop the passenger half of the hood. Though I’d hoped to guide her by curiosity through the haze inside the car, I saw that through the window peered her quizzical mien, buoyed between the rising tide of her shoulders in an excruciating display of seeming apathy. Now I would have doubtless shared with her the video cassette recording of Starla regardless of her response to my atavistic request, but I cannot properly express the elation with which my sunken heart ascended from its murky depth when I realized her response was only because my precocious perch was positively swimming in her new seat; she was simply unable to see my beacon for the dash! I opened her door and held her dainty hand while she hopped down from her seat. I carefully slid the blinker from the hood onto my upturned palm and asked by the intermittent light if she’d please, in this clothed compromise

of pink and green, play among the fireflies with me, like we used to.

She lifted a corner of the plastic case as though peeping under a rug; she allowed the hovering bugs to escape one by one, and they seemed to incandesce Genevieve's demeanor—it had begun to parallel the vespertine atmosphere at this point—mutely Morsing their neon gratitude before rejoining as indistinguishable blips the astral welter of their scintillating brethren. I didn't immediately join her; I instead marveled, slack-jawed and awed against the car, as gregarious Genevieve giddily gave chase, pirouetted, glided. She was ingratiated at once within the coruscating annulus of dusk about her—a twinkling torus from which she plucked and freed seemingly at random those luminous integrants of a grounded galaxy—and what slumped me in stupor was how lucidly even the lowly but enlightened bugs, dancing by the lights of their derriere lanterns, were able to intuit the benevolence of their ephemeral conductor Genevieve the Great.

Meanwhile, against the car, the gaumless yokel—a dim bulb mesmerized by the pretty lights—searching the fleeting permutations of her zodiacal creations for some sign of a favorable tomorrow, felt a sudden itch. As though the phalanx of fireflies—a swirl of impalpable allegories, imbued each with his heart's yearning—had contracted among his child into an aggregate ring of all his hopes and hopelessness. A ring! The ring seemed to tickle his lone external locus of vulnerability, to prick his Achilles metacarpus: the ringless ring finger by which he was dipped into the stygian river called Life. It haunted, reminded him of his failings. A penance abided. The fluttering persisted until unconsciously did he swipe against his hip the cathetic ring gathered upon his own finger into a bathetic neon line—a trail of firefly he'd obviously smudged upon his pants. He panicked, leapt up, crouched down to hide behind the car's posterior and surreptitiously scraped away what remains he could to keep from Genevieve the offal truth of his thoughtless impetuosity.

The moments I had spent furiously scraping and hurriedly swiping were buttressed by stolen glances of Genevieve through the windows, and it seemed no matter the level of my assiduity, something like a highway stretch of warning signs remained to dot an implicative stretch along my side. Like the formation by my own hand of an obstinate constellation beyond my scope. Or a patch of Barb's jaundiced cells spread and smeared in the desperate bliss of my ravenous needs.

Chapter XII

I've emerged like gasping flotsam from the briny depths of yet another Barby fantasy, and I'm quite aware at this pivotal juncture that that is no small feat. I sympathize with those vultures of law and history—so burdened by their pettifogging duties that they descend gracelessly upon the uncooperative words of my discretion so that they may parse for some spilled clues about the frequency with which I've dipped-skinny into my illicit pool—I really do. And I'll spare them such bromides as “a gentleman never tells,” because we each know they wouldn't apply on multiple counts. I've nothing to conceal; I simply have no record of my consumption to share. I will state only that in order to keep the narrative on an even keel I've indulged liberally and judiciously—the two are not mutually exclusive—at least until this most recent union, for which I frighteningly experienced some uncertainty getting up—it is a cruel irony that my moments of greatest dependence must coincide with those of my most desperate impotence—and who else, I ask, would spare the merciful bromide I required?

If the frequency of my immersion is such an issue there should be little difficulty in following the traces Barb has left along the ramified channels of hers and my life-paths. I suspect you'll find her broken down, huddled at her nervous work in some bloody darkened dead-end, where you can then impose upon her your vain interrogations, your infallible magnifying glass, your trivial queries to which I'd almost guarantee her complete capitulation.

Into the blissful realm of Barb there exists a trio of primary ingresses at my immediate disposal, and I am free to enter at each turn any singular opening or combination of the three as the spread of my sickly spirit demands. But into Starla, I could only crack the guarded combination of one unblemished gateway, and that only by virtue of the pedagogic stewardship afforded me. Though by my awakening I've been reminded of the expeditiousness with which I need to forge onward—I cannot afford to fribble away the precious luxury of time I so blithely dismissed earlier—before I dive headfirst into the telling of that triumphant unlocking, I must carve a tunnel through the rough coral of travails endeavoring to obstruct our union.

You've likely inferred by my hopeful intonation earlier that it was directly after the class wherein the intrusive Patrick, pathetically gathering his wounded head, had fallen from Starla's side via the artful circumcision—she pulled back and I incised—we performed in tandem, that she gamboled gleefully back

to my office to claim her rightful spot alongside teacher, where the pair of surging surgeons resumed their licentious game of doctor—in fact I kept with a foolish optimism my own priapic speculum, a crude astrolabe dreamily notching the stretch of astrolabia, ready and secretly in-hand for most of the remainder of class in case she'd kept her implied rounds—but alas, my freeway to heaven turned out to be nothing of the sort. Rather that torturous and hackneyed highway, laden by speed bumps and inimical tolls, that must invariably stretch between all cities forbidden by the stochastic misfortunes of geography and culture and mores to merge. That she denied herself the steamy offering I'd laid for her at the corner of my desk, I chalked up to either a self-imposed asceticism for the remorse that the cold precision of our successful Patricectomy had elicited within or a prudent concern I had somewhat embarrassingly lacked about how such brazen hints of favoritism might slight her classmates.

How I'd failed, sadly, to envision her was as the lone, indehiscent seedling, quivering in the vernal winds of post-adolescence, but staunchly resistant to the visceral throes of pollination that she was. Certainly I'd harbored, at the very least, some suspicions about a spiritual proclivity she might have; I'm not so obtuse. But even so, I had dismissed out of hand any cosmogony that would foster the perverse irony of a perfectly nubile creation imbued with seemingly none of its designed yen. Yet there we were.

My grand epiphany was born out from the original contention that I had to reconcile: my aversion to the nasty gasper she suckled versus the queer longing it seemed to ignite within me. See, sometime after I first saw Starla, but before she had transferred, I'd discovered by some auspicious bit of fortune that she kept in her schedule a rigorous regimen that floated her, during the precise span of my lunch hour, along the horizon of woods that stretched across my office window. With her flushed face, sweat-streaked and glistening, below a tautened coif that funneled into bobbing ponytail—despite its nominal intimation of rollicking bareback activity, a more strictly utilitarian and less alluring hairstyle than the equestrian homogeny exercised by that athletic set I cannot fathom—and above a sleeveless tee, darkened with drenched parabolas of sweat, which covered a constricting “sports bra,” stifling the percussive rhythm Nature intended with her gait, it is quite possible I had admired from my distant vantage her striding figure—nigh indistinguishable from any random runner who perchance followed her route but for the indelible arrowhead I fortuitously noticed pulsing amid the elastic, electric blue that hugged her calves, any number of times earlier that semester. Once I recognized not only her but over the course of a week the regular path of her unvarying program, it became incumbent upon my agenda-sculpting prowess to indefinitely free from that hour any possible obligations that would dare impinge upon my unadulterated peek at perfection.

After my initial realization that it was Starla who shot past my window, it took less than a week to recognize I could rely on her punctuality. So I internalized the timing, anticipated it each midday like a pantless, panting mongrel, and by two weeks' time I had even grown to adore her perfunctory 'do for the rarified glimpse of her delicate neck it afforded me. Of that porcelain neck, exposed before the free-swatting umbrage of her ponytail, I treasured its faint undulations, the evanescent bas-relief hollow of it when she swallowed, the tiny strained corbels that emerged when she flashed a grimace. And I of course projected these cervical nuances into the coital reflexes I imagined myself eliciting.

My inurement to her routine had become in that brief span so complete that my tumescence required only to recall that imagery, to figure the countdown to my lunch hour. To obviate any sort of sluggish sexual languor, I opted for the "light lunches" from the cafeteria menu, raced back to my office and pawed at miniature sandwich triangles, apple slices and carrot (among other) sticks—eyes constantly on the clock. When the time neared, I could intuitively track her unseen progress through the walls of the building so that from the moment the nearly knee-high verdigris enveloping the precious meddling of her copper calves, the iridescent aquamarine shorts that hypnotically shuffled up and slid down her lustrous thighs had breached my vista until the overhanging finish-line bough of a shaggy linden stole her from my sight, I was able to furiously work up to a glorious climax of my own. A lecherous old chap popping out, peeping some fleeing popsy inappropriately, I cannot deny, but there was more to my messy catharsis than the base animalism of it. I too was in training. Catching my breath, I had hoped that with the indulgence of my satyriasis would come the stamina I feared might desert my eager swimmers once submerged in the euphoria of her Elysian streams.

Our little routine, of which one might say I'd developed an almost anaclitic addiction, continued mostly unimpeded—I even sneaked into the office one Sunday, and, feeling a bit big for my britches after wending through an empty wing, neglected to even close my door whilst I laboriously pistoned in vain until the lubrication of hope dried up and my hand fell off—Starla never showed...From one smoking shaft to another: vexed was I by the internecine marriage of aerobic and cigarettic activity to which she subjected her precious lungs. But this surreptitious Sabbath excursion did provide me some ostensible answers, most notably regarding the etiology of her smoking habit: Upon the knoll to the right of the linden, at the end of shooting Starla's normative trajectory, sat dubious Damian, coolly puffing away at some cigarillo as he expectantly peered with the affected insouciance of calculated, strabismic distant squint, leering through a graying haze down the empty alfresco path Starla had graced every other day of the week. Immediately I recalled with vivid clarity the day I caught the two engaged in attentive conversation at the northeastern library quoin. (I know in the instant of discovery I

wondered if there had stood some filthy communal receptacle for suckled tips and spread ashes between them concealed by their stance, but couldn't recall; in retrospect I realize I never checked until in my ephemera-collecting mania sometime later when I sifted its finely pebbled bowl of residual rubbish.) I went limp at the thought of the gauche b-sting of his blitheness infecting her litheness, and I knew at once who it was who'd dragooned her collegiate cravings of nicotine.

My initial reaction to throttle subsided fairly quickly—I'm talking about Damian's head now—after I'd taken stock of both my exhausted throttling hand and the flaccid and exposed imbroglgio it was loosely supporting. My other dilemma stemmed from the fact that since I'd already committed to sacrificing a modicum of personal propriety with Starla (this was just a short time after I'd been made aware of her coming transfer, when the defenestration of all my rules seemed just as imminent), to threaten Damian with expedient expulsion or even failure, on some ostensible charge of literary ineptitude, was simply unthinkable—on paper, he exhibited, now to my chagrin, a propensity or at the very least potential for inviting, nigh inspiring, prose.

I trust I needn't spell out the nature of concatenation with which I linked their shared vice to discreet debauchery. The miscreant was still but a middling wordsmith, whose untempered talent would constitute a mere foible in this uninitiated duel. If it had even come to that—no, you need to deal with these types more directly...Though for all the advantages we as authority figures, elders who wield from our own oral scabbards trenchant tongues both incisive and exacting, enjoy in the pursuit of our youthful but nubile muses, still are we taunted by an obstructive fencing we cannot breach that stretches across the ridiculous ha-ha of maturity. And so, laughing at our ebbing manes is that bedraggled pate of the young; chuckling at the bland state of our stable employment is that mysterious air of apathy: a devil-may-care lassitude about his future, or lack thereof—I beg you, again, to please hold your laughter; I will be here all week, people, a malaprop comic stinking up the joint—a miasma for some unknowable reason irresistible to damaged damsels and modest mademoiselles alike. There is simply no accounting for the fold and bent of the labile labia of callow youth!

I managed, sans media pass, the following Friday night, upon the conclusion of one his band's "gigs," to finagle an interview with dear Damian. I had caught the muffled mush conclusion of their set, a clangorous din that I daresay lost nothing of its dulcet harmony filtered first through the venue's wall and then again by the rolled-up windows of my hermetic automobile parked just outside the rear exit. Emblazoned on the tattered flier I'd torn from the student hall community bulletin board was his band's name, "The Broke and High Men," a droll moniker I recognized immediately from eavesdropping on an inartful piece of Damianiactal discourse among agog ogglers and show-goers who should have been

tending instead to their own word-play in my classroom. Oh, how I might have sacrificed a holiday with Starla if I could have witnessed him squirm when he'd be pressed to disclose the duplicitous nature of his acerbic band name to poor old Starla's mother, inscrutably forking onto his plate tender cutlets of a cooked Christmas goose! I've imagined it as a jolted writhing not too dissimilar to the petulant performance that rope-gyved Damian would give after stumbling from the club's fug, running clumsily into a wayward elbow, when upon waking some twenty minutes later before the feet of his exclusive audience of one, a masked phantom who demanded post-performance a recapitulation of all manner of relations into which he'd undeservedly roped Starla. But the show went on: Even in his half-inebriated state, he instinctively launched with a ceaseless growl into a defiant litany of depraved acts unfit for print. His vain attempts to provoke, regaling me in some approximation of his "singing voice"—or at least as close as he could muster with one cheek to the floorboards—with absurd accounts of a feigned saturnalia whose veracity not even I, tremulous with an enteric churning of paranoia, could deign to entertain, served instead to assuage my chaste concerns. A wave of placidity washed over me, and a pacific ocean was I, flowing, coasting out from the abandoned building with absolute certainty that the ruffian had never dipped so much as a pinky finger into the paradisiacal port in the sterling sea of Starla.

Emasculation was not my game, however, and I trust that when the identity of Damian's terroristic interrogator is revealed to him, within the appropriate context, he will laugh off the episode with that pseudo-contemplative chortle of his. Damian: Let history magnify not the graceless display of your puerile truculence or the sullied and tattered state of your habiliments roiling that dusty floor but rather your unshrinking mettle in the face of adversity, the industriousness you exhibited in escaping your fetters (an heroic yarn I'm certain, to which, regretfully, I may never be privy—one simply cannot grok the unease with which I wordlessly passed him in hallways subsequently, always with some combination of incurable remorse and morbid curiosity), and that the only vestige of cowardice I'd spotted was that small congregation of guttate markings about your one eye—I've since been made aware that these tribalistic inkings should have perhaps elicited some apprehensive inkling on my part—that I'd never noticed but through the fraying eyeholes of my vigilante mask. You see, the staple-perforated bill in my possession with its equivocal "The Broke and High Men" in the coming days became to me something of a dropped gauntlet, a double entendre from whose dichotomy forked two divergent destinies. And, though unbeknownst to me at the time, I would later claim my half, leaving the literal moiety to you.

As I alluded to earlier, I held in my hands the trump over all suitors, save Hershbeck, in that Starla had conferred upon me the privilege of fostering her one worldly passion; she had—willingly,

remember—entrusted its molding to my eager hands. Though I respected the gravity of this arrangement, I was encumbered by an insistent compulsion to introduce to her another secular passion, which her otherwise inquisitive soul had theretofore rejected at each turn. It was from our incunabulum—scabbed over by the insidious scribbling of professor-emeritus Hersh—that sprung the inspiration for my choice of the milieu earmarked for our intimate communing, consuming, consummating. Her story, a poignant piece of allegory on the human condition, had employed a littoral setting where turtle hatchlings staggered intuitively from their sandy ovum enclave along their onerous seaward path, fraught with the failings and pitfalls of unfeeling Nature, so I canvassed the surrounding counties in search of some local simulacrum of her imagined setting. I auspiciously happened upon a terraqueous nook where the tor that sloped from a tree-lined opening toward an idyllic lake was littered with fallen catalpa leaves, scattered like incipient carapaces paralyzed in their sundry points of lakeward progression.

I envision my dear artist, tethered to his atelier's desk, as he eagerly smooths out the wrinkles of his paysagist smock, cracks his knuckles, strokes the bristles of his ready brush, but I implore him to read on, to internalize fully the setting beforehand, to infuse that brush with the spirit, the electricity of a soon-requited love, yes, but one whose imminent efflorescence still seemed less a storied shell than a slippery jellyfish in my grasp. No perfunctory portraiture from afar of some generic inamorato and –ta, hand in hand, foregrounding a shimmering lake surface will suffice, not until suffused with the reticent vibrancy that began to bubble up at first in those wind-trembling leaf-tortoises and then in the thumping hearts and throbbing veins of all the unseen creatures of wood and water caught within the radii of our passionate shock waves.

Let us start here: the skulk of the fox. The gaggle of the geese. The hesitant clutch of lakeside lovers. No, wait...never you mind the pre-prandial vermilion rush of merlot, a dash-of-cherry communion of sorts we shared before the open door of my office refrigerator, which (was) served to obtund her inhibitions (It was intended initially, innocently, as an aperitif; I had just shared with her that I'd located a press that would publish a re-worked iteration of her story (Never again would I part with the wounded scripture she initially handed over once it found its way back into my possession.)), which prompted an uncorked Starla to suggest a celebratory outing, to which I, feeling her suddenly coquettish hand upon my elbow, ejaculated: "I know just the place!" Nay, it was rather her gasp of pleasant surprise—I'd somewhat tipsily navigated my dirigible transport along the sinuous rural route up to the bosky purlieu of the bucolic milieu of my choosing—after we'd debouched the anfractuous wooded trail out to the laked opening, and then when she rose to twirl with her fingers and release a catalpa tortoise

to glide down down down, zigzagging, careening gracefully through the hush of a zephyr—the leaf kissed the catoptric plane of water at the exact moment another, with faintly softer edges, mimicking its every flutter and turn, rushed up from below the wild grass and cattails at the edge, where the conjoined pair hovered in a waltz elegant and symmetrical—that truly catalyzed her willful osmosis into me.

Oh could our union have been so seamless! I'd overestimated this hopeful votary's ability to engage his youthful goddess in conversation once the effects of our pre-prandial toast (and her subsequent sip-fest throughout the duration of the drive) had melted away her desire for didactic discussion. We sat near water's edge upon a blanket I'd kept rolled up upon the backseat. She with her knees up, me with crossed legs, and nary a foot between her tapping toes and mine. At the vertex of my crossed shins lazed a stuffed and opened picnic basket—filled with comestibles and comforting confections we selected through the glassed display inside a local bakery (though the thoughtful drink had chillingly awaited its destiny, our dinner was an ensemble extempore)—inviting Starla's reluctant hand. Between her knees nestled the neck of the cherry merlot, whose mouth she'd stoppered with her now pink-imbrued thumb, subbing in as the porous cork with which she had closed the lips of the sloshing bottle since we first sneaked out from the office. As usual, a refulgent Starla radiated intrigue and elegance with her understated sense of style: the washed-out denim comfortably hugging her shapely thighs, vainly guarding the effortless flashes of her calves with every rise and fall of her playful pedes; under her burnt canary cardigan a violet blouse with a ruffled satinlike peplum whose calligraphic folds read like some divine script, a circumfluent commandment about her waist I desperately tried to first translate and then to impose my own loose interpretations; a light application of iridescent violet upon her eyelids which intensified when her eyes widened and the dark, supple suggestions of a latent sensuality in her mascara. The ponytail she'd saddled herself with was salvaged by the purple ribbon, with its loopy churchgirl innocence, that lassoed unevenly its flopping halves—it was of little consequence, though, as I didn't intend to leave it in for long.

Before us the water pulsed white in the low sun. Gaggled geese aimlessly adrift—with the curve of their heads tucked into long, craned necks above their oblong bodies, they paddled about like animated G clefs—dragged behind their acuminate tailfeathers coruscating cones that fanned out in smooth dissolutions of lake, and the lacunae in our dialog was auspiciously filled by the subtle symphony they orchestrated: the suckling meter of water meekly lapping against the muddy shore; the tenor of belching toads; the sporadic percussion of pensive fish nearing the surface, rapidly darting below to yank from the sky fleeting, gulping vortices; and then me with oh so little to add.

I couldn't ascertain the level of appreciation she, in her mild state of intoxication, held for the wild rhapsody, so I continued to dribble sweet nothings here and there. But at every pause I measured my words. Even in these propitious circumstances, I was careful to keep from our ethereal conversation certain inimical intimations.

She tipped the bottle back once again—she'd long ago ceased wincing at each swallow—and replaced it within the hot alcove below her thighs. Its flanged neck stuck out between the interlocked fingers convening at the confluence of her knees, and its bottom swung to and fro with faint swishes that mirrored my biological pendulum. I pulled out from the basket a croissant sandwich but she kept her tight-fingered grip at my offer. An epiphany: I recognized the role intended for me in this symphony: I was cast to play the satyr who'd pranced out from his wooded hideaway and abandoned his pipe, intent to make a lyre out of the chaste yet obstructive lace of his nymph's fingers. I would pluck them one by one, bask in the timbre of each breathy intonation produced until at last she'd succumb, supine on the blanket, and from whichever lovely crevices I'd have to lap up my share of the merlot spilled in the process, only Pan may care! I thought of the wine splashing about; I heard the washy purl of a gully sluicing the forest floor somewhere behind us, waging a moral war beside the peaceful lake. The parallel was unmistakable: the serene sea of Starla and the raging river of my libido. And though she erected at the estuary a dam of fingers to prevent the confluence, rifting the figurative and littoral country between us was my river, turgid by the voracious consumption along the way of those tributaries of her own filling: the hum of her mellifluent tongue, the intimation of sugary fingers sliding from her mouth, her wiggling toes, the powdery pennant she wiped across her thigh, the undulations of her throat, her fingers clutching once again at the knee...Oh, what was that? Whilst I meandered in my purgatorial bravura of metaphor and imagery, the divine hand of my muse had deigned to swipe her angel food from between my legs and the sweetly-addictive evidence stretched like an ambrosial galaxy smeared upon her thigh.

Instinctively I attempted to reciprocate the between-the-legs game she finally initiated, but as I groped toward the wine bottle I found she proffered it willingly, gigglingly. When she let go she tumbled in a ludic exhibition to the ground, one hand pulling that impudent peplum down over her briefly exposed navel and the other propping her head. The purple ribbon had begun to relent, allowing rogue strands to frazzle just enough to give her hair some savage character; some had framed her face and others fluttered within the exhalation of a sigh. I dropped to her side to pick the grass and leaves leeching her cardigan. I began to rub from her thigh the sugary residue. Or maybe just absent-mindedly trace it. She did not protest too much. She merely rose to her elbows, tucked the willing strands that

would obey behind her ears, left the wild others to lie as they chose. With a leveled hand against the sun she applied an eye shadow that stretched across her face and dissolved provocatively—though I suppose only I noticed—somewhere in the bunched welter wrinkling the piqued peak of my pants.

Clouds began to creep between us and the sun. She spoke—something about watching clouds. I can't commit anything that slipped from her lips to the durance of quotation marks—in my defense I was rather rapt by the involuntary rise of her knee under the saccharine cirrus with which I lay in busy effleurance. I did, however, catch during her wispy expatiation something about the visible shafts of sunlight that seeped through a cloudbreak, that she likened the rays to the brays or the gaze of God through his billowy cupped hands, or some such piffle, but I didn't recognize her desire for some response until she had petulantly straightened her leg away from my reach. Toward the askew moue she'd turned away boldly approached my hungry lips, whispering, "Keep your head out of the clouds," as she unconsciously licked her lips, "and your mouth here—"

And suddenly I possessed—yes, THIS is the phenomenon to which we devote nine-tenths of our jurisprudence and ten-tenths of our poetry—the plump of her underlip. It glided slowly, smoothly between mine, glanced the edgy tip of my tongue, the tipsy edges of my teeth. Her sapid gasps of grape-tinctured heaven perfumed my mouth, tickled my cheeks. In the shapeshifting force of my crude geometry, I nudged an arbelos from the soft isosceles of her nose working upward to the cool pink putty of her upper lip. The infinite passion that stretched across those finite seconds revealed as a reverie to me a doorway—an ingress to a blissful dimension, to prophecies fulfilled, to a palpable beatitude—along whose perimeter I blindly groped until, at the moment I began to grasp the beckoning knocker hung insistently within reach, there stormed through that parting doorway an obstructive sort of awakening: "But what is my mouth, what am I doing here?" like a butler shunting my palm with the brunt force of sober awareness.

I had been clumsy, forward without forbearance. Aswirl in the delirium of imbi- and ambition, I had inadvertently effected this vicissitude—with the sort of characteristically mild, but ribald, riposte I couldn't seem to resist, no less—engendering in her the very intimation of awareness I'd tried so hard to eschew. Back in her natural pudeur she averted her gaze, lakeward now, where the lull in our soundtrack began gradually to give way with an eolian crafting of latticework across the lake's surface. A tremolo authored by the breeze through the quaky grass gave rise to startled Starla, who stood over me a moment...the sudden segue: a swooshed susurrus of rubbed denim...she crepitated underfoot the withered foliar audience that the breeze had marshaled about our blanketed stage. Beside her abandoned shoes I shrunk, doubtless a peaked heap if she had turned back to catch me, helplessly

watching her flee.

The rising allegro she inspired seemed to parallel her movement, with the croak and splash of frightened frogs along the bank, beyond the rustle of the reeds she playfully leveled with an outstretched hand and the matted snarl of grass she graced with her gamboling feet. Gamboling, I say! She wasn't sprinting, not fleeing at all! In her tittup the cardigan, draped over her neck and clinging to her breasts as an obsequious pushup, hovered and fluttered up from under arms and behind her shoulders. How she juddered and jumped! She'd passed a collection of reeds, impinged upon the secluded nook of a goose aloof—it honked; she giggled. I lay there as witness to the performance of the beast, as it raucously shook and stretched, and its wingtips on downswing dipped the water with two angry plops. Cascading droplets from its drenched, pulpy underbelly stippled the dueling ripples, and then from across the lake the sonorous gaggle erupted in a frightened chorale cacophony. Starla stumbled backward a little before mercifully casting a playfully furtive glance in my direction. I rose, erected to a swelling string section, a rousing diapason that perhaps only existed in the amphitheater of my head, but one that inspired me to draggle optimistically along the spoor of my quarry. Fortunately I had the foresight to gather the quarter-full (not three-quarters empty—optimism, I repeat!) bottle, gripped now in my right hand, the blanket in my left, and between them the thrust of Cupid's arrow magically reappeared, on my person now, like a throbbing compass needling true north.

The grand production reached its crescendo when amid the din of gurgle and splash and whir, Starla started and suddenly crumpled with an ululation that sobered my step. I hurried to find her on the glorious rear whose undulant rhythm I had just been admiring, bending her right foot so that she might catch the mark of the haughty assailant that dared nip at her bounding feet. When she spotted me she crimsoned and grimaced. I squatted at her feet to survey the ground, and she lifted the bottle from my grip and kissed its lips with the unfettered abandon for which I'd ached—the bottle seemed to drain from her countenance that flush of embarrassment so that neither evened red-faced. I found the lowly assailant by the serrated edge of an embedded rock that peeked out at the damage it wrought with its gout-peaked crest. I scooped out from the clutches of abetting earth the criminal, red-handed and stone-faced, and I held it aloft. It was a miniature blood-capped Olympus, nigh weightless in the palm of a modern-day Perseus who flaunted the stony pantheon like the head of his love's slain tormentor.

In the submontane vista an exasperated Starla quietly uttered, "Oh, lord," and covered her lips after an adorably hackneyed hiccup had bubbled up. Even without her gracious clue, I knew immediately the identity of my grandiloquent tormentor, supercilious master, eminent caster of this first sedimentary impediment...I vowed silently to him right then and there that the final stony thrust to

break his sanctimonious façade would come, and by these hands. Then I lowered the rock to shoulder level and like a baseball tosser chucked it toward the demonstrative goose, farther away but still at it with the pitch of its bellicose bellowing and plangent plashing.

Knelt before her, I beheld in my hands the pedal splendor of her sole: the unique maze made prominent by the dirtied ridges of her swirling print. Gently did I thumb either side of the slit that halved her foot. She gasped and moaned painfully, but regardless, she granted my first—shallow but arousing still—glimpse of her fuchsia insides. “Looks like I’ll have to have to suck the poison out,” I told her.

A nervous laugh spluttered from her pursed mouth. “Don’t be stupid.”

But I wasn’t stupid, Starla. Nor was I a doctor, though I wracked my brains—how I wished for access to the volumes that filled their shelves! I would have named for you some pernicious malady, replete with recondite and Latinate verbiage, if need be, of one that I could convince you only my squelching lips could stave off, lest the spasmodic episodes I wished to later induce be tetanoid rather than euphoric...In this proximity, I inhaled the pheromonal philter you unwittingly exuded, of sweat, of scent, of blood...yes, blood...while yours found some small release, mine drained from my weary head to painfully accumulate below...All I asked was a small sample, just a taste to replenish what I had lost, was losing above. Perhaps to enter your own anemic venter in a life-saving transfusion both sanguine and sanguinary. All I needed was some ostensible excuse, some flimsily reasoned finger flick to unsnap the muzzle of decorum I’d been anxiously gnawing!

At some point in my swivet I lifted her unmaimed foot and held it next to the other, and it was only after I had collected her that I collected myself. I shudder now to imagine the fear I must have inspired standing over my injured pet, leering with burning eyes down the double-barrel dell of her legs I was unconsciously raising. Vainly she attempted to douse the conflagration by suggesting for her fresh wound a cleansing wash in the lake. That bacteria-ridden cesspool beyond, where there floated rabid geese and cursed princes who leapt in fear at her arrival? Oh no, no, no, no no no nonono. Oh, poor Starla, how could I willingly subject your precious insides to the corrupting agents doubtless found in such strange bodies?

Certainly she recognized the futility in trying to extinguish any fire at this point. It was in fact an inferno, fed by those very legs in my grasp, legs browned with a sunbaked patina that I’d similarly imagined at my mercy since even before I’d ever glimpsed them during their bared spurts, legs striving in that short shelflife of feminine perfection: smoothly plumped beyond the gangly pubescent with a vulnerable tautness guarded still by a tender silksheet of babyfat—it was this supple adipose lamina that tallowed the roiling cauldron of my loins hung heavily under my guts. And the only way to slow its boil

would be with a teetering, sweltering, loving sway, until the offending froth of its contents had spilled.

I carefully lowered her legs and looked around. The faded flame of a fox darting uphill in the waning daylight directed my eye: Ra's nimbus had begun in earnest to descend into his nightly death, and about its catafalque there spread an evanescent aura of gray-streaked magenta, which would soon be gloaming would soon be black. There I for the first time caught sight of the top of an unnatural structure breaching the horizon. She could not be expected with one good foot to hop the trek, and I couldn't possibly navigate with Starla on my back the precarious path back to my car without God's voyeuristic gaze to light the way, so we opted to tame the rocky acclivity in pursuit of the building above forthwith.

While I felt no lingering effects from the wine or my—relatively—advanced age, I ascended with little difficulty, backed by Starla, who had slid her legs through the triangles of my akimbo arms and crossed her arms at my chest. My jolting trudge was spurred at each step by the grinding of her groin as it slid against the small of my back. Though not blotto, she was surprisingly receptive to my travel accommodations (I quietly suspected that the sobering effect of her wound allowed her to grasp the fact that we had no realistic alternatives, but then I had learned earlier to avoid the misstep of offering unsolicited appeals to her conscience.).

Her breath kept tickling my scalp, tousling my hair—it was almost too much! I halted about halfway up the hill, before day disappeared, and directed her attention skyward, where a cirrus smoldered. "Okay," I said. "Anymore all clouds recall the same memory. Of when I first spotted you, your face concealed by that wisp of cigarette smoke. Like a cloud, when it dissipated there awaited an azure expanse into which I willingly, hopelessly lose myself." Trite I know (spare me your rotten fruit-missiles!), but (I confess: perhaps because of her altered state) her deliquescent arms seeped and her sweltering cranny crammed into me. And it was true, of course, but even I hadn't expected such a warm response. She breathed inside of my neck now, every exhalation spidered among my erect hackles down the center of my suddenly nervous system, descending to succuss my coccyx (Have I sullied the beauty of the moment with one breathy innuendo too many? No?)...In my discombobulation I noticed that behind us, across the sloping lea we were cast by the setting sun, with the rigid limb of her hurt foot protruding just above my hip, as a comically perverse gray-green amalgamation. Like an amply-sexual amplexus of a shadowy frog ravishing the complicity of its prolonged mate. And from the mid-section of this impossibly long figure there jerked the pendular heft of his impossible erection.

No, wait. That part wasn't shadow.

The hill we surmounted had been in actuality a cuesta; at the escarped lip there stretched a

dilapidated roof appearing before us in the dark something like an imbricated sea. And in the middle floated the insulated cupola that had beaconed to two desperate stragglers.

With Starla grounded, I tested the edge of the roof. In the sepia wash of dusk, I gingerly walked the tightrope of a truss. Whilst I fastidiously measured each step, a limping flash tumbled beside me a footpath of bowing shingles under an impetuous trail of airy footfalls. With that, the suddenly nimble Starla recalled our chase beside the lake cut short by that discourteous stone, and again I followed her. This time into the cupola.

I stepped inside through an empty window frame and she already lay amid a billowing aureole, a nebula of amber motes that undulated out from under her, still filling the empty torus between beveled ceiling and rumpled floorboards, between the walls and her fallen figure. Central. Supine. She lay beneath a hole in the ceiling, in the defeated repose of ravaged and shored flotsam, one arm crooked flatly above her head and one knee meekly raised as the last dissident to the pervading aura of inevitability that suffocated the room.

While she rested above, I investigated the lower levels, ransacked the ambries, and found that clean water miraculously ran through the pipes of this forsaken church, so I returned from the washroom with a soapless pailful and cloth. I wiped centrifugally from her cut, careful to remove every rimming speck with the dampened cloth. I wrung out the cloth, dappling the pail of sloshing water with translucent pink splotches, then traced the contours of her foot, erased lines of muck with the drenched and dripping tongue of a crimped corner. Her foot curled and recoiled under my cool breath. And then I worked the other filthy foot. Running the edge of the cloth between her toes, a lustful lustration. I gestured a moment with my eyes about the halo of our surroundings and pronounced, "We're practically married now, you know."

She laughed. I can't guarantee I hadn't unwittingly tickled her. Though I will grant that the type of banal sex japery with which she deflected my very serious implication held a certain juvenile appeal to the memory of my caducous humor—I can only recall the nature of her ribs; the heart escapes me—it elicited from me a dismissive snort and a swift advance.

Kneeling behind her head now, I undid her bow entirely to gather her now myriad wayward strands, crafting with my fingers four concentric and fugacious valleys from the horizon of her hairline, arcing and revealing by passing strands the delicate and delectable maze of her right ear, and I tightened the ribbon once again by tugging with demonstrative yet harmless force the twin loops until she winced in simultaneous anguish and intrigue. But despite their dexterous desire, she stayed her hands, and her demeanor leveled to austere, to taciturn, and my flotsam treasure, the nervous mermaid to my eager

seaman, began with pastel fingernails to harpoon the shallow wales in the deep blue seams of her jeans. Wales whose flensing I'd long imagined, so prepared was I to flay—among the many other ineffable f-verbs with which her generation was profanely proficient—the succulent flesh within.

Surely I needn't familiarize the reader with those popular childbook illusive illustrations where an often symmetrical design offers two distinct interpretations contingent upon one's chromatic focus (think of the white chalice that parts the lips of black lovers, or vice versa). As I stroked Starla's hair, the brilliant sparseness of both us and our conversation idly bathed in the idyllic moonlight pouring in through that rustic aperture—a starburst oculus of fractured ceiling boards and rotted shingles—cracked fortuitously above. A bit before the moon had fully revealed itself, however, I had foreseen in that timeworn window a potential for the provocatively psychological prodding of just such an ambiguous illusion, when our jagged wicket would soon entrap the transient lambency of the passing moon. So when the spiny arc of light that the parading moon presented finally began to peek in on us, I asked my recumbent Starla, with her head inclined upon my knees, what she saw out there.

She lifted a rigid hand from her thigh and massaged her nape in contemplation, attempting to wrest from the lush marsh of her mind the answer she thought, so much like a student, I sought. I allowed her caudal hair to fall; it draped the eggshell softside of her forearm, twitching and pulsing at each scratching drum of her fingers, as fluid as anemones in placid water. Humming aloud her drunken ratiocination, her eyes slipped from the swelling aperture to the illumined sheen of her forearm, gleaming between chocolate tresses, and she sexlessly shrugged: "Looks like the moon coming."

If you thought the puerile gesture that marred her extemporaneous response might dissuade my crusade with a didactic and dilating No, then look no further than my silent response to it: Yes! My succinct student. Yes! My perspicacious pupil. Yes indeed! Though a more perfect articulation would have replaced the rather weak noun "moon" with the stronger adnominal "lunar" or, preferably, "moonlit" to better punctuate the precise prescience of her seemingly simple observation, I could not possibly have summed up the apotheosis to which we were rocketing any more deftly. And perhaps I could have, should have left it at that, refrained from eclipsing her white portent with my black obverse, but were I to have left the ambiguity of it open to the more literal, less fortuitous, interpretation—from which will invariably cling my detractors—I would have risked the grave delay of our destiny. So I began, completely impromptu, mind you:

"Through our window: a secret view to the firmament's hidden hollow (My right hand engaged in its own puerile game of hide and seek,...), a stellar void. Tither creeps a strange, whitehot orb.

(...cleaving with probing palps her once-reluctant legs,...) Slow and methodical its advance. (...loosing a slender calf from the fold,...) It impinges upon the ebony nook, a canvas hitherto untouched, (...investigating the slope of raised underthigh,...) now immobile, unable now to resist its aching fulfillment by the indomitable light...fuller and fuller until the final vestige of blackness succumbs to the impending phosphorescence (...my impudent thumb getting warmer, getting warmer still, now glowing hot.): at one moment an unbearable starburst, a burning weight which will soon give way to a luminous lightness only intensified in its entirety.”

And would you believe that with something of a theurgic synchrony, my ham-fisted countervail effloresced precisely with my needle-threading thumb slipping the button of her jeans down under its slit? The popped fissure of denim, punctuated by the sibilance of my tongue’s trailing (entire)TEEEE, gave the suggestion of suddenly uncorked champagne, fizzing and spilling out. The result of the release of that pressure: an involuntary unzipping as she heaved, revealing parallel to my palm a radiant and wavy flash of Easter—he is risen, indeed!—lavender that matched perfectly the glacé fingernails bunched up at my insolent wrist in meek—if not ostensible—protest, attempting to usher away from the dressing room beyond her peplum curtain my prurient reach.

The invisible and weightless agents of guilt and desire whipsawed my distressed damsel—I acknowledged within her trembling, doe-eyed uncertainty both a paralyzing fear and a permissive nod. I slithered beside her, bearing my plump, forbidden fruit. She offered a supplicant stare. Of surrender, yes, though I also intuited the crux of her fear: that an explicit confirmation would sully in her memory the coming experience—or maybe it was the unknowable destiny of her prolapsed soul within our postlapsarian future.

As she prayed silently, I tugged one end of her ribbon, slowly slipping through, until it unleashed her hair; I insouciantly flung the ribbon aside and placed one of her tremulous hands onto the zipper of my low-hanging fruit. Together—mindful of our milieu—we made from my slipped slacks a makeshift hassock, upon which I knelt in grateful genuflection. Still she, pinned by a bibulous mélange of wine and moonshine, tussled with her conscience, so I slid a shushing finger down her lips—slipping her underlip chinward, revealing a wet flash of teeth—so that as I worked the buttoned strip that veed from her collar to the latitude of her noticeable nipples, peeling away a rippled sea from the softsand expanse of her exposed chest where the faintest down glistened like grains bright-white against white in the moonlight bath, I moistened that parched shoal with the evanescent wetness my finger had purloined from her springlike mouth.

I crossed her, with a kiss first upon her forehead, a soft peck upon each socket (In the midst of crossing her fleshy T, yes, I dotted her eyes...I know what punctilious contretemps peck now at the reader's chin: But Ckol, there are no I's in Starla! And I reply, au contraire! that the reader would do well now to accept from the inherent communion of First-Person the transitive property possession of his own impending I, to take responsibility for his distant, craven acts of vicarious voyeurism, for that invasive I is unmistakably coming...Enough of this fatuous aside.), then to nose to her licked lips, sliding tongue-tip down the sweat-slicked cascade from chin to the tender depression between her clavicles where the pearl pendant at the end of her heretofore hidden necklace nestled. I dotted wispy kisses down the rete of her mid-breast valley, rose to catch the ciliary flutter of her closed eyelashes, from which faint gray-black rivulets floated mascara flecks in jagged tearlines earward: a farrago of titillation, of fright, of ecstasy. She vocalized for me in stuttered gasps and melismatic moans the annulus of braille I fingered along her right areola, its omphalos rising seditiously against its unjust imprisonment under the purposeless grail of piety, under the purple cup of her brassiere.

But her cup then runneth over, over that perimeter of supple flesh, resting again where it began when the looped song I educed with my bold, circling fingers seemed to elicit from her own an unthinking, linear trajectory, starting at the fractured waistband of her blue jeans. She rose up—an empyrean arch against her immaculate sole—and when she'd cleared with the band her hovering, callipygous impediment, I gently lowered her—one palm over the warm, pudendal ripple of draped purple that was then unquestionably mine and the other to brace under her bared derriere a smooth landing. I relieved her of both the cardigan and blouse with one gentle effort, allowing the methodical rise of the clinging blouse to ease her still-cupped breasts into the stifling atmosphere. It crept up the porcelain columns of her raised arms; the pearl dropped and dangled just above the miniature pink ribbon between the twin wire frames pushing upward into the soft undersides of her malleable breasts. As those tops slipped finally over her hands and allowed her disheveled mane to parachute onto her bare shoulders, the oscillating pearl shone like a moon corralled among grander celestial spheres. Behind it the chevron of its shadow pointed southward, starting somewhere in the welter of dragging strands and over an emergent sheen of collarbones, as a divine downward edict I dared not defy: As she lay back I pulled the waistband down, down over her supersensitive thighs, which intermittently quivered under my fingernails, down past her knees, above and below which I playfully collected and massaged loose folds like misplaced prepuces. At her ankles I unraveled the bunched denim veil, pulling the hems over the pointe of her ballerina toes, careful to spare her maimed foot, uncovering completely two bridges to that final guardian of celestial bliss: the thin veneer of a silken fig leaf, now darkened,

sheer and nearly sliding off, melting away.

Immediately I ran my fingers down her loins until they hooked the ruffled band about her hips. I held the sides of a body clenched, almost rigid. Her pearl lay curled up among its chain in the hollow at her throat, a sort of upsidedown fulcrum, walled by taut fibers of her rigid neckline, balancing her collarbones. It echoed the downward sentiment that I again obliged with a removal of her panty. It slid down, peeled away reluctantly from her perineum and unleashed the heady, almost disorienting scent of bliss.

Even the pusillanimous reader—forthright but foolhardy in his stalwart assertion that my advances were undesirous in spite of her concerted purple underensemble I unveiled—would be as tight-lipped as my Starla—she in the incipient throes of an inchoate supernova—when faced with the bared clue I then uncovered...a wondrous, glabrous cleft: an obvious effort to appeal to an, ahem, elder suitor of whom she probably suspected, I admit quite understandably, might harbor some of the seemingly pedophilic predilections of pulchritude endemic of our times. An obvious effort.

In her pudency, she whimpered and started to roll. But her predictable effort to cover up with a raised and crossed knee was swiftly thwarted with a stern and pushy, seeking hand...Words fail to capture the fluidity of that transition from my hand sliding from her knee down her inner thigh to my warm, barely bearable envelopment. Immersed to the hip was I in my own baptism, an epochal awakening, and the only witness—the voyeuristic moon, tethered to its circadian routine, had long since been dragged past the window—to our consummation was the lugubrious, shadowed face of an suspicious onlooker I caught hanging in the corner. See, in order to prolong the proceedings, the pro-seeding, I found it necessary to occasionally avert my gaze from the titillating battle that raged between her flush breasts and the florid ballast upon which they undulated, and with one sidelong glance I found that the ribbon I had earlier flung had landed curiously beside us in the shape of a floored ichthus. But because of the exaggerated tail fins it bore, it recalled the simple arithmetic symbol of “greater than,” which opened up toward the raptured pair. I was able to pull out—metaphorically—from my fervid exertions long enough to follow the mathematical truth that started at our seminal linking and concluded at the very same crude crucifix whose mysterious presence has doubtless flummoxed the reader since the beginning of our story.

Despite that the vengeful polemic I had silently uttered lakeside before a stoned Starla was a distant avowal, the moment of my triumphant vainglory was delivered in the presence of my nemesis, but I found because of that I had derived no more pleasure in the defilement of our wooden sanctum. I groped, gripped by a surreal metacognition that even in the tedium of my rote rhythm I’d ascended that

rarified strata of tranquility shaded by no higher plane...And finally my blood-charged rapier—so often an albatross found hanging around sundry cervices—once forged in antediluvian flames, was tempered by the plunge into Starla's Elysian waters. And by those ecstatic thrusts was loosed the residual film of my ghost, at once dissolved and coagulated as the sprawling, pearly floe floating amid the purl of her pristine flow.

I awoke to a querulous shaft of God, burning an astronomical oval beside me in search of fallen Starla. She was gone, her clothes vanished. Behind me there was only the sheen of the decanted bottle. Before me, beyond that importunate glow, her contorted ribbon, and further still, the crucifix remained as the lone remnants of Starla's lingering presence. Ignoring the bottle, I reached over to snatch the others and spread out, supine, clutching the momentous mementos each in either hand. I basked in the candescent spotlight that illumined the content and flaccid serpent, my votive offering imbrued with sanguine stripes of defiance and, as I noticed when it animatedly pulsed for the nonce, redolent of the battered manuscript Starla wrung when she anxiously petitioned my guiding hand for the first time.

Denuded still of inhibition and habiliment, I stepped out from the cupola's window, from the musty enclave of our secluded Eden, and glided an angel gait down the familiar truss that bore me on that previous night of biblical fruition. My paradise quickly lost: Upon a verdant slope just beyond the crest of the hill I again—or rather for the first time—came upon disheveled Starla, who sat sniffing into her knees—I immediately commenced my re-robing. As I teetered upon one leg, pulling my slacks up the other, I mapped in the panorama the paths of starcrossed lovers—heirs to a kingdom of unimaginable bliss, the esoteric throne of love—along the edge of crystalline pool and up the rock-pimpled climb to where behind me the nexus of sacred and profane lay shrouded by the tidal escarpment they ascended. Although I'm loath to include it for the trite symbolism—she likely inferred an antitype of her rushed maturation—I'd be remiss if I failed to note that the chelonian catalpas that had dotted the landscape just the afternoon prior (and even at least as far back as the day I'd initially scouted the locale, I promise) had been miraculously swept up overnight and strewn across the water's surface.

Over her I cast my shadow buttoning its shadow shirt. I could see she'd spent the morning in the church's lowest level, clearing the makeup from a face whose freshness was now marred and ruddied instead by undereye rubs. She stood up from the shadows and with a stern face insisted she was ready to go. She limped out from under my expiatory fingers on her shoulder, and at first I swelled with a perverse version of pride as she gingerly trudged...until I remembered her foot. And the ichor that pumped through me quickly subsided to mortal blood. I heeled a penitent beat all the long way back to the car, and she refused my every snorted appeal to recreate our halcyon eve of felicitous piggyback

glee.

If that walk was the declivity from our zenith, the ride back to her apartment was the nadir. She jostled woodenly in the passenger seat, unable even to muster up ambition enough to swat away the insect amputee of my desperate hand as it crept along her thigh on the sly. Finally she broached the subject of her story's publication—I assured her that a copy would find her, these things take time. Silence again...at least until we eased back into a complete stop curbside before her apartment complex, when she asked how I knew where...She stopped herself. With a hand yanking the doorhandle and an incredulous eye toward the bulge atop my thigh, she let loose the bomb, "So do I at least pass?" indicating the breadth of my enduring repute I'd prayed she'd evaded. Stunned but ever the gentleman, I silently watched her through. She paused on the sidewalk, perhaps in reflection or even to deny me which door might lead to her apartment...she quickly limped in, most assuredly cognizant of just how fatuous and futile would have been such a tack.

(Passing the class should have been of no concern; it was of the idea of passing her onto another professor that I dreaded. And don't think for an instant I'll deign to grade here for the lupine gallery the seminal juvenilia of my ovine tyro.)

I stalled, idling outside until I detected the glutinous malaise stuck in the air and pasted on the faces of pedestrian passersby aghast at the rumbling of my engine. In the surrounding windows stood the silhouettes of garrulous gawkers, bumptious busybodies eager to unsheathe their pocketed cellular telephones, each with police headquarters a mere button-push away. And of the legion of window-framed neighbors, it seemed the lone holdout to be Starla, who forgot to wave me away; she feared, I'm certain, that she'd upset me with her insolent reflex to my swollen pant. But it was I who needed to atone! Suddenly some doodad in the rattling undercarriage of my already conspicuous vehicle failed, popping so loudly that I juddered with it, and the gears seemed to fleer at my automatic shifting—why oh why did I neglect, after these incipient warnings, to hand the keys over to the salubrious wrenches of my local garage?...Starla, of course I was happy to see you, but that cruciform bulge *WAS* a Jesus in my pocket. And the two of us chugged away: a pair of hung chums, each shouldering the heft of the world's guilt while anticipating anxiously our second comings.

Chapter XIII

After once more slipping headlong into Barb's serene oblivion, or perhaps drowning in a dose of Barb's oblivious serenity, the prodigal whoreson returneth, awoken, to reread what has been writ. He hath henceforth come to realize that his is forsooth a suitable fate...that any premature proclamations of triumph uttered were only of Pyrrhic, illusory, delusional victories. And know it is naught but that implacable pursuit of truth that has stayed my hands from mincing these pages of minor declension, to wrest from history how I so unceremoniously lopped its Ghost orchid with the same indelicate fecklessness that I would plow the fields of sycophantic dandelions annually springing up from the fertile soils of my propaedeutic garden.

"Ringless and saturnine," if the reader recalls from an earlier patched excerpt, are self-ascribed attributes that my unfortunate archaeologist has likely by now declared a curious sophistry, but I swear it is only an unintentional half-truth. One of the two flutes before me stands perfused with the nostalgic coming toast of cherry merlot, but from the bottom of one of other before me sprouts myriad tiny bubbles that start, running up the alien annulus that sits aslant, nestled at the bottom and leaning against its concavity of glass, convex to me, vexing me with a virtue vitreously distorted. They float a salutatory train of transient gems along the austere edge, chugging up the inner loop of the band before leaping forth from the diamond—a permanent gem beset atop the engagement ring I've, unbeknownst to Starla, schlepped since her first disappearance—and they race upward like effervescent lemmings through the suspended topaz bullet of champagne I just poured...And here, I've raced ahead of myself.

Addendum One

Djimon-Heimmel

April 1, 2000

Reverend Ingo Christoph, 71

On the twenty-sixth day of March, beloved Reverend Ingo Christoph, 71, decided to go on to be with the Lord, as had always been his greatest, everlasting desire.

Ingo was born January 3, 1929, to the late Alastair and Imogen Christoph. He had one sister, Shalyn, who passed at

birth.

He will be especially missed by his faithful parishioners and the tenants of various homes where he served as chaplain.

Full obituary forthcoming. No visitation hours will be observed. Those in mourning for or in celebration of the deceased are simply asked to pray.

...Christoph had awoken for the second time in the crisp midmorning hour and found himself still upon the porch of his ramshackle cabin within a peasoup of virgin mist and still creaking against the cabin floor working with idle legs his rocking chair. A chair crafted some decades prior from the same felled trees whose leveled trunks like scattered and upturned Gorgon heads guarded that selfsame cabin whose singular construction had ushered their undoing. It jutted from the mountainside and from his panorama Christoph studied the empty vista enveloped below by the insidious fog. A world smeared out of existence perhaps by a vengeful god and as such only the twin spires of his church miles off dared rise above the vacuum as if in silent and imposing requiem.

Below him fog and above an interminable canopy of cloud. He wondered if he had not awoken in Purgatory but thought the idea blasphemy and commenced to turn the leaves of the Bible spread in stalwart vigil over his lap. About his own parish he carried a reputation of doomsaying from behind his pulpit and his chaplain's desk and in secret did he oftentimes revel with escapist fervor in his shameful judgment of man. Making analogs of the moral degradation to which he bore witness daily to

apocalyptic allegories in Revelations. In between his somnolent respites this morning he dragged a weary finger along the book's passages for a parallel to this portentous plight for which he knew well he may have to one day account.

He looked up from the book hopeful to catch some evidence of dissipation and stared at the forest's edge with such concentration that every instance that he thought perhaps the fog lessened was followed immediately by doubt that he'd seen any such promise. But at one such study a dark figure he could not deny suddenly appeared. Seemed to materialize from nothing save the fog he had by then been resigned to regard after all as some looming judgment. When he had neared enough that Christoph could make out in the hand of the dark figure a brandished book Christoph offered a hale salutation but when he received no reply he shuddered and stood timorously and careened in cramped posture.

He who is found is not lost, he said. Have a seat friend, and he collapsed into his own seat as would one in coerced penitence but only because his throbbing legs failed him. I mean no disrespect.

Still he received no reply but the dark figure silently assented to lower himself onto the empty seat before Christoph. Even in this proximity he appeared to Christoph a featureless shadow from which he could distinguish among the lava of his pustule-pocked face only the eerie phantoms of obsidian pupils afloat.

Have a name, stranger?

The nameless figure responded with a sigh and hove and then leveled across his lap the book he'd been carrying.

Well if that don't beat all, a reassured Christoph said with a grin. I received mine as a missionary. Your Bible I mean. And he held the personalized cover with its branded leather and the gilded edges of the pages emitted a dull sheen when he clapped together the covers. I daresay it looks identical. Where'd you get yours?

The dark man crossed his legs and placed one hand over the other atop his copy and finally he spoke: Tell me. Have you ever considered that you might one day effect by virtue of your own dark fantasies a rapture even in miniature? Do you suppose a creator might hang loosely at the whims of your elegiac fancy?

Christoph gripped the edges of his book. I'm not sure I know what you're getting at.

The man furrowed his brow but to Christoph the ebon centers of his eyes did not waver nor did they belie any clues to deduce the nature of this inquisition. Here. He offered his Bible. I want you to read a passage for me.

Christoph waved it away with an emboldened air of self-sufficiency. Thank you friend but I think this one'll do.

I fear my edition possesses an error in its translation. Please. Friend. And he thrust the book forward.

Christoph hesitated but reached for it and studied the markings and weighed it in his hands by transferring it back and forth. It was markedly lighter than was his and he balanced it upon one hand. Yes sir, he started. Either we so have different editions or I am off my rocker. This elicited nothing from the opposing conversant. I do believe something has indeed been lost. He cleared his throat. Where did you get this, now?

Somewhat south from you.

But I didn't—

I trust you will find when you open it the book falls automatically to the verse in question. I've creased many a page musing over and delving into this one. From Revelations. With the end times so near you can no doubt empathize with why I'd like to get this matter squared away forthwith.

With glassy eyes Christoph looked out again beyond his visitor now at the barren landscape as if he sought some benign answer from the shroud. He looked upward and above him and past the jagged edge of his tin overhang he caught the methodical arc of one vulture and then another coiling about the long taut chord that tethered his heart to heaven.

I expected a smile, some twinkle in your eyes, the man said, when I invoked the book's name. Go ahead. A flash of teeth unveiling itself from behind his sliding lips finally betrayed some emotion. Take your time. It's all the same to me.

He obliged an idle while in thought and considered how to beseech this stranger for mercy but from what he still knew not. Instead of thumbing to Revelations Christoph placed the binding onto his lap and let the book fall open. Into both halves was bored smaller than his splayed hand and among the Word a carved-out ell that spanned from Genesis to Revelations. He looked up to see a small revolver brandished like some innocuous plaything in the hand of the stranger. He swallowed. Why...?

Why? The why of the matter is inconsequential. And you know it already anyway. If you don't it must be unknowable. He placed the gun on his lap and folded his hands over it. You want to know how this came to pass. What you could have done to stay such a demise. But that I cannot say. Maybe if you search deeply enough you will find it. These queries do not interest me. They are in fact beyond my ken. I know however that if you follow any alternative trail of whys you will invariably reach the identical dead end. It is a useless pursuit; for after all your philosophical tail-chasing and hand-wringing in

hindsight I will still be here. This will be here. Nothing can be changed by this knowledge. There are two things: what is and what is not. Nothing more. The choice to accept it is yours. I can offer nothing more than that.

You mean you won't. And with the determination of survival Christoph clutched his armrests now but there was no life in his legs and he relaxed his grip in resignation and his forearms fell against the rests and the Bible from his lap. It tumbled down his dead legs and heaped onto the floorboards at his feet.

The stranger regarded the fallen Bible with a cold indifference and rather saved his ardor for the revolver in his grip. I have reconsidered my scant offering. If it assuages I can offer this optimistic bit of patronage: Every soul on earth is at this moment travailed by a similar inescapable fate. This is it. The big one. What? Is this not how you imagined it? He raised his eyes from the barrel now mercifully facing away. Did that not help? Again I expected from you some betrayal of the apocalyptic glee you withhold.

Now what?

Now what indeed. Might I suggest some canticle. I still await the biblical benediction for which I came. No? Well, you know there is still one hope for contingency. Is it too obvious?

Christoph closed his eyes and he prayed.

For the ostensible humility of the act, I have yet to encounter in the annals of history a picture that more succinctly epitomizes raw, devoted humanism than that of man engaged in prayer. I won't bore you with the efficacy of the thing, the futility with which a man of your learned status has undoubtedly struggled and facilely overcome already. Allow me: for all the altruistic intentions, the bared soul, the sacrificial pleading that may go on behind closed lips, there still presides over our kneeling penitent's heartfelt monologue the irrepressible Ego of Man. An inescapable solipsism. Perhaps he seeks to impress upon an entity he has conceded as omnipotent and omniscient some unique perspective that he imagines unconsidered. Or better yet he hopes by his passionate appeal to persuade the hand of a shapeless creator that he has presupposed both timeless and infallible. By either he endeavors to elevate especially those particular petitions of his myopic concern by the simple force of his will. As though he wields the authority to imbue the words offered in prayer with a gravity that the moths of thought fluttering heavenward at every single waking or dreaming moment from his mind do not possess. But if a man silently yearns in his heart for the annihilation of his brother, does the direction of his yen somehow shift in the wind of his sworn denial? And what then by his confession of the same? These answers are for me the same as the earlier whys for you of this predicament. Nothing. This is naught but gloating now. It bores even the victor.

Christoph opened his eyes to the world but still he seemed to float in a void of oblivion.

I do not deal in hope. But there is this: an omnipotent power may at any moment inject himself into the narrative. If this is not meant to fire, you can trust that it won't. We both know you appreciate an ending pre-written. The creeping of the hammer under his thumb resounded with a final sonorous click. If you would: For what did you pray?

Christoph inhaled a pensive and deep breath and let it peacefully exit with: I prayed for you, just a moment before the stranger eased back into his seat jerking the smoking revolver from Christoph's dumbly agape mouth.

.....

A thrush, roused at the orotund crack, pierced the mist and swooped by helter-skelter and was just as suddenly swallowed up in the shadow of a loose-squatting conifer. A metallic dust glinted along the rope of pale light that stretched from the neoteric aperture on the tin sheeting to the ebullient one atop the slumped chaplain's pate. And from his oral opening cascaded rubies, spattering the golden tome at his feet in a gaudy display of disposable income, outcome now, outpouring, splashing over the desultory caesurae—in one regard painstakingly and in another extemporarily—carved away for the grand canyon—those anacoluthic precipices of prolix proverbs riddled now by a dubious communion of blood—which had begun to fill with a crimson and parochial deluge.

Stranger sat in purposeless silence, aimlessly musing, ruminating, until finally something numinous arose, reached across from an abyss: Seated as he was in such propinquity to the sacrifice, an apocalyptic ardor had transferred terribly unto Stranger in this homicidal exchange as he faced the day. From within the whorish fog there emerged the septenary head of the roaming beast upon which she lazed. Originally there were but six—the aforementioned pair of gothic spires; from afar, one vulgar horizon of firmament-scratching monuments to commerce; and somewhere in between, an emergent trio of ghostly and ectomorphic phalli, minarets erected at each visible corner about Luther Place—that poked through, but then a seventh, nigh indistinguishable from that pervasive, cursed obnubilation, breached with an insistent, dark billowing that pumped heavenward.

He leaned forward, over the rail, zeroed curiously in on the locus from whence the smoke rose. He hurled a desultory bullet in the direction of the then ornithoful piney cone and with one seamless second shot thrashed the sudden thrush, which crashed at once without ceremony save the confetti of rubacious plumage that hung with a playful mid-air curling and zigzagging, giving no credence to the peremptory pull of gravity. He tucked Christoph's bible underarm and began to step slowly from the

porch. Before he evaporated into that fog from which he had materialized, purblind Stranger stopped at the bottom step and blithely emptied the remaining chambers into the fog, downhill toward town, and tossed the revolver into the sanguinary muck of slumped mass, having punctuated his morbid epilogue not with a period but instead an insidious ellipsis...

Chapter XIV

While across the proximal corner of my table stretched some local newspaper, skimmed and suspiciously yet auspiciously devoid of any germane obit, there was no dearth of dampened rings—evidence of the coffee mug I nervously sipped and stamped, the circular spirit of my matrimonial hope on downslope—among the numerous messes heaped upon that tabletop. Such was the ingravescient nature of my bouts with caducity: Whilst I pored over the unfolded map engaged in some last minute reconnaissance, I could not help in my incidental palpations of the rectangular ridges of the cartographic thing but relive my handling of the lifeless folds of the graphic thing of ol’ Sue’s eiderdown and sodden shroud before it sunk in slow motion, caroming in one eternal moment off of my cold, paddling shins.

I so rarely partake in the colloquial “cuppa joe,” so called by my ersatz barista, a jovial Josephine—I shudder still at the intimation, so insistent was she to juxtapose the emblazoned nametag that jutted out upon the proud breast she dumbly puffed at every offering with that homey coffee slang, that she hoped the lonely traveler/hopeful Jo-ficionado might infer—who on this night dutifully kept me “topped off” at her every round, but I attempted to soothe my frenetic mind (informed by those somnambulant students who shuffled in, dedicated to no ritualistic practice more than they were to procuring that steaming disposable portable they carried to my dismay into our every mid-morning meeting) with the constant flow of an Arabica aide. I figured that had it failed to stay the invasive madness, at least the caffeine would stay a slumberous slip, lest I miss my destined conference at Luther Place—let punctuality redound to the virtues of Starla’s liberator! Timeliness was all I had, however. I lost any faith that it would keep me alert after plump Josephine curtsied her desperate buxomness with its cloying cloud of perfume into my aggrieved shoulder to whisper that despite the desolate state of the diner, she could do nothing to prevent the proprietor from tossing me from the premises in a pathetic pratfall plummet if I dared exercise or resume my presumed right to “light-up a smoke.”

I balked at the supposition and asked her what in the character I had exhibited thus far could have possibly caused her to assume I’d so heedlessly disregard the well distributed signage that expressly forbade it.

Well, she gestured with a patronizing nod and puckered moue, it was no bother to her, really. But all the same, she should really just get rid of those, those things, paraphernalia, she dubbed them.

As she reached over my shoulder before me to clear from my altared placemat the Starla-flicked matchstick and –kissed filter—a duo of phallic and gluteal mementos, respectively, that I had surreptitiously exhumed before bustling busybodies in ostensible search for some insolent change that had leapt from my pocket, and while the collection of the matchstick has been duly recounted, a similar collection story exists for the butt, when one sweltering afternoon I rescued its provocative bend from its pebbled immurement strolling past the once-mentioned outdoor library ashtray, during that dark age when fantasies of Starla inhaling instead my fiery soul seemed far from imminent—I found Josephine’s wrist at once in the vice of my impetuous grasp.

With a thump she dropped to one knee; she slapped the tabletop with her free hand, unsettling the table’s tenuous grip to the wall, upsetting the mug, whose contents not sopped by that newsrag cascaded over the opposite edge of the table, splattered upon the plastic upholstery. I told her, in no uncertain terms, her aid in this matter wouldn’t be necessary, and she spluttered through the pain some incoherent petition about the rain outside, some vain civil cavil about how she reckoned I wouldn’t want to get soaked out there, as though to rationalize the thoughtless transgression in which I needed by my addiction to partake would require that I exhale my noxious fumes within the encasement of their dubious joint. In that moment of punitive abandon, I realized that I already despised her, ephemeral Jo with her incessant tending, unwarranted innuendoing, the little frizzled dollop of curls that oozed from her head and spilled over that puffy elastic band of hair-corralling pink better suited to some callow coeval of my Genevieve.

I fumed vicariously, irrationally even, with the ire of every smoker ever shunted like a leper into less temperate climes, punished for the venial sins for which their lungs had already suffered enough...but, no, this fight was not mine—the passion abated suddenly as it had arisen. At her utterance of rain—a phenomenon theretofore unnoticed—I, etiolated of my raging red top, leaned upon a McCarthyist trope, so championed by my derivative Damian—what kindred spirits were we after all! what sort of literary bond could have been forged had we not pined after the same lithe songbird, I dare not imagine—when as a supplicant I beseeched the window at my shoulder as though it might offer absolution for my plights which were legion. It offered naught but my ghastly reflection. An apparition. A deaf portent that howled soundlessly of a grave reckoning with which there could be no bargain struck nor petition made. I leaned in and glassed the bubbling landscape under the shade of my leveled palm. Rain whipped sideways and battered the cracked earth like a judgement. Finally did I cow at the clangor of pelting drops overhead as though they beckoned and at the same time announced the irreversible malediction of perdition to engulf the countryside upon which I traversed.

I eased my grip, apologized solemnly, sincerely. Despite my display of visceral vitriol toward her, she was not my enemy. Josephine wobbled upright and gingerly flexed her wrist and curled her fingers while I clasped closed my commemorative argente cigarette case, professionally engraved with the lapidary carving of Starla's and my indelible crucifix. I stood and folded my map; beyond her, loitering under the dim lintel of the kitchen doorway, some greasy kitchen monkey juttied his haughty unshaven chin around the tiled quoin. I stole a cheap, yet incidental—I promise that my infidelities were never even surreptitiously hedonistic—"feel" when I smoothly inserted for her troubles a creased twenty-dollar olive branch into the pocket at her bosom. Then I walked around her toward the counter, where I laid a munificent ten for the coffee. As I reached the exit, I was beckoned by the bellicose brogue of "And what about her broken hymen?"

"I will pay...wait," I turned. "What was that?" Our peeper stood there, a few paces now out from the mouth of his lair, gathering his hairnet in one threatening hand, striking a Napoleonic pose with the other hidden away under his apron. "Excuse me?"

"I say, what about her broken hand?"

Josephine stood up from across the restaurant from where she'd stooped to wipe the table. She clucked and sighed. "It's okay," she said. "I'm fine, see."

"And what do I do with the paper now? What about the paper?" he demanded of me, of Jo, I couldn't tell.

Buttressed by the sibilating wall of rain that roared through the interstice of the door ajar behind me, I, attempting to exile the runt back to the kitchen with an earnest don't-make-me-dispose-of-another-body-tonight scowl (Use your imagination.), somehow summoned up the requisite equanimity to assuage his fears with a remarkably calm "It's yesterday's."

"Damn it, just let him go," came Jo, to the rescue—'twas my forward fingers, I knew, grazing the sloped venal field of her chest that had again ingratiated me back into the jilted fold—she swooped in, wiggled over in my direction. "We'll get another, now you shoo" to him, to me, I couldn't tell. But he reluctantly slinked back, kneading the 'net as he retreated.

I inquired of my rescuer if I had in fact caught sight of the intransigent transient sobbing.

"Crying?" Her face contracted in incredulity a moment. "Oh, it's just some tattoo. We don't ask Kids." She grimaced. To gird her wrist she had applied a slapdash poultice of the rag, coffee-brown and steaming, and she added, "It's just he takes that damn paper ever' day to some floozy down in the ward down the road. I don't know. We'll find another. Don't worry about it." She grasped the makeshift bandage, and with mouth agape a few moments, she doubtless considered some ill-conceived

proposition (Perhaps she hoped the throbbing of the wrist was simply a precursor to a convulsing tryst with the dangerous intrigue of the rogue patron standing before her lovelorn loins.) that in the silent interim she prudently abandoned. “Now you get along. I shouldn’t have touched your belongings. Go on.”

Of course I could not keep from asking exactly what the attentive reader must also ponder: “That tearful cook, is the chap’s name Damian?”

“We don’t need any more trouble before the regulars come pouring in.”

“But the newspaper—“

“Now I said don’t worry.”

“I will pay for that, too, somehow.” And I shuffled backward through the door, until it closed between us, and the awning that sloped over the ingress shielded me no more from the ruinous rain.

In my driver’s seat something else was brewing; I stewed under the percussive clatter panning the roof. It wasn’t long before the rain began to let up, however, and the vaporous tentacles of a thick fog performed their advancing glissades to embrace the pre-dawn dark. I leered through the diner’s picture window—the neon glow of a canvas gleaming in the night—watchful for a glimpse of an emboldened nemesis, hopeful for something more benign. Some floozy?...In this Hopperesque composition, the teratoid nighthawk awaited in shadowy environs, studying through the pane as one and then another patron braved the threat of inclemency to take their places at the counter manned by a wounded Jo, armed with urns of her eponymous elixir.

I felt each nameless raindrop burst upon the windshield like one in a barrage of needling caprices...What was more bedeviling? Which was the more egregious trespass? That a groundling such as Damian had been granted access to Starla’s aerie or that she would condescend to find comfort in the daily banality of such media in the first place—was I to blame with my pedagogic insinuations to “read everything”? Not to mention those wretched wrenches tossed from above! Oh! Each precipitous needle of rain, like a syringe to inject me with contempt, a boiling, caffeinated rage for the whole of this infernal hamlet, for each of its inimical denizens—contemners all it seemed of justice and truth and righteousness—and I imbued the spattered droplets obscuring my vista with the gathering souls of those pitiless cretins. When they stippled my windshield with a kaleidoscopic rime, I happily dismissed the glommed lot of them with a flick of the wrist, unleashing the twin brutish blades of my wipers to shunt them away without pageantry, without mercy. When they’d been flung from view I reveled in imagining the slithering mist as a serpentine harbinger of an inchoate conflagration, or better still, a gathering ghost vainly canvassing the scorched earth for some speck of surviving life among that

settlement's ruin—a ruin that I would delightfully oblige if only this country had not demonstrated such a confounding propensity for untimely rain.

But what a fortunate decahexis did that storm also bring! For when the drenched throng gathered once more it was not to form a lynch-ready mob; rather, in the next instance, with an apt fulgurant afflatus, I caught along my windshield an electric filigree of the droplet edges gilded and enlaced in the fleeting moment when the sky was cracked by a jagged bolt to spark the night alight. In it I was transported at once to the night I had parked, after desperately navigating darkened streets under a similarly rain-battered windshield—this very one, in fact—spurred by the frantic and shrill cry of my infantile rear-facing Genevieve behind me. Our first turbulent, Starless night, and she was screaming for mother's milk. But it was not then with the dread, the anxiety, the fear I was experiencing on this harrowing night—had I too lost forever Starla's breast?—that I then cathected the crystalline configuration before me, but instead with the intensity of my love for the babe I then collected in my arms after stepping out into the rain and into the backseat. Unable to provide for her the mammary for which she blindly rooted—in respites between her crazed tantrums both tempestuous and edentulous—while I unbuckled her, I lifted her from the seat and snuggled her against the biggest boob she'd ever know. And over her lolling head tucked under my chin, until she had calmed to a placid bundle buoyed by the rise and fall of my chest, I stared at the cumulous mass on the windshield before us of raindrops, embryoed each with a tiny nictating carbuncle...ah, to this we shall return...Let us make our way back to outside the diner, where still entranced by that flash of perspective, I helplessly watched my unthinking blades, keeping to the promise of their delayed rhythm, mechanically and mercilessly arcing again, carving out from my Genevibrant shield two limpid arches to reveal the fog-swallowed morn. I zipped out of the parking lot and flicked on my headlights, illuminating little beyond the sinuous plume of a graying day before me.

Addendum Two

...Stranger—stray, injurious, contemner of life—stepped for a second time this day into a clearing—this the curious scene of an incondite razing. He produced yet another handgun from his waistband and held it parallel to one leg of his methodical gait while he sloshed through the catoptric floor of collected rainwater that moated saturated soil about the square of smoldering ruins. A roofless domicile, an open house that beckoned from afar, from whose pinked and blackened walls undulated terpsichorean wisps of stubborn smoky gray beneath the black billow under the drizzle. He looked inside, kicked a patch of smoked and soaked drywall that gave way to his foot like clumped sheets of wet clay that dragged with it splintering studs and stepped onto the soft bed of ash blanketing the interior. Black smoke pumped all about him and billowed translucently through the glistening mist. Intermittent flames sizzled and licked meekly about the perimeter where cover still permitted.

Still-hot ash sifted at his shuffling boots. Patches of shag here and there. The black valances of the sunken and split roof on either side of him. Random coagula of melted and tempered plastic—a charred grille leaning in the durance of one such gobbet. A few unrecognizable articles of clothing peering among charred coils picked clean of their cushion meat. Nary had a hint of any intervening hand presented itself until he kicked up from under the sodden soot a cache of cardboard pieces that palely echoed the washed-out imagery printed on a similar piece that he noticed floating outside. He bent to collect them. Their burnt and wet edges sludged onto his fingers. He delicately turned them each and leaned them against a wall near enough to where a hissy fire might dry them out but would not consume them.

On his haunches he spun quickly from his work with his gun leveled. A jangle-jangle snapped him to attention and before his extended foresight conspicuously slinked a cat. It stopped, sat on its soot-caked hindquarters. Stranger rose with his sights squarely between the reared ears of his feline intruder. He stood tall against the wet detritus cast down from the heavens. Drenched in God's tears. One rivulet inched down from his bedraggled hair, halved his sallow forehead and veered to slope down one side of his nose where it halted, hung there a moment, clinging to the bottom against the vein of water flowing behind until finally succumbing to the rush, falling from the bulbous rim of a nostril distended by the unencumbered grin that stretched across his face. Bang bang.

The cat regarded his strange salutation with naught but a queer a cocking of its head. It raised to

paw at the barrel, to lick the cool steel annulus of it before lowering indifferently to all-fours. Stranger again knelt. This time holding steady his firearm with his forearm upon his knee, he reached with his free hand and scratched the cat's breast, allowed the pendant hanging from its chain to drape his wrist. He looked closely at it, a small golden key, and closed his fist around it, yanking the resistant cat by the neck in the process.

It skittered clumsily, tugged vainly. The soft pads of its paws found little friction upon the ash, rainslicked to some alien mud, as it attempted to retreat from the grip Stranger had by its strained neck. He twisted his other wrist and said Bang again. No outturned ears heard him, however. Not over the clarion crack issued from the implement protruding from his palm that split with its discharge a single link in the chain. The cat slipped out at once and darted out of sight. Stranger rose, began to survey the scattered, blackened faces of surviving lock faces attached to the skeletons of erstwhile dressers, of wayward doorknobs, of vain lockers, all the while swinging the chain as though he breathlessly pushed forth through the suffocating milieu with a strangely satisfied air of occupational perquisites, with the welcoming of renewed purpose.

Chapter XV

One week—three mandatory class meetings!—had elapsed without my truant Starla’s peerless presence after our secret Sermon of (or “with,” or even “on,” if you’re feeling especially provocative, evocative—pick your preposition) the Mount. (Apologies for the crass nature of some of these equivoques—so rarely is the unfairly unheralded work of the missionary christened with the lurid pap of ribald nomenclature with which its less orthodox brethren seems destined to carry; I would certainly refrain were I playing the naïf for the sake of an inattentive audience—and we well know that is not the case—of her eventual return.) Nor had she raced by my window during even one solitary lunch hour—my fist pistoning to her painfully distant strides would invariably have been, however pleasant, an absurd simulacrum so soon after our umbilical consummation, with which I still from time to time involuntarily heaved inside—though this I could assuredly owe to her wounded sole. Woe to her poor foot! To the overstressed and compromised iambic dimeter of her poetic stride! And in her absence so helpless was I to nurse her back to health...what a damnable lot! No sign of her stellar figure lighting her apartment window in those dark evenings and no response either to my first tentative and then tenacious rapping at the front door.

If it was by process of elimination that I presumed Starla had taken refuge in familial confines—she had not, in all likelihood, burst after I dropped her off at her apartment into stardust, space-borne and far far away...the nebulous and cosmic makeup that may one day eons henceforth coalesce into some perfect, unattainable universe of breathlessness...after reflecting upon that big bang, the supernova of pleasure my probing rover had educed in us each—then it was by process of delegation that I tracked her down: so begins my process of delineation.

Despite all obstructions, inimical red tape, the social and professional stigmata that threatened our union by the sanctimonious hierarchy of Academia, I cannot deny it was in fact that very paradigm—my entrusted position of concerned custodian over her academic affairs (not just!)—which afforded me the fortuitous pretext by which I could uninhibitedly exhaust every resource at my disposal—without fear of institutional reprisal—in order to transmit to her some urgent plea.

I clumsily began at the beginning: the Office of Student Records and Registration—even before that though, a fruitless sojourn well before Starla’s disappearance, even before her appearance, at the

Office of Student Affairs, whereupon my furtive *mélange* of curious inquiry and optimistic naiveté was dashed by a bespectacled stump from whom sprouted those wooden responses of propriety and policy, had quickly proved its provocative appellation to be naught but a nominal consortium for those sordid and consensual student-teacher services for which I had long considered myself something of an expert. At the Office of R&R, though, I sought Starla's home address addressing yet another stump, a frumpy shrew, who could have obviated my subsequent hassles with a simple gesture of good faith or good will. But after clicking and clacking, banging upon a keyboard ostensibly at my behest, she, while forsaking eye contact for the aqua glow of her monstrous monitor, declared she couldn't give me the information. Couldn't, or wouldn't? I impetuously hissed. Certainly, I beseeched, if my authoritative status and concern as molder of a single, youthful, impressionable student—most precious asset to campus and community alike—fails to supersede these ostentatious and archaic pretenses in the names of privacy and confidentiality when they so clearly serve to undo the good of those laudable intentions, then have we not failed the student (I'm fairly certain I did not inadvertently substitute "student's") body—a concession, as educator, as advocate, I was unwilling to consider—so dependent upon them? Sorry was the literal and apt descriptor for what she coughed out, and the spluttered phlegm grossly continued that she could not process my request at this time, PROFESSOR (haughtily stressing my title). Anything else? No? Next!

I returned at a later hour, when I hoped a more receptive receptionist, or even secretive secretary, might be manning the helm, and I cast upon this one my same urgent impetrations to the same tuneless results. Despite the relative impunity I presumed in these matters, I did intuit a reasonable fear of the red flags that could have been electronically raised in adjudicative quarters at my persistent, insistent yen. So, hopeful to avoid the trappings of a profligate prof, I abandoned my vain endeavors at that useless source.

I did, somewhat haphazardly and completely foolhardily, stumble into the den of a communal computer laboratory near witching hour, harboring aspirations of anonymity whilst I embarked on a cybersearch—have I properly appropriated this modern modem MO of neologistic logistics?—of my own. I swiveled uneasily before the great box and fondled that plastic tadpole whose umbilical tail connected unseen somewhere under the table. With a chanced wheeling of that alien controller, before my eyes upon the screen there flashed a rectangular prompt, prodding with geminated blank boxes for identification and password, whereupon I, chary and alarmed, wheeled backward at once, in the process severing the tail from the spermiform figure still stuck to my guilty hand. I rose from my chair, let the impotent plastic murine mainour clatter from desk to chair to floor, and slinked out, unseen, from that

sparsely attended late-night convention of sparsely-touched slovens and key-clattering slatterns.

So wracked had I become with worry I had overstepped some traceable boundary that for the remainder of that night I stayed in, slumped over the desk in my office, and I busied myself devising outlandish punishments—the draconian writing exercises I could never force her to submit in absentia and rigorous physical exercises to which I hoped she would—for the black hole of Starla’s contumacy. And after each lewd machination committed to the recesses of my mind I would caracole in my seat to the gin providently stored in a clandestine compartment of one pullout desk drawer, and I, attempting either to tamp those dear reveries deeper inside or to drown them out (I can’t say for certain), downed pony after pony until I finally passed out in the cradle of my crossed arms.

The next morning I awoke hoarse. I snorted and coughed and at some drummed reveille, the rousing ruction of a light but insistent knock upon the gate of my office stall, rasped for my unbidden visitor (*c’est la vie* for the in-demand professor!) to come in as I dutifully replaced the night’s vigilant cap and quickly slipped the bottle under my desk. I called her in. I was groggy, of course, aridly saddled by the dehydrating marriage of drink and the cafard of a drying heart. Two malicious, nigh vertically canted lasers of sunlight that shot through the interstices at either end of the blinds—one beam of which I recall relentlessly attacked my temple despite my tic-like attempts to reposition my head away from it—only exacerbated my stupor, but no manner of compromised faculty, no meddlesome blinders from this realm or beyond could have kept from me an instant ken by the unmistakable gait of her thighs, cloaked as they were by a modest dun skirt extending well beyond her knees, of the identity of my visitor as she made her way in. I recognized the naturally age-sloping pulchritude in her figure. I sobered at the inhalation of reluctant sensuality with which she perfumed the room. The primordial beauty nearing my desk. What but the dickens—what knowledge of the crude instructor before her had preceded, neigh...I mean nay, perhaps precipitated this visit?—had brought this lovely portent, ghost of Starla future, and what scornful tidings did she bring?

For the provident dowry of latent sensuality she’d biologically bestowed, it was easy to see that, much like her fictitious grand-descendant turn of Starla’s turtles, no matter where she roamed she was no further than a stone’s throw from the shell of sanctimony: her inescapable home. That no stony look was lodged in my direction nor a remonstrative palm across my muzzle when Starla’s mother extended her hand was assurance enough that she had advanced oblivious to certain extracurricular activities she would doubtless deem particularly inappropriate, and I felt something of a rejuvenation, a carefree duende as I engaged in this unlikely convening. I took her offered hand, which was, despite the faint glove of maturity that had begun to filch its softness, so redolent of daughter’s warm touch that I was

silently and enormously appreciative, firstly, that I'd the prescience to remain seated despite its seeming impropriety, and, secondly, to those anonymous architects of furniture, whose provident design provided the slab of deskwood with which they today so deftly shielded the embarrassingly sudden sturdy space between otherwise unsteady legs. I confess I heard little of her introduction. Myself a bit swollen with perfidy—but in thought alone, Starla!—I lost myself in the clutch of her hand to the ponderings of a covetous wretch: shameful curiosities abounded, such as the comparison of congenital dexterity or the endowment of genealogical traits and physical anomalies. I, weighing the delicate structure of her hand, the bony segments that made up her fingers, even slipped into fantasies of how her osteal crisis might hold up while she, denuded upon a wooden floor, thrashed in similar throes of a moonlit fantasia.

She took her hand and seat, and with that sylleptic gesture, my thoughts and I were mercifully sunken. The gravitas that should have informed *modus operandi* from moment one finally settled over me, and I asked what brought her to the welcoming ingress of my orifice, shrewdly eschewing mention of what had brought me to her daughter's.

But first: I have neglected the disclosure of my exhausted efforts to reach out to Starla after those initial dealings with that couple of registrar watchdogs and, of course, before my own failed computation the night prior. Suffice it to say, in the interim since she had taken leave my professorial commitment became unprofessional; faced by the pitiable lot of puppy-eyed pupilage that encircled my dais, my inspiration to inspire had fizzled. Save for those few classroom meetings—now dreary contractual obligations from which my absquatulations, on the second, were demonstrative in their immediacy—I stayed in-office, avoiding my duties as curator of current student work for class discussion, so that I might pore over exemplary pieces I'd curated from those halcyon days when immanent still in my self-appointed duty was that once-delicious process of natural selection, when I reveled in weeding out my prospective, yet struggling, writers by the bare tenacity of their spirits. But after scaling, reaching and then tumbling from such a concupiscent acme, the sidereal ecstasy of elevated strata, how could I ever again get up—even for the tempting surrogate of Mother before me!—to judge the porous molehills whose propositions and impositions were certainly imminent?

It wasn't long before I exhumed Starla's premier primer—oh how, as I palpated the incidental creases and intaglio trenches of doodlemarks (yes, absent-minded and whimsical work of my own doing, so committed in ink as I gorged myself on her vouchsafed history) in the margins, far removed I felt from those purported days of innocence!—an introductory assignment with which I used to commence each semester, but which had in later years fallen to the wayside for the utter banality it seemed to net. It

was a simple request to précis precisely one's path, academically and personally, from sundry humble beginnings to my class—funny how I posed a virtually identical question to mother in our first unofficial meeting—including an honest appraisal of one's perceived place at the table of American literature. Hers was brief, and puzzlingly, despite that the assignment's rubric included specific instruction to share an impression of campus life and its effects on the yearning mind of the hopeful author, Starla appeared to defiantly disregard that order—how I yearned to re-press her endearing cheekiness!—offering little more than a nod to the viridescent vista and its fortuitous proximity to home. But fortuitous for me, tucked away in her submission were a couple of suddenly useful nuggets.

One was the identification of an emergent confidante, upon whom she seemed to depend when questions of all manner of college life arose. Somehow I'd no issues tracking down Greta through the accepted, official channels at the officious registration building—I must say though that the ease with which I was able to procure this information gave rise to a palpable unease in regards to the detailed difficulties I previously encountered in those very confines—and when she opened her dormitory door I immediately recognized her face: I had caught her and Starla palling around the grounds, even once chatting late in the evening under the cloudy plafond and amid the wall-papered mosaics of canonized excerpt of a local off-campus café, each laughing wisps of mocha and tobacco that dissolved into the stuffy mesh of fuzzy smoke and jazzy rhythm above. And now in her own doorway Greta stood before me, regarded me. A furtive look. A pensive mien. By some ineffable and inascribable sense of atavistic compunction I regretted coming at once. At standing there upon the rough dormitory flooring. At acknowledging the ad hoc foreign art gallery within which I stood, the taped facsimiles of open invitations crudely scrawled at their etiologically incipient to ice cream socials and study groups and whatnot. At breaching the decorous pact of what has been agreed upon and understood should be at its most risqué the platonic nature of teacher-student out-of-class correspondence. I apologized without epexegetis and turned away to leave until when as I was slinking, half a hallway away into my retreat, she had invoked with a sotto voce sort of hushed shout Starla's name among indecipherable babble.

I spun around, tried to walk back calmly, to measure my response. "What do you know?" I begged in not-so sotto voce.

She shuddered. "Nothing." I was coming on too strong, too suspicious. "I mean, I do know her."

I feared divulging too much. But I hadn't the capacity at that time for anything but pithy prodding for her pity. "Do you see her still? Can you contact her?" She shielded her torso with one arm between us, bracing a hand against the jamb and clutching her side with the other. She nodded a meek nod; a sheen shone under her eyes. I waged by her mannerisms that to inveigle her assistance would be

a delicate operation, but so drunk with desperation was I that in my potvaliancy I blurted out, “Starla has missed a lot of class hours. You see. And I need her. I need to see her. Please,” I painfully pleaded, “if you could...” She continued her automatous affirmative gesture, nictating incessantly, agreeing ostensibly to my every desperate fragmentary request, my blurting palaver, sometime during which she disappeared to the click of a gently closed door without ever vocalizing any unequivocal acceptance of the implied quest.

Oh to be sure, the situation called for more tact than I could muster, but I’d at the very least squeezed my rolled-up SOS into the mouth of some sort of vitreous vessel that just might tread those ancillary tributaries to which I had no access.

Another nugget I had panned from Starla’s assignment was that despite all of her mother’s epicurean proclivities she harbored a distaste for the societal declension she attributed in part to the proliferation of “dangerous ideas” (Starla’s emphasis) that served as the inveterate current of literature.

Not that I’d any inclination to repudiate such claims—to posit any theorem, agreeable or no, would have served no greater good in this circumstance—nor could I even if I had. But, owing to the oft-contentious nature of post-adolescent-parent relations, I did think it best, if only to sate some curiosities of mine, to allow the subject to tackle on her own the duality of the profile Starla provided. She broached the topic of daughter’s avocation right off: “I wasn’t against this experiment. (Experiment?) Though I admit I wasn’t excited either.” She unfolded her hands from atop her crossed legs, uncrossed her legs, recrossed her legs. “I’m sorry, you must think me a prude. Prudent, yes. (Oh, a pithy one!) I understand the power of words. But I also know their value.” She stopped, sighed. “Well, to be honest I don’t know what my Starla has shared about my disapproval, if anything, but I thought I needed to address it. It’s just that I believe there are certain ideas children needn’t be exposed to. That is until they are old enough. I’m not crazy about, well, you know, the sex and atheism and such that run rampant in your field.”

“Of course,” I patronized.

“Until a certain age,” she tautologized.

“Of course.” My voice was wrecked but unbroken. I wheeled back while she settled herself, and I erected—inconspicuously smooth-slacked now but, alas, unpresentably crotch-cockled from the night I’d just spent in the chair—and crept over toward the corner where there sat my rather capacious miniature refrigerator, from which I produced and presented a chilled bottle of merlot (No need had I to secrete the communal blood of Christ.). “Ahem?” I coughed, ostensibly oblivious to the irony of the scene to which she was genuinely so.

She wiggled free from her cuff a watch that nestled against her wrist, disapprovingly studied it. “A Sunday morning? No I don’t think so.” Already I had begun to doubt the veracity of Starla’s characterizations. The cuff again covered the wiggling time. “But I have an idea now what she has shared about mother.”

“A simple gesture of hospitality. We workaholics rarely know the time or day...Read nothing into it.” I returned to my seat, muffled a cough into a fist, my ham-sized receptacle...“Forgive my voice,” I grogged. “You may not believe it, but I’ve long considered myself something of a relic. Unfortunate may it be, I recognize that I am, by virtue, or lack thereof (tee hee!), of the stranglehold of my profession, an unwilling accessory to...well, let us call it what it is, ‘the disintegrating conscience of contemporary literature.’ Peruse the bestseller display at your local bookstore—I don’t need to convince you these were not the books lining the library shelves of our youth.” And here I punctuated the spurious ire of my apodictic claim with the exclamation point of my finger jamming its undertittle onto the desktop, the apropos pause of such declamatory punctuation, and then I followed that ostentatious demonstration with that very same hand flattened over my heart. “In fact I have always held firm to the belief that every worthwhile idea history has ever posited has already been committed to the pages of The Book. Capital T and B.”

An aside, to my dear artist-at-work: If I might again be so bold, I would direct your illustrative acumen to a depiction of our present scene in some sort of comic (Am I to understand “graphic novel” to be the preferred nomenclature of today’s discerning reader?) panel or even series. The aged vixen, prudish but impressionable, unknowingly seated across from her antagonist. Our prurient protagonist. She, attempting to assert a moral code she has astutely perceived obsolete in these immune confines, is stunned by the object that the second shaft of sunlight illumines. While the aforementioned sunlight from one side of the blinds attacked my temple, his garish twin—perhaps suggest an interminable, mythic origination point for the pair by having the shafts burst mystically into the otherwise enclosed composition of the panel from the blank purlieu of margin (an aesthetic gimmick to which no serial illustrator can be alien)—stretched across the desk of my makeshift temple as a Son-light settling upon the erected crucifix I’d proudly placed there. Make certain to accurately capture her expression of delight: the Son was not anymore the only force at this unscheduled conference positively beaming!

“Amen,” she said solemnly (not at all as genteel as you’ve probably assumed—I felt faint pangs of pity), shaking her head as a gourmand finally swallowing some noshed half-baked delicacy of comfort food. “Doesn’t it do a soul good to hear it...And I understand you’ve been seeing Starla?”

“You could say that.” I felt my brow contract and contort.

“I must say, some of the reservations I have about sending her to school start to melt away just knowing someone so principled could be guiding her.”

I resisted the insidious inkling inside to equivocate the anecdote of how I had personally, with fiery enthusiasm, escorted her daughter to the pew—well, to a higher plane to be exact—once already. I was, however, taken aback by the passive, almost conditional, pith of her implication: *could* be guiding? I leaned back into my seat, communed with the merlot swirling in my right hand. “I still don’t know why I have Mom seated before me, as opposed to Starla. If you will.”

“I know I should be speaking directly to Professor Hershbeck. He was not in.”

“Ah,” I sighed, “even at this juncture of the semester, you’ll find the laggardly among us keep their weekends. Still am I here, and still am I uncertain about my guest. Please.”

After a moment, she answered, “For some reason she won’t share, Starla returned home without seeing her commitments through. I fear I might somehow be squandering a blessing. An opportunity to persuade her to a more lucrative, more sensible field. But as I stood over her, and she was sobbing in her hands, I actually felt as though I understood the hardship of Abraham as he bound Isaac. Forgive the blasphemer. I hoped someone here might shed some light.”

I nodded, directing with narrowed eyes our conjoined concern somewhat tritely crucifixward.

Silently thankful to the angel of motherhood who saw fit to swoop in and encourage her impuissance, I thus spoke: “What is verse if not applicable to our own harrowed lives in these unrepentant times? But your burning bush I cannot be.”

“Amen,” again. “Indeed,” and she scanned the perimeter, slowly past the emblazoned bindings of lurid texts lined up in conspicuous windrows upon my shelves, with the collagen of disapproval wriggling like maggots underneath the skin of her brow. No doubt tallying the souls she imagined damaged by such an otherwise unassuming collection of text, words, pages filled up with the pornographic, obscene...there a dog-eared paperback *Tropic of Cancer*—had husband or even some dissociated other once contemplated the cosmos, rapt by the ethereal stink, the twitching eye buried within the black crevasse that halved her exposed and heaving nether?—there the hazy sneer of my Charlotte as she spied the salient spine of Lolita jutting provocatively from and flanked by her erstwhile samizdat-candidate elders Sade and Joyce. The tide was turning. Much as I’d enjoyed our little game of sophistry—however one-sided—I felt hungover, growing tired of the charade to mollify my bush-beating berater.

But fault lay with me. Secretly, foolishly, I had taken the liberty of frankensteining a hopeful construction of Starla’s mummy, my future foe, with naught but the spared parts at my disposal. I

confess in my mind she had burned with some antedated and puritanical ardor, railing against Literature-as-Creation, an affront to the one true maker. A fatuous pretense, I knew, carrying with it a disappointment whose stench of inevitability should have tickled my nostrils at conception. Still it was this antiquated monster whose parochial cosmogony I had anticipated smashing if and when she dared to dam the creative or romantic waters about to prodigiously flow from Starla and me. But what should be done with this, this garden variety censor holding the key to my love's cell, but to hold her hand throughout the duration of this peculiar promenade until finally from that hand did she relinquish unto mine that elusive key?

"How many times my soul has bristled at the troubled company I'm forced to keep I cannot begin to count." I attempted to waylay the tide. "We have missed Starla. She has missed a lot."

"There is something." She paused. "I suppose you are still wondering why I'm talking to you at all." Stammering.

"Come with it. When shall we expect Starla's return?"

"Even though Professor Hershbeck was to be her instructor for these four weeks—"

"Four weeks?"

"I've felt I needed to speak to you. She won't even give me a straight answer about her foot. It is obviously hurt. She hasn't run since. When I ask about her time here, yours is the name she seems to mention most often."

I perked, I peaked, I was piqued. Not that I had been given reason to be overly concerned, but, "Anything specific?"

"Vague suggestions. Nothing, I suppose. But..." She pursed her lips. "To think when her advisor briefly warned us, she laughed, outright dismissed the possibility."

"Warning?"

"Of course we were most concerned about the college boys."

"A more plebeian welter of testosterone you're unlikely to find."

She closed her eyes, started, "I'm not quite sure I should be coming to you with this at all. You'll probably never have to see her again." (Ack!) She sighed. "Okay. Certainly a man in your position is somewhat familiar with the nature of young girls." (Natch!) She then let loose into some spinsterish harangue about estrous girls at the precipice of womanhood, their unrealistic notions of love and romance, in the most querulous, sexless fashion imaginable that I tuned out, nodding reflexively from time to time until I had descended out of sight behind the desk to fetch from a side drawer some generic form with university letterhead. I sat upright and as I busily smoothed the sheet out on a vacant swath

of desktop, I latched back onto the speech to hear: "...see, I have these intuitions that Starla might have developed some inappropriate feelings for you."

My pen fumbled betwixt gossamer fingers connected to a donsie limb spun from the flutter of my spidering heart. I lifted the opposite hand to surreptitiously palpate my facial expression, hoping I'd betrayed none of the giddy elation pulsing my exsanguine cheeks. I managed to cobble together some banausic sort of response. "Of course, these sorts of things do happen..." (Of course!) Blood slowly began to refill my vacated veins. The embattled winds that had theretofore governed the precarious tide between us started to winnow a different narrative—I didn't require her consent at all. The matriarchal shibboleth I had originally feared upsetting was crumbling before me; I needed to wrest from it that embedded (em-bedding?) key before it too was destroyed. "...I needn't patronize your sensibilities parroting university policies regarding such fraternization or my strict adherence to said policy." And now for the part of me that wished, for curiosity's sake, the identity of the admonishing source—how expansive was the renown of my disrepute? how vindictively loose, by the virile exertion of my pedagogic transgressions, had I stretched the once tight-lipped quim of desperate undergrads?—but also, and more pragmatically, for some instructive lead, I added, "but I've no taste for this tabloid fodder and since you've not considered it germane to inquire about Starla's work, I will need to seek the party responsible for this cautionary counsel."

She was clutching her breast, so taken aback by my mild tirade, when she said, "I want to be clear. I have not accused you of anything."

"A name." I glared upward, only momentarily breaking the fastidious focus I'd placed on the vice of my fingers, the nib of my pen below, pushing into the paper. "Please."

"Sylvester Guth," she gulped.

"Guth, Guth...why doesn't this ring a bell?" as I exaggeratingly hooked the G. "Department?"

"Well...it's her principal."

"She sees her principal still?" My voice feral, I bristled at once with an envy primal and territorial in its still-bridled fervor.

"Usually just during school hours."

Suddenly the sight of the wine curdled my gin-soaked insides. I could feel the acidic dross of my stomach lying in wait for the signal of some rogue eructation before propelling forth in a grotesque exodus. I nudged the glass away from the page with the capped pen butt, and, ignoring the pre-printed requests before each line, scribbled upon them instead all the pertinent information I could guilt from her about Starla's, ahem, high school. I bookended the episode with sylleptic symmetry, dismissing from

my office my subcutaneous guest and soon after the acrimonious dregs of the previous night's binge.

Of course I hurled from the gut-punch of Starla's equivocation. That the natural thespian, playing the darling role of teacher's pet, of ingénue—to what end, I could extrapolate only by the fateful fruition of ours; of course she'd preserved an innocence none could deny in the apotheosis-of-method-acting her maidenhead, by whose blood we were finally cleansed—had kept from me the academic nature of our relation, and thus the dubious disparity of our ages, was at once troubling and exhilarating. Let us number the plausible options for which we can potentially account such withholding: 1.) She assumed the ramifications of sharing this information would prevent my advances, and 2.)...Because there is a one and because I have no eraser, there must be a two, but I'm at a loss to provide another.

But it was not this arbitrarily-despised disparity that continued to haunt me after the initial shock—the tellurian poltroon who deigns to malingering from the natural pull of Venus to appease some unnatural gravity deserves the forlorn remainder that awaits to suffocate him. No, something else was amiss. I'd allowed Starla to slip from my grasp, to streak my sky, dragging the coma of my fizzling heart, yet I possessed so little of hers.

Whence came her passion for writing? The brief disappointment I suffered over her mother's aversion to it got me thinking. Was it a simple act of petulance, defiance? Though what I read from her invariably retained a tinge of mother's religious taint, I wondered if it was a genuine expression or merely a palimpsest whose original coat I might eradicate with the proper turpentine...oh, had I impressed upon her how she'd replanted my deciduous affections of semesters' past with an evergreen needling?

I digress. Again: whence came her passion?

In my perilous solitude, often am I prone to desolate cerebration, and Starla, if nothing else I can attest that all ends in tragedy. All roads to this, and who were we but wayward souls entwined by the threads of that same passion: mad puzzles of text with which we, you and I, populate the page. And why? Why by our divination do we perfuse those lexical assemblages—if not tragedies then they are nothing—with a piquancy, a poetry, so that our fiction may transcend the pedestrian pleas for mere communication? Worlds are pulled asunder and reassembled to reckon with madness, the tragedy of these elegiac times. Perhaps to order the chaos that surrounds us do we dabble in the absurdity of quickening, of an abiogenesis without precedent.

And from the primordial soup within the inkwell we quill narrative from nothing—homunculi thrust forth from some virginal chasm, universe sprung from our gaping godhead. What is wrought?

Actors funneled from that blackness, lionized, lambasted, plucked from the ether and sentenced to negotiate the maw of our construction while from that very parchment block of text we whittle for them paper failures and meretricious triumphs. And when they defy our con- or subjugation, we exercise the plenary authority to drop a period when they beg for comma, to subject predicates to fragmentation, to predicate subjects upon participles, to dangle the pensile lead of their lower case whys over the fires of literary perdition—deletion, effacement, desertion—when they dare direct objections.

Coursing the cursive veins indited by my hand is a plasmic ink by which I, rather than rectify the shortcomings of creation, revel in the sorts of depredations, the perversions upon which my own creator so haughtily and selfishly engorges himself. Yet I have had my fill—these borborygmic rumblings of despair in my gut have forced my hand. A hand that runs the curve of Barb, oblivious, immune to the suffocating pathos under which I now toil—oh, she’s such a pill!—under my fingers she collapses, she shuffles, she spreads as though it is only by my will that she may move. Barb’s relatively swift deterioration upon my table: undeniable. But at least I know that she won’t run out on me (Starla, forgive again my insolent tongue.). No, it will be I who absconds, leaving her behind to tell my tale. But for the paucity of it to which she be privy, I, sunken in my chair and reduced to the pretentious inanity of memoir—or worse yet, dreaded epistolary “to whom it may concern”—am tasked to write the pertinent backstory, to fill with these juicy berries a plentiful punnet for your pristine hands, to painfully relive it again before I finally hop a train charging inexorably toward some unknown terminus.

Chapter XVI

Nestled among a copse of willow trees along the off-road track, parallel to Luther Place, that I'd pegged for my last-minute reconnoitering, I sat behind wheel, behind loping engine, pathetically clutching my small firearm against the suddenly noticeable paunch guarding my unsure guts, with, according to the map (I could make out little for the fog), at my left a clear shot through the driver's side window and the shaggy boughs straight to the entrance. The handle of my gun threatening at each inhalation to puncture my flabby flank—could this sad sack behind the wheel have truly been our erstwhile virile hero?

How disgusting! How vain! you chide, that at such a pivotal juncture I could sit there lamenting the sorry state of my neglected physique! But hear me out: I indulge now in such triviality merely to illustrate how I came, by an untoward cognizance of the causal relations existing between my portly posture and the cruel celibacy Starla's disappearance foisted upon me, to rationalize that if we might have indulged instead during this painful interim in the physical exertions that should have constituted our carnal wont, the sluggish predicament in which I suddenly discovered myself just might have been averted.

I snapped out of the superficial stupor of self-abasement to resume my pitiful espionage, regarded my surroundings—the drab fog had begun sometime during my vain obsession to melt way, though during the dissipation the subtlety of its gradual gradations were nigh indistinguishable to my studious eye. I started to skim the translucent film left by cranking my window down. The once-ubiquitous fog had indeed dispersed, seeped into the earth, now glimmering in a glorious sheen upon the grass, in the sweating icicles of catkins festering along the plenitude of boughs hung before me. I breathed in the stuffy heat that poured in through the lowering glass, and as the ivory façade of beckoning Luther Place came into focus, so too did my blind proximity to Starla, and inside I began to feel the heat.

No, the irony that has doubtless incandesced the mysteriously hovering bulb of recognition above your own cranium was not lost on me. 'Twas the reprise of a familiar role—the hopeful hunchback, the voyeur attempting to spy some vestige of his heart's betrothed from the undetectable vantage of some distant window—that had once imprisoned me might lead to the freeing of Starla. The

disappearing mist too enjoyed its reprieve, finding purchase not only upon the vast grassy tracts of the mown and mucro, the feral and frowzy, but also over my cathectic eyes, as a wobbly screen of nostalgia and yen laid over the rage with which they were already bobbling. The dew, the glassy grass, the seminal glaze clinging to the pussy willow...I was transported to the church floor, the biblical flood of our consummation...to the sweat-slicked expanse of her chest, the shining slope of her craning neck...to the diaphanous beads she was so quick to wipe away from glabrous underarms exposed by a pinned wrist, slippery in my grasp, I held tight against her radiant and liberated hair above...I gazed lapward again—it was my pant now, not the revolver, that sat dangerously cocked. And, perhaps predictably, I attempted in some kindling kinesthesia to assuage my swivet swiving the proxy of her ghost: a bittersweet recipe of the tender cutlets of memory dredged in the deplorable vulva of my fist's dry rub.

Would you believe that in the years since Starla left I'd not enjoyed even a singular instance of such catharsis, self-induced or no? That the whole business had felt a vulgar distraction, a self-serving affront to her memory? A wholly unsatisfying simulation of holy stimulation, bah...If you refuse, as I suspect, to accept such a posited assertion—or positive lack of insertion—then I implore you: shred this whole spurious document, see to its destruction, at the very least cease reading it—however, if you choose to leave it intact, I beg that you expunge nothing of its questionable content—for you're likely to be nudged by your faithless skepticism to dismiss it if you continue...I had riven the denim façade of my erected temple, throbbing with the fervid and mute babel of a million, a billion anxious votaries, devotees each to Starla's image. Though by unveiling myself, I had swamped the car with an unholy effluvium of perspiration and pondwater (from last night's backwoods obsequies, remember), and despite the bloodless faculty such a solemn association should have engendered in my manner, no great effort was required for the rapid ascension of a numinous ache within, a spiritual whirling of my bustling, piscine choir, who threatened too quickly to crescendo up the towering Babel in my hands, erected and rapt and crushed by the flanking of the phantom lips of its divine muse, who deigned by chimera to envelope my steep steeple, tumescent with ebullient congregation and transcendent with holy aspiration. With such celerity did my phallic aspergillum threaten to overfloweth that to forfend the Spirit from prematurely seeding the infertile implements of steerage that jutted out from the cockpit of this flightless beast before me, before I worked myself up to some simulacrum of absolution, I, foolishly hopeful that even an illusory visage of my muse might mercifully crest the horizon toward a finish line of some divined linden to illude my desperate yen, chanced a glance out of my open window, wardward, toward Luther Place, where, keeping vigil beside the topiary parallelepiped I'd recently breached with this very vehicle, there stood like some watchdog god to frustrate my overzealous reach the police

officer of that earlier close call—there was no mistaking him by the thick chiaroscuro of hirsutism adjunct to the pasty snakes of skin curved as the undersides of his crossed arms and the greasy creases across the elliptic target of his forehead.

Had my ambitions blinded me, had I attempted to soar too close to my celestial source of light and warmth? Fallen Icarus, lagan now in his eponymous grave, certainly must have to some degree enjoyed the warm waxen coagulum of his haughty ambition as it melted away, a climactic ecstasy preceding the fall as the alien glue was purged from his youthful body. But not so for this wayward Cretan, whose tower toppled despite his pathetic attempts to mold it upright—upon the interruption of that blessed liturgy did my congregation, halted in cerulean purgatory, commence their denominational conversions, going in one fallen swoop from Pentecostal to Baptist to agnostic, seething in the throes of their stunted transubstantiation...but, hold on, what was that? Dost thou eyes deceiveth thee? Didst thou just peepeth the word “target” above? Or do your incredulous eyes roll still at the conflated pastiche of mythologies that followed? Did they skim over it in your voyeuristic pursuit of the seedy details of my masturbatory misadventures, did you attribute its use to the highfalutin bombast of a careless author? Well if seedy is what you want...unbeknownst to the entranced debauchee, in his free hand trembled the clutched revolver, and as he fecklessly hunched over the centralized ache of his moribund mass of fizzling seminal congregants upon spying the cop, he did manage to successfully, yet unintentionally, unleash one shot. A deafening roar. An evanescent azure plume puffed from the tip of the climbing barrel and hung, dissipating about my face.

A pox upon any who'd peddle the canard that in any sense I was shooting blanks! Parallel to my left foot the shot had cracked a ruptured fissure of floorboard, spang in its center a peephole burrowed out by my misfired missile, likely lodged in the soft sod below. But I hadn't the time to study for the hint of some circumstantial evidence; I instinctively dragged the shifter clattering to D before the reverberations had begun. But curiosity trumped instinct, or perhaps stronger was the instinct in fact to gauge audience reaction before retreating as an itinerant fugitive farther behind the woolly willow billow, so before relenting the pressure I had applied against the brake pedal, I peered out toward the gregarious guard—lo and behold he stood now, loosely akimbo, convivial even, somehow oblivious to the floorboard-plunging plangency of my clarion call while keeping the curious company of that conniving wretch who would, to the care of outgoing mail with which he was entrusted, brazenly take indefensible liberties and just as soon turn around to yuk it up with indifferent authorities.

That they somehow detected nothing, this was a mere corroboration of the implied narrative: If any crusade in history had been, mine was a divine ordinance; success seemed suddenly imminent. I

leveled my firearm out of the window, concerned not with how I might compromise my mission but rather with the weight my already overburdened conscience would be forced to bear for a murderous catharsis, and I blotted out the white of his forehead with my foresight, raised the gun ever so slightly, imagining I'd the prowess, the acumen to anticipate and compensate for the barely detectable arc of my intended message's trajectory, the thwarting push of a swirling zephyr, Bang. Quickly again, this time aimed at the chest of the other. Bang bang, I said. Bang bang bang. And I drove away, exposed, concealed, getting off without getting off, clunkering onward—it seemed the bits of car I'd lopped off were merely cosmetic, that I'd spared the fates of any essential ventral gadgetry.

Even if I had then exercised the reach of my divine impunity, bloodied my shoes trampling their corpses on the way to reclaim my beloved from that fortress, what fate might befall Genevieve in the aftermath? Though I dared not doubt the righteousness of my impending destiny, I was hesitant to enter into any shady get-rich-quick covenant proposed by that eternal shyster, still smarting over the pristine jewel—purloined and unapologetically sullied by yours truly—once beset in the firmament of his gaudy diadem and now grounded in the durance of some lowly lockbox. In earnest did I then empathize with the Abrahamic apprehensions of Starla's mother. I too was brutally aware of the insatiable vanity for which a reckless and priggish God would demand—and for what? naught but some psychopathic validation He hath derived through all manner of bullish intimidation and hallucinatory inducement: the sacrifice of a father's precious progeny. Oh, the narcissism of God: a quodlibet with which I haven't the time now to philosophically hum (though the conclusion should be self-evident), fribbling my words in lengthy harangue or prolix rhetoric, but it was one with which, by this circumstance, I was forced to grapple. I chose to duck away, to flee, vowing to be as calculating, as exacting as necessary so that when some angelic apostle might visit, in the moment I stood before that threshold, to burst the bubble of protection I'd deigned to accept, to deliver the punchline to some grand joke played on me, I would persevere undeterred into that dark place.

Chapter XVII

Neanderthal was the lilt of his grunted introduction. In fact, rather gruffly he identified us each: “I, M. Sylvester Guth; You, Musbee Hershbeck,” and by my silence during our vigorous handshake I considerably eschewed such frivolity as to what the heretofore unmentioned prefixed M.—certainly not Monsieur, I mused—in his name abbreviated, and that it was in actuality, not that he should trouble himself over such middling trifle, Ferdinand, and not this exotic Musbee. After the rocky jolt of his spluttering intro, he evolved into a specimen affable, exuberant and excessively prideful—a trait I presumed symptomatic of his age, a trait that likely pumps the lifeblood of his neophyte contemporaries ascending similar principal ranks—of the reputation he’d, in spite of the obloquious opposition of stodgy, petition-toting, editorializing, small-town parents, garnered for the very sorts of college-preparatory heterodoxy that had brought my Starla to me...(For the conservancy of words and time allowed me, I won’t expatiate the pith or adumbrate the breadth of those methods—let us remember that only one such example applies to this saga. But while I have the podium, I would be remiss if I neglected to add my voice to those who laud his experimentalism, applaud their conscientious implementation; long may he reign unabated under the auspices of Academia, free from the tyranny of petty puritanism or slothful conservatism. Eternally shall I be in his debt!)...Truth be told I might have found the mesomorphic lad on this side of winsome had his mannerisms not betrayed the improper impulses that itched within at my invocation of Starla’s name with a grossly perceptible passion...no, allow me to emend that to warmth—should an engaged pedagogue not exude such a, if not intimate then at least innate, familiarity with his pupil?—perhaps a time too many for his liking.

It had seemed the simple validation provided by a cordial face-to-face with Starla’s collegiate mentor was enough to embolden Guth—absolutely effervescent upon bolstering his mental tally of endorsement with the unequivocal approval of the inimitable Ferdinand Hershbeck—to awaken in him his latent distaste for protocol, which he promptly flouted at my request—sans any reciprocated request for some laminated confirmation of my sovereignty in such matters—exhuming Starla’s transcript in order to produce a facsimile with which I might steal away. Without prompting he allowed a gander at the thick compendium sandwiched inside a manila folder tabbed with Starla’s name underneath a quaint rectangle, a blue transparency—I at once thought of Starla’s aqua calves while they scissored the

horizon in her calisthenic glory, of Starla's foot under the dribbling water of my drenched towel in the cupola, of an imagined slippery Starla scything from lather a pink swath starting at her knee raised above the suds and down the shin draped over the bathtub in the hypethral grotto of my eroding brain...Inside the folder: a panoply of snippets she'd submitted for consideration to experience firsthand the iniquities of university life—ready to welcome even the sea of underqualified alumnae-to-be through which she waded—if only for a few scant weeks, as well as a number of unrelated pieces, mostly autobiography, essay, book report, etc., culled from various academic echelons of chronology and quality, of which I was disallowed the privilege of copy but from which I eidetically logged whatever I descried. I'll leave the reader to his own imagination regarding what sorts of salacious details a pre- to adolescent under the repressive thumb of a religious home might divulge within the intramural halls of a secular institution; I took the deductive tack, gleaning from the preponderance of (understandably) sophomoric philosophical musings—who dares cast aspersions upon our naturally inquisitive youth?—certain items of specificity, such as favored hangouts and restaurants. Anything that might expedite the upcoming chore of tracking her down. It was apparent by the effort that must have been expended in the compilation of such a bulging folder that Starla, or perhaps even conceivably just her welfare, was something of a pet project of his. Much as I imagine transpires anytime one truly intuits that accompanying him is a kindred spirit marked by prurient proclivities much like his own, the dam of my discomfiture began unconsciously to crack, allowing through its fissure the rush of a theretofore indecorous query: “And I assume Starla is seeing some bully boy from the local ‘ball squad.’”

And whence came his tell-tale moment, the nigh inscrutable pall of exasperation that flashed across his face, the betraying wave of expression alluded to above. I might have overlooked it myself had I not, in moments of solitude, retched just the same each time that my masochistic mind saw fit to contrive the cruelty of Starla in such unfit unions. Of course he steeled himself immediately, absolutely certain, I'm sure, that his secretive silt of sinful longing had remained lodged behind his own dam of decorum, but alas Guth, I saw them; you could not stay those flecks from the overflowing current of your subconscious flood. He had gathered himself to reply, “Ah, boyfriend...I'm sorry,” but for his lack of inquisitive inflection (or relative lucidity, really) I couldn't discern if it was a genuine pittance of sympathy—my heart sunk—or if he'd wished for clarification—of course I could empathize with the discombobulation—and I wistfully clung to the latter but without the presumed courtesy of elucidation.

“Yes...I wonder about the smoking...Is she blighted then by the likes of some urchin?”

“Smoking?” he said. “Starla runs cross country for the school. I can't imagine...” and by that sloppy interrogation my unlikely bridge turned bulwark; he punctuated this metamorphosis with the

raised drawbridge of a slapped-together folder, concealing its contents, the mysterious timeline of Starla's literary evolution. He turned with the folded booty, safely on the opposing side of the vexing moat that was his desk, edged by a gaudy guilloche of aquamarine, and as he slid the desiderative dossier toward a lockable filebox, he deftly unleashed into the water against his invasive interrogator this incisive gator: "You know, I'm not sure she has even mentioned you since she's returned."

And I remembered the words of Starla's mother, of her perspicacious suspicions of daughter's surreptitious passions and now I had this sad ersatz executioner—not even bondsman, merely a bumbling confidant foolishly entrusted with information beyond his grade—who, under the guise of protection, would blithely subject me to the pillory with admonition and exhortation, and I, too, was emboldened by the recollection. Fear not, I exercised the understated modesty, though admittedly none of the provident discretion, appropriate when brashly suggesting that Starla "probably hasn't stop talking about that cur, Ckol....."

I would like to propose that two rutting ibexes could not have more deftly used their calloused heads in such agonistic duel, but in replying, "Actually I've recently spoken with Mrs. -----, and I anticipate a visit from Ckol—is it really spelled like that?—as well...Please, a moment while I call for Starla," he had simultaneously called my bluff and sent me scrabbling at its edge, seeking lower ground where I might privately tend to my tender gash. Horny too was I, but after I bore the brunt of that prick I noticed my footing crumble upon this foreign acme, and before I could hope to halt his depressing the button and the situation, the ubiquitous ding of the intercom interrupted the bustle of the hallways outside. Following it came the sterile facsimile of Guth's vocal stylings, shaded by the faint underpinnings of antagonism, as he beckoned from the throng Starla. At my retreating heels was that perilous precipice of his office threshold, which seemed to offer a pseudo-suicidal leap to safety, though it unfortunately offered neither tactful nor inconspicuous means to escape.

Like some providential mountain sprite, Guth's fair-haired secretary, oblivious to the forest green of garter girding her glorious left thigh that peeked out from under the creeping hem of an already inappropriately indiscreet dress, had slipped through the interstice of the opening door at my rear. And she mercifully brandished my rappelling apparatus—the ostensible impetus of my ill-conceived ascension: the paperclipped pages of Starla's transcript, which had fallen from my mind till then. I intercepted her with a hand upon her shoulder before Guth had completed his omnipotent and -present address. I quickly cajoled her back into the antechamber from which she debouched, employing what was doubtless the tiresome sort of flattery the fortune of her aesthetic dowry must routinely engender in hiring heads, visiting patriarchs, adolescent oglers agog, etc., with some unwarranted

rejoinder about how I could use such a quick pair of legs in my department. Intimated that by the fabricated cellular device in my loose fist I'd been summoned elsewhere to some urgent matter. Snatched the transcript. Asked her to apologize on my behalf to Guth; I simply had to leave immediately. Of course dutifully, she assented, smoothing out the hem over her thigh, flashing an automatic grin, evermoist lips sliding effortlessly over glistening smile—what delusions had Guth in the pursuit a sexually-sublime angel when he toiled within the reach of this sexually-sublimating devil?

I stumbled into the corridor, nearly knocked down—do you suppose she might have appreciated the irony of that opposing direction?—some oblong, slovenly teenage mistress with tensile knapsack straps stretched about her shoulders so that she advanced gravid at the back and fecund at the front. She clucked with the bloated insolence of her age, refused to even look up from notebook mangled in her hands—had she not crammed enough into her capacious plot during her illicit all-nighters? What could I do but rail vainly against this irrepressible declension in our midst?

I clamped the transcript straight-armed at my side and attempted to navigate the short concourse toward the egress, carefully averting my gaze from the stream of nubile scamps and their waddling receptacles, passing the tributaries of emptying classrooms, focusing on the tessellated bedrock of aquamarine-cream linoleum underfoot, hopeful that I might spare myself the fisheye of my Starla had she caught in her peripheral net my salmonic, upstream struggle, surging, flitting, flopping into the breathable pockets among the class-free turbidity. And would you believe that I succeeded? Though success seems a vulgar concession since it required of me a stern austerity, a wicked asceticism, as it was I who was cursed by the limpid view of Starla. A silvery sylphlike emergence from the school of barracudas and puffers, she floated swimmingly to the clarion call of captain...her demure ensemble hinging at every step upon the red kitten heels at which I first cast my ropeless harpoon...about to dull with her radiance the song of that salacious Siren, Guth's secretary, waiting within those iniquitous quarters. I clenched the transcript, I bit my lip, though I did steer clear of my white whale as she glided blithely by my crew of riotous seamen. No, I reminded myself: this briny shallow could in no way provide the slick propitious venue for our reunion.

I swear I've been tasked with nothing more antithetical to the very core of my monomaniacal, Ahabic being than to abstain from accosting her right in that hallway, fishing her from those waters, laying her on some plush plank or over my whalebone peg-leg where I could, in the cleansing spirit of my piscatorial duty, probe with a hooked finger a moist slit to lay bare her insides...but I labored these sea legs onward. I needed to ply myself to another pressing engagement while I awaited the promise of a more favorable tide in more clement climes.

See, in the minutes when the offered chrestomathy still lay at my disposal, with Guth preoccupied in self-aggrandizing ramble, I took the opportunity to parse one particular piece of Starla's work, of a still-formative vintage: a crudely-penned tale from when she still, if only ostensibly (I at once could intuit that it was written by a still nascent Starlitterateur), operated under the romantic binary of love eternal or love impending, of enchanted ballroom waltzes, of promenading and dashing princes falling hopelessly in love after serendipitous glances, whereby they glimpse the theretofore unnoticed pulchritude of unsuspecting maidens on their own whimsical woodland walks. This is no attempt to disparage the juvenilia of pre-adolescent scribblers who'd dare test the tempestuous waters of fiction. On the contrary: What her precocious pen lacked in refinement she compensated with an eye for detail. And from my place at the round table I spy the gilded actualization of the fully-realized bijouterie she'd once rendered—still effervescent in the amber glow of champagne—that in story slid finally from prince's vice onto the rough digit of pauper virtue: a simple white gold band clutching within its four prongs the brilliance of an aptly-named princess cut—I even requested an extra chevron upon its pavilion to accommodate the “unmeasurable sparkle” with which Starla had imbued the original. Do you note the understated elegance wrought by those flanking baguettes, modest diamonds from which the eye will detect some fey beginning of the austere annulus that you will no doubt recognize, as if by some enigmatic epiphany or courting circular contrivance, smoothly curves on anon to no discernable end? (Oho! You chortle at the apostate evoking some hackneyed matrimonial metaphor of sempiternal love!) But now that you've dug up their end, why don't you exhume their origins? Surely they rest still in the coffin of Starla's school record. Diddle that plopped placenta from which my heart had until then blindly and unknowingly gorged. Regale me, please, in some greater hereafter with tall tales of how such a callow boffin had managed to unfurl his chaste umbrella against the pluvial urges that thereafter needed relentlessly.

Of course these grandiose objections—and I must apologize for these defensive polemics geared squarely toward my judgmental beta and not necessarily the subsequent reader, who'd curiously tipped this tome from his local library shelf before skipping home with it swinging in the jaunty crook of his arm, despite that he, too, may very well now harbor a similar animus—are indeed tintured with a meritorious perspicacity. You wonder with what sort of perverse calculus must I dabble, fumbling with the moniliform strings that make up the abacus of my heart, that would allow any favorable probability in Starla deigning to accept the hand of her debaucher...Permit me this proleptic aside (as though you have the choice!). Certainly the rococo liberty I've pilfered in order to evoke “placenta” in regard to my relations with Starla's file has had the reader beseeching as he skimmed these past few lines an empty

sky for a clarification he shall now miraculously receive—I suspect he may well, upon completion of his reading, not only feel his prior skepticism justified, but he may go so far as to declare he'd have preferred the hackneyed blessing of unanswered prayer in its stead. Despite any reservations the unabashed disclosure of my pedagogic transgressions has seeded, however, I pray the belletristic sod I've packed above it has succeeded to convince that permeating all this lurid botany is not just the dirt of animalistic lust but a genuine desire to harvest from the fallow fields of contemporary literati hopefuls a lush crop of fruit-bearing seedlings as opposed to treacle-oozing saplings. Would you believe that until recent years (for obvious reason), I had deigned to donate time vetting the submissions of grade-school luminaries-to-be to an annual short story contest under the auspices of an outlying town's newspaper, overseen by an ambitious editrix—a lovely alumna whose, I confess to some chagrin, perky diligence denied us the need for those precarious backdoor admissions you have assumed transpired—who had been granted with the prudent contest the vehicle by which she could trace the intended tracks—at least in spirit!—of her literary inspiration: moi.

(While we're here...) For those inimical groundlings so entangled with one punctilio they'd dare extrapolate some perverse parallel between my process of higher-education evaluation for chesty nubile debauchees and chary new-blood debutants: My murderous revenant awaits (...end seething admonition).

The bitterness my reader will need to pump from his craw is that I sensed almost immediately an awakening, that I was in fact re-reading in Starla's earliest stabs the recapitulation of that princely proposal. The ruminated ring had existed within as a latent numen, a loose nut rattling around my guts like some ectopic shrunken heart. Finally it ballooned at the déjà vu I felt when I again touched those words (or that they again touched me).

You see, unbeknownst to me, I had evaluated Starla's (theretofore anonymous) piece those many years ago. Awarded her deceptively simple narrative my good-faith first-place vote. Yes I did. Coursing the contours of those few crinkled pages there pulsed an understated power my woefully deficient acumen would fail me now to adequately articulate. An audacious idealism; a pure, incurable optimism; patently unthinkable in the sort of contemplative essay or autobio, bolstered by wizened hindsight and arduous experience, with which I now play author. I desperately, willfully swallowed the sparkling encapsulation of hope and virtue the young author had crystallized in the indelible image of that ring. Despite how the story affected me, however, I dutifully submitted, as I did every year, the verdict to my former pupil and promptly resumed the dirty business of rating the performances of postadolescents. It is a futile curiosity to ponder that had I been a loyal subscriber to that paper, I might

have caught Starla's name and picture when the results were published—I've no idea how she even fared!—but in my own crepuscular contemplation, I've come to regard this oversight as a sort of blessing: Had I allowed her grainy newsprint image or captioned identity to seep into my consciousness, I may have then worked so assiduously to obtund the resultant Humbertian urges (no nymphet was she!) that I might have either applied the prudish catholicon of abstinence in the interim—effectively stripping from myself the drill of my teaching toolbelt—until my precocious prepubescent had blossomed, or, inconceivable as it may be, I may have steeled myself from her magnetism with such efficacy that I would have effortlessly denied her the portended transfer she so timorously requested in my office that fateful day so that Hershbeck might then have his way with her.

Thankfully neither came to pass, though as God churns, minuscule, indistinguishable from the ingested boluses pouring into the fattened belly of the believer in times of prosperity, so too, at the prodigious buffet of lit and lust at my disposal, did the ring reduce to too-soon forgotten totem upon my return to professional work. Like a calorifacient morsel consumed, it burned quickly, fizzled and melted—though never fully—until only a molecular, atomized reminder remained, a subconscious residue of its precipitous drop, reflective of the domes of water that suddenly dot my floor—fleeting gravemarkers for the unseasonal snowflakes now curiously slipping through the opened window. Let us ignore this ostentatious display of climate-manipulation-as-miracle—why don't you unearth a copy of the following morning's newspaper and count other locals who reportedly witnessed snow tonight—and instead cut to the quick about what is happening. Each impossible flake in an endless parade races inside, hovers, glistens as a simulation of another hopeful, yet faint, star—a Star!a heavenly body—before falling, disappearing, allowing the next tormentor in this ridiculous constellation to take its place. It is obvious I'm being mocked, taunted, tortured by haughty Goddy, employer of transparent allegory but opaque motive, lording over me that by His resentful embrace He eclipses my risen sun, casting His resultant umbrage over my desperate duende, dusting these confines with His revengeful salt of chilling provocation.

Dust to dust: I reciprocate by arranging my ad hoc and willing companion into a star of my own—the pointed barb of a circleless pentacle—and with the same impudent digit that I effectively broke Starla I perform the symbolic pillage of a crude clitoridectomy: I thumb from between two limbs of Barb's astral composition the little red pill (I have foreseen your concerns: fear not, the removal of this simple subtrahend shall serve as no great dissuasion when it becomes incumbent upon your author to once again partake—hers is a many-wondered body of pliant doorways to serenity.). As I pluck it from its nook, sliding it toward my demented face, I push the rest of her away with my opposing hand, leaving

her a soundless mound of bluish yellow, curved and crumbled, and I slide my chair back from the table, rise. Brandishing the hapless appendage in my fist, I defiantly march to the window. I peer out to catch the shape of the catoptric disk by which my voyeuristic tormentor hopes to spy this masochistic proceeding, to flash my crazed rictus of insolence back at Him. The night sky is a freezing pelagic welter of cloud, expectorating, fore-forked by wet black boughs and pierced by the gauzy corona about the dim moon...and not even the whole moon at that, a moiety, peeking at me from behind a tree so only a half-moon extends unilaterally in fatuous semi-espionage.

A pilcrow, lunar lackey, dawdling henchman, he imagines himself undetected as he hangs there, so eager to illumine by his dull reflection the darkness but only from behind a cloudy veil. Pathetically does he hover like some inflated paparazzo biding his time, but his sullen subject holds no delusions of seclusion from derision and scrutiny, so to sate his timid spirit of divine reportage, I offer my spying satellite the lurid imagery he seeks opening my left hand outside the window. It is hard and dry, the pilfered pill, and the gathering saliva I feel cascading into my mouth would suffice to let it slide easily down my throat. But instead I allow the snow to slowly soften it where it lay upon my numbing and tremulous hand (Look back: from here Barb appears almost green now—though she is not gone yet I feel a responsibility to share with the conscience-addled reader that at this juncture, with how much further our sojourn must schlepp the narrative, I can see there is no chance to save her; God knows I've tried, and I will try.). The flakes descend lackadaisically, their ramified and crystalline lips osculate with wet, sloppy kisses before melting, melding into a frigid pink puddle in my palm. The sinuous prints of my fingers like bloody rivulets in swirls. When I first press into the red nugget, it digs into my palm; I ache in the impression of its forceful divot. But I continue undeterred until eventually it begins to relent...as though by the sheer force of fervid defiance am I able to divine some molecular shift, some chemical compromise, and along some microscopic perforation it fissures and gives way, and I levigate the tiny granules of it like a spread of smeared firefly across my palm.

It tastes sweet still on my tongue. A perfect tincture to dulcify my harried heart before I slam shut the window and return to my seat. Up close, the paucity of Barb's redness barely blushes—how embarrassing!—in rare, random spots among the spaces left in the illusory diaspora of green again dominated by discernable blue and yellow patches—detachable, detectable, delectable cells. And what is a body but a supple concentration of cells? If hers was once infused by some sort of, pardon my ignorance, "soul" (Can this too be bartered for along the rialto of "the street?"), I wear on my imbrued hand the residue of its forsaken dust. I bear on my palm the stigmata of its empty grave.

(I caution the studious artist, as well as his commissioning benefactor, to stay his impatient hand

from crafting the pornographic diorama he has invariably envisioned, at least until he has read through to the end—certainly I've filled my punnet amply, picking the sort of questionable berries that have imbued his stained fingers with some curious apprehension. Though I lack his dexterity, I do empathize with his yearning plight of expression, but in his haste I fear he'll later regard the inaccuracy of his depiction of what he assumes a faithful recreation, based upon the bitter mixture I've employed of sophistry and metaphor, to be a difficult pill to swallow when at last the curtain is lifted.)

When I try to ball a fist the folds of skin on my palm pulse, bunched up against that rubiginous hollow where I crushed the little bit of Barb. Color of rotten meat. But an eerily familiar burn: On my right forearm a similar mark perdures (A seamless shift to provide yet another opportunity rife for the manifold trickery at the digital disposal of the artistic auteur tasked with the silver screen adaptation!), for which I shall now recount the etiology of its shameful radix.

Renascent after the exodus from Starla's school and then the jeweler's shop—the receipt of the custom-ordered engagement ring still legibly nestled inside my wallet—I'd scoured the town, though without success, haunting all the old haunts Starla had divulged in Guth's collection, before I randomly settled in to deliberate at a local eatery. Popping in unannounced at her house—her address was a simple enough item to procure, snatched from a dangling phonebook tethered to the payphone whose receiver I apprehensively cradled after some tense consideration about dialing the listed number—was relegated to last resort status in order to avoid the row or otherwise unseemly confrontation a second meeting, this under far less palatable pretext, with mother was certain to facilitate.

While I desiderated, forking a loose interpretation of quiche, a flan of egg whites (though I suspect some synthetic substitute passed my palate) and spinach, but bacon withheld—still I managed to maintain the light dietary fare that constituted the singular, self-imposed requirement of my recently-abandoned rigorous noontime regimen!—I contemplated with a wistful glare through a nearby window how a just universe might expiate the draconian abeyance it had foisted upon my unassuming yet well-aimed implement of carnality, an inextricable and natural tool—what higher purpose, in the end, does the perpetually scabbarded rapier, holstered gun, belted drill serve? Suddenly, my glare softened—by some astronomical fortune I beheld through the window the distant and smoking remains of my celestial desire. As though she had been dropped from the sky, like an ameliorating meteorite, like an olive branch, an armistice, as affirmation that the path I'd taken to reach this point was paved with the golden bricks of a heavenward predestination, no matter the doubts I'd cultivated during the arduous peregrination; all contretemps forgotten, all crises righted. How striking, how gracious, thought I, that the initial magnanimous gesture of reconciliation come from above! As I blindly hied to seek across the

street the café wall upon which leaned my Starla, I, dodging lines of obstructive and malicious machines, felt the weight of my wallet flapping my inner coat pocket—the receipt! The ring! Perhaps it was in fact my conciliatory gesture of commitment that christened this hopeful bridge of communication, though I recognized in media res that these minor frivolities of just who had first extended his genial hand toward civility could be hashed out at a more opportune hour.

I skipped over the curb like a schoolgirl, toward my schoolgirl, collected myself, caught my breath before rounding the corner of the plaza. I stopped at the brick-and-mortar quoin to study her from a conspicuous distance: she struck an exasperated pose. Though attired just as I remember her at my first fortuitous sighting on that park bench, she exuded little of the effortless sensuality I fondly recall. Rather than blow free as wispy apparitions the carcinogens tightly imprisoned in the gasper she beheld, she expelled lengthy drags of smoky soliloquy in graceless, untransformed plumes as malignant when they exited as when they entered. I crept on. Leaning lazily, she favored the one tender foot, balanced upon the other; tote clutched below her breast, shielding her peacoated midriff. Ashes dropped, flicked without ceremony onto the cement below.

Brace yourself, reader, as I recount the vicious vicissitude into which our diplomatic hero obliviously launched himself headlong: sans salutation, I breached the tornado of tobacco smoke swirling aimlessly about to lay siege to the perimeter of her withheld fortress, employing my array of arms—cupping her cheek to block the cigarette with one and propping myself against the wall with the other—to assault the dental sentries of her mouth, to usurp the abdicated throne of her plush underlip.

I don't begrudge her the defense tactic of a knee reflexively raised, nor for the toxic emissions of smoke dragoned from her nostrils and gassed from her coughing mouth that filled the lengthening lacuna between us. It was rather the psychological warfare with which she immediately countervailed that had me reeling: "Who do you think you are?" she hissed, she rasped. "What are you doing coming to my school?"

"Let's dispense with these games, Starla," I pleaded. These internecine games of war invariably end in annihilation—I sought inhalation, infatuation, capitulation. "Come with me." I halted my retreat, chanced a foray into the scorched earth between us after she winced replanting her foot.

"No." She extended her armed hand. Held me there captivated by the hypnotic sway of her minatory scepter.

"What do I tell the rest of class? They clamor for your deft hand." (Of course, you have postulated, it was I who clamored, but reader, even you and I must also dispense of these games forthwith.)

Looking away, Starla again lodged the disintegrating cigarette between her lips; this time it blazed in the grip of her provident pincer fingers with which she lowered and propelled the smoking filter out into the vacuum of the parking lot. She exhaled through the contorted expression of guilt or contemplation on her face, already at work lighting the next. Shrugged as she raised her smoking mouth. “So I’m late.”

“Late? Late, you say? A more glaring understatement I cannot—“

My modern reader, the panjandrum equipped with hoi-polloi colloquial soap opera vernacular and the benefit of history, has of course already processed the gravitas of my truant Starla’s alibi. Perhaps that reader ridicules teacher, for teacher’s plea was retarded not at cognizance but only at the moment he recognized that that preceding shrug was not the gesture of cool insouciance he assumed but rather the convulsive start of stunted sobs, of gasps from which slipped a procession of serpentine dialog boxes of smoke that were filled with a divine text unreadable even to its clueless votary of unshakable faith.

“Oh, God. God,” was all sniffing Starla deigned to offer up as trembling translation.

She flinched, clutched the tote tightly to her abdomen as I attempted to lend a penitent hand. A concept suddenly began to germinate—the analogous conceptus in my mind finally began to gestate. “What are you hiding there?”

By this point, the weeping was intractable. She again stayed my approach with the threat of fire, and though I may have once played the role of old fox, I, engendered now by the paternalistic spirit of protection that suddenly washed over me, would cow as no skittish kit, would face any hellish flame that might dare flare up to threaten my family. I unleashed a swift paw to swat away the enflamed teratogen in her hand, unintentionally harming her precious arm—for that affront I shall burn eternally, as you see by the mark, the impetus after all to this painful aside—and causing her to drop the tote. Guilt now attempted to usurp my throne—abdicated after a particularly curt reign of patriarchal rule—as she crouched to gather the smoldering missile, with her peacoat ruckling about her inconspicuously enceinte tummy (of course she wasn’t yet showing), and I apologized profusely, knelt to grab the sack that elevated in her grasp as I dropped, as though we balanced opposing sides of some grand scale. Weighty, incorrigible, irascible, I was a sunken, lowly penitent at her feet. Beseeking even her shoes, those vermilion vessels upon which she had first descended, for clemency, for forgiveness for this fallen wretch, reaching out unconsciously to grope for the elusive chimera of that iridescent arrow, root of my enchanted bedevilment, starting at the ankle above the buckle of her shoe, sliding, creeping up her shin. My hidden fingers quickly mounted the sleek hillock of a knee under her loose dress and gathered the

tensile fabric in a sleek fold between my fingers; the synchrony of her pulling away, the satiny cone of hosiery stretched out from her thigh and a sudden sussurant snuffle created this primal illusion of a stocking torn, of a blissful unraveling, the rousing sensation a silken serpent of temptation, emerging from its shed integument to bare the passion fruit of curiosity atop the limb it slid down. I erected at once.

Of course this all transpired virtually instantaneously, I can't even recall if I or she spoke a word between our exhilarated gasps. And though she puffed out noxious smoke signals of hesitation, still there was the fact that she had allowed my hands to work themselves, from that quaint argent buckle, upward to such elevated strata...beyond her knee, proximate joint to the hot hollow where our beatific symbiosis had induced this little miracle, the quickening in her quiescent center, before she recoiled. Affronté now, embroiled silently in an esoteric bout of divine sciamachy, she parried, "No. This isn't right. This isn't his plan."

"Plan? Whose plan?"

"God—"

"Damn it, Starla," I said, desperately grasping from that stuffy air some irreverent rejoinder. "He works in mysterious ways. Don't you always say that?"

Only some of the fumes had dissipated: "What I always say! How do you know what I always say? You don't know me at all." She positively crepitated in exasperation with a hard snuffle. "Go." Snuffle. "Please."

(O Starla, of the myriad and manifold biblical couplings against which you'd hoped to justify ours—perhaps you'd settled upon the serpent and Eve—you neglected the most obvious: God and his unconditional, yet oft unrequited, love for man. And such were the contentious airs of our relations: You'd known only of me what you could glean from published texts and word of mouth, but what I knew of thee, the things I could preternaturally intuit, as though you had been molded by my own imaginings, were as innumerable as they were wondrous!)

Her amygdaliform eyes had cashewed—can you see how I was, I am, nuts over her?!—oh, how I hoped to desalt them. To assuage her guilt, I instinctively reached for my coat pocket to exhume the ring so that she might in good faith lop off this insidious crisis of vestigial conscience. We could slay that beast eloping in bucolic churchyard or even within the rigid confines of city hall. Of course I snatched only its paper portent, the receipt, which I had at some point nervously rolled inside my pocket into a cylinder, an ersatz ring after all. "I see you are not thinking clearly. I will go. But not alone. Come with me, Starla." Unconsciously did I begin to pull out what must have appeared to her damaged sensibilities

some sort of cigarillo, as though in my supreme and blind devotion had I taken up that usually abhorrent habit so queerly entwined with my romantic and apotheosized image of her. Back into my pocket I stuffed the commercial charlatan when the absurdity of proposing with a paper ring finally struck me. Staring as a supplicant at my pocket-cloaked hand. "Leave me to deal with the rigid formalities of Guth."

"You don't have to tell him anything."

My head snapped up. "I won't have you waddling school corridors, bearing like a misworn knapsack my child. Just another Polly Puffer."

"Who?" Bemused, beleaguered. She looked at me, beyond me, wiping the sheen from her praline eyes. "Never mind," extracting a fresh cigarette from her tote, "you don't have to worry about that, either." And she shoved off from the sandstone brick wall, breaking the obtuse delusion of my optimistic oeilade, and slipped effortlessly past me as though her foot pedaled in fine fettle. I did not turn around. Instead I leaned into the sacred shadow of my phantom mistress, and, bracing myself against the wall, allowed the closed curtain behind the café window there to broadcast in Technicolor reflection her Dorothean Ozmosis, a transition from the gray umbrage under-awning into the vibrant sunlit dimension in which I witnessed her ease into the passenger seat of some renegade sedan that had somehow slinked undetected into an illegal curbside repose behind me whilst I tried in vain to succor.

While the car rolled unceremoniously out of frame, I, with my supplicant palms dimpled and stonewalled by the rough-hewn façade, attempted to keep from conjecturing the identity of uncredited, off-screen bit-part actors, the guild of little tricksters and the tenor of their unscripted yet implied dialogue, the gilded road of deceptive liberty. I tried to abort any unsavory kernels that her parting words had imparted, but still they popped in the ebullient oils of my crazed cranium. Like the deific analog I played in our holy conjunction, though, I granted ostensibly, if not earnestly, her possession of free will, or at least, if the pith of my omnipotence precluded its existence, the illusion of it. But this garish display most certainly tested such assent.

As is customary in your entertainment-generation's episodic reprieves of commerce, I am going to try to sell you something: that my risen ire had ebbed naturally—almost super- so—as a palliative wave of fatherhood, of its tacit joys and inherent wonder, washed over me. I tuned in to view in reflection a shadowy grin I couldn't bear to force begin to unfurl across my face of its own accord, but just as I crested atop this euphoric tsunami of bliss—headed by an uncontrollably effervescent froth of bared teeth—the curtain was suddenly lifted, separated; little did I, or Starla, I hope, realize that our tenuous scene had been viewed by a live bistro audience, and now the transparent palladium of glass between us could do little to retard the fleer of their patronization of canned laughter or cued applause.

My wave dispersed meekly into the sand rather than crash against the onlooking shores of minacious minstrels and po-faced poetasters, enthusiastically reveling in their misinterpretations of this situational tragedy as comedy.

I reciprocated with a silent sneer, staring at individual faces at first, then at the mob generally, until the nebulous agglomeration began to blur into the indistinguishable mass of the makeshift curtain of my growing silhouette, when I again caught the reflection of my irrepressible smile. What did I find in the face staring back but the source of their derision—and quite probably Starla’s aversion—a wilted diastema split by a stubborn spinach leaf. I recoiled. Stochastically I selected a single visage from my presumably scholastic clique—an attractive and doe-eyed mien, unassuming and perhaps naught but the unfortunate collateral tendered by evil coevals, and whose attention was perhaps only just caught mid-study amid the clangor—and I held her gaze, with a snakecharmer’s charm, by an overlong leer through the pane of my discomfiture. In the off chance it endured such pitiable company, I hoped to extirpate her senses of optimism and security, much as her mates had so ruthlessly attempted to filch them from me. I leaned closer to the window, to her, baring the mendable malocclusion of my devilish grin. A dreadful anxiety seemed to creep insidiously over her but still she faced me, seemingly paralyzed; with an impish prehensility the tip of my lashing tongue latched onto the edge of the bitter leaf clung to the back my teeth, and I sucked it in, letting it flicker like a forked licker for one sinister moment before vanishing into the dentilingual hiss of my clenched maw.

Chapter XVIII

Phantasmagoria in bold, vibrant color. Lively. Primal. Primary. Fantastical mixtures of red of blue of yellow. Before my somnolent gaze swirls the sprint of tomorrow, the lurch of yesterday, halted and coalesced into a single stationary and lucid harbinger, marching in place, pumping above the circumvallate and varicolored clutter its legs bestrode in vain locomotion. Presenting to me, to my reader, a prescient present, unravaged by the pettifogging constraints of time while blending the gist of a history unwritten and a future untold into one seamless scroll, a cracked Kerouac narrative bereft of context but without the need for any such directive...a bouillon, complex but vivid coloration, bled from the cells of my partner in crime, sprawled as she is in her primary splendor, and souped into concrescent chroma. It is she that has supplied these vibrant hues for the dying. I merely apply the requisite darkling, countervailed by the essential and fulgurant lightening of Starla, of Genevieve, to cobble together the necessary undertones, to render the pinks, the grays, the black and whites with which together we've woven this rich tapestry. And upon this welcoming pad may you spread the mud caked upon and desperate to be sloughed from your filthy souls, from the footwear a more conscientious reader would have removed outside. It is okay, really. These are passages divined from ethereal strata and I am but the conduit, anfractuous and fractured, yes, turgid, barnacled on the inside by tenuous and tremulous asps of unrequited desire, so if you suspect a tremor of the apocryphal or pretentious in my expeditious transliteration, the fault-line lies squarely within the perimeter of my inadequacies. Heap upon me your aspersions, shovel the sod of your doubts.

I have red to Starla.

Blue kisses to Genevieve.

Stop. Do you find these connotations trite? I understand, I really do, but there is no rationale, nothing at all for dear yellow; though I deliberately reach for the sallow spread of Barb after I've nearly exhausted her pucey offerings.

A dose of red blue red

Yellow blue

Red blue yellow,

Now here lies

Empurpled prose

Jaundiced journalism

A varicose fellow

Chapter XIX

Reports of my gunfire have been greatly exaggerated—oh my Starla, I have only words to play with!...(yet now do I lament how I have slaughtered the elegiac nature of my saga, reduced as it lay before me to a ribald compendium of gobbledygook, of misappropriation and misattribution where never the Twain should have met.)...No, I should be clearer: the report of my gunshot was an exaggeration. It must have been, for its wayward crack attracted not so much as a curious glance from those waylaid cacklers obliviously blocking my unabated way to Luther Place.

But as I came to, my mind was held captive by a singular image: that of the revolte hole in my floorboard through which I, ears ringing nearly deaf by the car-caged sonority of the blast, had watched the taupe and scabrous tape of road race by, measuring by silent stone and momentary mote the undercarriage expanse of my escape. With the leonine instincts of one on the lam I groped desperately at my side for the implicative implement; my arm flailed against a vacuum where it should have found, if not that agent of friendly fire, at least its plush cushion of my passenger seat. But nothing, no reassuring thing to greet my flitting hand. Inert now: In lieu of the roll of vehicle underneath, there crept the sudden fright of vertigo; replacing the pinhole scroll of road in my view, an unnerving explosion of whiteness. That tiny ventral aperture, once tailed at either end by crackled lines of cosmetic damage wrought by hairtrigger carelessness, had transmuted to a window, tiny still but ruptured, erupted from the jagged but opening crevasse of space and time, and through this interminable portal was I debouched, delivered into this white-washed conundrum where my frantic hand finally found the ballast of thin rail bolted to my hospital bed.

Once alleviated of my initial disorientation, recumbent, empty-handed and light-headed, buttressed by the rail, I labored upward until I was seated upright, hunched over and ran my other hand slowly about the back of my head, palpating for wound or any indication of what had sucked me into that interdimensional passageway of concussed sub-consciousness. Nothing swollen or tender or purulent or bandaged or feeling out of place. Palmed my cheek in yawning exasperation, felt the prick of cespitose stubble, shadowy vestiges of my unkempt and neglected countenance. Suddenly aware of how long I'd been away. Genevieve! I needed to ring Sitter; I spun around in search of a phone, but as though tethered to the bed I recoiled at once, heaving to the excruciating percussion of my heart as it

beat mercilessly against the inside of my chest. An excoriating throb escorted my terpsichorean arm weaving and waving through the delicate jungle of obstructive corporeally-linked cannulae and inimical rails so that I could wheel the phone-bearing table around within reach. No dial tone. I vainly poked at the numbers until a stern voice suddenly assured me, "Someone will be right in," and then an incessant hallway trill intermittently belched in time with the red light blinking behind my head.

I had become preoccupied with my peremptory, bruised chest—I studied the purple grotesquerie under the raised collar of my gown—and when the shuffling single-file sibilance of slowly slid hooks unfurling below them a secluding ecru curtain had served to announce the tending nurse's arrival. I did not so much as look up to demand, "I must go. Now."

Deadpan, she offered the bedpan.

I frustratingly attempted to pick among the folds of the collapsing parachute of my gown at the adhesive ovals connecting me to the bleeping, flanking machinery. I fumbled around them as though I'd never before plied these fingers to any task of simple dexterity. She had buried the lead—I was convinced—content to tease as a haughty island afloat in offshore safety the assuredly continent and patient mass before her rather than facilitate the tectonic shift from his landlocked and embedded immurement to Pangean locomotion.

"I am requesting...No, I demand my phone call." I let my collar drop, only to find the panorama then afforded me was that of the exposed expanse just beyond the loose and pendulous vee of her scrub collar—a floral-braed cleft, a florid broad chest hovering over mine as she feigned exertion—quivering above my chin until finally she managed to mute the alarm behind me.

"There," she said as it ceased. I've no doubt that the desultory and resultant blood-displacing frisson elicited by those corralled and hanging buttes had produced a frantic EKG analog, a wanton corollary range of steep and sundry peaks that I was helpless to level, but I did prudishly cloak one such conspicuous peak with the shrouded Everest of my raised knees as she provocatively rose from such inappropriate propinquity.

She spoke softly, with an almost imperceptible but sultry rasp of which I caught nothing but the sense of seductive song with which she filled our small, enclosed enclave. I dumbly watched the scene play out, cinematic, surrealistic before the backdrop of dun curtain, through an oneiric air in one effortlessly graceful movement she rent from its perforated grips the machine's last expelled readout, snapped it onto the clipboard in her hand and somewhat ominously thumbed the machine OFF without looking up from the clipped chart. She glided around the bed, allowing two fingers to trace its rippled edge, studying still with a conspicuous half-grin her clipboard, until she halted at my opposite side,

where there sat both the phone and freer access to the controls she had so laboriously stretched across my vulnerable torso to mangle. Could she not read upon her printout portent that in fact my patience was terminal?

It was there, one hand upon the receiver while the other balanced the overburdened clipboard underneath, augmenting her left breast, that I was able to intuit the nature of her untoward and salacious soliloquy, dissolved to a weightless nothing within the shared air of her unsuspecting and non-reflecting foil (incorruptible, unwavering, so faithful was he to another!) as I suddenly recognized my nightingale succubus. Before me, in a supplicant pose masquerading as cocksurenness—had she not in her suggestive stance so salaciously served up that supple breast as though she was in the middle of her lunchtime rounds, I might have swallowed whole her psychosomatic offering—stood a former student, failed (such elucidation feels superfluous here), and, I suspected now in the smug afterglow of a meretricious harangue, whose triumphant deliverance she had probably envisioned in myriad fashions ever since I had finally meted out the harsh but candid evaluation for which she incessantly requested, though it remained but a presumably churning overture of which I'd not heard word one.

Assiduity had been her undeniable virtue—so prodigious was her ethic and prolific her effort that I suspected she automatically attached an exponent to the minimum number of pages for every given assignment. Unfortunately booboisie was the immutable class from which she sprang—so absent was she of any orthographic or narrative instinct that to wade through the unseemly stacks of her work became a cumbrous slog through which I arduously raced toward our terminal conference. I simply could not reconcile the immeasurable progression of her writing acumen with the measurable accumulation of the written depression, so when at last this impasse required a passing nod or no, I imparted this heartless, coddling quip, via an admittedly unwarranted hostile postil: "Consider, perhaps, a career path pursuant to the stenographic arts."

Predictably she had popped into my office whilst I absentmindedly lounged upon the ad hoc davenport I'd had surreptitiously placed in the corner for just the type of carnal curricula she'd come to initiate. (An aside: Please, whenever the pernicious college hounds of logistics and budget, blithely engaged in the deplorable pogrom of program depredations, dare rear their ugly heads to threaten the future interests of our liberal arts students under the pretext of those same students' waning interest, I beseech, I implore thee to freely promulge this text as testimony to the inexorable spirit of the young artist under fire. Through the revolving door of my office I've witnessed no disconcerting dearth of malapert dishes willing to flout inhibition and decorum in order to reclaim the precious reins to literary aspirations they fear lost in rapine, a tenacious and firm body that augurs well for the weal of Academia

regardless the turns to which those formidable tormentors of austerity would subject it.) Bless her heart; she tried, but of course persistence and diligence were already the known quantities, her calling cards. Even upon considering the values of those cards showing on the table and their potential congress with any withheld, face-down plays she might turn up, I had resolved to dutifully stay any inevitable advances she might try to yank from under sleeve. Unfortunately, I could not stay my laughter at her perfunctory, jenny-come-lately stab at logodaedaly, a lispy something about willingness to “take your (my) dictation”—I have elected to eschew the vulgar phonetic spelling of her implication (just as I refrained then from gifting, with only a hint of the backhanded, to her my dictionary), which one may well presume that she assumed correct, in favor of the still-ambiguous, less graphic, orthographic lemma—when it was she who turned up upon the table with a dealer’s hand.

Ah, she was but a sylph then—barely a patch on this current incarnation—a gangly scribe hoping in vain that her Assiduity, by virtue, would eventually silence the latent Booboisie bubbling out. But old contentious and crass Time, working strictly on a first-syllable basis, deigned instead to exacerbate the great divide between those titular endowments in her developmental interlude since our last meeting—I’ve no doubt the tally of mazophilic partners who have rejected any opportunities for such rarified jouissance ends with, if not shortly after, my name. Now look at her! A full-bodied specimen, top-heavy with an (understandable) acrimony I would have hoped abated during the nursing-school interim whereby the veracity of my assessment must have been, well, verified. She seemed to harbor another sentiment, however, a resentment of sorts, more a reveling in the role reversal our present predicament presented her.

“I am now a man beholden,” I pleaded. “To my dear daughter, Genevieve. Fiercely faithful to Starla. And if you can find it within yourself to allow for the possibility that the wretched scourge you hold responsible for dashing your dreams met his earthly demise some five years ago on elevated and sacred ground, then to you, too, I am beholden.”

“You have to press nine first,” she indifferently countered, wheeling the table over. “Then dial the number you want to call out. I’ll be back.”

I lifted the receiver, strangely relieved at the placid bathos. She yanked enough of the curtain from the wall to slip through the corner. I asked, “The time, my dear?”

“Nine.” Shlip went the curtain.

I braced myself for the call. What to divulge, what to demand, and oh how the heart behind this battered exterior ached for the undue absence of Genevieve it had endured. Of course that Sitter would mulct me for such an inconvenience, which could have merely registered as a trifle, a curious nugget of

speculation for the indolent quidnunc with absolutely nothing, really, going on in life anyway, was a certainty, something to which I certainly had to cede, agreeing in principle to a regular, well-remunerated slot watching Genevieve in return for remaining slotted.

Sitter answered. But when she insisted that for some reason my generally genial Genevieve was incapacitated, unwilling or unable to be roused by her soporific sitter, though, I tensed. Still in bed after nine I could accept, given the lax atmosphere of guardianship this pesky ephemeron engendered, though if she insisted upon flapping the circadian wings of employment, she would need to bug, to pester, exhibit with some authoritative volition a capacity to buckle down—sans the punitive belt—to sacrifice the unscreened acts of television viewing and retard the assumed horseplay that had permitted my little foal to commence her roughshod stampede over decorum.

Sitter had done her part to instill some confidence by ruffling the eiderdown under Genevieve's head. She groaned, smacked lips—the drugged synesthete could feel the endearing and darkened oval of pooling drool under the spittle string snapped by her itching finger—“Daddy,” she hazily, innocuously this time, yawned, “missing Mom—“

Suddenly my heavenly transmission was lost in space, when in another bathetic—this more pathetic, less cathartic—cessation, Sitter's voice startled me from that sublime divination: “We've had a long day. She's been looking for her marbles, she hoped you might know where...I told her they were yours...” But as she prattled on, I slowly slouched in vicarious slumber, adopting my daughter's sleepy inclination, and the ire with which Sitter's voice had filled me dissolved. In my anesthetic paralysis I allowed the white noise of it to disperse: a psychedelic flux of dishwater bubbles seeping, scattering aimlessly from the cheek-oblique quincunx of enigmatically shallow divots—termini for the innocuous conduit through which transmitted not only that somniferous voice but also electrical simulacra of my baby's sleepy lilt, having navigated an unimaginably intricate labyrinth of intercounty wire just to grant these parched ears a few quenching drips of inspiration—dotting the concave earpiece now floating away, careening through the vacuum as jettisoned jetsam. Telephonic, teleportational, lackadaisical Genevieve bubbling listlessly, wistfully, bloop bloop blooping up from those holes: I was warped—molecules expunged from my patient repose, initially one by one, to comingle with those dialogue bubbles and, finally, into a wholly comminuted nebula of blissful stardust residue, indivisible travelers of space and time funneled through that tube into some parallel dimension—slipped into another time, a similar place.....

...Stirrup-legged Starla, tensely reclined, supine upon a bed not so dissimilar to mine whilst I attempted with stolidly nimble fingers to intercept the wild throes of my parted parturient. Irrigating the

sweat from her forehead through the sticky heat of her hair. Shoveling ice chips mouthward. Anything to help. Conducting staccato exhalations. Whatever she needed. Already broken blood vessels popped up here and there to form the perinatal astronomy of her ruddied face.

On a chair behind me heaped the splayed squid of Starla's shed habiliments. The capacious denim pants—her drenched pajama bottoms currently draped our showercurtain rod—soon to be rendered obsolete in the promise of postpartum puerperium. Atop them the pink champagne cashmere she'd picked out that I could not have possibly resisted giving to her before our Xmas exchange, her cherry undershirt (the titular evocation of it snug about her belly particularly endeared it to my proud-papa palate (though referring to our unborn fruit as the pit of her stomach, mercifully, never caught on)), emergency pajama slacks and matching socks. She'd trudged in as the uncorked actualization of our communal merlot, fizzing out, decanted now into the pure, naked essence of her fruitful notes within the punctilious logomachy of faux-grammarian grumbling...

...the doctors, nurses, caviling cavalierly: "That's a contraction..."

"That was not..."

"That's a contraction..."

"That is not..."

"Yes, it's a contraction..."

"No, that one isn't...oh...it is...wait...okay. It's a push."

"And push."

And Starla heaved again, hunkered down...taut chevrons of blanket stretched out from each end of her taut fistfuls...filigreed merkin of blood splashed in an ornamental lace along the pudendal valley...a red carpet laid out for my princess' imminent crowning, emerging, plopping eminently into doctor's hands. Floppy mass of legs and arms and belly, elongated head approximating the conical crown of towel she would one day don in regal play, all hued an especial purple to intimate royally her premier decree: to snap her first photo. I humbly, fumblingly obliged.

Doc turning among his gloved hands my incandescent universe, plugged in still, hopeful in the soundless void to elicit at last a primal, primeval cry outside the primigravida...

The dream was over.

I opened my eyes at the light interruption under my lids. A shadow, a silhouette, an eidolon in staid approach. A flick of the bedside lamp and from darkness emerged the welcome visage of my aching heart's desire—oh, could it be?—Starla! I tried to cry out. Already she was upon me, finger crossing her lips to retard my fruitless harvest of words. The familiar down-gilded patch of blanched

flesh glimmered above the stem of cleavage that dared up from the low valley of her cherry top, stretched pendulous now at her flat stomach. She removed the flanking phone from my unconscious grip. Reciting in untranslatable tongues a poem of longing, of love, her hands plunged aggressively into the cotton veneer at my sides. Twirling twin whirlpools upon the fabric of my gown, drawing slowly into the churning vortices the edges of its opening. Those edges inching further apart against my back until flapping triumphantly away from my dorsal underpinning. Gown lifted and flung aside without ceremony—my naked legs over the edges—and aquiline was the nature of my spread.

I stiffened. My visceral urges laid bare. Yet still something more urgent bubbled up from below. I felt no greater compulsion than to assuage any festering doubts, to assure her I'd remained chaste in my desperate chase to find her. I needed to share how swiftly I'd just spurned that Jezebel, student-cum-nurse, not to mention the countless other impudent come-purses who'd popped up, ceaseless in their fatuous attempts to derail the pure trajectory of the path before us, intended for us, in the torturous interim. But, but, but, I struggled to get anything out, my words reduced to unintelligible moans, rapt in the unexpected ecstasy of a suddenly rapacious Starla's imposing sexpeccations, dribbling liberally the warm liquid of her amorous, ineffable prosody along the eager tract of my riled and rumpled nether scroll. A fluid transition. I trembled first within her hand, suddenly soaked under the wetness of her, enveloping me fully now, melting...the pressure...mounting...wading then afloat and then fully immersed, thrashing uncontrollably in the sublime wash, reaching, groping, at her chest—something tangible to regain some semblance of stamina, of balance, of composure—at the sheen of the soft flesh apex above her unattainable breasts. Merciless over her deprived prey, she denied my effete petitions for reprieve, and I merged, succumbed, sucked into unfathomable depths by her indefatigable undertow...closed my eyes...clenched lungs and cinched loins exploding in a helpless and euphoric supernova...an oneiric onanism...

For awaiting on the other side of that careless nictation lay the source of my most grievous transgression, both the deceptive climax and farraginous nadir of my interminable fall: my scurrying nurse, spurious prankster, nocturnal emissary of hospital bedlam, guffawing as she sponged the sprawled carnage of my cockasian—forgive the vulgar ejaculations of the defiled victim, unable to constrain the premature eruptions of his rancorous ire even in reflection—congregants, theretofore preserved, conscientious devotees, saving themselves for the promise of holey communion upon more elevated strata, upon poor elegant Starla (or at the very least in secretive craven, yet unabatted, indulgences performed to the memory of her image). And even after sheathing salaciously without consent my swollen sword, I swear I heard her take the petty liberty to shake an aspersive spear

toward my emptied head: “Brevity is indeed the soul of wit.”

A spurt of blood splattered from the head of the venomous snake I plucked from my arm. “What matter of poison are you pumping into me?” I hissed, picking at the myriad connectors on my torso.

She recoiled, popped her latex hands off into the hazardous waste receptacle. She had thought I was awake—sleepy, but awake—she assured me (without apology, mind you)...as though that might license her any licentious or unprofessional manner of revenge. And the insolent laugh! The brusque banshee of a curt cackle, which will eternally haunt my spirit, that she loosed once that modicum of vengeance was so messily extracted! I expelled her with perhaps a more courteous benediction—how do you suppose she would have spelled that?—than she allowed my steeped mass: “Out! Out of the room. Now, you pitiless wretch. Ah, I shouldn’t have been forced to come here!”

Did my unintentional double entendre emit her into the hall in furtive hysterics? Perhaps I too could have delighted in the serendipity of it had I not been so fraught with hysterics of my own. The milky lees of guilt festering like dead leeches, already engorged on what little dignity had remained. There sat I—welter of curled and useless wires clinging loosely before me, over the edges of the bed in exaggerated loops—a quickened cyborg; with the sentience engendered by the confused sight of my exposed life-giving insides did I experience for perhaps the first time such a palpable shame in sexual matters. My circuitry shorted by the searing tears of disappointment and pudency. I stewed there in aloof compunction, shuddering, the weight of my previous failings with Starla, the heat of my inevitable failings with Genevieve permeated the stuffy air, drying upon my thighs via the paralyzing stickum of guilt.

I wept.

Some time had passed with no replacement visitor to interrogate or castigate this quixotic spigot—in neglecting to alert any superior she had presumed correctly that I’d eventually come to consider our mutual transgressions a wash in light of what we’d both to lose—in that period of solitude I envisioned within those translucent dregs of my unspooling a portentous prosopopeia: the specter of law’s prehensile tentacle lashing out to manacle the inert specimen, permitting to chance the fate of his homebound child so that he might heal more quickly in these sterile environs from some mysterious mishap. I sloughed the admonishing puddles bedsheetward, rubbed the excessive residual remainder mercilessly until clinging to my skin was only a powder, persistent but powerless in its judicious pull. I started to calm—my folded clothes beckoned from a chair in the corner.

My legs were a literary (or more often than not, not-so literary) reference in the incapable hands of those amateurs of prose I used to vet: their obvious faculty underscored for emphasis, emboldened

by the urgency of my desperation. Yet when I attempted to stand upright in the contextual morass of my setting, they were rightly italicized; I was reduced to negligible footnote, heap of ideas in the white space below, whose paternal entitlement was forgone in its abeyance.

I waited patiently for some employee to tend to the ruckus, but when none appeared I scuttled on my elbows and forearms toward the chairborne clothes. The unbearable pain of beaten chest. The excruciating throb of uncooperative legs dragged behind as abated sensation began to once again bate. I forced myself upright. Endured the fusillade of invisible needles mercilessly drubbing my thighs until they began to regain feeling as I worked my pants over them. No undergarments—I reddened with the requisite embarrassment at the gross, involuntary patina with which they must have been infused in order to necessitate their discreet disposal—and empty pockets. My wallet was missing. Had the hospital confiscated it or had a fortunate light shone for once upon the anonymous convalescent?

Backed limply against the wall under an open window, I sucked thirstily the fresh air and the intoxicating inpouring of moonshine. With diligent hands I cupped my obdurate knees to induce some movement. As if the netting in my legs wasn't harrowing enough, I caught between gasps the orotund voice of authority cajoling some loose scrub down the corridor. I massaged with purpose, rapidly and forcefully, deeper, until my knees rose of their own accord, and finally eked out the necessary effort to gird my loins and waist, pulling my pants up over that deflated elephant face, the gullible dumbo until then loosely—and then only occasionally—covered by the thin gingham circus tent of gown linen.

“Four doors down?”

“Yes officer.”

Two distinct footfalls beating opposing paths.

I scabbled up onto the chair and slipped silently through the window, snatching a salient slip of paper I'd almost overlooked underneath my clothes...I must apologize, yet again, to my dear, jilted reader, pregnant with expectation, who has certainly grown to anticipate with some affection the deft employment of an adroit witticism to deflect my impending fetters, but I reasoned in a flash that only by the deployment of some fearless jettison could I forfend a shackled fettle, and by this dauntless defenestration was the bel-esprit transformed, seemingly reduced to the gut-instinct gravity of visceral action heroics—fear not; the uncharacteristic response, despite the preponderance of precedent flying in its face, was no ad hominem jerk-kneed, knee-jerk reaction, but rather simply the swift acceptance of the lone viable egress at his disposal—hunched among the soft mulch and decorative azaleas lining the hospital perimeter.

Whilst the cone of officer's flashlight flitted an oblong net about the grounds I kept my cover,

cursing peeplessly the painful pulsations of a broken heart, a bruised soul—how could I possibly deign to keep from Starla the details of the sordid affairs that brought me to this undignified state? But though this incipient man-of-action era would cede not to the trappings of machismo or conquest-claiming braggadocio, the opportunity to escape it afforded me when that perilous light was suddenly abolished also disallowed the woeful lamentations to which I gravitated after my fall. Nay, they would have to wait for my nocturnal woodland communion with the moon, unshakable beacon overhead, persistent security eye of a sick and hidden leviathan I'd nothing to offer but a contemning palinode extempore, rhymeless but reasoned, to retract or refute every short-sighted verse of praise ever committed to His honor. I ceased chanting my incantations of ruin and dismay against my itinerant tormentor as this pathetic peripatetic came upon a tussock at a moonlit clearing in the forest. There I knelt irreverently in genuine flection only to read the mysterious note I'd crumpled during my daring escapade. It unraveled cinematically upon my palm, revealing in a hydrangea-like dispersal naught but an anonymous phone number with instruction to give it to anonymous me, the victim, the patient, upon discharge.

When this impatient discharge covertly then inquired, cautiously, into the first telephone he could handle, about the hospitalized "victim," a groggy voice muttered something about my car being ready. He then inquired himself, had they let me outenbout at this hour?

I carefully equivocated that my release had received satisfactory approbation.

And then the familiar pidgin—roused so, I noticed in it the audible ruffling o'pinions—cooed, making unmistakable his identity: So they just gots you on probation?

Just?

Chapter XX

The Letteraturizzazione:

Upon my improper send-off at the plebeian hands of that unfeeling “playhouse” coterie—they of the mochaccino-mockery and frappe-crapulence, whose so-called artisanal drinks were doubtlessly imbued with the same tasteless tenuity that afflicted all of their hapless mugs—I opted to endure one more arduous week away so that hardened Starla might soften in my absence. That cliffhanger scene would serve as no coda, would mark no series finale, however; rather than await a green-lit okay, I proceeded to plot the coming acts, the unthinkable twists of next season leading to a triumphant series of episodic climaxes...oh, fret not, my vision consisted of more than just those salacious ratings-boosters...even somehow fitting into our heavenly saturnalia the insertion of a lovable cherub to divinely disrupt the familiar familial dynamic/formula of connubial newlyweds thrown headlong into inchoate cohabitation.

So after a tedious week of rote pedagogic obligation—no, as you imagine, I did not give much credence or care to career at this juncture; as matter of fact I began to develop in the promise of distance a discernable disdain for the lot of abecedarians pleading with beady eyes and plaintive cries for guidance—I endeavored a return, with the script rough on the tip of my tongue, to make my pitch to Starla. At first scouring the streets in foolish backtracking on a wild chase for goosing—wait, this was not the tenor of my pitch—I swear I’d the appropriate gravitas about the situation, but there is no denying that my blood would boil, skin would bubble in a crazed form of fornication (her absence bugged me so), at the thought of her, just the sight of her—even the frowzy Starla of our last meeting—could educe. Fortune reared both sides of her capricious face when I again happened quite by accident upon Starla in the local grocery’s parking lot. She stubbornly trundled a stubborn shopping cart to its corral over cracked and uneven pavement...Portentously could I see in the dainty gait she labored the daily slate of our entwined fate: radiant heroine, having had to forgo a promising future in the games of track and field due to an unforeseen pedal injury that refused to heal, traipses the trails of an outdoor market, dragging her feet then in the luxurious languor of a needless life, to procure the fresh and organic ingredients to a brunch she has planned for her and her dutiful husband, who, having gladly forgone his tenured academic employ to tend to his family, on a secluded veranda writes daily and furiously under

the striped awning of a bungalow until the lingering perfume of their mid-morning tryst subsides...To exhibit the delicate restraint necessitated by our still-tenuous relations, I stolidly approached at a cool five miles per hour rather than the thousand with which my heart revved. I carved an impromptu park point from the driving lane before her, and leaning out of my window stammered in the few precious moments at my disposal the sensual synopsis that would invariably conclude with us leaving that paved slab of vehicular congregation together. I felt the burn across my skin as she briskly contemplated my submission, over the transom, over an excruciating eternity in seconds, before she granted me the courtesy of a response: "Don't you follow us," to the letter, bearing the stamp of disapproval of her every fleeing step.

Though I wished desperately to envelope her, to moisten her sticky underflaps with my unburdened tongue, I am no masochistic philatelist—this shall later be evidenced by a particularly grievous oversight—so I avoided chasing headlong and posthaste after her every canceled stamp. Instead I crept away until she, returned to sender, had boarded the idle car—it is the devil's playvessel after all!—of her waiting mother.

Though the whip of her response lashed my heart, I respected her wish—replete with its wink-wink emphasis on "us"—and retreated to friendlier environs, where rather than sulk in the petulant gratification of licking my own bitter gash, I resolved to divorce from the inefficacy of tongue-tied rhetoric and resume my affair with the more forgiving and seductive intermediary of the written word.

Three days later, with great pluck and greater aplomb, I, letter in hand, braved the paved walkway to Starla's parents' house, rapped upon the door once, twice, thrice, prepared to face mother again and father at last. But none answered. I committed the federal crime of placing the postageless letter into their mailbox, stepped away and nearly impaled my lower half upon the precariously placed FOR SALE sign planted just off from the porch corner. Dejected but undeterred, I banked on disgraced mother's speedy fastidiousness with regards to all facets of their absconding—certainly this palliative remedy refuted any rushed diagnoses that would dare posit mother was still in the dark—and retrieved and later lawfully slipped this exhumed letter into an official envelope of my university into a stalwart mail receptacle to let the venerable postal service service my outdated outgoing address:

Oh, Star La. Mouth contracts and tongue slips from the sibilance of its dentilingual conference, bounces just once off of the palate before it lolls upon the gaumless gums of the unwitting fool who evokes you from afar.

Starla, yours is the face that inspires a million hopeful stargazers, glimpsing you through frustrating tubes or panes, to work in secret, bent at their cloaked rockets; I am but the first mad scientist who dared launch his crude construction. I am that hapless fool whose ambition outweighed, for at least this blessed incident, his discretion.

Though it took more than a decade's worth of dark years for the clarity of your refulgent lightness to reach me, lowly satellite in the warm bath of your light, I am now, hereafter, completely enthralled by your luminance, the captive of your magnetic pull. I revolve about your brilliance, held at bay by the tenuous and arbitrary rings of decorum and protocol no longer.

Blinded from staring too long, too closely, our cosmic collision as inevitable as magical, miraculous...we crashed. And I savored the swelter of your flesh, probed, penetrated with astronomical ecstasy the ethereal swirl of your surface. But when I retreated reluctantly against the force of your irresistible gravity, when I finally sucked at the foul air of the vacuum, the vile nothingness outside your atmosphere, I looked upon your faculae sullied, your face dulled. But Starla, I gasped helplessly there before your celestial body an altered beast, a transformed wretch...nothing was sullied—only in the jouissance of our wanton expedition did we secrete the sacred, the sacrosanct...let there exist no shame, no second guessing, forevermore.

Our universe expands. It is not just astral aphorism, but fact, and from our fortuitous spatial exploration, though I cannot see it, I know our clustered galaxy balloons in secret, but it will one day envelope everything, consume or demolish all opposition—strange, staunch purveyors of misguided idealism, of some mythical predetermined, preternatural purity—to sever the orbits of any who would deny the undeniable beauty of such unbridled, unscripted growth, even in the stellar progeny of their own apocryphal big bang.

I am thinking of oracles and ageists, Starla, the miracle of prescient christening, the tragedy of Christian presence, of the fey naming to which I justify my conceit. And this son-lit idolatry is the only so-called immortality I can now offer you, my Starla.

P.S. I pray those pernicious comets I have infrequently witnessed arc in perilous proximity have found themselves hurled permanently from the purlieus of your fragile corona.

The reader raises a pensive brow, understandably, at the raconteur's inability to recapitulate that clumsy cartside salespitch yet keen ability to transcribe, verbatim, the goey filling, bookended by

the high-plagiaristic confection of pastiche, of this sweet remittal; though my capacity for recall may be exemplary, the simple explanation is not one of confabulation. It needn't be. The original letter had ricocheted among its requisite posts, opened and resealed and marked at midpoint, or its intended endpoint, "REFUSED" by its ancestral interceptor and boomeranged back to my workplace mailbox. But of course, that is not before landing in the main heap of mail—for obvious reason, I could not risk the c/o addendum of my name under the return address—at the university office as a curious piece of rejected remittance, then opened and parsed by officious eyes and officially paired with the letter of immediate suspension with which it whirled back into my possession.

But for the prevailing of cooler heads and rational sensibilities my suspension and subsequent expulsion might have been a messy affair—I flirted with the notion of attributing to the whole letter business some grandiose and ill-conceived literary stunt of maladroitness, in a craven attempt to retain employment, but then to what end?—and I regret to report to my drama-starved hoi polloi that I stepped noiselessly from my post, willing to stumble optimistically into whatever path might expedite my transformation into the enviable starring role of my earlier parking lot reverie. And it is no great irony that the job that would so allow me to make ends meet would meet its end so, no? Certainly to stretch the credulity of my superiors so near the impending tell-tale birth of ineluctability could have only invited a harsher ruler coming down upon later upon my culpable hands. So I took their knuckle-crack thwack: surrendered tenure and compliance with the perceived necessity of distance, moving outside of the community—the realtor of a yellow forwarding rectangle (I can only notch its unpeeled survival among the scant others that pocked that great bedpost of fortuitous oversight), adhering still to the corner of my returned envelope, quietly suggested I “change address to” one specific street in a quaint village not too prohibitively far for my sudden nomadic needs—and vulnerable to the whims of Johnny Law only at the behest of “the victim’s family, as they so deem fit,” as outlined by my erstwhile employer’s exhorting valediction. And thus was the bodhisattva relieved of his post, prepared to ascend at last toward nirvana, high above the festering throng of cold, plebeian ensconements, expediently exposed and offered in shameless ergonomic attempts at getting a lithe leg up on and a trembling foot upon the empty seats of their putative competition, a corporeal duty that had so glutted for professor naught but a primal urge rather than any higher calling.

Chapter XXI

My unlikely, or perhaps inevitable, hero dispensed with the mechanical tendency to condolence and well-wishing, eschewed the brief backstory that brought about this reunion and geared the conversation almost immediately toward the alarming visitor who'd preceded my coming.

—Stood pert'ner right there where I was standing, the strange man had, and he laid across the counter these little pieces of burnt cardboard pictures like he was dealing a strange kiddie game of poker.

Was this before or after my accident?

—Well, sometime or so after he'd called the po-leece, some few hours or thereabouts, this fella walked on through the door. Askin' questions.

And of the scene? Take me back to the accident.

—The scene? Oh. Well it seems I wern't responding none to his shouts or rousing shakes...(Let us now dispense with this dashing and flip-flapping charade while I flex in the spirit of expeditiousness my hermeneutic muscle, for the discerning readers' sake, for a more pellucid and palatable recapitulation of the mysterious etiology of my abject bruising, the radix of my abrupt cruising, my brief hospital stay: Our hero, Floyd the playdoctor-cum-mechanic, had been fortuitously coursing in the early AM those idyllic backroads of his roots—his lifelong rustication is a presumption for which I simply needn't traverse a lengthy limb to snatch the leaf of verification—when the sonorous round of my revolver first (at least on this morn) entered his head, leading him into an extemporary investigation. Upon arriving at the scene, however, he'd recklessly attributed the orotund crack to the crackling car-tree collision, which left my grille, cracked and puttied about the slivered barkwool of a sylvan bulwark, "coughin' up smoke sumpin tair'ble" (a direct quote for validation) and "pissin' a neon puddle" (To be honest I just don't know how to translate this one.). He concluded that I bade consciousness adieu when my trusted steering wheel, apparent malcontent of normally corrigible dirigibility, had forcefully impressed upon me the depth of its disapproval at those ribald and feckless gestures to which I had subjected it (this of course a blank in the retelling that I have filled in), branding me with the erstwhile encircled corporate imprint of its maker, attempting to maliciously send me to mine. Upon alerting the local caregivers and authorities, who had graciously allowed him to tow gratis my car back to his garage, he repaired my enuretic engine and replaced the brakeline so ominously severed beneath my feet. This last bit inspired a certain puerile

intrigue in goodolboy Floyd, who had extrapolated from the wreckage murderous machinations— corroborated in the concatenation of the coming strange visitor’s uncanny punctuality—the sort of scathing scheming his peregrine ilk invariably link to big-city iniquity and broach with a certain tight-lipped discreetness, and he, dryly wringing that ubiquitous rag of his, looking left and right as though he sought to cross some parlous avenue he might not be able to recross, wondered:) Did I have any such enemies where I come from?

Reader, had I then known what you know, what I know today, seated here, subjected with each periodic break to a sentencing of my own undoing, I confess I still would have told him the same thing that I at the time genuinely imparted: I knew of nary a soul who wished me dead. And, now, to the business of the gentleman with the burnt offerings?

But he didn’t know exactly about calling him all that genteel-like...

I supposed not, what with those singed art pieces at the ready. Should we have called him philistine, then? (Ah, these games were tedious at such an hour, but had I obviated picking such low-hung fruit, how could I live with myself—ha—if they had just uselessly fallen, bonked floorward by my head as I turned doorward in those cramped quarters, to rot forevermore?) He stood reticent within this jocular line of questioning, and the temporary time for temporizing had passed: Well then, why not just produce these mini-masterworks so I might have a look-see before heading home?

He carefully laid them out one by laborious one. He patronizingly thought they might look familiar; he was right. They were quite clearly the remains of the detective set by which I’d patronized his business. Pray tell, I asked, where did this strange man claim to unearth these barely discernable palimpsests from that same production line of gewgaws my Genevieve had so enjoyed?

He wouldn’t, or couldn’t, say where, but I could rest assured he’d a-been praying over it.

Was the man a police officer? (Was my insistent digging a betrayal of my grave concern?)

He couldn’t rightfully say.

There was a carvable tension filling the air between us by the second. Rather brusquely I told him I thought I’d then appreciate the immediate repossession of my keys.

But he wasn’t feeling so compliant: Seein as though he’d the only store in those parts with this particular line of toys, he admitted he couldn’t very well deny selling them there incriminating pieces...This strange man then asked if he could and then with permission used the telee-phone. And kept on walking when asked if he needed to collect the evidence like he didn’t hear a word.

My keys, I pleaded, appealing to a tending of the present, and how much did I owe him?

He disappeared and rose from beneath the counter, my keys ajingle against one hip in the aloof,

semi-akimbo pose he struck while round the other hip he brandished, half-swallowed by his mottled filthrag, my providently removed revolver. The cold power of it in his hand emboldened his spirits: He suddenly warn't so sure I could pay what I owed. Not this time. He then laid the keys and gun atop the excoriated cardboard detectives spread upon the counter. The irregular base of a foreboding isosceles erected in the canted palladia of his rigid arms. He risked a lapse in security to produce my wallet from some unseen locus and laid it down, too, to cap the linear constellation of circumstantial avoirdupois before his dumb adjudicative countenance, as some nascent god suddenly cognizant in the incipiency of his own weight plenipotentiary.

The gravity of things fell unto me. I had to get out. I had to call my Genevieve, to tell her I was coming home. To go home. Why was this not my first order of business? He'd drawn errant conclusions, would he be so cooperative as to allow me to collect my preserved effects and be on my way? We could put to rest these concerns, born of nothing but baseless suspicions of an innocent merely exercising his inalienable rights and somehow caught in an unfortunate web of circumstance, until at some later date when I might return and gloze for his approval when the truth of this scenario had made itself fully known to me. Now we hadn't the time. He was not budging. I sneaked in plain sight over to the telephone, without requesting permission, lifted the receiver to my cheek and, inexplicably, reacting unconsciously to an ineffable afflatus transmitted perhaps from some rival divinity, I depressed with an automaton digit the redial button rather than the seven-digit sequence of home's phone.

A ringing in my ear muted all but that inculpatory voice from my periphery, prodding, provoking: Could he, he supposed, safely reckon I'd found the infirmary?

Hadn't we already addressed that subject? Ringing still in my ear. Every unanswered trill pulsed into my raging veins the calming CCs of some sedative. Yes, I nodded, my head swiveling at the earpiece in a silent gesture of appreciation. No answer. As my robotic fingers extended toward the call-canceling prongs, to execute the coup de grace on this inspired calling, my soothing phone metronome was curtly interrupted by the uncanny canned sound of none other than my own voice, beseeching me from across a spectral plane to adumbrate the particulars of my business, for a brief onomasticon of whom they involve. My nerves started again; my hand over the twin apparatuses of execution on the cradle spidered uncontrollably. The alighted albatross of gravity crushing me now, locking its jaw at my arms, swallowing my will until there appeared but one egregious egress from this stifling suffocation.

I wrested the power away with one exacting demand: What exactly did he tell this queer visitor of his? And I warned to prevaricate not on his behalf...

The guarding triangle dissolved as he erected, fumbled dumbly with that dumb rag, loose in his

hands like a Samsonian peruke, doffed not by the philistine but by the ire of the polyglot and polite cosmopolite, once so sensitive to the lug-nut's linguistic deficiencies, so conscientious with regard to his verbal disabilities, that he had deigned to bastardize his own, swapping a blessed diction for a wretched colloquial in his presence. Now allowing a cataract of vituperations theretofore vigorously eschewed to rush mercilessly from the glossy sluice of courtesy at once rent from my lips—how demented must I have appeared wiping from the frenzied geyser of my mouth the frothy dregs of that eruption across the back of my hand!

My spider-hand, arachnid appendage, sentient, flitting, acting independently of its own accord: When Floyd then dared defy my lone demand with only a dodgy mollification, a wily “turnt out ‘twas somebody's poor dog, deader'n anything, layin in the bush, yonder, t'other day”—an unsolicited overture in regards to the putrescent stench of Sue in the car or the cat in the sward that I once feared might prove to catalyze my undoing—my alleged tarantula skittered an allegro tarantella across the counter, violently dragging its reluctant partner until we'd rapaciously accosted our unwitting third: the unassuming revolver, glanced askance away from the palm of stag Floyd's—ah, until then the deer fool hadn't his hart truly in the hunt—timid reach. He instinctively began to hightail from my point-blank—oh the tragically comic irony that turn of phrase will later reveal to the attentive reader—proximity, and though I cocked the hammer of my leveled shooter, so assailed was I by a rare metacognitive pang of conscience that would deny me the foresight to blast my timorous target, to bask in the vicarious and universal satisfaction of firing my mechanic, bleating, pleading there beyond the register, that I merely impetrated sternly my cornered quarry, appropriating the calm demeanor of my telephonic tactics of interrogation, for which I needed not unduly stretch my tensile prowess of recall. Of course, beyond the imminent dangers that might besiege—if not already besieged—my peepless home, what had truly sent me spiraling from my aerie of composure was his icarian ascent, that uncaring accent with which he dared rise up to challenge the veracity of my insistences, hopeful that I might carelessly allow a dialog bubble that casually floated the incriminatingly misspoken entrapment of some unconscious betraying, self-sabotaging “...so you say that unbearable stench arose from a trampled cat swardward whilst I tramped wardward?” to slip rather than fastidiously reiterate his silly feint of canine carrion, this shifty grift by which he'd planned to arrestingly alight upon discombobulated me with the stony rather than gossamer wings of his own ill-fated, sun-baked ambitions, swooping in with some daedal a-ha!-ccusation, whose deft unlocking anyway lay holed up in some labyrinthine prison for which he simply hadn't clew nor key.

From the once-charming symbiosis of his cardinalneck drawl and canarybellied blather

squawked an idiotic idiolect, a pathetic patois I regretfully report shan't be, can't be transliterated here with any semblance of coherency for the discerning reader. Only the splutterings of a madman: of "that red-faced devil", of implied threats to his family, how he should have never something or other...you get the indecipherable picture. And I would have been content to let him deliquesce frantically into a convulsing puddle of cold blood and tepid urine and warm tears had his temperature not risen rapidly, had he not risen suddenly, charged to receive the pig-tailed receiver still tethering my left hand to the wall as if even had he wrested it from my grip that I might just idly watch laissez-fairely as he beckoned for some obstructive police service in my presence. There was no avoiding the butting-in of officers—certainly due to my escape from the hospital and the surreptitious agreement between the authorities and this unpredictable beast, a quizzically-delayed visit from the police was forthcoming—but I couldn't risk the expedition of any such inimical, criminal confluence, so as he snatched the phone from my grasp I came quickly and judiciously down against his temple with the steel serif of my eloquent ell, so silent in its swift deliverance, so graceful in its skull-splitting arc—the tempered tension of our tête-à-tête coming inexorably, irrevocably to a head—whereupon he flopped, bloodlessly, with what should have been a chilling celerity unto the floor. And sangfroid or savoir-faire, I cannot declare, but this facile exhibition of violence shook me to an alarmingly minimal degree. It took me longer to collect my personal effects than myself, and I immediately afterward stepped over his motionless—save the conscious-clearing rise and fall of his working diaphragm—mien and out the door, knocking my head against no unseen or passed-over plums of wordplay for the fruity punnet.

I felt in my throat the chill of an iced coffee shot shooting down the gullet when I flew back into range of Jo and Damian's den of joe: picture window shattered, carpet shard-shagged and ground shard-graveled alike, perimeter cordoned by a yellowtape warning. I slowed to a conspicuous and lawful pace—yes the brakes were performing masterfully!—as a hopefully inconspicuous early-morning traveler passing by those extant coppers—fine conductors for heated confrontations and electric scenes of unrest but not of peace or of speedy, just deliberations regarding the assessment of such hard-boiled garboils—whose deviation from their intended route to canvass that horrific scene I'd no doubt had been fortuitously radioed by some theurgic dispatch from beyond. I clutched at my heart, still aching from the blow that against me the very wheel in my hands had earlier dealt, but this was different. I recalled as analog my unease driving past the deflated cat, a remnant likewise crushed by yet another of these destructive wheels, along the path of Gen's and my hegira from Sue's idyllic mausoleum. But this time I navigated the flexuous path not with the smug satisfaction of the saintly Samaritan with which I was then infused. This time, under the invidious specters of sun and moon, co-conspirators suspended

in conniving concert just above the horizon, flashing their wistful glares in concert from opposite ends of my windshield as a grotesque chimera—a pathetic firmamental cur begging for some unctuous blandishment over this providently provided opening for escape that I would never deign to offer—no, this time provident I, blithely aware of the incriminating autotomy I'd committed of deserted sweat, of the tattletale grease of finger-smirched evidence left behind, though, for a change, none of the noxious vomit, could reassuringly and defiantly brandish the once-lost revolver that had so fortunately been rebequeathed.

Chapter XXII

Since the retelling of that shameful hospital episode, a cooling period has elapsed, allowed me to call once again upon my diligent artist-in-waiting, to challenge his acumen whilst suggesting the appropriate media for our ancillary retelling. As perhaps you have guessed, I've tasted again from the placid and halcyon hole of barb, now just an imitation of her glistening body from what feels an immemorial earlier: a minimal rendering in sparse pointillism, in point a lissome heap aswirl under my angry fingers, eddied by my parched tongue.

Ah, but not so fast! It is not a mere, mundane rendering of that pool I lap for which your services need rendered. I am now that scurrilous cur, tragic, orphaned canine of voracious maw and voracious paw (or is the other way 'round?), that beholds through apogeed eyeholes of sun and moon a world lost to darkness when I blink, bathed in the depravity of my uncontrollable slobber...where am I going...ah, to the artist: This time of reflection has inspired for my imagination the creation of a hologram, such as that iridescent imagery, marveled at by children and adults alike and packaged in their contemptible packs of sports card collectibles, that produces opposing silvery scenes dependent upon the viewer's perspective. From the right, let us see a triumphant reunion, a dreamy, starlit reunification of wayward lovers on the illicit milieu of hospital cot that, when tilted to the right, dissolves at first to indistinguishable nacreous blur until only the bed returns in familiar focus, this time bearing the overbearing scrub of a failed writer who with overbarring embonpoint delights still in the prodigious production of an unsolicited outpouring...How graphic to be? Oh, do think of the children, the poor innumerable children, inchoate gambolers in a divine lottery, denied their unadulterated scamper down the hallway of Providence promised them. Please let our artistic endeavors be conscientious of their unformed eyes and uniform demise above all else.

Methinks there be some chicanery afoot. Espied in this daylight hour from my elevated view was once again some questionable activity in the neighboring abode. This a discombobulating mirage—has my Barbara fermented hallucinatory powers in her extended stay? Might that more corpulent Starlookalike I just noticed across the way have been placed in the window by the crisscrossed venerable receptors of my brain to torment me? Like a portly portent in the fashionably red garb I last recall seeing upon Starla's plump pregnant, an over-vitaminsed vixen slammed shut the window as quickly as she had

emerged within its frame to look round. And she vanished.

I return to my work a spurned man, betrayed by myself and this unsightly sprawl of cells I still call Barb. Bitch. A rutted mass fit for the splayed raking of my dogged approach. No longer does she redden when I scrape at her sides; no sanguine trace of crimson turns up or seeps out when I twist and twirl her cyan exterior, scramble her pliable parts. Even my barb hath judased, though she needn't be lazarused to be of use in this sanctum—but couldn't Starla, the one true Starla, perform such messianic miracle? Hallucination just won't do. Return; I am humbled, begging now. Raise our blessed babe. Ordain the uxorious life I so desire, you so deserve. Together we can shed this fleabitten doggerel, bury the bones of our creating...come. Please.

Addendum Three

“Cup of joe?” winced our usually jovial Josephine, still smarting, bracing the wrist that tilted the pot. Steaming coffee quavered toward its lowering spout, suspended there above the empty cup at the elbow of the irregular patron, who regarded her query from his seat with a snort, a strange mix of curiosity and contempt.

“Tell me, please,” he said, pushing at the rough and blackened edges of two ostensible trading cards he’d been studying as though they were damaged tarots laid there foretelling doom. “Do these look familiar?” She shakily set the coffee pot onto the table and reached down to touch—“Uh uh uh,” and her approach was retarded. “You don’t want your prints on these. These are crime scene evidence. Certifiable.”

“Oh my,” she studied them closely. “Arson?”

He noticed her favored forearm, furrowed brow. “At least.”

“Ooh!” Jo blurted. “They are from kids’ toys. Like part of a play detective set. Seen ‘em up the road a time or two.”

“I have had a less-than-satisfactory discussion with that very same seller of these very pieces.”

“Uh huh,” she dumbly nodded.

“What I need from you is whether or not you might have any inkling about someone, anyone, who’d recently had occasion to utilize these. I trust you serve a fairly regular clientele. Any random faces come through? A father or mother using a child as cover...any new customers at all?”

Jo surreptitiously stole a quick and furtive kitchenward glance. “Is someone going around impersonating a police officer?”

“Investigator.” Indiscreetly did the man look beyond Jo; he studied the bumptious busser or dishwasher against the doorway hovering over the scene from afar. “But yes I do believe you might say so.” The eavesdropper slipped suddenly back into his cave, immediately clanging dishes and spraying water.

“You don’t exactly look like a police officer.”

“And why do you suppose that is?”

There was consternation in the furrows of her face as she pieced together all relevant evidence

culled from her rapt late-night television viewings before her shifts started. The ridges of concentration flattened right before whispering with childish whimsy, "You're undercover."

One elbow upon the table, the other atop the back of his seat, he leaned in toward her, pupils oscillating in garish encouragement. "You hush now! Don't go giving me away." He smirked. "I'm going to let you in on something. Confidential, is that all right?" to her eyes all alight amid a nodding face, "I am working with the locals on this, but truth be told I'm something else entirely." She leaned in closer. He clearly enunciated each syllable: "E-ra-ser," looked theatrically around, "so called because I make problems disappear." And he eased coolly back into his seat.

Jo rose with incredulity, clucked aloud. "Now should you be telling me this?"

"I will tell you, Josephine, I am a good judge of character. Wouldn't have my job otherwise. I don't think I have a thing to worry about with you. Am I wrong?" He watched her pursing lips. "By my rough calculations I suspect the police will be arriving within fifteen minutes anyway if you need corroboration."

"No, no. That's alright." She wrestled with her conscience. To what conspiratorial agreement had she foolishly committed plucking in secret the twenty from her breast pocket? Should she have claimed it? Oh but how her heart still fluttered at the thought of the smoker's touch, the perilous curiosity and appeal of the complex and oft-misunderstood criminal. "This one's on the house." She recommenced the interrupted filling of his cup.

"Sit. Here, if you would. The diner is almost empty; certainly you can spare a few moments. When I return perhaps you'll remember something. Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"Pardon my language, but I have to hit the head, as they say. I don't think I could stomach another sip."

"Yes sir...raser," slipped in trochaic wit from her lips.

"Now, now, Jo." He flashed a reassuring grin. "You know what men in such positions have to do with people who know our secrets." Chuckling as he turned.

He walked briskly off, through the dining room, past the set tables and empty chairs, amid the eerie glow of morning light burst through the windows to cast the room in a golden haze. A lanky sallow fellow with a swift wooden gait. He trampled silently the already well-trodden dirty damask carpeting onto the low-squeak of red-tiled linoleum as he rounded the counter where there hunched the only other patron shoveling a mucous soup of egg and hash into his unclosing mouth. A scraggly pariah, doubtless a morning regular, who hadn't the dignity to pluck the lees of albumen or grease from the

course gray net flanging from his chin, yet he'd the gall to stare over his plate an obstinate stare, chewing all the while, as this undeterred strange Eraser brazenly breached the kitchen ingress.

A scalding plume of exfoliating steam obnubilated the scene; the susurrous rush of shower-streaming from the manned sprayer, suspended at eye-level, lowered as though from heaven, had drowned out the soggy footfalls of his approach. Without missing a beat, amid the beatless and noisome waterlogged clangor of rattling ceramic and glass—doubtless the inspiration for civilian-life “musical” compositions—he launched an elbow into the soft sub-cerebellar tissue of the dishwasher's neck with such force that our galley dweller's knees buckled immediately. Whispered haughtily, “It was your teacher, fool,” as if to finally provide closure to some unanswerable mystery. The assailant kneed his temple on the way down so that he toppled sideways in an ataxic display of twitching impotence face-first onto the sodden mat below.

The brief moment of silence after Dishwasher let go of and before Eraser engaged the locking mechanism attached to the sprayer had afforded the unsuspecting audience outside only the belly-splash of a bowl and an innocuous soft thud of head dash, upon which the scalding water now occasionally rained during the torturous tenure of its erratic tethered bouncing. On his way out he slipped into a wet apron hanging from a rack and emerged from the kitchen before those unwelcoming eyes of haughty Eater, well behind whom sat Jo with her back still to the meeting pair at the counter.

The apronclad imposter waltzed over from the opposite side of the counter before an unsatisfied customer, who grouched, “I don't know you. Who are you?” to which the stranger in reply yanked the wires of his unkempt beard, plunging mechanically the clandestine subcounter carrot he suddenly found in his fist into the fleshy locus at his thus-exposed larynx. At the end of the crimson vine that spurted forth there patted a dull plash, a whole three seats down, in between misted an atomized scud and a red stippling about the surface of the counter. The man wheezed rapidly but made no other audible sound save the vain thuds of his flailing and the curt pitter-patter of the scuttling feet of his chair legs against the floor.

Adam's apple to the hilt, he attempted to violently unsheathe the ribbed root vegetable straight through that lumpy protuberance but all he did was snap his victim forward by the neck, over the counter. Blood gushed from the wound over the plastic precipice, its diffluence ridging the rims of plates stacked behind the counter, cascading into a growing pool in acuminate trickles onto the floor. He let go of the carrot and unlooped the apron strap from his neck and placed the apron entire over the back and head of the slumped and shuddering body. With one hand pushing down upon the draped neck he calmly slid the man's final meal's plate and coffee mug away from the languid strikes of his obstinate

arms. So slick was the counter now that when he almost miscalculated and sent them clattering noisily to the floor, he'd had to, to prevent their fall, lean upon the craning neck to stretch far enough; below him for a moment spluttered a godawful spray to rival the splashing output of that cleansing implement that still whipped in wild undulations about the sink in the back. When the body ceased its intermittent juddering, he stepped aside and, dripping along the way, walked to the main entrance to jam a wedge under the door.

Jo somehow sat oblivious still, holding up one piece of evidence to the light when Eraser returned. "Has anything come to mind?" carefully plucking the cardboard from her hand. "Now I told you not to touch."

"Oh, I do apologize, officer." She bit her lip, indiscreetly wiped a hand against her breast, felt for an instant the rush of coy lawlessness in the gumstick rectangle of a folded bill once slipped there. But it wasn't on her anymore; it wasn't ever in her. "Well, the other day a guy, maybe yesterday...real peculiar type, sat in that table over there. Smoker. And we don't allow that in here, but, well he was a peculiar one like I said...First time we ever saw him and I suppose the last. I hope that helps." Hand still rubbing absent-mindedly against the breast.

"I'm not so sure." He noticed, directed the thrust of their confab toward her suggestive pawing. "Do you think that helps?"

Her hand ceased suddenly its provocative caress, as though she snapped back to consciousness. "Sir, I don't mean to poke fun. Did you make it to the bathroom all right? Your legs."

He paused a contemplative pause, the steam from the still coffee he held before his lips dancing around his nostrils, before his eyes, as though he weighed by it the sprazzatura of his casual exploits. He turned his head back to her slowly, easily, "Do you ever pray, my dear?"

"Yes, I suppose. Why?"

He took a sip. Let out a hot and labored sigh. "I'd like to know how you pray. For what. I try to empathize with the inclination to utter some hopeful words in these times of trial, but I cannot. I find it unrelatable."

"Moments? Like the scene of a crime?"

"Just like a crime scene."

"I guess I just lay it out there. Asking for answers and such."

"And do they come?"

"I like to think so." She topped him off. "What is it that you're struggling with?"

"Allow me an attempt to explain: I don't try to impose some illusion of order upon the chaos

that is the human condition. I try my best to live within it. It is my job to. But sometimes it feels like a greater power out there, maybe something inside, is issuing directions, urging me to do just that. To order the chaos. Communicating in grandiose but undeniable plainspeak. And though I didn't ask for this burden I'm obliged to act upon it. As though I haven't a choice."

"Something like predestination?"

"Oh, that's good." He smiled a genuine smile. "Maybe. I can't say for sure."

She started to speak but he cut her off "—Damn these pants are getting uncomfortable. And I'm making an embarrassing mess of your establishment. Please let me finish and I'll be off. You've helped me. You have."

She nodded her assent but couldn't help but blurt out, "The voice, is it your radio dispatch?"

A chortle. "Jo, I'm not testing you. This is no riddle." An austere look swept over his face. "Now I swear, if you don't quit with these precious little quips I might not have it in me to share with you the rest of what I have to say before I take off."

"I'm not trying to be cute, I swear."

"I suppose you can't help it." He paused agape. "I have a strange little theory, if you'd be willing to indulge. I've never tested it out. In fact you're the first person with whom I've been comfortable enough to share this."

"Shucks," bumped her red-faced, bumpkin interjection. "Anything, sure. Shoot."

"Are you sure you're not trying to be cute? Goodness." He tittered and stopped. "Pray. Silently. Please."

"But I don't know what to pray about."

"Look around, there must be something. 'Just lay it out there.' But don't tell me. I need to know if perhaps divine signals are getting crossed and transmitted directly to me. It's crazy, I know. But if you would..."

She stood there, braced against the table with her outstretched hands, closed her eyes without looking about for some needy soul. He watched her scrutably screwed face with the taint of his own supercilious air while the few moments spent in prayer passed. "Amen. Okay," she uneasily finished.

"All right," and he cracked his knuckles, then the cartilage in his neck in the preparatory pageantry of expected showmanship. "Okay, okay. The voice, it tells me," pointing to his temples, calmly opening his eyes, "you are seeking forgiveness for the filthy innuendo and chesty mannerisms by which you curry the favor of your gentleman patrons..." to which she recoiled, upright now, massaging the throbbing forearm with which she'd just absentmindedly pushed off. "No, no, sorry, that is not quite it,"

he corrects himself. "I tried paraphrasing. It says, 'You need to put something besides a breast upon that arm.'"

With the murine meekness of a struck quarry, she started, "I did use some cream earlier—"

"No," flashing a feline grin. "Sorry. I can see why you thought that, but that last message was a direct quote."

"Direct quote. I don't understand. And I don't appreciate...I...Am I in trouble, officer?"

"Oh Jo, sometimes you make it too easy. I told you I'm no officer, and the time for banter is through; I meant a direct quote. To me, you see. Repeated verbatim exactly as it was divined. Given the circumstances I hadn't articulated that properly and for that I apologize. What I should have said is that it is I who should put something on it. Something other than a breast, that is." Just then a spasm of some sort sent a plate crashing onto the floor behind her. Jo whipped her head around to see that below the slumped mailman—a reclusive regular who'd most days stop in before doing his rural route, oft-carrying a plastic bag of turnips or other rooty comestibles from his personal garden to share with the diner—dozens of pinked fragments like sharkfins and sharkteeth, porcelain floes of sundry shapes, seemed to bubble up to the surface of the crimson abyss still pooling on the floor. "Jesus," he groaned, which was canceled by a shriek from Jo, which was likewise drowned by the deafening blast of the leveled gun beside her ear—she hadn't even noticed that it was his unarmed hand, and not crippling fear, wrenching maliciously her wounded arm that had brought her unconsciously to her knees. The bullet pierced the previously slid cup, which exploded with a brown splash and sprayed bits of porcelain, and hit beyond the counter a mirror that octopussed with an instinctual splay of jagged legs. The lookingglass portal, into which Jo's eyes were immediately trained upon the bloodslicked face, strained and lifeless, of the maimed mailman, had plinked and chunked before her reflected eyes as a specular map, cracking along its borders, spilling with an agonizing lull its jagged borders of extemporary and temporary states one-by-one onto the floor below.

She rose awkwardly in his grasp. Wailing and whimpering a snotty petition of gibberish. "Now sit," he said, tightening his grip. She cried out unintelligibly between gasps. "I need to you to calm now. I can only wait so long, Jo. Our fifteen minutes are nearly up." He insouciantly sipped his coffee and waited out her hyperventilation, still tethering her by her nigh numb arm. "Okay," picking up his gun he'd laid after the shot upon the table, "pray again." Pointed it between her eyes. "Aloud this time."

"I don't know," sniffing, sniveling.

"Sure you do. What do you want more than anything? Perhaps you'd wished for a more presentable figure, a more tempting temple for those betrothed diners whose unfaithful hearts you

hoped to exploit. Yes?”

“Why are you doing this? What do you want?...I...just can’t.”

“Christ, Jo. Look. Around. Be in the moment. Who can grant you clemency in this trial? Think it through. The need could not possibly be more imminent, could it?”

“Okay...okay.” The saliva that bubbled out with a perversely radiant iridescence from the second O- and popped at the gurgled –kay might have, under friendlier circumstance, elicited a red-faced, self-deprecating chuckle from Jo but this time only a chiding snort from the other. She closed reddened eyes, wheezed, moaned, trembling, and after a few starts and stops offered with marmoreal ora this plaintive protest: “Why?”

“Indeed. I am beginning to think that, stripped of this futile pageantry and morbid stimulation, you do get it. Perhaps better than all the others.” He lowered the gun, loosened his grip. A contemplative pause. “Will this help?” Let go of her arm completely; she reluctantly looked down, gestured a quick nod or merely an intractable shiver—who could say?—“Go on.”

She did not know if he meant to pray or run so she ran. Darted as best she could bullishly through the dining room. Knocked about angry chairs and upset tables as a mad cow that had stared down and survived a failed bolt gun stun might. As she struggled yanking at the door handle, the window to her right and then left crashed in crystalline downpour, leaving in their wake a craquelure of the cracked and obtrusive glass jaws through which poured the golden haze of a sadistic god. She again cowed to her knees, this time in frantic resignation, awaiting the coming crack she wondered, in a queer moment of lucidity, if she’d even hear.

When it came she felt nothing but a brief sense of paralysis and a cold pulsation of fright shooting through her body. One hand on the door, she slumped, crouched further and turned to see the menacing posture of the shooter, the gun slowly dropping back to his side from being leveled toward the kitchen. The delayed recognition of the dead thump that had sounded when the bullet she anticipated had instead allayed the gang of teardrops frozen forever upon the dishwasher’s fallen temple. She tried to scream but no sound came.

He stepped over, stood over her, bunched a fist of her hair and attempted to stand her upright. But she stumbled away, leaving him, the clenched spaces between his fist stranded. “Dear Lord,” she burbled as she drunkenly rose. He hadn’t shot her, maybe he wouldn’t, so she ran.

“Go on,” he urged her again, no less enigmatically, trailing her toward the food preparation station, rubbing his fingers free of frizzy hair. “Maybe he will jam my gun. Hell. You never know!”

She scabbled along the narrow space between the counter and the busted mirror, crunched the

glistening wintry walkway of glass—a scabrous covering over the rink of sticky blood—passing the bloody snowed man with his misplaced nose, and whisked into the back, where she frantically searched around for a cleaver, a knife, a fork, anything, blindly groping, squishing onto the table a variegated welter of single-serve condiments in her mad dash, streaks of red, gobs of yellow, like a buffet before certain desperate authors...but the staid mayonn-aised up beside her, able to ketchup...and she mustard only this salty protest: “I won’t do nothing for you!”

That doubly negative utterance was enough to send him to violently kicking the backs of her knees. As she fell she caught herself, splayed atop the messy table but unable or unwilling to let go and run again, despite that her knees and toes reached, like a child dangling from the lowest branch of a climbed tree but afraid to let go even though her swinging feet glanced the ground. “The kicker here is that whether or not it is you who does the praying doesn’t much matter in the end.” Stunned now with an almost serene mien, she refused to acknowledge him, wouldn’t face him as he popped out with a mallet she’d overlooked the bottom of a large metal colander. “You see, there’s somebody praying on your behalf, and the confounding thing about this whole vain and convoluted system is that sometimes that’s enough.” He domed with the colander a jar of strawberry jam he’d unscrewed so that the openings lined up and then sunk the barrel of his gun through, into the jarred and jellified spread. He raised the crude contraption—clunky in his grip like a cartoonish laser gun or strange satellite—so that its transmission would swiftly reach her receptors. “And right now I’m praying. Right now I’m praying for the fortitude to finish this quickly, because even though I realize to you it may seem a trivial matter, I am not proud—what I am praying for this time is that you won’t sully this final moment of appropriate fruition with some proclamation that what I hold before us both is actually jelly, or marmalade, or preserves, because I’d rather not know.”

Chapter XXIII

All praise to my indiscreet xanthic confidant—let us impose a temporary moratorium on Barbspeak in similarly colorful language—that little forward sticker stuck to my returned letter, permitting me no lonesome interim unawares in regards to the precise coordinates of my sidereal star, at first detected and studied and gazed upon from the safe observatory of the hotel roof, two floors heavenward from where I would initially board, with the aides of a city map and a rickety quarter-gorging telescope (presumably intended to magnify the boring, broccolied valley of indistinguishably dense treetops crowding the landscape visible all the way across the roof, on the opposite edge of that capacious structure, where it had been lazily screwed when I first came upon it) while she, pony-tailed (Perhaps merely a product of how much I'd longed for just such an unbridled and unfettered glimpse of her, I found its functionality to be charmingly apropos in that earthy milieu.), trowel-in-hand, shirt clinging to the sweat on her bent and overdressed torso, dirtied her knees tending to pink tulips in a flowerbed. Now, please, righteous reader, before you drown in your indignation over the supposedly-edified me resuming such scandalous and self-serving practices over my own simulated two-lips of long distance relations (Woe to the perverted soul so quick to project tawdry innuendo upon my innocuous "lazily screwed when I first came upon (the telescope)"!), latch onto my offered scull whilst we navigate the stream of conscience: Did I not spy through that glass a second moon, a glassy moon, vitreous influence upon my churning tide, my turning insides, visible, transparent, purling, tilting welter of waves ambitious transformative reformative reflective waxen waxing yet fully eclipsed, undetectable in her perihelion oogenesis to all but Mom's inner-orbit, whose cosmogony I was equally responsible?...

I hadn't dared breach this alien atmosphere, risked a rage-induced blindness exercising through that scope my constitutionally-preserved heliolatry—though I considered an amendment to that same bill of rights for the lecherous and lowly mailman, phonetically redundant fool, distastefully bearing upon his breast the very emblem of that grand institution which had enabled by its merciful omnipotence the Xing of my map, a foot soldier far too willing to take full advantage of his paper authority to audaciously peep the practically prone and glistening Star between us at just the moment my seditious spyglass, the quizzically complicit conspirator that you may be certain was at once executed upon its treasonous and execrable act of sullyng my investigation, completely digesting my

final coin, pooping out on me—simply to disrupt the tenuous harmony of Starla’s family or chauvinistically rope my rightful bride. No: I resolved solemnly then that I’d a right and responsibility to provide for and protect my budding family from just such wayfaring waifs airing junk male inserts whilst freely roaming the streets with ostentatious impunity.

Though the mere suggestion of abandonment pained me, the elevated ubermensch did not swoop in to scoop her up, racing at such a velocity to reverse the earth’s rotation, and consequently time, to save her from such graceless indiscretions—the chaste pitch of my lover far too diligent to allow such base advances (Genevieve, do you see Daddy did not always fumble the odd sporting analogy?) anyway. Nor did I, despite the temptation of a carefree lassitude it would provide this idyll-starved aesthete, spend the summer slavishly engrossed in evanescent rooftop peepshows, engaged in the rotten slotting of my own front-loading-quarters, so to speak, but sadly not into the hind- of her. Instead I estivated most of that sweltering season sans-Starla as the boorish dilettante, cosseting those fallow inclinations, earlier alluded to, toward artistic endeavors that had lain dormant inside that otherwise fine academic imprisonment of didacticism to which I’d, admittedly, volunteered, pursued even.

To announce my re-arrival so soon after my dismissal would almost invariably facilitate a game of unrequited tag or hurtful hide-and-seek, whereby this perpetual It would inevitably forfeit the good fortune of overlooked clues theretofore bestowed upon him, until the learned chasee would forevermore leave behind no trackable spoor, no trail of breadcrumbs for the chaser, be he skilled or swift enough to sidestep in his blind ardor the tossed restraining order that would preemptively corral him to the tree into which he had just calculated only his initial countdown to “ready or not, here I come!” antics when next they crossed the demarcation of coming-game boundaries. So while I allowed some time to elapse for Starla to come to sense, to sensibility, to seek me out, I kept the precarious company of a former pupil I had ever-so-fortunately come upon—no, I promise, it’s not what you think...and subsequently have I come to hang my head over how unintentionally rife might this document be with opportunities for the uncultured ilk who revel in this sort of juvenile ribaldry...but no—in the hotel lobby on my way out one morn, where amid an exhibition of crude painting and sculpture, paced the author of the unquestionably best piece ever submitted—virtually—in my class: one Selina Rouge—my conferred nom de plume—aka, to a clueless faculty and to, particularly, an apoplectic Hershbeck: U Humphrey—her preferred nom de guerre (Despite that from the onset my vowed commitment has remained to a relentless pursuit of unadulterated truthfulness, I suspect the cheeky Miss Rouge will appreciate that made-up palladium even with my inclusion of that euphemistic alias of her own devising; the rest, I assure you, is of the utmost veracity, however unverifiable you

might find it.). While this seems an extraneous deviation, I would be remiss if I did not step to the dais and immortalize that exemplary piece of hers, which has been heretofore forgotten to nearly all, lost to the vast shredder of history.

You see, she never truly turned it in. I know of only one surviving copy—contraband now, a samizdat-in-wait for any of the spurned but archeologically-inclined, slaving to turn up some disseminable issuance of appropriate opprobrium or even questionable calumny against the provenance of haughty Hershbeck, stored away in a locked compartment of my desk that, only upon that fortuitous meeting with Selina had I realized, I had forgotten to clear out just days prior—and by the time you come across this, I presume the vultures of taste, that cenance of censorship (assuming they, unwilling to sully their puritanical talons with a thorough pick-over, did not see to the dubious desk's immediate immolation) will have at some point in the interim descended upon it, beaked at its innards, keeping their beady eyes peeled for any other copy that might work itself up from the grave.

In some ways one might consider Selina the predecessor to my Starla: a wayward transfer from Hershbeck, although under far different circumstance, a beauty with whom an inappropriate relationship would develop. From apposite to opposite, though, the obverse of that coin: it was Selina, despite that she'd no burden to prove her literary acumen, and not I, initiating a non-work-related tryst. Alas, moved to ineffable effect by the quality of her words, the *je ne sais quoi* of her work and in particular that piece de resistance, I could resist only so much, and so inspired was I to eff' the ineffable that I, caught off guard by her plundering advance, found myself hopelessly sucked in by the passion of one kiss before decorum took hold—I, catching my breath, assured her such extracurricular exertion would be completely unnecessary. But obviously had she slipped below, untucked my shirt, her hands scrabbling underneath the vivified flaps of oxford, working on the fly, and unbeknownst to her, very nearly on the verge of—embarrassingly, for a teacher of such infamously unflappable repute—applying a dirty dentifrice upon the teeth of my zipper, upon her flossy fingers, until I was able to choke that flitting ghost at her wrists. But I digress...of course she took it hard, the rejection I mean, though she forged onward in her semester's studies, and upon completion of her coursework, I had always assumed she had left the university out of shame, unable to bear inhaling the same rarefied air of her unattainable, betrothed as he was in that immemorial time to his own work. And here she stood before me once again.

Now I empathize with poor reader, tapping his impatient foot at the opposite precipice of a widening caldera, wherein there lies our common ground, ground or grinding to a ghostly nebula of dust. I see him, arms extended, reaching out over the gulf where once there bubbled and roiled the

magma of intrigue now reduced to a cloud of redundancy, begging for the zip-line of pertinence to explain why he's been asked to endure yet another braggardly quasi-exploit when all I can construct for his passage is a rickety bridge. Hath my devotion to Starla not been long established? Why oh why would I deign to include yet another episode of thwarted debauchery when the caliber of my character has, too, been firmly established? We are getting to this, but first I must add that it was not so easy to stunt her roving hands—hers was an unreciprocated desire, but that does not mean it was unrealized. I may have denied the brief heavenly friction of her palm, but here is the rub:

(Every bridge requires solid foundation...) Selina had so successfully infiltrated the circle entrusted with the printing of, or maybe only compiling, the university's student-adjudicated literary journal—for this purpose alone? I cannot say—that she'd either been handed the reins to cover design or had finagled her way in. What I can attest to is that even though the pair of piquant pieces to which she'd attached her name the previous semester had piqued the interest of more than one head, pseudonymous was the nature of her master stroke. Unassumingly it came in the form of innocuous by-and headline, splashed across the equatorial latitude of the cover, where the eye was drawn to the bold block:

“Remembering Hershbeck
U.Humphrey p.24”

in font reverent and simple, evoking a jejune but august issue for the March/April issue.

Before we riffle the imagined, forgotten, forgettable passages, pages blacked by blocks of tepid, toxic text—student stories and essays and editorials to which we may triskaidekally file without fear of future regret into the aptly-titled bin of juvenilia—from cover to feature in pursuit of that desiderative twenty-fourth, I think it imperative to distinguish in the mind of the less attentive among us—those beleaguered colleagues of mine may certainly skip directly to the next paragraph—that it has until this point been one Ferdinand Hershbeck, singularly, insidiously haunting these pages. But now it is Edmund about whom we have gathered to pay perhaps a final remembrance. Edmund, patriarch of the worldly clan Hershbeck, father of Ferd, perched upon the upper echelon of Academia, the throne of revered repute reserved for gracious benefactors, the sort of generous humanitarians whose grand philanthropy could atone even for the gross philandering of gross offspring—the bitter aftertaste of my insinuation is not meant to disparage the deceased, for whom I've nothing but the utmost.

Now we've flipped forward to meet up with my acrobatic yet bereaved brethren, now where they've begun to parse the plot where an article should have begun but no heading calls for their

attention. We flip forward a page, back a couple; oh yes, I forgot to mention that page number 24 is— was? I'm unsure what tense I should be utilizing—smack dab in the middle of what has ended up in print as a four-page interview, not the full 'beckian memorial anticipated. But not erroneously! Much to our delight, the transcribed piece finds our enigmatic Humphrey, not so hump-free now, engaged across the staple-borne humps halving the magazine into two crests falling outward in foaming waves of washy conversation with a notable novelist of local lore, a then- octogenarian whose then-waterlogged noggin had at one time quietly commanded of the literary set an unquestioned obeisance to rival that of sir Hersh.

What we lucky test-readers discovered was a whirling hodge-podge of anecdote, farrago of aside, olla podrida of advice in the welter of a declining mind still grasping at branches of lucidity soon uprooted from a riparian reality rapidly bidding him adieu. Mid-page, after he'd briefly mentioned mentoring at and reading publicly at university, U. casually asks the interviewee graciously donating his mind if he'd recalled and could regale the readers with an anecdote or two of his time keeping the company of a younger Edmund, to which he replied, "...Edmund?"

U: Edmund Hershbeck. Renowned for a deep appreciation and support for the university's writing community. Certainly you remember...

H.M.: Hershbeck...Hershbeck...Well...

U: I was hoping you might corroborate some of the seemingly universal praise.

H.M.: ...I'm sorry dear.

U: A rather large painting of him hangs in Stratton Hall.

H.M.: Stratton Hall, Stratton...oh, yes, the portly fellow with the queer predilection for sporting ladies' undergarments? Why yes, yes, Strapping Stratton! I do indeed remember him, his misfit attire jiggling rather distastefully the exposed flesh in his rakish nightly hallway frolicking where we'd been lodged.

U: ...

H.M.: ...

U: You've been asked to help curate the upcoming anthology expected next summer...

And that was the whole of any allusion to Edmund. Now it should go without saying that the umbrage borne by the junior Hersh at such brazen affront would keep the issue from the clamoring masses of its readership, but having a front seat to the aftermath, I will say this: a dauntless Ferdinand that first day prowled the English wing rapping at every office door hunting every leaked copy. I witnessed him demand of the clueless student-editor the surfeit of uncirculated copies that constituted

the entire printing not in professorial hands and for which the collective fund, with a wagging and admonishing forefinger, would not be reimbursed. We may thank the gods of courteous overrun that there existed in the annals no tally with exactitude; there were unquestionably more than the three hundred ordered but my denied and stashed-away copy could understandably be presumed among the three hundred three confiscated copies I watched Ferdinand personally count before trundling the rolling librarian's bookcase of them incineratorward.

Whilst the faculty hoisted their own canards regarding the identity of whomever would foist upon Hershbeck such petard, I, nestled solitarily in the intersecting ichthus of a Venn diagram of teachers who'd read the incisive excerpt and the handful of readers (students, mostly) who might have been able to detect the interviewer's true identity, secretly reveled in another literal visit from a Miss Humphrey. Ursula Humphrey'd originally shown up in the first-person narration of Selina's (semi-)fictionalized account of a student resisting a rapist-of-a-professor's unsolicited, rapacious and illicit propositions—not mine, of course!...But regarding the comment itself: That H.M. even consented to the interview—a fact later corroborated with perhaps even less validation than the patronage of a supposedly lingered Edmund—in the initial grips of caducity could preclude neither the possibility of an advantageous fabrication on U's part nor the feckless abeyance of tactfulness on H.M.'s. As a vetting agent of fiction, I needn't the truth in that matter, just believability. We never spoke aloud about the reactions it elicited—from Hershbeck to me to her, all tacit. Heaping onto our pile of curiosa: To be exact I accepted merely the front cover text—I couldn't fairly presume the interview, to my knowledge an ad hoc submission for purely journalistic purpose, was either plotted integrant of the creative endeavor or fortuitous catalyst for it—for consideration in grading; in my doing so she had set a precedent for brevity, hemming away the inessential to present only the earnest narrative, whereas contemptible contemporaries and temporary emperors of Word would ramble on, expatiate on such frippery as meddlesome, peddlesome advertisements pawning off unused but secondfoot intantile shoes (I once flunked a lunk who mistook—or ever more egregiously thought me incapable of distinguishing between the two—his indolence for temerity by turning in a deceptively thick, stapled stack, cover page emblazoned “What is Courage?” and followed authoritatively on page one, in seemingly bold print (though a colleague shared that it was apparently “Black Arial” or something of such nomenclature, to which he feigned some surprise at my ignorance): “This is.” And nothing more, like a terroristic threat, like some dead-on-arrival jihadi wholly on the wrong side in our war and already bedded by seventy-two virgins of wasted ream, numbered each like inconsequential conquests (I demanded he fill those unfulfilled sheets with a treatise on procrastination and its futility against an obvious superior before I

dealt him his final failing blow (Now, now. Please lasso that lubricious bull bucking in your mind, attempting to buffalo my pedagogic mettle with baseless suggestion; regarding such matters I have vouchsafed to the reader only a stampede of truth.)...these parentheses, pulsing like secret throbs in meta tingle, bring me back to the illicit episode with Selina, cupping, embracing, enlaced in hypnotic dance with a lover; hither barges these ellipses, pushy guardians of conscience, cutting in as periods of better sense given to the dotted line of ultimatum: Forgo this elliptical farce for the promise of an eternal bliss hitherto unseen...You must understand now my difficulty in stopping her hands before getting too far, so close was I to gushing forth with a reciprocal brevity...Could I have loved her? In a word: yes, yes, and I might have, under a different firmament, in another epoch where the world might have twirled about a different axis, I might have...but I must remind you: Though we spinners of yarns, quilters of worlds, may preside over the myriad fantastical dimensions we've woven, still must we reside among the same mundane three that loom over yours. And because my Starla deigns to inhabit the terribly terrene and tangible realm of length, of height, of width, I know the measure of my heart I could have ever truly handed over to the destiny of Selina to be infinitesimal. Even now as I recall staying her hands I look up and see Starla's face transposed over hers...Selina, Starla...only now do I recognize the unimaginative pseudonym my witless protection program was able to generate. Don't blame the maimed. Can't you see I'm in no fair fettle to pen this? Who am I? Who is Selina, Starla now, but a mishmash fata morgana for this afflicted miragynist? And while I effectively bullied the daring yet craven parenthesized student for his ambitious solution to his late-start affliction of writer's block, how can I demand of the audience a clemency for this dilatory work of my own? Ah, these are questions I cannot answer for you...

Back to the matter at hand. She took me in, of course. I, unemployed transient of suddenly limited means, could ill afford to lodge there in the hotel indefinitely; she saw it clearly in my desolate countenance. I shared with her the entire sordid story, just as I have one last time for you, down to the minutest detail as I knew it at the time. She swore up and down any infatuation she'd harbored had long since checked out. Had been evicted.

In exchange for my stay at her tenement, she required, dear that she is, only that I work daily at my art. This is no confabulation. I know, I know, such a singularly beneficial offering would have given a more perspicacious bum some pause, but the narrative requires only the bum perspicuous; therefore save your cumbersome judgments for the end, when I will have left an atmosphere feculent enough that your putrescent airings might comingle seamlessly...The gallery at which she kept vigil displayed the work of her students—forsooth: a teacher in the end (equivocally what she always wanted)!—and I took

advantage of this rare opportunity to hone my expressive nonverbal artistry in drawing and in painting under her tutelage. I had committed each morning to performing at least a rough gesture before even relieving a bustling bladder. I needn't waste any more paper in detailing the roughness of my scratches—discommoded, I unfortunately intuit a need, antithetical to my writerly conscience may it be, to clarify that my commitment was to gesture *drawings*, lest the boorish reader imagine a paw of oafish propensity groggily groping for early morning self-satisfaction—work in desperate want of her detailed guidance when she'd drop in for diurnal repast or to turn in for the night.

Every now and again she'd intimate something more might transpire, hopeful to appeal to some sense of deep regret inside, at first suggesting here and there that my steadfast adherence to school policy was in some way the impetus for ushering her absquatulation from the university and, consequently, the life of literary triumph for which she seemed to me destined. I remained unmoved, steadfast in my commitment, to Starla now. She'd later move on to a subtle, but ever more direct, tack, leaning into my back, sliding charcoal or pencil or brush along the canvas via the reluctant symbiosis of our concentric fists, my own frustrated over yet another uncooperative rendering. Despite the resolve with which she attempted to convince only herself of the opposite, the poor girl still wanted nothing more than to fill her three circles with my foursquare, but by no force of will would they fit—'twas the only request of hers I'd ever reject in or out of hand. To avoid fingering her for the voyeuristic eyes of the vengeance-lusting authority who'd like nothing more than squeeze the life from this now lemony leman, I shall refrain from divulging any further identifying, incriminating biography about when I'd had her, when I wished I'd had her, when she'd had it with school, anything of the sort to be had.

Forget for now the intimations above; our quotidian congress was more than simply a tedious back-and-forth of unrequited yen. I ask: who could thrive, let alone survive, under such a repressive and paralyzing paradigm? To thrive in these environs is a subjective matter, I'm aware, but know that only by Selina's helping hand did my crude embryonic and shapeless blobs mature along a spectrum of recognizability, of life, so much like an analog of their very inspiration. As you've supposed, like so many of my predecessor masters, I drew (on) my muse: the people of the street—rather more specifically a person on it—a numen bustling, blooming, beaming obliviously along the macadam promenade that wound through the downtown park. Through a brazen scrim of composure and shade and occasionally rosy flora, I snatched from fate a practically unencumbered view of Starla's circadian walks, not by hiding but by playing the thorny orthinophile, the discreet birdwatcher perched upon a bench just along her periphery, quietly huffing the fresh air of nostalgia reliving each day that I could those first few bus-escaping steps of hers that would come to initiate our true picaresque. Most days I, paralyzed when and

while I caught sight of her, would hurry back to my workspace—careful to keep my distance, never trailing her—and capture on paper everything I could of whatever innocuous yet intoxicating acts she might perform for my flitting birdbrain.

In its infancy, my work was mired mostly in the stodgy stencil of representational pencil, sometimes charcoal, no better than stickfigure bilge really, in any objective sense. I traversed the plank of media, swashbuckling the canvas with lively yet untrue stabs of brush, slashes of paint. So grand was the cupidity of my mutinous caucus of destitute seamen within to reclaim their pirated booty, a locale once festooned, marked by the dotted pearly path of their synchronized natation, wherein lay the treasure to whom we both, Starla and I each, saw fit to apply an X (so certain in our fervor that we had nixed the whys)—the blessed Xing of April, the inexorable march of libido, the ruinous subsequent exing that may still be reversed...ah these damned equivocal months reduced to this weak daze of ours to the minutiae of secondhand detail (Oh familiar stench of pseudo-timeless working, wafting up from this hoary passage, this rotten pastiche of past play, a compost of recycled refuse that the world's stubby-fingered garbage men would not deign to pick up when first I laid them out!), fomenting in paint. Selina coaxed the essence out of my renderings.

To get the most out of this limited engagement, I allowed myself no more than a single day to toil at any single work, and Selina taught me to veer from recreating what I saw into how what I saw made me feel—it only sounds trite in my artless articulation. Via this rudimentary regimen and primary commitment, dabbing my brush only in the red, yellow and blue provided, swelling Starla unfurled on the paper as gouache swirl, pink-purple eidolon, a placid, nebulous galaxy replete with lambent cluster at her center. Those days I reserved my starkest reds for the curt curmudgeons oft seated nearby who'd dare pass between themselves hushed, yet audible, judgmental scorn for Starla and especially the absent father once she had begun to show. Red too for the jettisoned gaspers she'd snuff out at the slightest detection of uncertain lookers-on—the paintings inspired by these convenings perhaps more suitable for blood spatter forensics than art critique—or wrath-acned me rapt in the rare and eerie dalliance of self-portrait repose (It should surprise none that in prescient turns of reflection I would turn my tools upon myself.).

As my acumen progressed, relatively speaking, so too did Selina's insistence that I toggle the variegated controls of manifold media, but like some uncouth youth blissfully cuffed by the chains of lawless proclivity, I clung to the arrested development of my implement-on-paper crime predilections, the only way of life I knew, leaving in my wake a manic spree of chalky outline, artist rendition and graphic depiction. However, during this period I did dare dip my toe in the puddle of modern gadgetry,

pooling the money saved by this gracious sojourn gratis to purchase the infamously chronicled camcorder of amorous lore—under pretenses pursuant to latent auteuristic inclinations, of course, which I thought maybe I could conjure up at will. Truth be told, though, I considered with Ludditic impulse only to commit Starla’s image to an unchanging and physical reel I could revisit, rewind, rekindle my spirit lest the one in my mind split from overuse if ever I suffered the cruel fate incarcerated from ever again seeing her incarnate. Only I hadn’t the technological wherewithal, nor the care within, to liberate the confounded contraption from its eight-cornered, corrugated and factory-formed womb, where it outlived in utero its parental warranty only to be later rent from those corporeal confines and shoved almost immediately into the untoward world of peripheral pornography. So I’ve no episodic video record of enclitic Starlambles for your clinical study, should the surviving artwork not suffice.

Far be it for me to filch food I cannot even eat from the hungry table of our artist-in-wait: You’ll notice I’ve not summoned his particular prowess for an orthographic spell now. This is not in lieu of need—notice I’ve not consented to any slapdash compilation of my invaluable artwork breaking up pell-mell the impenetrable narrative. To the contrary I would like to test the breadth of his expertise; I will aver now that a singular artist shall be tasked with the ordered accompaniments—only the renaissance craftsman need apply!—this testament of reckoning and love will serve as no collaborative open market for desperate and disparate junkies to peddle their loose “interpretations” of my tight words—we readers appreciate and require as consistent a vision as we do voice. In order to integrate my agnate pieces, however, I will only sign off on one especial usage. Since the vast majority of them are admittedly subpar, distasteful, crude or generally pedestrian (an attribute I suppose that could be applied to the best of the bunch as well), and since I cannot in good faith entrust their dissemination to the whims of some upstart editor overwilling to step outside his purview, this then shall be my decree: Collect, collate, mete the Starlasclapes out in a contiguous post-periodic table, reduce and rearrange the images into an illusory mosaic, a composite of uniform thumbnail facsimiles so that from a distance the agglomeration of manipulative chiaroscuro appears to form a rough resemblance to Starla’s visage—certainly you’ve been charmed by similar appropriations in shopping mall concourse promenades. To step outside the purview of my own just a mite, might I suggest the border stagger, ostensibly in haphazard zigzags, in order to suggest an angelic image born of dreamy accretion rather than the dreary secretion of simple symmetry, redolent of masturbatory rasterization, of those touched-up objects born of flattering artificial light and make-up sessions, so often posterized and plastered in the drudgery of degrading dormitory décor idolized by loutish lads of university.

Because I’ve made my dying wish to demand but only one other pair of able hands to help make

this project whole, it is necessarily incumbent upon the literary half to nominate the energetic, synergetic set to furnish the crafty moiety. So without nearer adieu, I hereby raise again Selina's protean hands, this time in deference, in reverence, as (perhaps at discovery or in real time either supine or slumpingly so, though at least at the time of writing a) prostrate baboon prone to the monkey business of sophistry but pleading plainly now with any clement overlord that might unpeel these overripe bananas of atonement I've attempted to tip her way (There is no need on the editor's part an ill-informed attempt to contact her. I've mailed a formal request to her in private to protect her identity. Either you will hear from her or you will not, in which case you are free to hire some hopefully capable primate in her stead.): I understand now the precarious position into which my stay placed her, I myself every bit as culpable for the brusque manner of our cleavage. For all her understanding aid and sympathy, Selina could not grok the unassailable reality of my atavistic obsequiousness to the seemingly indifferent twinkle of the stars, assuming that the affront of unseen, casual trysts need not incur their due reckoning. What could I have expected to the contrary? I tempted fate stepping into that atelier from the first until the last, where I stumbled upon her, unquestionably aware of my long apostate status, fondling the curious crucifix that had mostly stood vigil for the duration, erect amid my belongings. Perhaps thinking it just another crude construction of my own making—I can read that now in the crystalline stained glass of hindsight—for god knows what purpose, she bastardized that fatherless totem to seduce, to unsnap the snaps one by one down her paint-smearred smock at my apoplectic-mistaken-for-enraptured approach after entering. (Sadly I had failed to respond accordingly to its first act of depraved desecration, where when I extended in rote reach to ameliorate an untenably tenebrous studio by flipping upward the light switch, simultaneously palpating and effecting a lightening cast upon some alarming and alien fibrous protuberance against my palm, where there was unveiled from the cover of darkness my messy messiah, re-crucified over the blanched drywall rectangle of the switch's removed protective panel, so that the nubby erection of the raised switch then appeared as final inguinal nail—making quasi-quincuncial the holey pallor of our splayed (if one were so inclined to test its tensility) die-roller—straddled so by the forceful manipulation of the barely pliable parts of the now literally and figuratively turned-on figurant, drolly hovering above a wall-scrawled—in that proverbially irreverent modality of the modern artist—"I AM THE LIGHT." Forget what sort of tumescent utility bill might arise from such an untreated mirth-induced priapism—which I would not have been able to pay anyway—the true cost, I was then, am now learning, of my lax response to this light crucifixture's dim bulb of endearing, enlightening luminance was that I'd apparently no qualms whatsoever in temporizing when confronted by such waggish and penetrating sardonicism rather than face any

exceedingly extant exigencies, e.g. Selina's increasingly brazen behavior, for which I took no preemptive steps to dissuade.) I was predictably cross. I overturned tables bearing acrylic and oil, splashing red, blue, yellow, raining a salvo of honed lead and brushy horse-hair head, determined to make this my last temptation...angry, yes, but maudlin too over this blasphemy, this crass application of the arts—long the bastion and harbinger of morality and taste—more egregious to traditional value than the Pollocked path I wrought on my way to the temptress I'd foolishly considered a reformed Magdalen now mishandling my deformed savior. As I neared her, I raised my hand in harrowing hellfire retribution, but thankfully swiped from her only the corrupted crucifix rather than the denuded dignity of either hers or mine.

We two parted directly, never again to cohabit beyond the threshold of any single space as incomparable compeers combining the brilliance of their artistic lights. Never again to speak in vain tongues. And so it is that here I lower myself, humbled upon my own quasi-criminal and liminal threshold, kneeling one last time at Selina's welcome mat, appealing to her pragmatic, and not romantic, senses: let us crumple and burn past deeds, I beg, let our spirits forever comingle in the concomitant and sempiternal matrimony of final words and their finer appendages of fine artistry.

Chapter XXIV

Though I largely implied from the beginning a swift dispatching of my crystal medium to Tomorrow, no doubt the more cynical among us has noted my casual allusions to and repeated prognostications of his presumed readership that only conference with that fabled ball could accurately grant. I must confess in my collision with immovable Past that I did desperately dislodge from its devoted heart that discarded and omniscient optic, and I will once again address the murky conundrum it presents: this the ugly business of marketing. And I do empathize with the blissful dullard who'd much prefer avoid chancing any disheartening or enervating glimpse of such drudgery, who'd prefer to cash his hard-earned shilling in for the neatly wrapped hamburglary of squeaky-clean and bloodless paperback, I truly do. But this, dear supporter, is how your product is made, processed and ready for consumption. Come. Turn not a blind eye now.

(With all due respect to the aggrieved, be aware that henceforth the recused might and probably will interchangeably address his heretofore unknown editor or unnamed publisher as best suits him. This is not to undermine their individualized significance but rather to assuage my poesy sensibilities, and little umbrage should be inferred. Note that there shall be no mention of that third wheel of the invisible triumvirate of publishing: the accredited agent, uncredited here as his services, even more so than the editor, have been rendered obsolete.)

The triage of the inherent components of Literature can be blue-printed as plotted home, trached ranch, divided with spatial concern in sundry, capacious rooms shaped by scene and populated by characters fictitious and fictile, molded from the excavated clay heap of the groundbreaking breach into which we pour our ostensibly solid foundation. But watch how they swell and writhe and bow and bend in silent, secret interaction and chance osculation, all but making our meticulous outlining obsolete by the end. It is only by the smoke that pumps heavenward—ever more salient than any animalistic act the voyeur might spy through the cruciform divides of window wickets or draft-allowing doors ajar—that outsiders are permitted a true, genuine peek via ethereal plume or lume of the interior heat, the rubbed-twin-twigs furnace of inspiration emitting an immutable voice, a disquieted diction, pumping out for the outsider the suffusion of style, of syntax (even when, as is sometimes required of those intransigent structures unbending to the wolf's overblown huff, that very fire must raze like some

demonic child the whole overwrought construction), whilst below, squeezed from the bowels of our players and collected by some chthonic trough, seeps the execrable sewage of Symbol, the sullied and discarded traces of Theme, organic residue of interest only to those garbage collectors of posthumous literary criticism but to the omnipotent architect at inception: unequivocal waste.

You see, the atmosphere—every hovering, quavering molecule through which the slaving reader unwaveringly ogles in slack-jawed awe your Victorian or gothic or neo-minimalistic construct—must, in fact cannot help but, be shaded, clouded by the billow of Narration, be it tainted by collosi of the sesquipedalian or dotted by pygmy of the terse; therefore the author must shed concerns about arable plot or sustainable structure in the planning interim, lest he foolishly settle upon a pristine but ultimately boring backdrop of drab blue in the pursuit of crystal clarity. You ask: why harbor such reserve of septic pejorative for those historically venerated institutions of letter? But I counter: Can you not see how their very stench undermines the entire process, how completely it must vex the poor architect who has painstakingly parsed the stockyard of lexical support beams for the truest, least wormy studs of mot juste, nailed the façade, plumbed the hard-worn shelves of his electric lexicon for the invisible wiring by which his erected edifice might mysteriously, for tenants and vagrants alike, pulse and spark and radiate? That no matter what care he has taken to seamlessly sand over every screwy protuberance and cover his every bare wall, some importunate lackey inspector will invariably glean for the masses from that palimpsest a vague portrait of pseudo-truth that he has deemed the author unable to sufficiently cover up, as though he's possessed of an ineffable communion with those authorial assertions? Do you see how the analyses of his inspection threaten not only the stability of that construction but the poetic license under which future developments might crumble as well? (...Still does he fill the trough, thinking his plebeian platoons of curious subscribers need slurp from the instructive and didactic slop he has wrought...)

No? I plead with your publishership: Paste no teary pericope to dust jacket, forcefeed no unsound bite into the gullet of the potential reader, gourmand of epicurean predilection who finds distasteful those cloying attempts to sweeten the hearty and savory—willing to eschew the heartfelt and saving—flavoring that has infused this stew so carefully meted out that a just pinch of critical additive or editorial artifice would spoil the whole crock.

Cramped here, adumbrating my scant demands and contemplating my claustrophobic place in the literary cannon prepared to unceremoniously dispatch me as it has to so many before, I am fully aware of the predicament into which I've crammed both my publisher and myself. While this mutually fortuitous circumstance in which we find ourselves has afforded me a rare opportunity to side-step the

sideshow of logomachy over a punctuational punctilio here, solipsistic solecism there, myriad maligned malapropisms bound to be found and tripped over, and though I have freely, of a will my own, relinquished my stake in such adjudications, I would implore my well-intentioned but likely pen-heavy-handed adversary to agree to an armistice, not only for a spell, but to scabbard his pen for good before making his harsh marks, to follow the author to his end. Am I asking much? Has he not been duly compensated? How rare that for his slush should a diaphanous flake, resplendent gem of such magnitude, such immeasurable sheen emerge, nay, be unearthed, presented, peeking through the pile upon his desk asking naught but for the perfunctory spitshine of his effortless expertise to reveal its brilliance? How indeed! And I empathize with equanimous mister Ed. for the difficulty of his task—I do!—at the fly-eyed challenge of polishing the remains of the already shellacked luster...okay, enough of this dawdling, let us broach now the pink pachyderm in the corner, poach the speciously opulent hooks of ivory garishly flanking its purely functional trunk, for still there remains unresolved the aforementioned business about which we'd doubtless each rather circumnavigate: how to market this unique compendium. Again, I understand the cannon-drum conundrum of the marketplace that looms, what with a ready-made readership, genre-devout by default, holding hostage with flame the crooked fuse for any who'd dare exercise freely the proscribed nimbleness or flexibility against the strictures of its cold cobalt confinement. It is for this very reason that I feel compelled to guide his editor's hand as best I can in such matters.

The fluidity of language—all signs point to a conservative prognostication that schoolmarms no later than fifty years from this date will find utterly frustrating the inability of their classroom constituents (whiners of a reasonable vintage, no less) to comprehend these then-anachronistic morsels a present-day audience shall not hesitate to devour—is an evercurrent and volatile deluge against which even the calcified dykes with which we've walled established genre conventions and marketplace dependability cannot withstand, not without some provident and shrewd tinkering. Consultations with my crystal ball tell me the shoal-marooned populace of shallow writers and moronic readers are but a gentle aeolian nudge from a vicissitudinous shift away from the depths of novel idealism toward the insular mania of memoir, and for that reason I detect a tidal urge swells within the publisher's hull to unfurl the skull and bones I have provided, to brazenly flap the black flag of Memoir.

Before he commits to brave that purling wash—tide over the estival and beached readership, please—I must float some floes of confession to temper the heat emanating off of those tropic waters. Despite the misgivings I harbor and expect shall be ignored regarding even entering these waters I understand one cannot simply raise that waving yet unwavering M without the issuance of a requisite

and forthcoming slate of confession, admission, disclosure for those rare instances where fuzzy and romanticized memory fogs the fuliginous pane of truth, so hither parades your fleet of chilly life-rafts: Though I've made every reasonable attempt to transcribe verbatim any and all dialogue—or at the very least omit the quavering markers of quotation when the essence of what was said was all I could confidently conjure—I do imagine that I've unintentionally filled in a blank too many with things that ought to have been rather than were. Second, though the entirety of my travails detailed may be compacted to a nearly indivisible atom of truth, I am aware that some of the more fantastical elements will raise more than one empirically driven brow to incredulity; my diktat is that you take in faith that what I have provided is the truth as I know it, completely, and that any attempt to pierce its petrified pith after something unseen but verifiable will invariably blow up in your face.

Allow me for the sake of the inattentive and faithless a bit of redundancy: I have admitted fully to brief dalliances with lunacy. If from the incubation of these kernels you cannot help but pop out the inadmissible fluff of unreliability, rather than allow the expurgation of questionable passages so that it might sprout upon your hopeful hedgerow in the bookseller's greenhouse, I would demand a severance of this partnership entirely. While distant strings of popcorn may strangulate holiday trees in silly white-lie simulacra of lily-white leis, they will immediately, irrevocably be sniffed out at the iconoclastic approach of grinchish hounds. To avoid those bedeviling dogs, might I propose a compromise of some sort? I would not deign to suggest an ad hoc genre genesis on my behalf; spare mine the ineffectual fate relegated to work imprinted by such stale, neologistic portmanteaux as dramedy—drama infused with comedy, as though our highest art must otherwise preclude such congress—or faction—fatuous overlay of fact over fiction (clarified for that bemused cavalcade of dissenting readers perusing unawares for the seditious lit sect(ion))—this delicate work would sag under the burdensome advent of any such leading categorization, for one, because it would insist that those scenes, in question but beyond the reaches of reproach, might be merely threads of fabrication worked in rather than integral and contextual conduits of truth, and two, by the very nature of its nominal duality might it, in the purchasing process, subliminally set the reader up from page one to subtextually seek out the unintentional double-entendres with which my work is apparently rife, but to which, though I may have only recently noticed, is already amply infused with charges of my dismay and aversion. Let us simplify the process, for me, for the publisher. Can this singleton not comfortably nestle among the myriad and worthy thrones of Literature? Need we even bother with this whole rigmarole of subgenre? If this attempt to simplify instead complicates matters, if still you insist upon memoir, found epistle, what have you, if I have considerably beaten my own personal deadline for your bestseller season, I expect my fossilized work

to be posthumously and tirelessly defended against all affronts, against all unscrupulous deniers who haven't the ken to recognize that the ligature of autobiographical literature, regardless the tag of its commercial coda, is bound by what is truth and not necessarily what is true. And between these monolithic constructs lies a vast tract of difference, from true to truth—more than just an ending vowel movement into the fricative suffix of a quasi-biblical digraph—strained into a coruscating rill, a limpid distinction that whomever hopes to cast into this scintillating stream his rapacious reel must comprehend intuitively.

Certainly there is value in faithful retelling, reflection, recreation...it is only that I am uninterested in dredged memories redux; my recreation swings and slides in ludic playgrounds beyond the boundaries of bland recapitulation. Rather give me the out-of-bounds original, for it is instead in the capitulation of lissome letters, the subjugation of supple subjects that my interest lies. Is the gospel wrangled only from dry newscasts, from dry forecasts? Or Q: in quaint quotables to be sifted from the quotidian tedium of ephemeral editorials wrought by shaded gnome-faced gnomists? A: What an abhorrent actuality to prefer truism to truth! Anchors aweigh! Let us bravely navigate the whirling artistry of sophistry; rationalization; mythomania; equivocation; pseudology, when it suits (Oh how it warms the heart of the shivering Luddite that he is able to raise extemporaneously from the twigs of his needy commas the smoke signals that would provide the semi-colons he neglected to bring! It really is a simple serendipity that rekindles and redoubles the forlorn heart.)—fear not the briny obfuscation lapping agin the lubberly isles of fact, for you see they are connected below, presented as one seamless mass in an underwater vista reserved for the keelhulled soul who dares defiantly open his eyes.

True, true, a bounty awaits he who would avail himself the art of semantics—some antics wear thin, I know—but from my little isle of isolation, I'll toss this bottled message: Sometimes what appears as cryptic and sophomoric semaphore is nothing more than the marooned, fanning with a fallen palm his proximal nether, blistered and chafed as it is by his unabashed exposure to a distant, unsettling sun...let us get on with it. After all is said and done, perorated and perforated, you must, inevitably, understandably, ponder: why all this chatter anent marketing and salability? And I concur; if one were to extrapolate logically from the circumstance in which we each find ourselves presently, that would most definitely be a salient curiosity. Let's get down to it then, there are no women or children prancing about—and thus, the self-imposed moratorium on mentioning, imbibing or otherwise alluding to Barb in any manner is officially, necessarily lifted—let the men descend to their brass taxonomy, get down to serious biz: There is little need to dissimulate my crass concerns over the dissemination of my future fortunes...but, try as I might, I cannot escape that this whole charade is for naught without them, sans

Genevieve and Starla we would have nothing. Let us redirect the track marks of this race, inject again the narrative with lethal doses of my sublime heroines.

Chapter XXV

Those days, weeks even, following my prim absquatulation from Selina's den, I would still hop up from sundry, sun-dried park benches by which bubbling Starla's presence would effervescently and effortlessly grace, pregnant again with a delirious optimism that would invariably affix an expectant rictus between the pinned-back pinnae of my windblown pate on its hurried path back to the hotel. (Oh, loyal hostelry, though I battered your scope you never averted your welcoming gaze...for so willing were you to unfurl the vermillion shag—which so too would a scorned suitor, lust-blinded, heart-eyed—for my welcomed arrival so giddily prepare, never was I in desperate want of shelter...but perforce you better than any knew my heart belonged to another, one whom I couldn't possibly debauch further within your seedy stomach...ah, here I go getting ahead of myself again...) But there, so bereft of those craft supplies with which I'd joined that summer in intimate communion, I considered allowing my desperate need for expression to manifest itself freely about the maddening yellow walls of my room—it settled instead upon the generous book-break swaths of off-white inside the Gideon gift lying in dusty repose, forgotten within the coffin of a nightstand drawer. This sufficed for some time. However, interwoven in this makeshift substitution, in my sad slapdash defacement, was a tempestuous duality of unrequited commitment: mine to my highschool sweetheart and hers to the mythical quarterback, upon whose senior yearbook I had vainly scrawled picture postils and was already brimming so with the obsequious odes and confabulated accounts of His on-field accomplishments by sycophant scribes that the novelty began quickly to wear off. Without the guide of an omnipresent eye looking over my shoulder, my efforts slackened, my passion subsided. From the genesis of that industrious craftiness to the revelation that I'd sensed the itch toward the visual arts had been sufficiently scratched, this erstwhile littering litterateur finally again retrieved his interdicted inditing pen and indebted scratchpad he'd foolishly jettisoned.

The prodigal somethingorother returneth from those one-sided parkbench trysts, now with all the time in the world to sculpt from the more malleable clay to his eager palpi of ink and word his magnum opus: a paean to his greatest piece of poetry, a Jonsonian, germinating, gestating fascicle then—slipped past the chaste gatekeeper, accepted via heterodox submission process (To edulcorate the fey workings of that process of submission, to decoct from a perhaps less than sapid suffusion above

a more pollyannaish pollination below, allow me to invoke mighty Metaphor: It was an inadvertent transfer, facilitated by the sort of aleatoric yet theurgic collision (you've doubtless seen these types of chance meeting on silver screen projections) where Fate would contrive that the hurried paths two unassuming pedestrians were discretely taking would intersect fortuitously, sending them helplessly to the ground in a reticulated lace of quavering limb and quickening soul, whereby at last, in the process of collecting the spilled contents of the open briefs they each had been absent-mindedly fondling, was the little seed of his poetry accidentally placed into the folder of the other. A seminal confluence at the crotch of fate's ramified way, thrusting a heavy load upon her already full itinerary) but painfully out of his sphere of influence, conforming to the stylistic rubric of the voluptuous volume within which it would effloresce. I trust this elucidates to some degree the miraculous manner with which I imagined Starla's and my pregnant predicament.

Now one would presume, with an eternity of foresight and hindsight at its disposal, improvident Fate to be possessed of a less mercurial temperament, that its quicksilver caprices would account for the environmental factors, the inclement whether-or-nots of the oft-inimical matrices it carves out from us when it deigns to lay upon our laps like some avuncular cat-crazed derelict the unwieldy, scaredy and claw-wielding pussy of fortune, but one would be mistaken. So what then had been wrought? Disgraced professor, stripped of his post and reduced to an itinerant lifestyle to which he was unaccustomed, unprepared; oblivious babe in the blissful custody of her nubile yet unprepared and disgraced mommy, herself in the infirm custody of her disgraced mum (whose level of preparedness remains undetermined, though one suspects her, at this juncture, even less so than the others). A welter of disgrace spiraling a nexus of beatitude, indeed, but let me tell you, it was not all gloom and famine! Not at all! Perhaps it was wily Fate's intention after all to suggest—far be it for me to refute—that I embark during these final veins of lassless freedom on a voyage of unanchored writing. And did I! You may liken, if you like, the laissez-faire and carefree air of my workmanlike approach to our naughty, pneumatic nurse in the pneumonia—stricken by a sickly spell, yes, though ere the metastasis of those guerilla inflammations lying in wait beneath her chest—of her earlier iteration; I wrote prolifically, my pleonasm unencumbered by the cumbrous editor inside, seated tantalizingly behind his typewriter, with his gyved hands and gagged mouth vainly atremble at the egregious and brazen simplicity of my gross and frolicsome prolixity. It was the first time in decades that I can recall writing so recklessly, my words the stream rather than the salmon, a limpid outpouring detritus-crested in purling, burbling pockets of unchecked verbiage swishing without ceremony past the feet of my inner grizzly pedant ready to snatch mid-flight any daring attempts to transcend the murky and downhill shallow in which I waded.

It was a prodigious period, rivaled only on a personal scale, in scope and duration, by a brief sojourn post-graduate studies (One mayhap posit that I'm in the midst of yet another, my own native American estivation, but who among may boast such cognizance in media res?), when I partook in the quaintly, if unofficially, named Writers Bloc—a coalition of ex-classmates committed to holding each other accountable to rigorous wordcount totals—once we'd been paroled from the comfy confines of Academia. I had begrudgingly joined. Due largely to the cachet a certain essay of some infamy had engendered reluctant me, I was ceaselessly pursued for membership to that contorted consortium of mismatched catholicity, until at last I mercifully relented...but this is neither here nor there. These juxtaposed twin columns of word-laden periods have been erected as ad hoc podium, and from it I will now direct to my one-time nemesis, sibilant Sibyl, sibylline sibling of belles-lettre, and her distracting, lispy propensity toward trite moral truisms, her overdue headline of apology: I am eternally thorry. Know that despite my cantankerous and theadfast denial, your graveth premonition and braveth admonition have thuthly been validated (She will understand.). And oh! how with this invidious spate of apocope have I revealed a pathetic slate of pettiness toward a probably simpatico simpleton! What write have I, what right have I to reduce you further? Please, Sybil (and reader alike)—sometimes the expressive teller of my banked ire knows no prudent parsimony—accept this humble concession in lieu of cold, congratulatory handshake. Perhaps in the brusquerie of our back-and-forth in regards to that essay I seemed a piggish brute, or in the manner of my absconding a priggish brat...but let the record show for everyone else that at the very least I'd not recede quietly at the debilitating exhortations of Writers Bloc.

This prolific era too was short-lived. Whilst I toiled tirelessly, the hydra of Fortune had decided to rear for a change a pleasant head, this of my amicable postal clerk, who, on one midafternoon trip to collect my mail, produced from behind her counter a mysterious certified letter. I signed her proffered forms and we swiftly exchanged documents. While inattentively riffling files: with one eye parsing parcels, she surreptitiously kept watch with the other as I extracted from the paper pupa she'd handed over a formal correspondence, butterflyed under my fingers upon the counter. It informed of the passing of a well-to-do second- or third-cousin-or-something, an agnate magnate from some great-great-great and sans-scion himself, who had one seminal day, long ago, taken a secret, distant interest when presented with the "whimsical yarns" of eight-year-old Ckol. Later I would find that from the thirteenth floor of his east coast headquarters, where he'd ostensibly amassed his now fractured fortune, did he precipitate, splashing an impromptu, improvident road island, leaving a salty tide of spectators and concrete in no small state of despair and depression. Cashing in his cache of temporal riches for the

literary immortality of the obituary. I'd eventually surmise of the departed, perhaps out of some base need to connect, to justify the unprecedented largesse bestowed upon me, that our lone commonality lay in the detached yet vicarious experience of fleeting communion that the parade of rapidly passing stories, whose firmly life-affirming éclat lay just out of reach, promise as we tumble aimlessly toward the end, but as I recall him only in the peripheral photo galleries of memory, it is no great insult to correlate his demise with fortune (The presumptive narrative of suicide went unchallenged until the chance discovery from literally inside a false wall in his office of a manila folder distended by a ruffled ream of various single-paged pseudo-posthumous portents of his own demise in sundry, unrealized, creative manners. As a bequeathed beneficiary I was made privy to these queer first-person prehumous, humorous-in-hindsight obituaries he'd a penchant for penning when any seemingly precarious scenario from his itinerary would force his delicate sensibilities to reckon, even often mordantly, with his own mortality, so in case he'd fortuitously passed during the arduous interim afterward it would surreally appear to whomever eventually happened upon the addresseeless epistle presumably laid out (and later filed away when he returned unscathed) that he had somehow eerily foreseen and duly foretold his otherwise unpredictable demise (or ever more eerily a frustratingly picayune recapitulation from beyond that delimiting demarcation between the Living and the Non-). Of course in nature these, for all purposes, otiose vignettes had to be simultaneously specific and general enough to include exact locus but only an inexact hinting of the pith of the peril: "Oh but had I only consulted the fine-printed and -illustrated instructional booklet before crudely applying my flathead screwdriver to dislodge from my bedroom stereophonic setup the squealing and looping cassette tortured therein I might still be..." "What had I suspected, that that rickety contraption bearing the daily rush hour stampede of homebound-charging SUVs would remain perpetually structurally sufficient?" or "...and recumbent along the table, I succumbed willingly to the hooded wraith of Death alighting upon my capitulating mouth in cool, calculating descent, even intoning into its swarthy vacuum at the surgeon's request my terminal count-up..." but because no such feigned prediction seemed to accompany his actual ultimate precipitation there arose among certain forensic factions theoretical doubts, regarding the likelihood that he would neglect the articulation of the sure thing, that his fall was in fact the unseen accident of an eccentric doomsayer despite his ubiquitous prognoses, or, given his financial status, something more sinister. I was assured by visiting lawyer-types, brandishing said documents from their briefcase appurtenances, that because my inheritance was neither tied to nor contingent upon the adjudication of some dubious insurance payout awaiting the raised purgatorial portcullis of litigation, assuming no inculpatory foul-play muck was raked in the investigation, I was merely apprised as the assumed

aggrieved with commensurate concern over matters of familial estate and civic repute. Here I was hit with some sense of grave gravitas and solitary solicitude, and after conscientious noct- and diurnal deliberations I had determined to someday take up his atrophied mantle of putatively sentimental presentiments.). But here the true advent of fortune was born of my own preparation; inspired by the very foresight of Starla's forebears that would prove to be my professional undoing, I had swiftly upon landing in these new environs plied my provident step upon the pukey green-gray tessellation of that very post office lobby, completing at the behest of a convivial clerk—yet another pleasant ambassador (there appeared to me then a measurable divide of domestication between these rosy-cheeked stampers and their cheeky rosebed-stamping counterparts who roam feral and tetherless among the public) of that venerable institution's inveterate service—a change of address form for general delivery rather than relying upon either the hotel's or, later, Selina's studio as the receptacle for any correspondence forwarded there from my abandoned residence, my abandoned life.

In the subsequent days, I learned my benefactor had bequeathed to yours truly a handsome portfolio of transferred stock shares in high-yielding tech-upstarts. I parlayed this unusable unearned income at once into a modest life-saving(s) lump (in banker parlance, liquid assets) and purchased a somewhat secluded homestead, suitable, I hoped, for child-rearing—lest you thought in my apparent desuetude of effort I'd considered aborting my familial birthright, I remind you I was merely biding my time whilst Starla readied herself...Now to close out one chapter. Regarding the crumpled foil of distant cousin McGuffin: with heavy heart I regretfully report the only item of raised interest to the reader lay cozily dormant within guarded bank walls. True, there awaited no cadre of jilted relations to dispute the fractured windfall of his estate. There was in fact an absolute dearth of histrionic hysterics over his heir-splitting antics. Rather his judicious aliquots seemed for all the world to be so liberally sprinkled among an unsuspecting and appreciative lot of long-losts that I've nothing of dramatic intrigue to add, and so it is here that we will conveniently leave him, just as he so left us.

Chapter XXVI

The erstwhile unkempt and bedraggled elementary schoolyard that I often passed in the summer drives and walks, which I often studied through tense gulps and dampening eyes—forget completely my vacated vocation; I used to torment myself imposing among the imagined and upcoming throng of youthful pupilage our unborn junior so many years senior or my beloved senior so many years junior—now teemed, where upon glistening and manicured lawn, crepitating congregations of curled and frosty fallen foliage in the cool mornings, bundled against the chilly auroral dun, busborne Sals and Sallies sallied forth to disappear into their parochial classes and later reappear, relieved of their scarves and skullcaps, as midmorning and recessed rompers racing playfully toward swingset and slidestep. Against one classroom window pressed the cruci-taped corners of a posterboard, peeking streetward, affixed as it was to be read by September pedestrians. On it, beside and between tremulant renderings of leaves with an indelicate filigree of venation each, sloping here and there in a grand, disjointed suggestion of zigzag, there floated a disarray of big block letters, outlined in black and marked in with rustic and burnt tones, their imbricated repletion of random faded and renascent swaths of red or yellow or orange (the latter easily replicated by combining the formers) or brown (requiring a more precise mixture of the above), comingled to betray the impatient hands of their squiggly and hurried creation. The letters grouping in chaste celebration for the woefully inattentive: “AUTUMN LEAVES ARE FALLING!”

Autumn leaves falling.

Fall leaves a-tumbling.

Fall leaves falling.

Falling,

falling,

falling.

Everything falling.

But leaves?

But leaving? No,

not everything was

leaving.

I wonder if you might scabbard your blade of skepticism for long enough to allow that apropos of nothing, save perhaps the blessed consecration of my fervid desire, did my forlorn and foreloved materialize. When nearing home—yes, home!—one fateful eve, after taking in a juried exhibit of student art (with nary a Selina to be found), from afar did I notice someone with what seemed a brochure or map unfolded across her lap, seated stolidly upon my treated porch. I'd presumed that, if not some wayward trespasser (unlikely but still...), then perhaps a clandestine admirer, a hopeful apprentice, maybe a prudent student of yore exhibiting the arduous yet felicitous restraint to await the inevitable slip from my superordinate rung before taking her first step, or even a slinky Selina who'd skillfully evaded my critical eye at the exhibit darting from behind easel to easel with ease, had successfully traced my whereabouts. But lo and behold! What fortune! What superlative could this suddenly gregarious wretch have bestowed upon the empyrean vision then before his heathen eyes? The nearer my approach, what unsuspected visage would come to focus before this circumspect visionary, to levitate above an unruly bed of collected leaves that skittered and spilled piecemeal from their porchside piles across the varnished veranda floor, but my rakish bethroned!

She was a smoking beauty—to employ a particularly abhorrent patois for the appeasement of a perpetually modernizing readership—in fact. Ah, but if only that was all it was! But if only...It was a yen so desperate, so energizing, that I positively rocketed up the small stairway—willing to skip steps one to whatever lay betwixt me and sublime reconciliation—and quickly dropped to one knee, paranoid any superfluous footfall might trip the frustrating trapdoor under Starla's feet that at every turn did I reliably, maladroitly seem to engage—a more pressing engagement than any careful perambulation demanded my tending. I tried to apologize, to explain, to gloze after propitiation for my behavior there before her, in that same penitent position I'd rapaciously desecrated just months prior, to a coffeehouse audience of grossly wide-eyed Lears (and I their Fool!) no less, but she scuppered my blubber with a hooked hand into my shoulder: I looked up; she whispered meekly. I thought I'd never find you. You were supposed to follow; didn't you understand? Oh I've been a fool. How silly we've been. I need you, and she placed my hand over the smoothed silk draping her rounded tummy: We need you. Please...

Oh Starla my captain (oh my apocryphal caption!), I curse myself for tonight I barely subsist putting mere words in your mouth, but how during that triumphant nocturne—was that only in my head? (I confess I made out nothing above the distracting reverie-score, the promise of tickling once again the ivories of her quavering thighs)—did into that heavenly orifice I again enter, in an attempt to actualize an earlier dream sequence, a déjà vu of sybaritic fantasy, unfurling my tongue to suck away

that noxious fume ghosting your pearly gates to prepare for the transcendental advent of saint peter.

I worked my lips to the softness of her throat and a hand down to the small of her back. It was as if no time had passed in our eternal spring, we picked back up where once we got off...she warbled in the onomatopoeic ecstasy of low, long moan, a moooooaaan slipping from her lips, crescendoing at the normally imperceptible changeover of vowelsound, where the long O, from the incapable mouths of protozoans, zeros on the cline of elocutionary evolution, generally coasts unperturbed over speedbump A on its way to unaccentuated N. And at that hypnotic crest I slipped my hand below, cleaved with a quick pant her wet and prolonged diphthong (am I too figurative, am I too literary?); she uneasily lowered from the tiptoed levitation my magical fingers had educed, and together we careened clumsily in through the front door I kept unlocked. I'd designs on making my plump, starving Starla dinner, complete with all the trimmings (Disregarding the familiarity already detailed to which the reader lounges privy regarding her downstairs topiary proclivities, I'd once, while seated in a doctor's office waiting room, read from a bloody conservative women's rag—magazine, you crass knave—a fluff piece ostensibly penned by an experienced yet garrulous gynecologist who anonymously confided in print that by her professional estimates a majority—to the tune of eighty percent—of first-time mothers-to-be show up to all of their early prenatal appointments “100% bare down there! (the reprinting of this nigh Pollyannaish exclamation a matter of eidetic recall)” (Now I pray my skeptical students take seriously those previous pontifications of mine that they might potentially draw a relevant anecdote from literally any source. Read everything!)), and momentarily I had her laid upon my virgin bedspread, replete with opulent arrangement of plush pillows and an iridescent triangle of satin seductively exposed by the folded corner of a thin carmine and crenulated comforter. My heart in a vain race with the quivering limbs below it, I watched with a wistful eye over the meringue of her dress sliding, parting, dissolving upon her recumbent lap, deliquesced as any confectionery would in the propinquity of such heat, central hotness, piquant furnace, the gravity of my sun's molten center pulling me, headlong and longing, with naught but a modicum of conscientiousness for the delicate and requisite touch that might stay the childlike reach of my deprived sweettooth from devouring the succulent fruit below. I reveled in, above it, advancing slowly, suffering still the privation of these privates. But no longer! Like a ludic lexicographer in the esoteric play of his trade, mind-boggled, my fingers scrabbled along the proximal contours of her taut and labile limbs to grasp their nebulous definition, radial radix of my initial infatuation, back onto the tip of my tongue...On fire, on fire, she squealed, but I already knew. A pungent quickening, the slickening ingress, long secreted qua the warm secreting qua our hot secret. I could feel upon my chin the melding of seared flesh, a scarcely-contained inferno, manifesting itself

when I opened my eyes in peripheral flames, rising madly, cracking wise, quickly licking the night in ribald derision at the milquetoast supplicant inside, content in a methodical approach within his enchanted voussoir of euphoria.

But my wedge disappeared in the broad arch of her back, a raised foot, rising, clearing my shoulders, and my sweltering little nook lithely closed overhead and collapsed in a loose braid of limbs inclining at my left elbow just before I could begin to extinguish the spreading conflagration. I immediately attributed this repositioning as characteristic, endearing Starlicked pudency, but it was when I reflexively turned away, to the right—one, for respite from the overwhelming frisson elicited by the callypygean turn before me, and two, to redouble my frustrated efforts—that I spotted the raging flame—one cannot survive on metaphor alone—gorging itself upon the leaf-strewn varnish of my suddenly vanishing porch. I rose, unpricked by her prim primrose rose, and struggled to the door, where I halted hoppingly to cautiously stretch the elastic band of my briefs over my sensitive tumid-cum-timid middle—I was not about the doubly entertain the church of busybodies who inevitably congregate about such flaming tragedy—and looked back to see my statuesque Starla, clutching at her breast the collected loops of dress straps from which her shoulders had been mercifully relieved, her cardigan-draped forearm accentuating a distended belly, a cataract of disheveled strands from behind and over her ears groping impudently about the slope of her chest, as the bunched dollop of dress at her center slid achingly down her creamy thighs, ramped outward at the knees and seemed to billow, effortlessly elegant yet without the commensurate ceremony for which such a heavenly breach would demand, ankleward. I, the dutiful votary, pleaded with her, the deific caryatid—mindful that it would not be just my cantilevered nether but more importantly my ceiling of sanity to crumble and collapse if she dared abscond from her post—monosyllabically, “Don’t—”

“Go,” she cut in, complemented, reciprocated my brevity—would it be trite to conclude that she completed me?

To the understandably skeptical reader, prepared to chalk this too up to episodic phantasmagoria, merely an earlier iteration of my sordid bedside manner as a recent hospital admission, I can offer only this: When, after subduing with a whimper the hapless blaze of deceptive strobe with a merciless fusillade of strategically-placed thwaps of the broad underside of a vigilante welcome mat, after the smoke had cleared and a charcoaled agglomeration of immovable leafshapes puzzlepieced underfoot, I rustled up from among the blackened debris of my scorched porch two items of interest. First, the rumpled remains of a smoke-damaged watercolor portrait, returned to its very radix (though at different locus) but now emblazoned in ink near the top with my current address (this a merciful

forfeiture I could facilely attribute to Selina (if only we could all exhibit such grace in the immediate face of loss!), who had apparently known with precision the coordinates of my whereabouts while remaining inconspicuously, mercifully away), and second, the vestigial filter of an exhausted gasper, which I, upon discovering Starla's deserted post, while playing crime scene investigator, studied and lined up next to the spongy commemorative cylinder that I kept safely close at hand at all times. And to the surprise of none: a visual, tactile and, once past the bitter carbonic tincture—the duteous detective balks not at the necessary tonguing of the proffered butt of his smoking hot femme fatalish desideratum—a perfect gustatory match!

Addendum Four

She stopped before the grass-encroaching roadside culvert. She looked back to check that she was still within eyesight of the front door, though she'd paced this perimeter enough now that she didn't need the reassurance. One arm going robotically from hip to opposing oblique. Flashing some compact contraption before her downturned eyes that she slipped into her pocket. She inhaled the last of the cigarette between the fingers in her other hand and then tossed the used-up filter aside, well into the trees, where it lay hidden for the season by shade and branches among the forest floor, where there was amassing the annual heaps of collected dead needles and the fractured and later waterlogged filters from previous such deposits. She exhumed and lifted a new cigarette to her lips but demurred at the distant approach of a car. Glinting plumes of rising dust skewed the landscape at its rear. Black blobbed reflections at the bottom of either side of the windshield sloping up in silhouettes of roadside periphery from the top of the hood and dissolving into the edge of the roof. She surreptitiously slipped the unlit cigarette into the hair-cloaked notch behind an ear until she was certain she didn't recognize the car. But instead of driving inconspicuously past it slowed and stopped before her. What she assumed as passenger window began to laboriously ratchet downward. She defensively began, "This ain't no redlight district, mister..." before she saw its futility curtly reflected in the US MAIL decal beside the handle. "Oh. Box is on the house." She gestured with a dismissive thumb.

"Hold up, dear. Would you mind?" he said through the exposed moiety.

She turned back, snapped closed her lighter and slipped it into a pocket and spoke through a cloud of blown smoke, "You aren't the regular guy."

"New sub," he smiled, reading from a letter in his hand. "I'm looking for a Genevieve."

Without thinking she glanced toward the house and palpated the bulge in her pocket and then leaned coyly against the side of the car, affecting the playful posture of that ancient profession she had just unequivocally rejected. "What, you got a certified letter there, Mr. Postman?"

"What I have is much more important."

His mysterious manner stirred something in her. She impetuously clucked, "Yeah. I'm Genevieve." The window trundled downward, fully enveloped by the cleavage of its door. Sunlight revealed upon his lap a leatherbound and gilded Holy Bible. She stood upright, pushed off and backed away from the vehicle. "And you aren't a mailman, are you?"

He raised his hands disarmingly. "Guilty as charged." An inscrutable smile. "But still am I a courier. Please step in. We haven't much time. It's your father."

"Where is...wait, what is it?" Her neck craned to allow a quick housebound glance and she found no face in the window. She finally gulped down the calcified bolus of insolence that had been suspended in her throat for weeks.

"I shouldn't have invoked your father like that, getting you all worked up...I apologize." He slid the bible onto the seat beside him. "He is okay. But we do need to talk. Please." He leaned over the seat and opened the passenger door, sending into the outside world an incessant and peremptory trill through the ajar interstice.

She hesitated, studied the car, sized up as best she could what scenario awaited her, what scenario might have afflicted her employer. "All right. But I can't leave." She walked around the front of the car. A smoking cigarette dangled from her lips. She plopped down, torso turned away and her feet still touching the road. The relentless buzzing muted her, "Okay. I'm in now. Where is he?"

"Please." He motioned from his ear with an upturned palm toward the open door.

She exhaled an exasperated cone through the slowly closing door before sliding her crossed legs in. She rolled her window down. She plunked an elbow over the crevasse where the window had disappeared, her fingers crooked with a hooked cigarette jutting out from her forehead like a devil's horn. She hadn't looked back at the driver yet; she contemplated in the side mirror the root of this impulsive turn. Ennui? Frustration? Another drag, exhale; she turned toward him at last.

"Are you the business partner?"

"What I've come to tell you is that in recent days there have been two slain bodies found not far from here. An elderly widow, a man of God—"

"I haven't heard anything." Her fingers gripping the seat, she asked, "Is he involved? Christ. Are you a cop?"

"A man of God, not unlike myself, I was going to say," and he laid his hand almost invitingly upon the book. Contemplative now. "What I can tell you about my profession is that I awoke at some point suddenly, as if anew, pained by an immutable desire to wipe the world clean. A harrowing of this hell, if you will." He lifted the book. "Business partner? Police officer? I suppose I could be either. But I presume this does not answer your questions."

"Well what are you? Some sort of superhero? Mail Man?"

A wry grin. "Oh, were you always so clever? A requirement of your employer, I imagine. Or perhaps the indelible and greasy thumbprint of his touch. Believe it or not I empathize completely." He

cupped his hand beside the radio's clock. "Seven o'six," and he irreverently tossed the bible onto the dashboard. "How unfortunate, but we are almost out of time. I have a meeting I absolutely cannot miss. I had committed to memory for this precise moment an anecdote about the recent murder of a café staff, most pertinently about the killer, and you'd have done well to note the lack of the adnominal 'alleged.' Cold-blooded. He'd no qualms about nor understanding of the gravity of the act, and would confess this matter of factly to any daring interlocutor as though no alternative to these senseless killings could have existed. As if no tinge of conscience could have prevented it. Of course while I detailed the gory specifics of the case, you would have zoned out until my inflection shifted when I'd concluded that the lone link in our pair of known murders and at least one café staff member is that they'd each been compelled to pray just before their horrific, respective demises, at which point you would inevitably perk up and ask—"

"How could you know that?"

"And I would tell you, I don't know. I offer the fruit but cannot taste it. I have come to accept that indeed some power must author these ephemera, but I do not question its authority. Do I know why I am here? You? Why did you enter this car? Would it make a difference if I knew the whys? If I could answer them? Here we are just the same. Businessman, policeman, babysitter, I cannot say. Still I play my role. I have been abolished and resurrected, reincarnated so many times, in so many ways, the script written and rigid at each turn."

She straightened uneasily against her seatback. She tried to interrupt, but on he soliloquized, bloviated: "Knowledge may be the folly of man in general, but this I can tell you specifically: My lifeblood is the hauteur of man, and as such my history is his history; my fate, his end."

"Are you supposed to be the devil?" She said, "That it? Are you Satan?"

The faithful facsimile of a faint young voice erupted from the general area of her pocket: "Hey! Can I watch..." before she silenced it with the frantic tamping against the raised edge within the perimeter of her pocket.

He did not seem to react to this alien intrusion voiceover. "Now, now Gen. I must say I liked you better on the phone, though I do so appreciate your gall. You sound much older in person." He stopped to watch the creases of her brow stymy her attempts at stoicism. "Impressive the restraint, the progress that you have made in just our time together. I applaud you." Soft thuds were emitted at his sallow paws' slow clapping. "But let's not pretend that your eyes had not betrayed you long before you sat down."

"Okay, so what do you want?" tossing her cigarette out of the window, she threatened with her

other hand to open the door. "What?"

"I want to do you a favor. I'd like to assuage your conscience as best I can. Rest assured there was nothing you could have done for her. And that for her I've no harm in mind. That is it. That's all I can offer. Not much of an offer if you cannot refuse, I suppose." He placed his palm over the diminutive control panel at his side. "Ah, yes. Wait. There is something else. You see, you are not the only quick learner in this car. In the short time I've had it I've unlocked one of its increasingly salient little secrets. Would you like to know it, too?"

She yanked on the handle; it swung without resistance like some limp appendage within her fist and when she shouldered the door it would not budge.

"A piffle," he commented. "Though through your fruitless endeavor you have you championed that tried and true axiom 'show, don't tell,' and for that I applaud again. Still I deign to flout the conventions of your concise lesson: Once I push this little button here, no unassisted volition of yours will open that door. A technophile like yourself must marvel at its usefulness. I understand how you may see things differently, but as a fellow courier I confess that I find the innovation an absolutely ingenious measure against such security breaches."

"Fellow courier? You're just crazy. We're done. Let me out."

"Dear. It seems we've been written into a corner." He grabbed the bible and placed it again upon his lap and riffled the pages with no apparent semblance of purpose. "Our time is dwindling; prior engagements press. Still I am willing to make time for your soul. For transgressions against the girl I cannot forgive. There is still something you may do. I hope you see there is still an option."

"Transgressions?" she blurted. "I'm not even going to ask." He calmly seized her trembling hand where it lay against her lap. The embossed and parallel rectangle of her cigarette pack crumpled and crepitated rather than muted under this force. "No," her voice cracked, as she jerked her hand away, buckling when the soft ell of her elbow promptly dealt an unnerving blow to the proximal seat-sprout of the virgin belt buckle. She rubbed, flexed her arm.

"Now that was unintentionally humerus," he added. Yet as a presiding judge in the face of an absurd appeal he did not laugh. "Were you to deny the corruption, you cannot deny the sloth, negligence, impersonation, fraud. Had I after all some certified letter, whose name would you have forged? I see before me a litany of infraction against the law of both man and creator and it calls out plainly for justice."

"What can I do? Please," she pleaded, leaning away, against the door as if to create the illusion of some impassable distance between them. "Let me out."

“I have already told you there was nothing you could do for the girl, and predictably have you made no petition on her behalf. Trust me, your obsequiousness, your continued attention to detail in the face of a harrowing unknown, does not go unnoticed. Which brings me, brings us finally to some semblance of an answer. To the point.” He smoothed the pages outward from where a theretofore unseen bookmark kept devout vigil. She saw from the heading they were verses from Revelations. She saw his ruddy face contorted by pensive grin. “I cannot offer you absolution. You may seek it,” and he placed the book between them, “but you have to ask.”

She felt the book graze her arm, but stiffly refused to acknowledge it. She looked forward through the windshield, at the vivid vista of the forest before her, below which the distorted reflection of the treelines oozed along the edges of the hood. Entranced by the duality of all before her. At once she lunged halfway through the open window at her side, her flailing elbows grappled against the exterior frame. The dust-tinctured atmosphere of freedom tingling upon her lips. A palpable, bitter moment in desperate reflection before she was violently reseated. Her host insistent that she maintain her sitter status. Tending to the tender incipient bump on the back of her head, she rocked at the car’s sudden locomotion. In her peripheral foreground the hoodborne landscape morphing and pulsing, breaking apart and coagulating in random, indistinguishable black blobs. At her side now she saw balanced across the pages an ominous handgun, smirched in crimson spatter, with gelatinous gobbets clung to the steel. She looked away, slumped, folded her arms over her abdomen in the diffident posture of resignation. Tears seared under eyes whose once obstinate gaze could no longer deign to beseech the hopeless wicket of escape just inches away. The outside world, enveloped by the wonders of heat, of light, the ubiquity of breathable air which seemed now so precious, passed obliviously by, charged toward her up the hood only to dissolve in the illusive transparency of her prison wall. Sniffling, “P-p-p,” swallowing, her phlegm-logged voice shifting into the queer inflection of quasi-query, “Please?”

“Say a little prayer. Bend the ear of the unbendable. Really. I’d like to hear it.”

She squinted hard against the outpouring of tears his flippant suggestion educed. Then she forced her eyes open. The salty sting of recognition, like peering into a burning periscope that could offer nothing but pain but through which she had to look. He had stealthily exhumed a now-lit cigarette, set to bid Adios to the soon-to-be otiose auto manual and registration papers in his lap by applying its orange end to their smoke- and char-burgeoning ends. She said, “What good would it do?” and in monosyllabic futility: “Why?”

Chapter XXVII

Some remain, some have gone; I see others still somewhere in between, as granular pillars of a halite readership, salty poltroons frozen mid-exodus after they one too many times saw dummy in Gomorrhan dishabille but simply could not resist one more ill-advised perilous peek on their ostensible ways out.

Yet we are not so different; they, like I, prefer a tidy romantic wrap-up, a pleasing, pleasurable happy ending, an unexpected triumph for the hard-luck prufrock, hard-up, heart-down, for whom they have built up reserves of affinity, through whom they enjoy some underdog vicariousness, and for whom they have—perhaps merely by the rhetoric of his deceptive glibness—been duly convinced to root. And they want it now. But of that estival audience of phocine and beached readers, afeared of waddling through the sands of another relapse toward madness—how quickly they forget the explicit placidity fatherhood had engendered in me—yet possessed nonetheless by a squawky, nitpicky, flighty gall: may their grainy constitution crumble and disperse unceremoniously under the force of my vagarious tide; long may their gritty essence tinge the fleeting wash and comingle with the dispiriting sand they find so distasteful! I say that we timeworn conchs, always with an ear to the subtle nuances of the tide, everwilling to spill the ocean's secrets, who remain entrenched within that mercurial ground, are better off for their absence. Oh how must their biases have reduced me, upright among the strobing flashes of another fiery failing, to naught but flame-illumed phillumenist of unquenchable philogyny and questionable philosophy, smiling at the precipice of some dastardly lunacy! A piteous lot before their hideous Lot, indeed, but I've no longer the capacity to coddle the toddling inattentive. Has the roly-poly trajectory—not so coincidentally, I imagine, mirroring the state of their own bikini-stretched or roomy-trunk habitus—of Starla's and my relationship not been laid bare? Have I failed the journey accentuating the goal? By design our destination is no impenetrable mystery; I've applied to a healthy intermingling of tenses past and present a sprinkling of future to assuage the reader of any abandonment issues, but still we know irrevocably not only that, but quite precisely just how our tale will conclude...but that is neither here nor now...So with an active Barb as my witness, my acting impetus, here I am after all, reliving, reviled, for your indicting, inditing what will only amount to the sad soliloquy of Barb's lexical excipient, with you, just the same.

Starla reappeared the following Sunday. On this occasion, breaching my suddenly gregarious ingress, I spotted her at once just a room away, seated upon my livingroom davenport. Hands crossed at the tight osculation of her knees. Reaching over each thigh in squarish simulacra of my hands lay either plaid hem of her relieved peacoat, with both ends of its unfastened belt draping over the cushions like a defeated serpent, bracketing the faux prepuce of purplish calves in tandem, eliciting within me a breathless frisson of tachycardia when I spotted my elusive arrow nestled there, fortuitously, fatefully, pointing heavenward within the suggestive folds of her pucey pantaloons. I was reeling. Had the previous seven days made me weak? Or were they merely illusion, passed only in my mind as a penance of mundanity, endured in the singular moment I opted to tend to the conflagration outside before the one inside? Her demure mien demurred (not so meanly, impetuous reader)—I dropped the glassine sacks (along with my full attire, ample evidence to prove I had not in fact immediately returned from battling the blaze, that my chore- and bore-riddled week of ennui was not merely a self-administered punishment for failing to leave the world around us to the subsumption of misjudged flames of fortune, whereby we may have prepared for a voyeuristic audience of tasteless gourmands our charred tale en papillote (our crimped wrapping: the glorious and misleading fictions of our binding I would have laid out if only I'd known (this, an understandable oversight in an opportunity extempore that I've been conscientious to eschew in the subsequent pages of my looseleaf future))) I'd schlepped back from the grocery, and I dropped before her. But her knees would not relent as I slithered up the ridges of her pantlegs. She enlivened the dead ends of the deflated Daliesque snake at either side, constricting against the warm belly I attempted to touch those cold woolen flaps—I could sense in my slavering maw on my quavering tongue the warmth, the tepid presence of another; Starla shook her head in solemn denial. Graced the pathetic face before her with sympathetic touch.

“I am sorry about your porch.” She broke the silence. I crumpled, disintegrated faster than a million leaves afire under her hand, sliding mine away. “But we can’t.”

What a fine amoeba of carbon-based residue did I make! I broke down, had no spine, no bones but what she had given. A supplicant at her feet. Slavish, slathering, slobbering, what use had I for a porch, I told her, what good a threshold? I begged her, don't keep from me my child any longer.

“I hate to...I have a favor to ask.”

I rose to my knees, my hands flanking her flanks, invigorated by the explicit promise from futility to utility, the call to action. “Ask,” I said.

A cursed phantom of longing stretched from my cheek to her hand she'd pulled away so that she could gesture toward a crate of personal effects at the davenport's side that I'd overlooked in my

zealous approach. “I need some place to store this stuff.” She snatched the belt that had somehow been charmed into intertwining within my fingers. “Please.” Disregarding the perfunctory perfume of teenage pheromone mixed with some cloying floral mist—a vague throwback to the intoxicating juxtaposition of sin and sweetness by which she’d initially pulled in, directed the plunge of my unwitting arrow—and the effortless drag of her pony-tailed tresses—to my dismay unilaterally corralling all by the sweep of its horsey homogeneity including the delightfully defiant cowlick of a free-roaming, or the often consciously coiffed, kine she once tightly farmed into more imaginative herds—I noticed that with her coat closed, one could scarcely make out the rising bun in her erstwhile sacrosanct oven, hovering above her still sacred sacroiliac sanctum where I too yearned to reside. Of course Starla already held the deed to my heart; how could I possibly refuse to sublet my meager physical space to any number of her belongings, inert surrogates of my absentee tenant in a hopefully short-term lesseeless interim? But, remember, I was now a father—the neoliberal reader may abort forthwith his half-wrought contretemps of psychobabble semantics—and as such had my fatherly concerns: I countered with a singular, invidious proviso, a quasi-comically cosmetic caveat, a sheen of meretricious bravado whose transparency I feared she might detect as soon as I started (A salient question arises for your astute discussion group: when oh when did the power shift from my hands to hers? When did I again usurp it?). I told her, I started, with factitious and requisite cocksuredness, “The cessation of that pernicious habit is of...” but my declamation was interrupted when my normally stoic loo beyond the wall erupted with the impudent roar of a sudden and sonorous sluicing, echoed in concert as if initiating a round by the diminutive faucet expulsion and the subsequent muted purl of its eddying, with the whole shebang concluding in the rising percussive tap-tap-tap of cigarette pack-on-wrist on some short-haired hoydenish intruder emerging from that curious beyond.

Our third wheel brazenly lowered herself next to Starla, offered neither explanation nor salutation sans the insolent gaucherie of an unshielded cough and the emasculating gesture of an upward nod—which, fear not, I acknowledged in no reciprocating manner—and started to exhume a number of dun sticks from her crinkling pack. I saw in her slack posture and boyish charms a scintilla of the Sapphic, a latent threat Starla’s mother’s diligence had done well to arrest and whose womanumission I suddenly feared I may have unwittingly fostered in our previous meeting. Perhaps some bilingual ambition inspired in the scant intimations of breathy cunnilingual closeness during our previous interrupted attempt at a tongue-twisting tryst. When the orgulous troll, hunched, elbows sexlessly spreading discrete, threadbared knees, insouciantly brandished three cigarettes, Starla blithely asked of me with an ugly air of detachment, “What were you saying?”

Without hesitation I reached out and plucked the three-butted offering, in my fervor crushing them—would it be such an unforgivable peccadillo to pray some wayward carpal trespasser shared their fate?—and ambiguously gestured for Starla my sad headless posy of crumpled cigarettes toward the nameless harpy: “You must dispose of this trash,” as I let the mangled trio fall to the floor.

“Well then, we really must be going.” Starla ascended against my scrabbling hands, while the uninvited other descended into the vortex of unprintable, indecipherable invective swirling from her mouth—now I’ve no doubt of her insidious influence even over Genevieve In Utero—grabbling about to piece together the scattered and fibrous remains strewn about my knees as one would the bones of a slain lover. When she stood, that licentious sprite attempted to shoulder me in the way of a little, empty agonistic gesture but she barely grazed my torso, turned on its axis toward Starla, whose touchless exit elicited a direct shot of exponentially greater pain unto my heart.

I was losing her. Had a weeklong careless abeyance of my reunification effort nudged her to steep deeper ravines of sin? “Have you been writing?” I was able to muster, to send into the dying daylight of the vacated doorway before it darkened again, turgid now with a vulgar silhouette that bade me to “get bent.” In one movement I reached down and launched the loitering ell of a sinuous cigarette bit that for its final act caromed soundlessly from the slammed door onto my foyer linoleum. I looked down, down at the visceral detritus of tobacco, the dermic shreds of paper, sweat-stuck and collected there in my hand. I desperately wiped my hands against my thighs—how could the inattentive imp fully fail to see I was already bent here, patient, eager to reclaim my abdicated throne of pedagogy, ready again to impress upon, to edify, to instruct a generation blissfully deaf to the remonstrations and admonishments of better sense?

I pacified my riled spirit pawing longingly at the evocative contents of my new roommate, the pregnant crate, wherein there bulged rather conspicuously, among what I presumed to be the parentally verboten media of so-called tawdry literature and the salacious balladry of hack rock-and-roll so-called music, an updated chrestomathy—a sort of unintentional sequel to the anthology I’d been flashed at her high school office—to better understand this torturous tongue of silence to which Starla had been subjecting me. Oh how the cockles of my heart warmed just riffling through the pages of an unmistakably fictionalized-to-protect-the-innocent (and there be no such thing, to which even your inculpatory tenet of Original Sin will attest!) retelling of the conception of our holy triune! Additionally she had revisited the engaged princess-to-be of yesteryear, filtered through the lens of gravitas that comes only with maturity or tragedy: This episode found our chaste heroine accosted, waylaid by her rapist (So aghast at the thought that a real-life encounter had engendered in her any such unshakable

obsession that if even an alleged perpetrator had been named on the page I would have doubtless carried out his, and subsequently my, prompt deletion.)—funnily enough the courting jester—and I dammed the tear on the lam that raced down my cheek. Was she writing? Was she ever!

Perhaps proving in retrospect an early indicator of my cat-killing propensity, I flipped with giddy curiosity through the crate-clad scant stack of long playing albums recorded by guitar-diddlers of little renown, resolving to purchase a gramophone the following day (Incidentally I was in fact already in possession of a compact disk machine; it took the form of a small compartment of the monolithic stereo set-up I'd schlepped home at the behest of a glib, pustule-lichened department store salesboy, who, with flailing this-and-that-way limbs stretching the corners of his monochromatic and tucked-in polo, insisted this particular garish contraption would both (and I paraphrase) satisfy and dazzle the aural sensibilities of sundry coevals of fairer sex and complexion (authorial addendum). But I would require no sherlock technophile to deduce that the "last piece of stereo equipment I would ever need," as that oily snake oil snake had nominally foisted his wares upon me, would not elicit by its imperceptible reading apparatus any music from the tactile grooves of Starla's records.)—a chase made more difficult than expected when I found myself at the commercial mercy of our inimical overlords of rapidly ushered-out old and—in flashy new product, and just as it was with her exhibited predilections in the rougher sex, my Starla preferred a format tending to obsolescence—so that I might vicariously share in her nonliterary interests. Alas, I could not procure my spindly rosetta stone, and for my failing, I was forced to issue a rain check for the sinister ménage a trois I'd scheduled with Belle and her cohort Sebastian, much to the chagrin of a gentlemanly caucus of Afghan Whigs patiently awaiting their revolution.

Another Sunday. It could not have followed a sadder day of anxious anticipation, of worrisome walks and futile attempts to write (What a perverse inclination, it struck me, to dawdle upon paper when in love!), but I duly kept the Sabbath holy, barred indoors, cursing through the windows my rotten porch, the hint of the walkway that had permitted her exit, the outside world that kept her. Of course we (I am referring to you now, reader) each know that her return was imminent, so I shall refrain from dragging out this arduous period...During the next two visits she left the idle epicene ensconced within some idling unseen transport, out of eye-, ear- and gunshot (not that I'd have rushed to such measure, nor had I any firearm at this juncture anyway), while Starla refused my petitions to help her lug a few more personal effects where she laid them, before the proprietor of Chez Ckol, shakily studying the mesmerizing prism of manifold teenage rebellion presented at his feet. On her first return she feigned alarm over leaving her unpolished manuscripts within my reach, invoking somewhat convincingly frivolities such as impropriety and privacy while we both entertained the obvious absurdity of her

ostentatious plaints; to my credit, I assuaged the concerns of my pudent ingénue with the white-lie assurance that her the documents had remained in my custody untouched (What would the truth have accomplished but a further delay of the inevitable anyway?). Our little thespian charade might have concluded at that next poignant moment, an echo of our pivotal earlier office scene, when she pensively beheld the collected works of her precocious second act pressed perhaps quite unintentionally this time against the bulge of our baby. Instead of heeding such directorial artifice, we ad-libbed our way to a perhaps sloppier, yet altogether more move-in, moving climax: she in turn proleptically assuaged the ad litem plaint anent smoking still swirling within me by leaning in, placing a hand on my cheek, and through the cracks of her voice she whispered, ostensibly to me but it felt like to any number of concerned someones somewhere, “I promise it’s only when I’m nervous,” a subdued apostrophe punctuated for you by the lowly comma but for me, upon its utterance, by the dizzying heights of a heavenly kiss to the malar region of hell her blessed hand had just consecrated.

A kiss!

It infused my every extremity with a theretofore unknowable power nonpareil—but I was careful not to overplay my hand. When she next returned she found, after instructing me—how the table turned!—to reconstruct the uppermost story, by connecting her proprietary long player playing appendage atop my gaudy sound system (Even after a thorough inspection, quasi-comically we could not get the thing to enliven until she at last discovered the embarrassing virgin socket at its rear. I daresay mine was not the only pulsing tinge of déjà vu when upon her insertion the entire tower sparked and flashed with the electric life our efforts in concert had imbued.), a small box, not so dimensionally different from the velvety clamshell of the jeweler, wherein there lay (No one will empathize more fully with Romance Reader’s hopeful expectations that I’d propped up my annular promise of annual celebrations, anticipating future recapitulations of our peculiar “pop the question” moment whenever such occasion would arise in the company of our comely coterie of connubial couples, than I—though I must temper the exuberance of one Miss Pollyanna Paperback by directing her attention back merely to my last complete non-parenthetical sentence—but instead Starla found) a ringed set of keys to the, either overlooked or curiously placed, cherry-red chariot behind which her faux-chivalric chauffeur lay in parked wait, doubtless emitting from her various pipes a virulent toxicity for all the world to inhale. Obviously, Starla objected to accepting—I countered that the car would simply succumb to its rubiginous fate of inertia right where it nimbly crouched, curbside, only half shaded by a lonely linden and therefore vulnerable to inclement elements, if she refused custody. I begged her to bid the insignificant other with whom she’d come—though hopefully not—Adieu, that if

she were to decline a solitary spin in her own car from my abode that it be because she opted to stay, where in the utilization of our most recent synergetic construction, we could unsleeve our playable sides and get down to the forbidden beat. She started to relent, thanking me profusely, her eyes trained upon the key in her hand, but in the end insisted she couldn't, that she hadn't the time, and then she absconded like some brazen midday thief making away with the goodbye kiss that belonged to me.

(To quickly address what my audience—understandably aghast at the seeming thriftlessness of what should be the penny-pinching period of a father-to-be, unemployed and presently unable to make certain ends meet—must assume to be the prohibitive cost of such largesse, I will only vouchsafe further, regarding my financial state in facultative stasis, that the exorbitant inheritance from my late benefactor engendered a justifiably carefree disposition about such impulsive purchases. I ask: Would it have been preferable to introduce Genevieve to immobile Momma, grossly dependent upon the whims of some troubled androgyne hayseed wheeling freely down one-way avenues that have been duly documented to point up?)

That night, demented was I, lamenting as I passed the empty space beneath the paling linden—a lacuna whose nebulous edges were now gracelessly encroached upon by the exhausting and unbidden approach of yet another unwanted pickup—I, after steeling Starla and later myself for another week fruitlessly spent passing the redolent yet muted seminal scent of our shared finish line, stepped out and walked and walked and walked these city walks, paced the park promenade, retraced the nostalgic steps of my myopic portrait sessions, raced along the unforgiving concrete of my mind. Not since the efflorescent finery of our lacustrine lily, particularly those enclaved moments before beckoning Slumber, in which Ckol the Conquerer in his glory, reveling in the pillaged sanguine muck of innocence, basking in the silverglow of a total Venusian eclipse, clung in drowsy trance to the rhythmic tremble of its placid petals nestled at his side, had an intertwining of his and Starla's souls seemed more hopeful, more inevitable. This I knew. Yet for all the relative successes of my rushed steps I could not outgait the insidious inkling that another step forward, of upward trajectory this time, must be undertaken if I'd hoped to at last shovel the final smattering of sod over the grave inquisition that kept us apart, the motherly source that smothered the force of our rightful symbiotic bliss—I had to slay the beast that once exerted over our fertile land a once-thought impregnable palladium of sheltered upbringing, a domed matriarchal matrix—reflective in its concavity yet translucent in the convex—like some greenhouse that allowed only artificial light yet could not keep from inspiring within its agnostic audience of rose-goggled ogles agog an irrational inclination to an ineffable faith in creation, in a perfection whose possibility they would have doubtless shunted to the bloody bowels of hopeful hokum

just moments prior to their glimpses.

Now when I write the words “slay the beast,” it must surely be understood I’d no delusions of matri(n-law-)cidal plot-twists (Let the record clearly state that that parenthetical plea to in-law legality couched within a parental spree of outlaw criminality exists not to imply that I believe any such presumed denominations of ancillary relation would exculpate, expiate or otherwise exonerate any such thought—let alone action—but rather as one available option for dealing with the issue at hand), though would it have been such a bastardization of cosmic balance had she exited this realm of consciousness as did the widowed Haze, choking on the distasteful tidbit of daughter’s irrevocable fate? But a piffle, cosmos thought otherwise—what could I do then but slay her with the righteous sword of truth? A nod of compromise to their old-fashioned sensibilities (a flexible suitor was I): I resolved to navigate the night between us, whereupon before mother’s and father’s distrustful gaze, before Starla, caught midbreath and midstep on tip-toe at the apex of a spiraling stairwell, one hand nervously caressing the bannister outside her bedroom door that she’d drowsily opened at the sound of my sonorous song, the balladry of my request of daughter’s hand, to make known to all my honest intention. If they refused? Methinks there awaits for the litigious, invoking a holeless defense of holy murder-as-preemptive-self-defense that any self-respecting and impartial juror privy to “My mother would kill me if she knew I was here; she would kill us both,”—the words with which a startled Starla had greeted me when I’d vigorously and obliviously barged after my canvass of the city through the door to my kitchen, where she’d providentially kept vigil while I prowled the park—would be forced, if not by the grace of good sense then certainly by the preponderance of conscience presented, to concede. Mercifully it needn’t come to that. The prodigal suitor completely overlooked in his plotting fervor that the cherry chassis hath returneth. When I saw my pleasant peasant there dutifully awaiting her prince—the scene took his eminence immediately back to his entrance into the divine cupola of destiny, where about their giddy heads swirled a rarefied air, choked by the heat and breathlessness of imminent fruition—the totality of honorable aspirations and horrific machinations with which I’d been grappling crumbled at once, pulled asunder, awash in a freshet of molten desire—trust that the blood-filled beast within that had risen, glommed from the dregs of its searing silt, did fall that night, slain in a wanton and unhindered thrash against the moist chamber walls of its captor, of its belonging.

Second Coming came not with the golden chorale of angels, the plump fingers of cherubim a-plucking aureate strings, the crushing Gloria of predestination that paced our first; accompanying our dreamlike dalliance this time were the folksy strum and ethereal croon of her Belle and Sebastian—naturally I’d parsed the printed lyrics, delightfully droll as they were, in previous weeks, but I confess to

some chagrin when at last the voices pouring from my speakers bore no resemblance to a shaggy canine and her beloved boy—whose platter she, much to my dismay, rose to diligently flip over at each instance the stylus threatened to impinge upon the dizzying purlieu of spinning penetration perpetrated by dear spindle...a sculpted metaphor awaits, buried somewhere within this chunk of words, one with more adept hands—Selina?—what with the stylish Starla nearing by every turn the spindly reach of her penetrator, but for the life of this lummoX I cannot sufficiently carve it out for an astute readership, likely picturing already that comely bust of Starla at my tips...Please pardon that in my haste I've glossed over the zenithal reunion by my dearth of detail—what transpired was not the heavenly commixture for which I'd pined but rather a primal groping for the basest satisfaction of the flesh, a carnal exhibition of a young woman who'd, having clearly dipped into the valley of our sexless interim, openly explored the nuanced pulses of her pleasurable insides—ultrasounds notwithstanding—and she'd somewhat coldly made her triumphant comeback a whirlwind romance, a tempest for me really, an almost detached didactic and climactic affair, manipulating my posture, my fingers, my mouth, making nearly obsolete the impulses of her retired instructor at the whims of her capricious and leonine libido.

Drawn out and drowsy, I watched in the strained feign of fending off slumber's rapacious reach as she Mosesed—possessed still by mother's tyrannical pull, weighing heavier on her harried heart than the pearly anchor of any hurried heart-on-sleeve petition I could leave clinging upon the seabed of her roiling loins—from my side, leading an exodus of the slavish endorphins I'd already released, leaving me a spectator in silent anguish as she pulled taut the tousled strands into her cross-country coif and exited without farewell. But not before flipping the record already looping in my subconscious—I succumbed to the saddest soporific song, a lullaby dream about horses, instantly reminded that the stars of track and field are indeed beautiful people.

Temper your pity. Whilst we were engaged not, and engaged not in the passionate twine of head-over-heels love, do not forget that I was still, am still, but a man—senseless collection of erogenous parts patched together with threads of prurient predilection—and it was, after all, not complete hell that she put me through most subsequent nights when my Moses moseyed on back to part for me a red sea under whose toppling walls we ended up entwined in heels-over-head lovemaking. Nightly spritzes of authentic midnight decadence. Save for the post-vesperal visitations stayed by guts-riving bouts of cramps or the nuts, roving spouse of gramps touched by a bit of insomnia, I would find myself at the directorial discretion of her exacting vision. Oh auteur, oh author, oh ingénue! And hither comes the Starstruck prop boy, the galloping gopher, blessed by proximity, with fruit tray array in hand and stung blissfully by the searing juices of its fondled spread. Is it stiflingly hot? Here comes the night

shift custodian, granted the holy duty of nether maintenance, to remove the cover of unmentionables over her ventral vent, blowing hot against the tools—one hung in wait below my belt, others freezing further north—with which I'd enthusiastically tinker and service. But any repairing, needless; our repairing, heedless. Dear reader, much like your very own floydish mechanic, who, you've noticed, cannot or cares not to scour his hands of the oily smirch, the sinuous smudges of his toil, I would spend the following day a slugabed, stuck in bed alone by the sticky lubricating agent of my labor. And what of conversation? I confess some confounded bemusement at our reduced level of discourse: our child merely a womb away and my head in the oven, the god-fearing and effeminate tendency she'd occasionally exhibited toward teary emotionality that she'd eschewed completely in our new routine would randomly manifest itself in surreal mid-coital incantations of simulative, plainly practiced Plathitudes of her own tweaking and devising, in virulent lines such as "Every girl adores her dephiler" (I did not halt the procession for orthographic clarification) or "Eight nights I'm slain but pulse again like the bristling pussy" (I include this devil-entendre only over my morbid concern about what the completion of such a feline ennead might entail) or "Daddy, I have to kill you" (perhaps she would). I never broached the subject of delineation of her trancelike poesy in the cool-down of arch-ached backs and numb tongues and twisted wrists out of fear that any deluge from opened floodgates might send her scurrying once again for higher ground.

Though this nigh paradisiacal parade of nightly comings-and-going quickly became our modus operandi, underscoring every score was the unpalatable knowledge that our freedom was a slim scrim unable to mask the unbearable lightness of a looming creator in the background that had long forbidden such fruit sampling, such temperature tampering. That and my next-day lassitude and lax attitude toward any artistic ambition (I hadn't penned word one in weeks.) married to the alien feeling of unfulfillment did not bode well for the sempiternal march of carnal bliss (to say nothing of our forthcoming member, to that point still a peripheral, conceptual impediment (To the copious and corpulent crew of indolent snackers yak yak yakking your doubts about the veracity of a stretched Starla's stretched capacity for sexual exertion or desire, keep in mind, first, that at this point a loose-fitting sweater would suffice to dissimulate from any unsuspecting voyeur her condition, and, secondly, just how little one of such lithe and limber makeup beforehand must adjust her preferred positioning underhand until well into trimester number three.)) upon which we'd set off. But these considerations clambered quickly to the carseat in the back when at last we were thrust irrevocably into the precipice...the screeching brakes of our slewing and fishtailing transport reverberating through time and space, funneled into my screaming bedside telephone, whose call I dutifully answered even at that

ungodly hour of darkness. But the voice was not Starla's—who else but my succubus would need wake me?

A gruff greeting: "This your car?"

I rubbed my eyes, kicked the covers aside. "I realize I have been sleeping, but I will need more—"

"This here says it is."

"Starla?"

"Sure."

"Is she all right?"

"Can't be too bad."

Was I dreaming? I stifled a scream of frustration. The maddening prevarications! After a pregnant pause, "Hand her your telephone. I implore you."

"Can't do that," he went on, conflating his can'ts and won'ts, misusing pronouns of specificity, continuing his slaughter of basic communicability...He issued his ultimatum in less uncertain terminology that we convene at the accidental confluence of his and "my" vehicles, at an intersection of streets I did not know by name. By fortune, by providence, I knew the quickest, thus likeliest, route to Starla's house—I sped away clutching a cache of cash and reluctantly a last-resort checkbook of traceable transactions. On the way I found the prolonged and wayward dragon of idling vehicles, a sorry parody of a saurian, Asiatic parader, between whose simulscintillating nostrils and oblique, crumpled carmine tail—within which there piled over the steering wheel unto the driver's seat the deflated hemorrhoid of a deployed airbag—was an interminable tract of wilderness and suburban asphalt upon which danced sadly only one pair of legs: my brusque beseecher.

Under the immense pressure of a tireless interrogator, who in addition to a frightening fervor held in his hand a hefty wad of overcompensation to keep the night's unfortunate incident from the desks of already overburdened insurance piglets, the caller informed me that the driver of the red car had "T-boned his pickup" (our meeting very nearly coming to fisticuffs upon the ribald utterance of what seemed some crass trucker euphemism), causing, as I could see, negligible, cosmetic damage to his but unmistakable injury to hers, disposed obliquely against the fated corner of the intersection. After checking his person and ejecting himself from the helm, it seems he'd walked back to find in lieu of his sideswiper a vacated seat and an unlocked glovebox to grope about and rummage among, where he found my otherwise unlisted contact. Woe was I!—she hadn't saved for only me the forceful frissons of her midnight hit and runs! Of course once he'd gotten wind of how I intended to ameliorate his complaints,

the blowhard transformed conspicuously to a more loquacious claimant...the whiplash! the fragile back! the pain and suffering!...and much aggrieved, I assented to his exorbitant demands and absurd exhortations so that we might keep this whole bang-bang business hush-hush for at least a bit longer.

I may only write so facetiously in the past tense as I presently know the physical toll on Starla and gestating Genevieve to have been little more than twin shins fraternally scraped by the scrabbling brambles she blindly breached on her mad dash home; in the moment, however, I was a wreck. A wreck in a wrecked auto: I found my Star-car not merely salvageable but rather durable, dirigible, drivable. With the nasty business of business behind me, this red-bound greyhound darted off after his leporine lure, homebound herself, perhaps in fact nearing the homestretch on nothing but the awe-inspiring spring of stockings (her indecent stalker had begged her to don again—Oh that she agreed!) positively ravished by unforgiving flora, her poor torso shielded from chill by naught but a tawdry varsity jacket. Was she so ravaged by familial consternation that she'd chance a drowsy dance behind the wheel with Fate rather than crash at my place?

I frantically combed all available avenues in a radiating sweep. At one stop I even swore I'd caught through the interstice of a window now, stuck openly in the purgatory—in which we both felt trapped—of ascending windows her beckonly, heavenly scent. Of what use were our indulgences? When I stepped outside and lost the fleeting fragrance to the brash selfsame eolian phantom I believed had delivered it, I realized the sapid spoor I thought had tickled my tongue was instead the pungent residue of her, embedded among my unwashed stubble, mixing with her ghost wafting up from, hoarded by the scalloped seat below. A row of leathery lips consecrated by the chance cunnilingus endeavored on those nights that the discombobulating lingerie a skirted Starla left behind draped my bedpost as a disemboweled lingerer, the tattered and tangled viscera of rent satin and lace rendered unwearable by night's end. Like an Aesopian miser did I drop, drape the seat, upon which there pooled drool by the sialagogue of want, runneled tears by the lachrymator of loss. Let our senses comingle! Let our scents complement!

In what seemed my paralyzing paroxysm I blacked out. Some unknowable time passed on to, driven in the seemingly palsy desolation of a sable- but able-bodied fugue. When at last I came to, my hands, gripping a tight ten and two, were linked by a thin dull rainbow, a dun reflection of the auroral sun along the rim of my steering wheel. Unconsciously I had refused to abandon the track—I had kept on. I leaned forward to study the beige car parked before me. Just as my chin soared beyond the shifting sheen of gradating grays the door fell away from my elbow. I crashed chinfirst into the hardened arch, but before unleashing a colorful salvo of uncharacteristically vulgar invective, in through the opening at

my left swooped an ethereal and holey galaxy. I obliviously stretched the niveous phalanx thin to reveal in my grasp Starla's stocking, shredded by the rapacious insolence of thorny shrubbery. I followed the invisible progression of my rainbow; it flattened within the vice of my left hand and continued to where I found my melliferous pot of gold. I wept at this fortuitous turn. Starla cried too—reddened eyes suggested she had been crying, at least—and through her tears sniffled, "I can't do this anymore."

I fumblingly flipped the powdery, pulpy caruncle of the flaccid airbag from my lap somewhere over the rainbow, exited the vehicle and warmly placed her reluctant hand in mine. Together we entered the clinic across the street, where I surreptitiously beamed behind a salty cataract of tears at the hushed intonation of the receptionist, who casually remarked under her breath just how unusual in her experience it was to see the father accompanying the mother-to-be. Within the examination enclave, the cumbersome machinery whereby we were able to watch the fey, grainy accretion and animation of our baby in utero had metamorphosed me into a cornered agoraphobe, vicariously sharing the crowded experience of an avatar. Hemmed in by the actualization, the visualization, the implicit outline of the impending denouement of my moribund solipsism (How should it be written?); Oh, double-edged metacognition, the twisted fortune you afforded: here we huddled, cuddled, whipsawed by the pixelated harbinger of both a summery future and the fact that we were in the chilling midst of our hedonistic season's end. You could see in our wintry window, in our snowy little portent, that the weather was changing. That the coming Fall would precede the Winter of Our Disconcertment.

The technician or gynecologist or obstetric-whatever blithely cracked the ice that threatened to ensconce eternally the expectant duo in a frozen tableau—the nouveau couple paralyzed and silent and furtively agape peeping over the precipice into a brand new world (knowing the ambrosial soma of sex upon which they had engorged themselves would no longer suffice to sustain their ichor.)—"Fortunately I see no ill effects from the crash," to which Starla nodded her relief, "but she does appear under—"

She? While our espial go-between Swiftly delivered this Brobdingnagian divulgence as mere Lilliputian bagatelle, a transformative epiphany took hold of me. (As a youth, I coveted the notion of cosseting another, a singular love (I concede that this overarching petal might well have been a late-blooming efflorescence of an Oedipal reflex), who, in my pubescent history of inexperience, manifested herself as my own debauching Rosalyn—though her identity is immaterial and today should be strictly relegated to the curiosa collected by the crazy Ckol completist—to my teenage eyes the most beautiful girl in the universe both for her precocious figure and the sinful concinnity to which she secretly and sublimely exposed this chaste junior. After a virtual estival festival of sensual gratification upon graduation we split as is the wont of lovers of our coeval ilk, getting off to our separate secondaries. Of

course I was, speciously speaking, devastated, for at least that first semester apart, when I attempted with a series of ill-conceived letters a long-distance reconciliation. She was by then so familiar with my stylings that I lost her completely when during holiday break I anonymously eulogized her bumpkin drunkard father in prosodic vignette, published in our hometown paper's now-defunct feuilleton—I've been apprised of the fact this section was eventually displaced by the dull splash of the "Community Brief," so often collected on page as the communal taint of random street interviewee pictures hovering over the skid marks of hopeful bon mots in extemporaneous response to such riveting prompts as, "Where will you be doing your Christmas shopping?"—which concluded with the narrator musing over the mortal irony of the deceased's dim punishment of an organ named Liver to facilitate his own undoing. When I returned to university unequivocally single, under the superficial auspices of a half-year and cosmogony anew, every commute became an aesthetic orgy of successively more pulchritudinous potentialities; Rosalyn, having been almost certainly embracing a six-month jumpstart on her tetherless, parallel parkour, slipped even more quickly from my mind than did she through the sheets of her illicit paramours. However, the tortoise lapped the sleeping hare, I'm sure, harrying a cavalcade of racy encounters. My own plane tilted toward a piled-up cast of discarded castoffs, and my world continued to rotate upon an axis shifted thusly. From rapacious, head-above-water snapper to amphibious slow-poke my carnal transition was a gradual and grand affair. I was not unhappy—a merry, shelly creature was I: erudite monster, employing the spirit of didacticism in his voyeuristic and distant studies all the while silently harboring vitriolic disdain for the patriarch by whose genetic splicing did he seem inherently precluded from procuring a suitable partner—I was, however, unsatisfied. That is until at last I was blessed to find the cosmic counterweight to right my balance: Starla, of course. For when in proximity to her pull did Cupid's arrow pierce the vulnerable venation of my brittle carapace—I was hunted, eviscerated, boiled back to a primordial soup, beholden once more to a singular star holding by its gravity the wondrous demiurgical confabulation of my chelonian brethren divined by Starla's own fingers. Despite my deflating afflatus, still was I insipid soup, a poor porridge preoccupied by possessiveness, by physicality, by fatuous infatuation...I thought that when Starla informed of my impending fatherhood that I'd experienced an incorporeal coagulation, but it was now that I was inexplicably seasoned, thickened by this monosyllabic utterance of "She," bringing with it a flood of more precise emotionality, which conferred unto me a hitherto clandestine ken of empathy and of disgust for my deplorable history of facetious fondling; it was by the undeserved magnanimity granted that I was again made whole.) We departed the clinic under the sun of a brand new day. I conducted myself, somewhat naïve, as befits a Panglossian gentleman presuming eternal sublimity and conducted

Starla, somewhat bereaved, back to her house. Our ride coolly redolent of that uncomfortable carpool experience after our lakeside adventure. Though this time I was not so oblivious. I had insisted on escorting her home, deserting the red wreck, hopeful for a successful consilience—a harmoniously cobbled agglomeration of my crisis of conscience and their con science of Christ—with the not-yet-in-laws, though I think Starla and I each knew that our only success holding vigil at the destination to which we inexorably charged would be that of a successive crash.

As expected I was received tepidly at the gate. Mother genteelly feigned hospitality with a curt curtsey before shooing Starla kitchenward; I was ushered off to the sparsely furnished living room space—I could empathize with the itinerant minimalism, the billowed curtains and opened clothes-closet interstices allowing a view to our hushed audience of pregnant totes and crates—pilloried for the first before her father. Now to barbaric reader, pregnant with expectation upon his Colosseum bleacher, punting on the type of heavyweight and ultimatum-laden bout of rhetorical pugilism incumbent upon a father in the midst of the plucky plucker of his precious flower: Sop the restless sweat from your beady brow with the towel tossed resignedly to the floor. It was donated by dad, whom I quickly deduced to be uxurious dud, unable to dissimulate his shamed status as conscripted combatant, sheepishly bleating his contentious objections via the circumlocution of discursive discourse—waxing bland on the weather (indeed it was a-changin’); the adumbrated standings of American football squads (as though some thick-necked ruffian he might proudly call son sat before him); his “kindred affliction” of the bibliophile, a chronic “Narnia-philia” (the wink-wink butterflies of quotation marks fluttering, spluttering from his cackling cachinnation whilst my eyes darted about for some transportational wardrobe) back to the weather. Could it be that he’d been imbued with none of the paternal ichor with which I was now positively brimming? I confess that had I suffered such affront I would have been vividly livid: Did a bilious choler not rankle at the secreted scent of his own flesh and blood, purloined prematurely on my probing person and now wafting up in pungent impudence against his presumed obeisance?

I gambled a gambit: In fact it was while he madly pantomimed bookpage-riffling as though penitently fondling a concubine in confession—never was he more enlivened then when lauding effusive on the understated allegory in the throes of his emasculated Narnymphomania—that across the uninviting expanse, aye-aye, my captain, did I eye the atrabilious sail of Starla weathering in the galley mother’s vituperative gale. Diffident dad had long flung his white flag into the ring—in the spirit du jour of inversion, now might have seemed the time to fling to him the still-unannounced engagement ring embossing the inner lining of my jacket, but he’d squandered by his inaction any anachronistic claim to my dowry. Instead, as I asked, “Pray tell, whatever might the great lion represent?” like some audacious

child daring claim to a kingdom exorcising sword from stone, I advanced my pawn kingward with his own pusillanimous petard: the shredded remnants of the very ivory stockings in which they'd obliviously flown their darling star, the scintillating and celestial point amid a bleak firmament of dim galaxies and planes aflame, that had launched within me alone a thousand shifts; my very own shroud of Turin, final vestige of a savior no wounded lion charlatan could supersede—drawn against him and his abdicated puissance.

“Christ,” he gulped. “It’s getting a bit chilly in here.”

Queen slid diagonally into place to intercede, thwarting virtual regicide, toting a platter. “I don’t suppose we sent the restraining order to your previous residence?” She bent to lay the pungent hors d’oeuvres on an end table. I checked my mate; she dragged behind sullenly, almost petulant. Where her necklace—tautened clavicle-centric chevron—veed, her pearl was nervously massaged between divine fingers like ovum burnished extemporaneously yet perfectly by an obviously infallible goddess. God, I loved her. But the ebullient respect for women-as-A-sex that had so recently bubbled up within rapidly righted itself into a localized rather than universal phenomenon. For before me were her intractable progenitors, a direct lineage to make fallacious a favorite teleological syllogism that by virtue of its infinite intricacy, any complex system necessitates an ever more complex and benevolent creator, whose very existence would then necessitate ad nauseum an unfathomable train of proximity to perfection, where the interstitial chasm between its cars and the illusory mountain of perfection must sharpen exponentially, eternally. But for this track to possess any traction, for it to lead us to any terminus of relativity, we are forced to accept that though there may theoretically exist a driving engine that scrapes the escarpment, we must irrevocably settle for our adulation upon the one that empirically comes closest. Rendering the myths of any unseen, preceding cars obsolete. Now I am getting derailed—as I have rejected in my life the exhortations of the kumbaya contingent, so too would I forgo courting traditions contingent upon parental appeasement.

Starla and Dud in hushed, hushing concert: “Mother...”

In the spirit of civility I coolly awaited some epexegetis that did not come; surely I would have been whisked off the premises had an order been ordained. She mistook my silence for reticence and hissed back, though toward me, “You see you aren’t the only one with a flair for deception.” She gestured with an open palm above the food as she sat down. “I would offer our Chardonnay, but I confess it is of terribly recent vintage. And probably too early in the day anyway.”

“Nonsense,” said I, playing the game. “Though I prefer a red.”

Father piped up. “An astute ear for symbolism—”

“I trust bloody well that wine as allegory flows freely in these parts,” I said.

Pop went mum: Of what concern was it to him? He watched wifey with wistful, mistful eyes; he’d already roped his star, and regardless of how time had ravaged her refulgence, he was so obviously stalwart that no meteoric detritus could dislodge his encircling of its dim light. (Woe to the ingrate, ostensibly in love, who detects growing flaws in his stellar center and as a result anticipates with glee its apogee! When I first glassed my distant running Starla baring midriff, my eyes were madly drawn to the pulsing furrows, the penumbral crevasses, the lines of musculature that subtended, radiated upward from her ethereal nether like vertiginous lines of perspective to my giddy artschool sensibilities, lines now disappeared and merged into one *linea negra*, a magical, curved promenade every bit as wondrous to the wanderlust of my sundry and sensuous feelers.)

Mum went pop: “Amazing is His glory. Would you argue?” As if to dismiss any reply she communed sotto voce with her steaming teacup, “Amenmmmm,” resumed like teeming hiccup, “I am to understand you’ve recently come into a rather substantial windfall.” Another sip, another sigh. “I don’t know what honorary role you anticipate playing in order to fill to your legal obligations, but she will not do without. In fact...”

And the miscast, haughty soubrette took liberties with our script, musing in practiced *parlando* upon the consuetudinary lines that I, leading man as Adamic as academic, must recite. Oh, Priggy prattled on, half-stifling a coprophagic grin—sampling freely from the plated Pynchonian ordure-hors d’oeuvres I certainly didn’t order—clinging ostentatiously to her porcelain grail like an anfractuous and fracturing shell of motherhood, whilst I, steadfast surveyor, canvassed our insulated omphalos of disharmony—the anarchic paradise getaway, where were the hearts of childish combatants granted reinless reign, into which we’d flown headlong—to one side heaved father, deceptively upright like some demanding beast but cast harmlessly by intellect into the abyss of obsolescence like the lifeless flotsam he’d proven to be. To the other I spotted Starla, looked longingly toward her curvy shores, the pink peak where we first sparked a flame whose smoke we never expected would elicit any investigation until the wild conflagration of our careless tending left its indelible char...and directly before me sat proper mumsy woefully testing her range: at once playing both presumptive navel commander—a role I’d usurped months ago—a relic shipped in from the motherland to simultaneously rescue and chide her denuded countrymen, fortuitously left untended for a time by nothing save their base devices, as well as Lord of the Flies, my own oblivious Beelzebub, remonstrating unawares that she had in her company a lord of the ring—this ring was no mere junior token in my pocket—no, for all her meretricious thespian acumen she was to me acutely, simply Priggy, prating, piggish, pleading blindly for her cracked specs,

and I'd had at the ready to roll out, as I always did, the rock to mutilate her brittle conch, to facilitate her transmittal conk.

I weathered the icy glares, the burning tongue, endured a regular polyphony of synesthesia until Priggy ultimately delivered her ultimatum: to steer my rocket away from their Starla but be my baby's benefactor from light years away (an admittedly paraphrased peroration, but when you recall that the sad satellite had intercepted my epistolary conceit one begins to understand why such spacey verbiage used against me would be perversely apropos).

Now allow me to be Candide: Not all was for the best. Mother of Pearl, Starla, continued to nervously fondle her nacreous pendant. Amid an insidious calm breaking the tempest of my nemesis I stood. And only this was my cryptic response: "As I understand it, the phenomenon of a young woman's emancipation seems curiously married to a precious succession of gemstones." I knelt through the paralyzingly indignant air of apoplectic pop, to the moan of marmoreal marm and relooped my loosened shoestrings. Did I then brandish the engagement ring? No, I kept sheathed for this seemingly perfect moment my gilded coup de grace, determined to preserve the sanctity of my future present past the petty squabbles of a moribund generation on the brink. Despite the raconteur allure of echoing for future acquaintance and confidant alike the diamond-sharp blow I delivered to that dimorphic blow-hard—certainly they, just as the reader today, could not deny the irreversible eolian vicissitudes that the early wind had blown upon their stoop, into their home—how oh how could I entertain even in media res the notion of tainting so our forthcoming nuptial exordium for the ineffable elation of storytelling? Of course by now the general whereabouts and arc of the ring have been digested by the reader in a faux-fatalistic binary: either I'd never channeled the intrepid spirit that has moved millennia of lovestruck before me or that Starla simply turned down my proposal. Please consider, however, the possibility that neither option be facilely applied; what matters now is that my wrenching failings, the destiny of the ring is tearing up my insides, my visceral labyrinth of guilt-ridden guts flamboyantly borne as garish boa about the soothing shoulders of Barb's reverberating echo. When I rose before them I added simply, "So be it (a secular tautology of her demurred murmur from earlier that I imagine went unappreciated)." While the frigid priggish windbag impertinently carved from her snowy tract of hair frazzled striae—straggled sastrugi that suddenly highlighted a propensity of gray charging her coif that either I had not noticed at our first meeting or had grown prodigiously in the stressful interim—with a dismissive rake of the hand through tundra tendrils, I blithely and vicariously spread the phantom legs of their daughter, scarved my neck with lisle and the tattered memory of her iridescent innocence and walked off without a hint of the peevishness mother had hoped to elicit. I halted before the front door

foolishly hopeful to catch the rousing string section, that the skittering song of Starla's ludic aglets might again beat their familiar dulcet percussion against the hardwood behind in chase. Alas she was shoeless. And I, starless.

I needn't suffer blindly under a tenebrous firmament for long, however, and when Starla fell into my arms the next night I was convinced she'd cracked my cryptic adieu—from God she'd fallen. See, I'd astutely deduced, despite eschewing the topic even after it had become irrepressibly germane, that the pearl pendant was in fact a hanging harbinger of a June birth, more than mere adorning curio, which, when taken in conjunction with the presumed age of high school seniority and its concomitant yet arbitrary number that represents the passage into liberty, suggested that she had survived that magical moonlit traversal of a second, of millisecs, of that unquantifiable moment of exactitude (by which we quizzically disregard time of birth—even as it's recorded—yet apply the broad stroke of the calendar square, naught but an agglomeration of innumerable such instants) from one specific 11:59:59.99999(...ad nauseum) to its corresponding midnight tick, within which months ago she'd blossomed into a pistillate flower upon whose once alienable center no longer could alien legal bees with their apian legalese impede. "Go Eighteen; legally depend no more upon an unscrupulous set to procure for you your smokes," they buzz, "though not yet on the fermented blood of heaven's vineyard"...of course this rambling and grievous airing amounts to much ado about a punctilio, self-lashing wrath of my own petty squabbles, for they cannot conceal that months of such passings, an unfathomable number of moments in which I could have stirred her immured spirit had transpired before my inspired rabble-rousing...So certain was I that she'd returned to make good on the implied promise of her deserted crates to elope that I resolved then and there to commemorate that inexact moment with a direct proposal.

She permitted no words, however; she enveloped me at once. Silent but for the staccato gasps...the susurrant petitions of zippers...going down...the plunging sounds of hungry lips to flesh. The nubile reader knows such animalism at its most wanton as a harried race precariously managed along the slick and liminal isthmus divide between bliss and pain (I presume of my pre-nubile readership that your mothers are similarly displeased at your time with me as was Starla's), but so attuned were we to each other's naked idiosyncrasies that our symbiosis could never again be reduced so to simple sexual race where the collective aim is to stimulate, to simulate a tie. Suddenly was our minimalist symphony suffused by a new aural accompaniment: stifled whimpering to belie her hedonistic abandon. Not since our first had she so neared drowning in the Puddle of Pain. We had become automatons each, slavishly dedicated to the bent of our bio-programming, plugged in yet preoccupied by something greater. We

stopped in concert—not as in the climactic act of pseudo-synchro-ecstasy of those bedded and sweaty thespians we so emulate—two souls drenched but holding strong against the tsunami charging from the Sea of Bliss.

To the zipper so callously dropped I silently begged clemency, groping about for the ring in my pants pocket. Ready to blurt out my proposal, she snatched from me the moment, filled the empty dialog bubble between us into which I could only muster desperate grunts and wheezes with, “Dad had a heart attack.”

I filled the space with a surreptitious groan—how had it come to this? Had she been inured to our closeness so quickly that she relied on these intonations, these trite nadirs of ersatz prosody to climax? (Might I interject that such a confounding experience at the height of my prurient professorial prowess may very well have shaken to the core my every tenuous theory regarding the inherent relations between art and abandon?) So be it, I ceded, but I could not possibly offer my proposal after that. I shrugged and clutched her tremulous airborne ankles to resume the race, only to find the laved enclave once secreted by the creeping reach of our concupiscent wash, secreted from the threat of detection now bare but unwelcoming, the stripped strip upon which we had blissfully slid now dry and forbidding. We stumbled on dry footing, tumbled into a baptism of anguish. As a scrabbling chiropodist I frantically checked the scar of her once wounded sole, but her foot was not the seminal wound aggravated by my reckless forcefulness. There was no irony in the furrows of her face, framed for the moment by her vertical calves about to fecklessly flank my fecundating flanks. She recoiled when I hotly withdrew. Again when I withdrew coldly to the bathroom, where I finished myself off in quiet to the fresh image of a suppliant Starla, curled in fetal repose for the strong father figure she’d never known. It was a visceral response, a selfish, shameful throwback to our disparate carnal beginnings. She out of reach, I out of touch. But to my credit she was spared my callous ejaculation of her father’s memorial that I had once so thoughtlessly denied my grieving Rosalyn.

I reentered. The vacant dialog box that had hovered now ballooned into a vacated panel—if the prospect of rendering this black comic, stripped of humor and vivid color, might finagle from my reluctant, jilted Selina some artistic cooperation, I will permit it—and if Starla had intentions of staying, my untoward insouciance toward her lost innocence and the stent it would invariably dislodge from the cardiac connection between Daddy and daughter, she may well have had a change of heart. Oh, sure, today I can empathize, with Genevieve in Starla’s place and me in her father’s—with the forced celerity of Rorschach ink-blurt honesty I confess that I envision an appropriately wizened visage of that cellular smudge Damian, replete with rather than that virile mane now a depilating pate beginning with the

shiny abrading of a parietal faux-flaying, playing the role of debaucher Ckol—and upon an empathic consideration of the brazen irreverence of my actions I would just as soon turn my revolver underchin than continue this drawn-out imbroglio. But I would have fought for her. Do you see the difference? I would have fought, given the chance...Anyway, I retrieved the crumpled pants and slumped and sulked on the edge of the bed, where I was besieged by the analog admonition of some gregarious dullard whose opinion I'd neither solicited nor initiated, yet there, exuding amid a salacious shroud of bravado was his soulful, tuneless croon, coursing from the vinyl vortex to the speakers on the other side of the room, to assess perspicaciously the situation: I now understood what jail felt like. Had the jacket not leaned upright against the stereo like a specular portent, I was still familiar enough at this point with the cover imagery without needing to look to identify it...but I stayed my heart's desire that this was some elaborate role-playing ruse for a conjugal visit, resisted the urge to futilely peek over my shoulder, hopeful that a bedraggled and bed-ragged Starla lay admiringly agog, her Faberge face sunken wistfully into the plush give of a gossamer cloud; instead I stewed in the throes of my own heart attack, serenaded next by a simulacrum-of-sultry, the caterwauling, broken soul of a fug- and drug-infused chanteuse, asserting the maledictive but specious avowal of strength from a feminine outlier voice attempting desperately to convince herself of it. Never before had rock'n'roll racket stirred within such a communal excursion of the heart, so I stuck around, mesmerized, till the end; in my ire I considered pitching the spin-cycle benediction of my air-borne pants, whirling madly about its pocketed golden ring, toward the set-up whilst the stylus spiraled quietly in the record's dead ring, where mysterious glyphs glyptic and uninvoked, a post script to the closing prayer, marked the matrix of a placid end. I considered otherwise, settling in to the cluck and hum of the autonomous tonearm, rising and sweeping over the dying disk like a deus ex machina to halt the rotation of the record, the spinning of my head.

And I slept.

Of course the old coot survived. *C'est la vie*; after all, if we could simply wish one another dead neither you nor I would have made it to this soiree. Besides, his and wifey's lives were only of consequence insofar as they presented a mountainous bulwark to my happiness. To circumvent the parlous navigation of its unforgiving terrain, I'd been content mining the submontane tunnels, taking the clandestine side trails so that I might mount instead the soft curves of their fortuitous landslide beyond. With the Ckolward roll of Starla's rocks imminent, however, now had the scree been truly cleared. I could have scaled undeterred their faulty faces, trampled his snowy top and then her widowed peak. I could have revealed underneath their matryoshka masquerades not a series of diminutive and hardened inner stalwart selves or even a rushing repository of ursine magma, bubbling with the molten fervor of

parental protectiveness, but instead nothing. Absolutely nothing. Cones of hot air under their frigid facades, a limited range that could for a time obscure the sun's but not daughter's effulgence. I could crumble the rabble to rubble because the shade of their monolithic babble could keep from me their mourning star's lightness no longer. They were nothing. Props of a con artist. Pieces shifted and swapped that hid between themselves a singular, shared pea-brain. I knew this as truth when it came to me mid-morning that I had awoken without a tinge of concern or compunction over my poor compartment mid and post-coitus. I knew this as the gospel when Starla later that day, apologizing for her absconding, slid uncontrollably again unto my sanguine central acme, as she did each midday before she—reeking of a cloying flora to mask her pungent pudency of sex—laconically rappelled from mine to search for the familiar footholds that led back to the hospital until the date of Dud's Aslanic resurrection.

Dud was in a fragile state of convalescence when he, keenly cognizant of and beaten down by the pernicious inevitabilities of free will, of the absurdity of a universe cruelly oblivious to one's devout obsequiousness, rapped upon my door the rap of resignation, of conciliation, attempting to apply when I unveiled his pathetic lonesome figure the banal bandage of badinage. Antiseptic may it have been, though, it could not cover the grotesque wen of our overcrowded relations. Imagine: he, radix of the crux of our dispute, etiology of our disease, improvident provenance, etymology of the universal and numinous nomenclature of our dispute, playing ambassador! Out of some ineffable sense of obligation I heard out his plenipotentiary pleas to not keep from him and his wife—she needn't know of this rogue effort—their granddaughter. Not that I'd any intentions to that effect, but since he broached the subject, I employed the custodial leverage at my disposal to inveigle from him the identity of his informant in regards to my whereabouts, to which he agreeably replied: Starla's friend. "The butch one from youth group."

Youth group, or its preferred appellation—as per Starla's faithful retelling—young adult bible study, was the weekly meeting Starla and friend would skip out of to drop by my place. (Allow me to fill these parentheses with gratitude for the controlling maternal hand that had initiated this itinerary!) Butch, as intimated by the antiquated brusque brogue of his generation, translated loosely to "girl with short hair," which in kind insinuated something more transgressive (A quick thank you stretches these parentheses to the divine alchemist who had consecrated these sins by distilling their crass essence into something essential), which would perhaps explain why he was so quick to transfer his eggs of moralistic compromise into the basket of one whose fortune he was now irrevocably hitched. When I'd earlier attached the adnominal Sapphic to her aura, it was in the insensitive parlance of my own evolving age—

a thoughtless, flitting slip of the tongue; I'd no true sense of any orientation besides the uneasy one I'd felt in her presence—and though the term may schlep under the weight of an albatross a tone of intolerance, that was not the spirit I wished to convey. I do indeed identify more closely to a posterity on the up and up in these down-going regards. Let us make this distinction clear so that what I share anent my subsequent action shan't be misconstrued by pedantic detractors in a more punctilious future as a crime of hate but rather of passion:

(Disclaimer: There is no purer expression of freedom than from an assailant with nothing to lose, no one to whom his truth may endanger, naught but his sordid testimony and a lectern from which to deliver it unimpeded. Alas there is no soul more tortured than he who might enjoy this meretricious gift. I thought of all my transgressions that this I would take to the grave...)

In her collision, some gadget crunched or cracked, mechanism malfunctioned or pertinent piece perhaps prolapsed within Starla's passenger side door had caused it to mysteriously refuse the commands of the handle or controls of the window from within. This insolence, however, did not extend to the exterior—for all the outside world, appearing unscathed—where to even the velleity of a slender wrist inadvertently flicked would the door smoothly cede without so much as a squeak in protest. Methinks that buried within this deceptive duality, this dichotomy of pristine surface versus ruined interior awaits the exhumation of an allegory. But of what? Certainly not Starla, of whose insides it could be reasonably averred housed a sublimity more undeniable than her own inspiring outside...though now do I recall an earlier observation of mine, that our victim mightn't have had even a scintilla that Starla, draped as she often was in the presence of outsiders in loose-fitting garb, was with child. Might that be it? This is no matter to you—such are the flitting workings, the unshakable concerns of the writer's mind to which you are now privy that I haven't the time or will to extricate.

The moment I'd slammed the door on heart-rent Fodder, aka dad, aka Dud, on his irrevocable way out, I commenced the plotting that led me to extricate that little demon from my reality. I slipped a cryptic note, enveloped, but penned ostensibly in Starla's handwriting—a cursive artistry whose recursive assimilation I'd assiduously honed as a natural function of an obsessive tendency toward oneness with one's obsession (Pity an epidemic of cacography, wrought by the insidious ubiquity of word processors, computer laboratories and the proliferation of printers to cough up en masse an insipid, homogenized typography, will forevermore deprive contemporary and future admiring pedagogues such simple joy.)—under the door of the outbuilding behind the church that housed their weekly meetings, putting my faith in the elders who'd happened upon it would duteously see it into the rapacious hands of its intended recipient. A daisychain of loops and links: “Meet in the old lot three

blocks east.” (Unsigned so as to exculpate Starla—itself an astral festoon non-pareil, an interconnected constellation of wild stellations tethered by the unlifted pen of signature, whose prudent absence still left of the whole farraginous forgery the bitter aftertaste of the incondite—had it later surfaced as evidence.)

That she'd entered the empty car, its damage hidden by the shadows of a vacant lot three blocks away, and had subsequently gulleeted most of the rohypnal-laden quaff that kept nefarious vigil within the centralized cup holder was a confirmation of what I'd suspected from the first: she'd no qualms palming others' property, that the unscrupulous lips she licked had no issues taking licentious liberties at any hint of any open mouth within reach. That she nonchalantly tipped the bottle as a blithe Salut when I descended into the driver's seat was affirmation that though my methodology may have lacked a certain *je ne sais quoi*—riding wildly along the spectrum beginning at chivalry and ending with a faux-fatherly what's-best-for-you forcefulness—there was little doubt that from this administration of an amnesic dose I would lay for her, eventually, the foundation of a more tenable future (the latent concerns of a father-to-be positively oozing from me, suffusing my every decision!). Let me assuage Dear Reader's conscience, afflicted so with the notion that the very veracity of my claims of head-over-heel, eager beaver run-ins with ambitious co-eds must now invariably come under scrutiny—I assure you they came, scrutinized, in real-time adjudications—now that I've so casually mentioned the dubious possession of that abhorrent substance. I submit for my defense two items: an avowed, re-avowed, unwavering devotion to the truth and, concomitantly, that this virulent philter arrived in my possession in the most honorable of ways, as a vile vial, confiscated in the shakedown of a former pupil whose name I cannot recall—so disgraced by my discovery that he raced to withdraw the following day (and access to those records has long been denied me)—whom I'd overheard shamelessly engaged in a bawdry envisaging to a dodgy duo of dottle-headed, drug-addled dawdlers of his sinister machinations. Trust that I'd have no trouble implicating this rape-ready rapsallion in the lapidary permanence of this hindsight chiseling if I'd only the foresight then to commit it to memory, to memorandum, whatever. Better even had I simply turned over at once to the authorities the malefic mainour (as I'd planned), tucked quietly away into the dark recesses of my mind and desk drawer like some innocuous over-the-counter tonic—subsequently forgotten until a spring cleaning when a statute of limitations I, shamefully, presumed must exist and must cast doubts upon my story, had paralyzed me—so that that bleating cretin on the lam might have been corralled and sheared and castrated with a dogged celerity befitting his sheepish crime. Woe to the absent-minded professor, the circumspect suspect! Cast your aspersions aside. Pity him; succor him—he rails madly against a more universal injustice today without regard to

those litigious constraints that once manacled his tentacles!

Let us waste no more time on potential complaints I may have thwarted and return to the kinetic crime I will have imparted: She did not flinch at my arrival; instead she lifted the bottle that had hung loosely in her hand hung over the fulcrum of her left knee, indecorously apart from the other and raised impudently by the foot impinging upon the dashboard, dustless but for the scant detritus remaining from an excised airbag, and she watched the eyes that watched the final swishing spoonful of sugar, a bottled, cloying liquor to help the medicine go down as though she steeled herself by defiant imbibition against my merry pop-in (Excuse this superfluous aside that seems so suddenly germane—if its expurgation is deemed preferable to the editor, feel free to strike it from the manuscript—but I have failed to forestall an inexorable swelling at this allusion. That of my own synergetic rite of passage, whereby at last catching up to the racings of lecherous thought was a loping, groping dexterity—an autodidactic pleasure nowadays sadly stripped of mystery—that had glided under-parasol, alighted upon my unsuspecting and chaste nether, tumid, torpid, when holed up in my palm in my room, lost to reveries of what creamy and pliable wonders could await underneath the demure yet arousing coat that refused to indecently balloon on her ethereal descent, what flora blossomed sub-bloomers, what touch, what taste, what smell...Today that once-individualized trajectory of self-exploration is a lily laid open for each, a codified inculcation, a communal exercise, a sterile affair. A lily for all, the same dimensions, the erotic illusion of purity ripe for the plucking but out of reach. But what is within reach? They cry out, before ceding to a gross circle jerk to the indelible contours of the female form, that many-petaled wonder of curves exaggerated and augmented but pressed and flat in pages where the sublime is made vulgar, a quotidian and disposable sameness. Oh how I lament the fate of grade-school Joey—from what homogenized firmament will his Julie Andrews descend? Has he succumbed already to our culture's shared sexual muses anointed with oils of celebrity, slathered with the lubrication of standardization? What glossy mien has set to purloin from that fertile and curious prepubescent mind the fine jouissance of filling in blanks, of mining unknown caverns, tracing unmapped terrain? Will he be so inured to nuances of physical perfection that when the first wildflower presents to him her glory that he will decry the unseemly droop of her style, the stigma associated with the uniquely molten bend of her proffered receptor? Upon consideration on the matter I declare Poppins to be my Annabel, parallel paramour, even more so than Rosalyn the formative and juvenile precursor to Starla—from her unassuming bus-elevated entrance on high, the gliding gait with which she eradicated with no great volition any and all comers, warded off every prospective suitor, an achingly transcendent ghost afloat among some unreachable plane until the illusive aura of unbreachable piety that seemed to ensconce her was swept

away with the brume of a soul-sooting smokestack to lips, lips so impossibly human after all, finally to her soft, playful countenance besmirched in ludic work about my own filthy chimney, the echoes she evokes of my frissons of self-centered youthful exuberance are undeniable—who would one morning miraculously see in the mirror that the body into which she'd been incrementally inching, cultivating maybe unawares by virtue of a careful circadian routine of diet and exercise, had culminated in this Vitruvian ideal, a proportional perfection perhaps unrecognizable to modest eyes but immutable even when stifled under the starched habiliments with which she vainly attempted to conceal the wonders of her stark habitus. An unnatural stiffness even the tousling wind at the bus stop would not abide. No, if even her immovable king on high could not deign to keep his eolian paws from palpating her angelic form, I daresay no force could have prevented that before me, thither entered the woman to whom I would forever entrust the care of our prodigious progeny.), or even worse: that she'd anticipated it. "Where is she? Let's go," she ordered in an honest, matter-of-fact intonation, wiping her lips with a sleeve, as though her chauffeur had only just reported to duty. I turned the ignition and the low insidious rumble that seemed to start below our feet and shake the whole car was my reply. When I turned my head to navigate our backward locomotion, I caught sight between her thighs of an unlabeled bottle of red wine, erected like some Freudian phallus of potable potency at its unlikely locus, swiped, I was certain, from the church and nestled there among the frayed and shapeless holes, reticulated wickets to patches of splotchy skin, that pocked her blue jeans in that rebellious and cavalier coeval way. Dipsomaniacal? Kleptomaniacal? An unfounded indignation of righteous rationalization rose within: this is what you wear, this is how you respect the property of those helping to set you straight? But I bit my tongue, attained in my zenlike focus on the road behind us a deeper understanding that the nature of my expeditious expedient, already inexorably underway like a bullet loosed, a martial act as reprehensible as any, to be, irreproachably, an evil necessary, and, unlike our trajectory, irreversible.

Once on the road her petitions, so fraught with a forced indifference, were met with the forced indifference of her driver, looking ahead, looking behind, increasing velocity just so, to pass inconspicuously any discerning drivers who might nightly study the road with their Samaritan busybody eyes for signs of distress. Her tone shifted with the inflections of the motor. Thoughtless barbs under veils themselves of conscientious objections, ranging from "What are you, three times her age?" with the *ahem*-addendum, "Thrice, thrice her senior...yeah I know how to talk to pretentious old cads like you," to "You don't know where she is," to the downright incendiary, "I bet you miss your sweet little virgin, don't you? Here—" each met with a workmanlike stoicism, a statuesque devotion to the road ahead until after that last one she pushed her fingers under my nose and the toxic concoction of

cigarette smoke, red wine with notes floral and fruity, and the fetid odor scraped out from the forbidden recesses of some chthonic nook. A crotch-cozened—yes I was certain—but putrid and peregrine stench that would have immediately precluded Starla from its tally of pilferage had I taken a moment before reacting impetuously to this affront, swatting her hand flat into the empty crater at the center of the steering wheel, causing me to swerve and slow and stop the car beside a guardrail, where I might hopefully collect myself.

Idling, I handled the hectoring harangue with which she battered me, displaying once more the laconic resolve and requisite focus on the road. Suddenly the periphery of mirrors at our disposal enlivened in a three-headed beck of pulsing gradations. An incidental intruder from behind threatening our punitive rendezvous. A white knight emerging from the blackest night. As a participant in the communal procession of traffic, I felt intuitively, vicariously its deceleration, just as lucidly as its light-footed operator must have. But it was of no such kinship that I felt too the frantic desperation of my passenger—vying for the attention from a horn quietly unimpressed, and quite frankly as unimpressible as she would soon find the door at her right inoperable—but rather I felt it in her wriggling right wrist I'd unintentionally and unknowingly pinned to the wheel in our little kerfuffle. I kept the force of our fortuitous position until the nearing car was inveigled back onto its original trajectory, confiding by the coruscation of my left turn signal to my compliant compatriot that all was in fact well, that we were just about to rejoin him on that grand paved lane to freedom, and so the car swooshed obliviously past.

I pulled out from the makeshift shoulder; she reared back from my shoulder wresting her hand from mine. I waited until we reached a safe, comfortable speed, until she'd woodenly resigned to the seatback from her futile work at the door. You may be wondering why I had been abnegating the joys of castigation, of admonition, the spoils inherent in pronouncing victory over one's haughty archenemy before the deft deliverance of coup de grace, and the reason was simple: I could not risk imbuing even a bibulous youthful tormentor with a misguided sense of righteous vengeance in a crushing yet vain volleying of rhetorical engagement in the small chance that at a later date by mnemonic magic might some importuning interrogator cull from her subconscious any lost and latent details about "that forgotten night of drunken debauchery," a night she will have come to retroactively dub the night of her "reluctant redemption." No, I imagine the very concept of rational, syntactically-sound argument to be so alien to the beast that any such statements extolled by the likes of a pretentious cad would invariably lodge themselves into the shallow of her ears like indelible gobs of cochlea-clinging cerumen until some gossamer-headed swab would deign to coax them out.

Perhaps against reason, I had hoped for a placid incapacitation, that she'd have been a rumbling

mass of drool and snore before I even stepped into the car, and failing that admittedly unlikely fortune, that she would pass soundlessly to sleep without incident, sans fracas as we silently wended these bucolic streets. She seemed revitalized, renascent even, at the advent of an adversary; she had until then displayed for me none of the slurry drowsiness upon which I had come to rely. (Nothing like what I witnessed in playback of my own video-recorded exhibition, where I prudentially tested that precise dosage on myself, an admittedly denser specimen, reciting Patty P's poetry, laid out before me, ad nauseam, ad emesis, so that literally for a second instance was his hackneyed ending couplet vomited onto the page (maybe it should have given reason for pause that when I awoke I did remember without watching that I'd slipped myself the mickey: a partial, though not vivid, recall I wholly attributed to the fact that I'd been hashing out the logistics of this subterfuge for so long before the test that its effects must have fallen well outside the perimeter of any reasonably expected amnesic reach); do not go forth with fervent expectations to view this drunken but rather uneventful imbroglio, however, for it has been forever lost to the same celluloid purgatory where floats a veritable host of home movie casualties irreversibly erased, now at most momentary palimpsests, scintillas flashing briefly before the niveous static into which they transition to programming chosen to replace it: in this case the accidental and peripheral smut with which you've since imbued your own undignified imaginings that we've long since gone over.) Though I fully recognized I could not efficaciously countervail her fusillade of outrage, I was unable to stop myself from vouchsafing valiantly, defiantly: "If only you knew as much as you think, you'd keep yourself and your poisons away from her."

Another swig of vermilion had granted her again the illusion of flippant composure. Permitted a grin. Ostentatiously she popped open the glove compartment with the contemptible familiarity of a perfectly-placed curled-pinkie jab and exhumed from its gaping mouth the crepitant paucity of a crumpled cigarette pack—a booby-trap not placed by these hands—from whose opening she'd jutted with a skillful flick of the wrist a single fag end to her lesbian lips. She embraced the silence now, leaned coolly back within it. Broken by the crackle and click, crackle and click of the lighter ignobly ignited, the normally inaudible hum of butane feeding the flame, the exhalation of smoke dragoned forth with absolutely none of the sensuality with which Starla so effortlessly infused this pernicious enterprise. The smoke poured forth, choked out with a chortle until the last of it hung menacingly in the air. She spoke through the labral interstices flanking the cigarette, a cigarette stuck like some umbilical conduit that even in speaking she refused to remove and through which she pumped the pent and malicious vitriol understandably harbored for the cruel, deaf mistress, Nature, who would staunchly deny her any chance of reproductive joy without a hint of the biological compromise of compromised chemistry. An

unspeakable ugliness revealing itself, leaking out, lashing out as a suffocating animus: “You think I care about that little bastard of yours? Drowning in the blood of Christ!” and she hiccupped, teetered, lifting the tipple to a nipple—implying my unborn subsisted on the teratogenic dregs of involuntary transubstantiation.

At that I could compose myself no longer. I seized and ravaged her upper cervix with a murderous fortitude that unfortunately no back alley physician had been bidden to wage against her mother’s lower cervix some eighteen years prior. I’d her cheek against the window. Cigarette loosed and fallen. Wine sprayed and spilling. “Has Starla been drinking?”

“Bastard, bastard. You. Hate...” And with that, or some iteration thereof, the truculence of her flailing arms subsided.

“Tell me, tell me now,” I demanded, but the life had already drained from the slumped figure. A death-induced flash of dissonance, of delirium pulsed from my heart to my hand, where the spark of lunacy gracefully died with a somnolent gasp, a shuddering breath; she had merely succumbed to the workings of medication that my baited and impatient impetuousness had outpaced.

She had stolen from the church. Like Damian before her she’d attempted to glom in a desperate groping of trammeled defiance my peace of mind. Had she continued down this path there is no foretelling the toll to be wrought by her hateful kleptomania; hers was a present, possessed of an uncertain future, woefully in need of a wake-up call, and it was no small gift to society at large for me to be the one to induce its concomitant coma.

Dragged over to the driver’s seat, she moaned and mumbled incoherently when seated at the helm, draped the steering wheel when I let her go. Trust when I tell you there was less pleasure than even apoplectic Ckol, christened and baptized at the sanguinary altar of vengeance, could conjure at what next transpired. To substantiate the ruse only, I slammed her unresisting face just once into the pentapedal splay of the steering wheel, possessing neither the cushion to accommodate her unbidden approach nor the voice to announce her unbridled arrival, a brutal act of animalistic theater from the twisted creative mind that brought to you Damian’s Demise, conceived of by loins of survivalism, born through the dilating egress of necessity. The pure functionality of it does not now nor did it then mitigate the sickening thud, the indelible lapse into a simulacrum of sobriety that she exhibited, pressed up against the wheel, a sheepish gurgling for mercy that nearly brought me to tears, before the tenuous control she’d had over her glazed pupils finally disintegrated for good, whereupon they acquiesced to the pull of the quiescent brain, to which, I needed to then remind myself, she’d been grossly and abusively negligent. I replaced the letter in her pocket that had led her to the car with another that read,

again in immaculate imitation of Starla's style, that "We could never be, this is goodbye (sans signature)"—these transliterations verbatim should corroborate extant, lingering cold case inclinations, doubt as I may that they perdure still, over any apocryphal protestations upon which she might have insisted at the time of her apprehension regarding my culpability—I shifted the car from Park, let it coast unabated and unseen, swardward and copse-bound, as I tremulously trudged back under the weight of a heavy conscience...Could that not have been my daughter? Had I not stolen from the church as well (Remember when I first laid eyes upon her, the sororal hands she kissed, the both of them cloaked in the blackness of their filthy habits?)? Strip from us the cosmetic disparities of anatomy and age: Were we so discrete in our doings; were our vines not entwined creeping up the same arched pergola, coursing the lozenges of the same stellar trellis; did we not sprout from the common ground of epicurean predilection? Could that have been my Genevieve in some other dimension, in some merciless crisscrossing of fate? Certainly she was someone's Genevieve. But no, she could not have been mine, not my Genevieve, the beautiful child who could inflate the lowliest organism with an air of incorruptibility and innocence but could not breathe for her own mother even one aspiration to forgiveness or reconciliation. I'm slipping away, away...these thoughts only served to undermine! I forged on, fortified myself against these unwelcome sieges with the knowledge that those commonalities I shared with the my assailee were not the seedy integrants of those glutinous unions normally cleaved within the adhesive atmosphere of common interest but rather of the type between embittered, embattled combatants, territorial warriors—among whom is it implicit and tacit that no tactic be forbidden—prepared to spill blood over the very holy ground within which their impassioned devotion had germinated but would henceforth sustain only one...By the acceptance of this ancient martial covenant, unspoken yet sempiternal, was I equalized, a steadfast configuration of stoic countenance plus statuesque posture. A perfect equation of plausibility less the requisite subtrahend of cool indifference, calculating the difference between a madly mawkish and a reasonably rattled reporting of one in my purported position as victim of burglarious misdoings when I so apprised the authorities that my car, the car of my spoiled and apprized spoils, had mysteriously disappeared.

Along the pedestrian route back to town, whilst wrestling my conscience, I had disposed of the incriminatingly tainted bottle in a most undignified ecological manner, firing it blindly into the roadside foliage as an indignant effigy—regally cervine but quickly deposed—hopefully bagging for good my unborn bambino's buck king bucking the parlous munitions of their threatened future into a bosky abyss; it was not long after burning the original letter I'd recovered along with the stacks of practice pages I'd devoted to the emulation of Starla's penmanship that the police had come knocking. The lead

officer asked if I would be pressing charges, at which I ruminated ostentatiously before shaking my head demonstrably, replying, “I have thought about it and I trust that the poor dear has suffered enough. It is after all just a car, yes? It was destined one day to the scrap heap anyway. I can buy another. The important thing is no one was hurt. Oh? Well then. At least nothing critical, yes? But since we’re on the subject, officer, these floors will soon be blessed with the pitter patter of little footsies (too much?). Yes. Thank you. So you understand I need some reassurance, you know, that steps we take today will dissuade tomorrow these unfortunate types of unnerving run-ins. Yes, I heard about the wine; I pray the church is as forgiving. I did not write to her any letter. What did it say? Okay. Yes, of course not. Protocol and such. I understand. Please see to it that she gets the help, no matter the distance she must travel to find it (At this, I confess I allowed the laughably affable gesture of a smiling wink to crease momentarily my left pupil from existence. I quickly conjured it back to the appropriate circumference, leveled by eyelids, of the deliriously serious under an ironing brow of solemnity.), that the girl so desperately needs.”

Oh but those were the days, days when I could call upon those forthright defenders of the public—a public to which I am irrevocably linked no matter the manner of legal ambiguity that has linked itself to me. Not like when I charged homeward to save Genevieve from some unknown terror, slipping within my convalescent chassis and inside my smarting crisis—each in so different manners of fugitive discharge than mild-mannered, law-abiding I could have possibly foretold—past the busted restaurant bustling with impotent dicks. Most certainly not like today, as I lie in wait away from their searching lights, where strewn about me lies what remains of Barb, unrecognizable but to the uncanny noses of their nosy canines, Barb in bits, used and abused, exhausted, depleted of any splendor of the seaside vista with which I had once imbued her seductive sprawl. Ah but there is nothing they could do for me anyway.

I have gazed through the window again. Where lied, lay the moon? The bark-blotted moon, crazed lune, concealed by stretching trees. Refusing to show its diminutive face but reflecting iridescent now along an interminably vast blanket of freezing ground below—perception becomes reality, but I am not making this up—a reflection of a reflection of the silent sun now. Risking the cliché, the end feels unseasonably cold. Markedly frigid. It comes cold. Believe it. Replete with a juddering chill and even the illusion of a ground summery but snowy. Nature’s lot dissimulated of its envious hue by nightfall. By snowfall. Making clear by its diamond-bedazzled etiolation that my lot, with its single diamond swallowed diffidently in circumspection (and even that accomplished only in bacchanalian bravado), was unequivocally unenviable. As though I needed the reminder.

The disposed girl has graciously left us alone for all this time since. Doubtlessly thriving in environs more conducive to the enervation of her particular sickness...I will reiterate one last time that any of her presumed same-sex proclivities intimated either implicitly or explicitly were not the source of my consternation—so long as they elicited no such foreign longing in my nigh-domesticated Starla—and that I am of course referring to her chronic kleptomania and impropriety, among the litany of health and fashion offenses to which I was privy (and this, merely the scant list of infractions that I could enumerate in our short period of acquaintance!). It is perhaps a remittance of my guilt, stamped by her relatively silent surrender, that I send to her no further ill will, nor will I deign to hypothetically elucidate the horrific death that for her I'd once imagined. I send in its stead the general good tidings of a harried father to all of the world's daughters.

Chapter XVIII

Yes he is a stranger and I know Daddy won't be happy but he looked so sad and smelled like smoke and I know my mother used to smoke and he told me he had an important secret to tell me that I simply had to hear so I let him and now he has brought over Daddy's cross to the table. I mean crucifix, at this point. I apologize for the run-on sentence. He looked at it like a kitty cat, running his hand over it. I told him it was my Dad's but he ignored that and asked if I knew anything about Jesus. I just shrugged. Daddy has told me about some things when I asked about it but not much. I certainly didn't know enough to answer questions if this guy was some sort of preacher. Daddy would probably be even madder in that case. Anyway, Daddy promised he'd tell me more about the cross someday anyway. I don't think I care though. I'm sure it has to do with my mother. I just know. Everything does. Can you feel my eyes roll? Why did I let him in? He even mentioned the secret on the phone before he came. About my parents so I assume he was Daddy's business partner or whatever. Suddenly he started pulling apart the cross in two pieces. The crucifix I mean. I told him he shouldn't do that but he just kept going. I should not have let him in. It didn't even look like anybody really. The figure who was supposed to be Jesus I mean. He asked me if I know what people call him. I shrugged again. Then added that I know his name is Jesus so I guess people call him Jesus. He smiled. Like an invitation to talk more about it. Just what I was afraid of. I shouldn't have even opened the door. But I told him that I didn't know where Cheryl went either so what do I know and then he said he knew that she went out for a smoke. So she must have told him it was ok. Maybe that's why he smelled like smoke. Maybe she got lost. I was a little scared. Daddy will be mad but what if the secret is about him or about my mother that will help Daddy find her? He sure is an ugly cuss. The stranger. Damn, piss, ass. I don't really like to say bad words but I like to get Daddy going when I can see he's got my mother in his eyes. I know worse ones. I hear them in the music Cheryl plays when Daddy has left for what he calls meetings. She tells me not to repeat them so I don't. Well I haven't yet. Son of God, son of man, he said. Son of a bitch I almost said just so maybe this guy would tell Daddy what I said. I almost giggled at the thought but stopped myself. I was so nervous. Why did I let him in again? He stopped for a moment too, looking like he wanted to ask what was funny but I'm glad he didn't. He went on, saying Lord, Savior, Christ, and some others. Then he asked if I would like to know what he calls him. Jesus, I mean. Would I? Not really. He still hadn't

mentioned Daddy. Not as a name for Jesus but as in my missing Daddy. I just shrugged at first, again. I did not care. I did not want to talk about this. But he was still pulling Lord Savior Christ off of the cross one arm at a time and I thought maybe he was using this to tell me something I needed to know. Like a teaching tool. No, Daddy would not be happy with any of this. Maybe the message was a riddle. I do like riddles. So I said, What? And he said, I like to call him the Fisher of Men. I waited for him to say the funny or clever part but nothing came. He could see the disappointment in my eyes, I know it. I could not figure the riddle out. Tell me, Genevieve, he said and it felt weird that he called me by my name. He said, Does your father like to go fishing? I did not shrug but maybe I should have instead of nodding. I have never seen him go fishing but maybe that's what he really does on his secret business meetings. I guess I thought by telling him Yes that he would get to the point. He smiled like he knew I was lying. A lying little girl with a potty mouth. I would probably die and go to hell he thought. Maybe tonight for punishment for letting him in. That would show me and Daddy and mother. Look who your darling daughter looks to for attention! He held up the Jesus figure, now completely off of the cross. The arms were not connected to anything anymore and it looked like he just woke up and was stretching out now. He told me, "I like to call him that, Mr. Fisher of Men, because this is what fishermen tend to look like when they tell stories about the one that got away."

I giggled again to be polite and then got quiet. The next thing he said was that my box sure was interesting. Or pretty, I can't remember. He meant the gift from the old lady with the cat whom Daddy helped. Well, lots of cats actually. It was on top of the table a little ways away. I reached over to grab it and held it in my lap and I thanked him. It felt like a gift from Daddy. That's how I think of it anyway. I almost got the nerve to ask him to explain the fisherman riddle. And where was Daddy? Could he maybe find Cheryl? But he stopped me when he said, You know your Mommy sure misses you. He tied the purple ribbon that was across the shoulders around the face of the little Jesus figure where the eyes would go, that is if it had any. I did not want to talk about the cross and I definitely did not want to talk about my mother. I guessed he must be a preacher after all but I didn't get the one that got away punchline. Daddy will be home, I told him. Very soon. Then I remembered that he probably knew more than I did about Daddy and I got quiet again. Daddy does not like preachers. I did not say that part out loud. He said he knew that, that my Daddy would be home soon and that was why we should hurry. Hurry with what? He said the message he had was from my Mommy but what he did not know is that there was no Mommy. My mother left us when I was born. She sends letters once in a while I think just to torture Daddy but won't tell where she is or why she left. I have never seen her but Daddy says I have her eyes and her stupid, stupid hair that won't lie flat and that I should be happy that I get to see her in

the mirror every day. Are you impressed that I did not say lay flat? Daddy told me that the kids he used to teach did not even know the difference between lay and lie. Daddy often speaks in little riddles. Like that I saw my mother in the mirror. Not a riddle but a metaphor. I think. He loves to make silly jokes that I don't always get although I can tell by his face that he wants a reaction. I have a special face for when he is fishing for a reaction. Daddy, Fisher of Laughs! I made the face up all on my own so I know I do not look like her when I do it. Well I mean that it came naturally. I didn't try to imitate anyone else. This man with a red face must know my mother. Maybe she left to be with him. No. He is far too ugly. Next to Daddy, I mean. How could she have possibly? And Daddy is probably looking for her now anyway. I know that is why we stopped at that crazy house the other day, with the man who came knocking on my car window. But I didn't roll down the window or anything. He hopes to rescue her. Daddy thinks I need a Mommy but not everyone has one I tell him. Maybe he thinks I'm too young to get that. And it's okay. I used to tell Daddy that we would be married when I got older. By that I mean, he and I. Lots of people probably think that should say him and me, but I was replacing the subject we from the last sentence. And so you wouldn't think I meant somebody else. Maybe it's silly and I'll change my mind someday. We would never have to be alone. This ugly man with yellow arms and red face can see that I am not going to open up so he finally asked, May I see your box? I told him it is locked and I don't want to break it. It is a beautiful box. I would rather keep it in one piece than find out what is inside. But since he said May in place of Can when he asked, I said he may look if he'd like. So he held it up in his yellow hand and with one eye studied the keyhole. Right after that was when I knew why I had let him in.

Chapter XXIX

You waft through the ominous acidity of something burning outside, you stagger, you burst through the doorway. Genevieve sees you from the living room, jumps from the couch and rushes toward you, leaps into your arms. You don't even ask about the babysitter. She's fired one way or another. You twirl madly with your daughter against you. She is safe. Your heart is beating out of your chest. You see how completely you can be reduced to cliché? A daughter tends to fill her father up with them. But even of that you care nothing. You ask if she is all right, tell her how you've missed her. She leans back with her legs clutching fast at your sides to take you in. A tear escapes from her eye and then one from yours and you sniffle. You wipe your cheek. You trace the salty rivulet down into and out from the evanescent dip of a dimple to the soft edge of her jawline where there clings with trepidation that single issued tear, where it trembles above a chainlet you know that you have never seen. Your eyes race downward to its pendant. Your heart races when you see the alien, cerulean topaz rising and falling there on her chest. From whom, from whence did this enter your home? And when your dear baby Genevieve intimates that you did, YOU did, but you spot over her shoulder in the next room beside your crucifix, deconstructed now to a tableau of that stations of the cross with Manichaeian simplicity, Genevieve's box, perhaps cracked, lying in two hinged halves, open to the world, you remind her that she didn't want to break it open and she coyly confides that that other man who just left had had the key so she didn't have to, you go. You ask through which door did he exit as you ease her into the oversized plush recliner from which she had sprung and you assure her you will be right back. You promised you wouldn't leave her again. You just promised. But you go. You grope for your revolver. Your very own rotten Danish dagger, fast to your waist, leads you on, onward. Do not let her see that instrument. Wait. Wait. Now: Pull it as coolly as you can manage out as you step outside through the sliding glass door. Quietly, quickly. You hold the gun aloft, an extension of your outstretched arm. You can taste the smoky air on your sweat-slicked skin there. At eleven o'clock a strange figure meanders at the edge of the road. He knows everything. He knows everything and has seen your daughter and there is but one way to divorce from him all this knowledge so you level your gun and you do not think through the consequences and you squeeze the trigger, steady, true. Open your eyes. You were not circumspect, did not hesitate; you did not blink even once in the face of danger, did not trip over words

like so many before you have done and of you could be reasonably expected in this ultimate moment of reckoning. Look well upon what your paternal diligence has wrought. You step forward for a better look and suddenly you realize that the time between pulling the trigger and opening your eyes was accompanied by neither deafening crack nor residual smoke to shroud your view to that victimless plat. There is no one there anymore. You believe what lies before you is a bloodless meridian. You turn to run inside and you run straight into Genevieve. A wistful Raphaelian angel framed by the doorway as an eye witness to your murderous lunacy. You scoop her up and carry her inside with the gun now against her back. You imbecile. You reckon the weight of her in your arms. You will be forced to reckon with the weight of her innocence stolen by your hands. But you do not need to check a rolled chamber to see that what you have failed to reckon is the weight of your long-since emptied revolver. There is nothing you can do to protect her. But you know this completely when she whispers through her cries that the stranger had told her that Starla is indeed in danger at Luther Place.

Chapter XXX

With the juvenile trash of Sapphic temptation distantly disposed, Starla and I were free to resume undeterred our torrid daily routine, the temporal pleasure of the temporary custody of each other's corporealities whose continuance she perhaps never truly knew had been threatened. Always these escapades, to my dismay episodic and fugacious—despite my every petition for her to stay, to revel in the exhilarating euphoria of a strenuous mounting, she would escape, leave so shortly after the coming, rappelling as through from a repellant rocky climax. Still, she kept returning at her leisure. I was keeping strange, late hours. I would not sleep until she had come. If she did not come I did not sleep. Could she not acknowledge the universal truth that I needed more? That I could not sleep as a man in possession of a fortune but in want of a wife? For all my complaints I cannot deny she was gradually becoming a more affectionate lover. Gone were the cold, mechanical trysts of my supplication, of my subjugation, infused with unrequited passages of puerile prosody and morbid ejaculations. For a more worshipful deity upon which to dote in the splendid glow of post-coital excursions, this missionary, positioned at the altar of her burgeoning nook, could not deign to pray. Before her tortuous absquatulations she would usually permit the indulgence of concentrated infatuations, investigating the underappreciated intricacies of a flexed knee or the shielded scent of shaven underarm exposed by a hand tucked between her head and pillow, this pose augmenting one half of her torso, offering to my exploratory impulses the once-virgin realm of a plump underbreast—does it not seem perverse that the arbitrary decorum of apparel puritanism may make exotic such locales while rendering the busier and bustier cleavage of a particularly rakish décolleté dreadfully commonplace?—known in its stage of development only to a handful, and now encroached upon by our distending creation. And this, this emerged as the area of greatest sensitivity, of paralyzing self-consciousness, for radiating from our hemisphere of shared space was a growing monument to a sin that could not be denied, a mark that could not be washed away. And whenever I would dare to palm the slightest ripple upon that convex surface, hopeful to glance even a fin of our slippery minnow, she would clam up, dam up my gentle flow with the levee of leaving. And marooned again, from the bank would I carp vainly at our current state of affairs, anchored by the golden life preserver of the engagement ring held hopelessly at bay—the pocketed ring, in the circumsimilitude desuetude of punctuated finality like a probed and inflated

period, longed to enliven, envelope her ring finger, to register in profile as mere tied knot among the windrowed knuckles making unique her sinistral hyphen to link Starla irrevocably to Ckol...Starla-Ckol...my Starla-Ckol...hysterical...helical entwinement of sanguine entanglement...forevermore—while she floated away. Alas there seemed an impassable ocean bubbling between hand-wringing and finger-ringing.

Thanksgiving came and went and its only noteworthy demarcation within my household was the three full days when Starla had taken leave with her family—the subject of this subjugated deprivation mercilessly withheld until after her return (I barely registered that it was November)—when I'd engorged myself on none of the stuffing to which I'd become pathetically dependent. Three days sans sleep. Or if I'd slept it was a restless somnambulant sojourn of hypnopompic half-consciousness, rouse-ready and hyperemic at the faintest hint of a visitor. Not quite like tonight, when I've had Barb at my disposal for the whole of this present sleepless stretch (I confess there is no recounting the number of revitalizing naps into which I've slipped and later returned), but you must understand hers is a pull toward sleep. Whereas I could not rest in my methodical ascent toward ecstasy at Starla's side, Barb was acquired merely to be recklessly consumed, to quell with her soporific prowess my inimical anxiety. A soothing counterbalance her selling point: to calculate the tenuous balance required to winnow from a kaleidoscopic logorrhea an economy of words. And I sit here sullen and sovereign, a nation unto myself, hopeful to bequeath beside a gross domestic product the antiseptic and fine print of the paperthin path that zigzags betwixt the scatology of battology and the cacaphelia of cacozelia. And I am the mad cruciverbalist: I hatch an enlightening lattice of my own crucifiction over the black tiles of fact, and from this stark crisscrossing warped weft there emerges from a seemingly miscegenetic mingling the chiaroscuro of truth. Downward clue: a thirteen-letter word that intersects at its center with grief: "Regarding an extemporaneous yet felicitous theurgy of fortune."

Serendipitous was the manner of Starla's father's passing, for he had just triumphantly escaped the executive shackles of cardiovascular arrest only to ingress ingloriously that interminable wardrobe in the sky, so sent to his undignified grave by the ignoble nib of the pen he'd been absent-mindedly clutching on his clunky way to the bathroom when some wayward floor-borne tome (I hadn't the heart to press for a title when apprised of the autumn fall) tripped him up, and, incidentally, his jugular down upon the panicked pen that responded as much like the retreating squid as it did the stalwart porcupine at this precipitous breach. By the time he was discovered the inky pool of his autobituary—intractable echoes resound of a childish journalistic joke: What is black and white and red all over?—had matted the cream carpet of the guest suite beneath him in an illegible mass of hematogenous text both ink-

dried and unfit to print. Thus was our queer quaternion reduced to troubled trio of integers invariably linked by their same prodigious product.

Mayhap I recount too facetiously the mishap; truth be told, I would have subtracted in the equation another—a mother, of course—if the solution to these formulae was dependent upon my calculations. But lo and behold, some agent of fate of a more mathematical ken had figured for us that the absence of a father figure, no matter the value, plus an insoluble mother was equivalent to, even oftentimes less than, the addition of Starla—who had been hurdling at her whimsy the levitating fence of equalization between her own fodder and the lonely father on the other side—to me. Behind the everexhausting burden of gestating Genevieve, though, she could leap lithely and clear capriciously that partition no longer. And so for an approximate duration of the three days prior to the grand apotheosis of our pregnancy, Starla and I had for all intents and purposes been cohabitating in the sin of faux-connubiality.

Addendum Five

He coasted the driveway leading up to Luther Place in a newly commandeered car. Next to the dense hedge that ran alongside the southern façade, a Sasquatch donning a police uniform waved him cordially into his jurisdiction. The driver nodded at this direction through the jagged interstice of his window. A moiety of a window like the blood-reticulated and gaping glass jaw of a slain ghost. As what seemed some sort of defiant act he knocked the vitreous denture with his elbow so that it plinked in pieces, caromed off of the door and crackled upon the gravel outside to the officer's squinting incredulity, and then he rounded the turn that would bring him directly before the officer still standing tall at the shrubbery. A backslash of brush thick and spiny. He stood there now with one hand hovering almost balefully above his holster and the other beckoning with the impatient, curt waves of an upturned palm. The driver maintained a safe speed and as he neared, the waving hand of the officer descended as if to pat the head of his invisible canine partner before him. At this gesture the car screeched with a sudden lurch and sideways jump that was quickly righted and rocks sprayed from each of the rear tires and the engine inflected and vroomed into gear but the officer who made a reflexive break for safety had heard only the screech and thud and the crunches of his hand into the gun into his hip and the susurrus of the unforgiving shrub behind. One arm of the makeshift iron maiden's embrace. A hundred wooden spikes subjugating him paralyzed against the grille.

The staccato crank of the emergency brake. Cluck of the ignition, final squealing gasp of the engine. The swish of a recoiling seatbelt—he was as suddenly struck by the absurdity of these vehicular proprieties in a lawless encounter as he was by the vehicle itself. Creak of a roused door. An exasperated drone, the harrumph of the relieved car, the catch of carefree footfalls on the grass. The door latched, the drone ceased. These the cop heard. Banging with one palm against the hood, pleading to the deaf ears of the emerged driver. Gun in hand. The driver now the gunman. From beside the wheel well he raised a revolver and pointed it at the officer's face. The cocking of the hammer his only response to the muted demands of the immobilized. With a finger on the trigger the gunman lowered the revolver and then followed with its barrel the shapeless arc of this crossing along the disjointed line of his useless arms. He did not shoot. He stepped backward with gun leveled again at his sweating face. He turned his body but not his face and not his gun and continued toward the entrance of Luther Place. Wordlessly did he halt at the bottom step and lean into the lacuna of nothing but air and tension between them.

Nothing there to stop or even slow a fired round. His hand still and steady. Zeroed in. Beep! Went the missile laid flush into the cop's side, and with a push of an unseen button did the gunman remotely lock the car. The proximity of that orotund blast making infirm the officer's tenuous control of a still intact bladder.

The gunman rattled the locked door and reared back to kick the handle in when the door opened automatically. An elderly woman seated at the entrance with the butt of her cane against a button on the wall. She regarded him without expression. As though she either expected him or had no clue what she had let in. The gunman nodded toward her and walked indifferently by and stopped to scan the lobby walls.

A voice called, "Hey, new guy!" From around a corner a man appeared. He swung carelessly an empty plastic tub in one hand while extending the other. "Did you forget to bring in the mail?"

The gunman's grip tightened on the revolver at his side. He lowered his head to check its fecund state and noticed the laminated postal identification intended to dupe the babysitter still clinging to his chest. Genevieve hadn't even asked about it. "I am filling in for the other guy. Tell me, are you the everyday distributor of mail for the facilities?"

He merely managed to the colloquial affront, "You bet-cha," before he was reeling in a cha-cha-macabre toward the crimson goop of his insides splattered on the windowed wall behind. On the carpet below. A second shot. A third. The gunman astride the slumped body so soon again at one with his glutinous and misplaced muck then crouched and dropped his postal badge and unhooked the badge of the other and walked over to the old woman.

Footprints rimmed in blood materialized on the carpet behind him like the traces of some trailing poltergeist. He spoke sotto voce, "It's okay. Everyone in here is going to die anyway." He depressed with her cane the button and the door swung slowly outward but she buried her head in the word find puzzle with nary a reply. The sanguinary tracks now leading directly to the office door where the gunman slid this new badge of stolen identity down through the ridge of the badge reader and turned the door handle and walked in.

The office opened to him appeared empty. He stepped inside. To the window behind the desk where he could hear the futile rustling of the officer outside. The percussive coda of a fledgling fist. Screams. He eased the window down until the clangor was muffled and nearly dissipated. "You could have prevented this," he said aloud. To the air? To the window? Perhaps, to any uninitiated lookers-on placed unawares at the scene, but instead to the distorted director cowering underneath the desk. "You had a choice. I need you to understand that." With a sweep of his empty hand he sent a lamp, family

pictures, inkwell, all manners of effects personal and professional crashing to the floor. "I am sorry. I meant I want you to understand," he said. "You have entered the rarified realm of the needless. And here I have granted you something very valuable. Do you know what that is?" He awaited a reply he knew would not come. "So few enjoy this gift, of time. A luxury. Fewer still refrain from squandering it. Just let the wave of inevitability crash over you. Pray. Indulge yourself recklessly in the abandon of auto-stimulation this sense of danger invariably elicits in your overworked loins. Give in to impulse. Go on. Pray." An intercom microphone curled, as a shofar levitating at the precipice above a battlefield, over the edge of the desk under which a wheeled chair nestled. He walked toward the chair in the earshot vicinity of a click-click-click and he said, "You think you are making the most of this time but I assure you you are gravely mistaken."

When he pulled the chair from the desk and saw hovering among the clasped hands of the curled director the flitting black circle he did not startle. Rather he descended lightly onto the chair and she pulled the trigger. She herself dazed by the resonant roar in her cubby. She felt the weight of the upward smoking gun as though she had never before held it aloft. She beheld with some strange reverence this wobbling tool of destruction in her hands before the darkened backdrop of this body that had enclosed her within this desperate nook. She felt a tear searing the corner of an eye and then she felt relief. Relieved of that murderous burden when the gun was plucked without ceremony from her hand and rightly turned against her. And just as suddenly she felt the heel of a boot against her trachea. Her cranium caroming against these unseen corners of her desk that only her feet and perhaps the broom of the custodian had ever explored. How did he...How could she have missed? She thought these useless things. God as proctor at her side and these were the forays into unfettered abandon to which she allowed herself. Why wasn't she praying? she wondered. The heel heavy. The pressure increasing. "You could have prevented all this," he said. "This is what you chose."

She did not reply. She could not. She did want to know what he meant. Aggrieved relations were not uncommon. She had chosen when she accepted this job to help others—not this—such delicate advocacy tended to bring out the worst. On instinct alone she groped at the pantleg jutting from her jugular. "Residents, believers," he reverberated calmly, dispassionately.

"Most of you have heard about the untimely passing of Reverend Christ-off. Apologies if I've mispronounced that. Some small number among you know that he died by his own hand. Perhaps a retelling passed along as a battle lost to inner demons. Or that the shepherd had deserted his flock. We inevitably wonder: If he could not cope with the cruel complexities of this secular world, what hope have we? But in such thinking we have found our worldly rationalizations only serve to confuse. To

undermine an otherworldly, undeniable truth. And I have come, brothers and sisters, to shout the gospel from the mountain. I have come to share that the truth is far, far darker than the bloody result of one man's failings. Those agents of science crying suicide are bound by the logic of man. By earth's constraints of evidence and plausibility and precedence. Sometimes, however, truth has no precedence. But it has been foretold. A truth preceding the act. The gunshot was no act of resignation but of rapture. A lifting of his soul to the great hereafter. Indeed He weaves His loom in mysterious ways. Horrific ways. Abject to you and to me, we who are left behind. We the forsaken, what are we to make of this, this grotesque spectacle, this violent taking in secret? Why do we remain? Have we not suffered enough for our redemption? Whom have we denied but ourselves?"

He let up on the director's throat. She had stopped squirming when she recognized he had only been applying ample pressure to prevent her escape and she looked upon his dead eyes and said, "Who do you think you are? They haven't paid attention to one crazy word you've said."

He spoke just to her when he said, "I need only one," before the sonorous electronic knell of the intercom preceded the savage reapplication of his heel into her throat. Malicious now. "So what say you? Will you allow your chaplain's message to die vainly upon the pulpit? Will thou expire with complicity amid the impending torments of hellish chaos or will you take it upon yourselves to facilitate your own rapture? I say let us remind God we are still here, that still we wait. Oh but the time for prayer is passed. Our message shall explode from the fires of abandonment, and so relentlessly, so boundless will be our outpouring of smoke that Heaven will choke on it, will be forced to cough out that omniscient phlegm of judgment to extinguish our righteous flames raging in unison. Where is our miracle?" When he looked again to assess the response the body underfoot issued none. Vestiges of truculence revealed themselves on her splintered and bloody fingernails and the dented desk at her knees that now leaned placid and quiet against the walls of her claustal nook. He recocked and reset the hammer and placed upon the desk her dainty handgun and then kicked away the grip of her grossly prehensile throat on his heel and he rolled backward from the desk. He picked the gun back up and stood and opened the window as if the near silence of a coming breeze might soothe his soul. When his own placidity was ravished by an anguished howling outside he nonchalantly extinguished the intrusive cries with a single bullet from the repossessed feminine firearm to the oblivious cranium of the security cop whose motionless body now stood nearly upright, head bent, dripping still unto the radiant and lepidopterous splash of blood spread across the hood, like some depraved devotee before the craven image of his ruby starburst monarch. Shooter breathed in deeply the onrush of blood-tinctured oxygen and offered a devilish grin as it tickled his face.

Rapt at one end of the earth by the arresting voice that had disappeared for a second time she sucked at a cigarette and sat paralyzed in wait for its return. She slowly exhaled, then cursed the inexplicable sensuality of that act which she simply could not help but exude. Sat at a desk bearing yet another hopeful letter penned to a savior for whom she had lost all faith. Another letter in the litany of prevarications and vague pleas that she'd vexingly permitted. This letter sat unguarded however. Bereft of recrimination and equivocation. An earnest request in plainspeak lying there mocking through the smoky aureole that surrounded. She inhaled again. Played with her lighter. Waited. Reread the letter. Considered the weight of the letter in the pre-stamped envelope she'd been provided and then the outside world and finally that she'd been left truly, completely alone to make sense of this abandonment. She laid the letter down among the scattered unfinished others and rose from her seat and counted off some ten paces before pivoting languidly and launching the cigarette from her hands into an airborne curving curvet onto the papered desk. The evanescent ember spread of its dashed head. The imbricated paper spread smoked slowly at first. Its edges enlivened in thin irregular perimeters of flame, flames working fast until they devoured every letter, from stellar signature through the exquisite body to the dunce heading and spread across the sheets: a peregrine imitation of her upon the milieu where the poor thing had once been laid but where now only blackened bedsprings coiled in the uncontrollable inferno.

Chapter XXXI

lamb-unsure
 Patty could learn
 what enjamb
 meant well
 but look
 no
 further

~~I've kept to myself nearly all my life
 the story of the summer day when Dad and I
 both saw the boy tumble into the hyena pit.
 His father had perched him for a better view
 atop the fence. Alighted like an eagle.
 But a lowly mosquito or fly or some inconsequential
 pest buzzing about his father's neck
 sufficed to unseat by an unthinking swat
 the poor boy who just wanted a closer look.
 An unimpeded view.
 The boy was a stranger.
 I likely would have never seen him again anyway.
 But Dad and everyone rushed over
 amid a soundless explosion of spilled soft drink and popcorn and lion-shaped crackers
 and I didn't even hear the boy scream. Or the thud of his small body against the ground.
 Probably he broke a leg or his back.
 Even if he could have stood...
 All I heard were the vicious snarls
 and barks~~

~~and laughs~~
~~and the crack of two gunshots.~~
~~I did not see the beasts disperse~~
~~or what was left over of the boy,~~
~~for Dad had carried me away already,~~
~~and only now has enough time passed that~~
~~I can write or even recall the event~~
 in terms of verse and rhyme. I've long felt and still believe that
~~never again could I glance the zigzag fence~~
 of a zoo in past, present or future tense.

Zounds!
 That's an impressive panoply
 of purloined Zs you've filched from me,
 zonked out in a zircon-tinged dream
 of you. But before I'm zilched of Z,
 I'll recall one somewhat muzzily
 in the haze of oft-dazed memory:
 angelic you stacking, in the daedalean
 labyrinth of Daddy's Cretan brain museum,
 Zs like a tower of sagging bunkbeds,
 or a Zeus-like bolt of zigzagging zeds.
 But that monstrous zoomorphic mutation—
 conceived in dark zoophilic trysts when
 de-zostered Pasiphae with foolish zeal
 fostered a zygote of bullish appeal—
 detects the waft of sweet zwieback breath.
 Muzzle juts, zeroes, awaits the zenith
 promised by that heavenly breeze, pauses
 a minute...torrid chase! which causes
 you, zipping through, unfazed,
 the ziti tubes of a zany maze,

to use the flattened z-line
 (you spooled 'round your finger),
 buzzily zooming a beeline
 (now here comes the zinger),
 unraveling behind you the very clew
 roused Daddy unknowingly gave to you!
 I surrender the Zs you're seeking with zest.
 To the dozed arched zygoma cheeking my chest:
 'Tis true, it's but one hazardous dream fled,
 but angel, never will you leave my head.

Let's dock now lest we find ourselves too far adrift in those nigh unsalable waters of poetry—you see how I attuned I am to an increasingly mainstream audience that clamors for moor (Have I at any point exhibited an indifference to the reader's demands?!)—where I will reel in the nystagmus of the skimmer and the word-sodden craw of the bottom feeder reader alike by casting again the drum-tight lines of our stylistic ligature, this time as analytic literature to decipher the recurring dream—tis a nigh nightly fright fraught with subconscious symbol and inevitably ripe for interpretative interjection—that has plagued me since Starla's disappearance.

It is a simple wedding scene that haunts by nightmare more vividly than the rueful and elegiac reveries of my days. I await anxiously. After a toddling Genevieve has dotted the aisle with haphazard heaps of lobbed, lopped petals and taken her spot in a serried line of faceless bridesmaids, I turn with a swelling heart to catch Starla emerge from a door on the opposite end. She holds her bouquet and herself, naturally, as stunning monument to grace and beauty, arrested by the diapason of the organ. Peons rise by the pewful, gasp and flash their puny cameras as if the refulgence to which they were suddenly privy could be captured by their film. But the music plays and a murmur from within stirs the aisle-riven throng as Starla stands frozen at the back of the church. Yes, a church of course; as you know I am at heart a staunch traditionalist. But when her falling face frantically flits about the room I eschew ceremonial decorum—at light speed does this bridegroom bridge the spatial vacuum from apsis to apsis within the apsidal locus of our nuptial focus. Genevieve lags behind. The red bouquet Starla held before her has spread about her diaphanous waist at first as bedeguar and then to blood when I arrive to her, slumped and shaking and speechless. She falls in a billowing heap, and when I look back to halt Genevieve she has disappeared. Everyone is gone. Everyone but me—just as it is when I immediately

thereafter awaken.

I know my visions to be projections, nocturnal mishmashes of my own daily hopes and failures, colliding with a sanguinary manifestation of Starla's postpartum sense of emptiness and despair. Such reactions to birth, to the separation of a vital part of the mother misconstrued as loss are not uncommon, after all. With this I am not secretly hoping for some other misinformed interpretation to fall fortuitously from the heavens of the stimulated mind unto my lap. Why then am I mirroring myself and the reader with this vaporous bit of dreamy, ephemeral psychoanalysis? Aside from the previously averred rubric to honest and full disclosure of all tidbits pertinent or seemingly so, I confess I believe a small regiment of humane perspicacity must be deployed in order to combat on the battlefield of the diligent reader's mind the innumerable texts already gathered there that will have validated and contributed to this present prescient agglomeration of enmity from which I cannot retreat. Monolithic structures of ignominy on the horizon. I'm referring of course to those columns of calumny constructed by apocryphal architects of journalism—who would think it nothing more than quotidian bore to build up and then demolish me, defame and maim my character—to support the weight of their grand pestilent obelisk, bloated with the grandiloquent obeli of their own hubristic pretense, buckling under the pressure of their sales-driven agendas and deadlines (without investigating fully mine). I'm talking about scribe lackeys whose greatest act of volition would be the jumping at the chance to reduce their own workload by reducing the recipe of this literary mixed drink to a bitter cock-tale of equal parts bravado and bravura, failing to detect the subtle notes of love that promise to reward a conscientious tasting rather than the planned-in samples that must sadly be spoonfed to these gauche cretins. Such is the nature of the empathic dream interpretation above, which I have provided, or the lazy recapitulation of the attentive bedside manner, provided by unscrupulous doctors or nurses, that I'd exhibited within the delivery room, where I had to pull myself from the paralyzing pit of my couvade, replete with paroxysms of sympathy and pain over the premature adieu to which we were forced to bid our waning exordium, our arduous yet glorious first chapter, in order to wrest from Starla's jagged anxiety a flatline of composure.

I am a split atom.

And you, my Genevieve:

A fig

meant to cover

my blast of shame,
of naked aggression.

Let me dip my toe once more into the frigid cesspool of cliché: And with Genevieve's arrival was I made whole. When I first beheld her and finally held her, the absurdity of a life spent chasing paper accomplishments cascaded over me in an excoriating, cleansing wash. That I had been harried not by the knowledge I'd penned nothing substantial in the previous eight months, aside from the odd incriminating epistle, but that that once horrifying evaluation suddenly meant nothing. All trespasses against me forgiven, more or less; to wit (for those without it): simply reliving the experience provides for me ample joy that I might forget, if only momentarily, the muck to be raked over my grave by editing historians-by-way-of-histrionic editorialism, so quick must they be to cast their trivial aspersions of repetition regarding the dual nature of my enjambed meant-al balance presented in the paucity of provided poetry, to sensationalize for their obitch-credentials the fast-pitch Bar-bitch infidelity that has been so conveniently and facilely thrown across their plates, that they would willfully squander the proffered literary prosperity of a trusting posterity for their word-count pittance.

It was all whirlwind from delivery onward. One moment we hung helplessly in the air of the suffocating wait for her to cry out; in the next the ruddy body of our diminutive delivery fit 'most snugly in one papa palm whilst her comically conical crown hung heavily into the other. And then we were home together, she swaddled still in her neonatal flag of aqua-striped white and I in her inexplicable warmth—if this putative illegitimate be the sole positive creation wrought in the praxis of my anomic heterodoxy then I hereby proclaim the entire endeavor an unequivocal success. Starla's light seemed to dim, however, to retreat quietly to the darkling background: She passed through now and again more as an eidolon—checking in from the outside on the proud daddy-roo with his sleepy joey belly-sprawled—than she did the fiercely protective progenitor in the perilous perinatal periphery, of one plunged precipitously into the purlieu of a world theretofore unknowable but for which I presumed she'd been prepared prodigiously. Much how the prurient and capricious pussy rolls out her dizzying production of prrrrs, inflecting indistinguishably to the human ear of her status as either felicitous feline or perturbed purrer, such is my PR statement a conflicted peroration. On one protracted paw, Starla had seemed for all the world programmed to litter the planet profusely with perfect progeny that my heart ached for her apparent disillusionment, while upon the other, protracted Pa, beginning himself to feel previously unthinkable pre-rumblings of resentment amid a troubling presentiment, did she delegate her nearly every parental duty.

The claws of conflict never came out. Muzzled by a superhuman reserve of empathy—if my

silent devotion seems to you an abnormal abnegation then I would suggest you've yet to know the fragility of love—I held my tongue, no longer within the sapid recesses of her so-thought misshapen composition but rather in recess from them. We did not sleep in the same bed, nor did we ever appear to occupy the same space. As the geminate identities of one superhero disjoined we tended to our tellurian gem separately. Because my dear Genevieve maintained her pleasant plumpness and playfulness around me (and because I wasn't), I knew Starla was at the very least feeding her. But where? But when? And why was I denied witness to the sublime symbiosis of breastfeeding, of nipples stretched by the functional fulfillment of their holy covenant, of suckling sustenance, of a single pink hydrant unveiled without titillating pageantry to extinguish the fiery wrath of an infantile appetite— areolate oasis that would be to my hungry eyes every bit as arousing and satiating as when the well of its sensuality was tapped, turned on by the attentive tinkering of my own rudimentary tools.

So surreal was our arrangement, so swathed in a kaleidoscopic swirl of toys and soiled diapers— disposable Shrouds of Urine—and bliss and confusion were we that I cannot even recount our manner of transferring the child between us. Our Solomonic divide. I do not recall taking our sleepless and colicky starlet from the outstretched arms of a sleepless and choleric Starla. Nor can I even tell you how I scooped her up from blanketed bassinet or crib. I can just barely articulate how she felt once she was there: sublime.

I had sought feverishly for the solution to our dissolution when from the mailbox did I fish out the forwarded envelope, pregnant with twin copies of the journal that had accepted *le Story du Starla*. The shredded envelope lay sprawled upon the table like a heap of ink-imbrued octopi mangled and disemboweled in the breathless exhumation of the pages I thumbed tremulously, my own octonary braid of fingertips twined along the spine barely able to contain both the finely crafted leather binding and the ebullient elation with which I twitched. More a book than journal. An anthology. A careful curation stabling the finest upstart ambassadors for our craft in one attractive, portable volume. The frontispiece: a bold and crenulated outline of a turtle as seen from overhead trudging upward from the imagined beach below the corner of one page into the crystalline and soul-replenishing oasis of the written word on the other—while eschewing the growing tendency toward the *avant garde* (A more tired concept, toward which our nameless alchemists of the lexicon feel they must mechanically somnambulate for recognition, for validation, for what?, I cannot fathom.), this toed the cutting edge without senselessly abandoning a timeless aesthetic quality—a mythopoetic harbinger nominating, declaiming silently, vividly, unmistakably just who would lead this methodical charge. I ushered the foxing air away slapping together the marbled roan cover and began forthwith the slapping together of

a breakfast with which my Startled fox, if her listless spirit required it, could in celebration marble her maroon covers.

With Genevieve passed into my custody like a relay baton, we rounded the home stretch of linoleum known as the kitchen. The pendulum of Genevieve: she, ensconced within the downy plush of her mechanical swing seat set atop the table, sleepily oversaw the proceedings. The whisked eggs swirled in the bowl like a chunk of Jupiter biopsied. Genevieve enlivened in an eruption of implacable waves crashing hard against, enveloping my quaint seaside shanty heart as the largest body to revolve around our sun poured, sizzled in the pan. I snatched her tiny, tiny hands from midair and we pantomimed a father-daughter wedding dance I secretly knew I would never see—I could not deign to let her go. By the time I returned to my erstwhile omelet the egg had congealed to a stubborn pan-clung fluff, therefore I retired to the penetralia of Starla's slumber chamber balancing the precarious scramble of Genevieve in the crook of one arm while over the other hand there floated a tray heaped with one small plate of pared apple slices and peeled orange quadrants next to our most recently delivered co-pro-creation, the book. Obnubilating a second plate was a cumulus of egg of the most utilitarian preparation, the brainy coagulum of Jupiter's heart, but prudently garnished, I gambled, by the borrowed ring of its saturnine courier. What better time to propose?

What we found upon nudging open the door was a bedspread in oceanic disarray: a frozen whirlpool of sheet and comforter in disheveled waves, spilling over in haphazard splashes that crept insidiously along the bedroom floor. But nary a sign of my Neptunian goddess submerged or afloat or ashore. Nothing until I scanned the room and caught sight of the flotsam of a bottleless letter sailing the wayward driftwood of nightstand. Bracing the tray's edge against my hip and along the rim of the stand, I held with my child-free hand one corner of the paper, where there accreted in the slow unfolding a note of frightening familiarity that any credible graphologist might understandably attribute to my nefarious white-knuckle grip in practice, when I wrung the upper echelons of the ladder stages of my diligent copy-editing process, but to me there was no mistaking the genuine article, the effortless loops of her pen: "We cannot go on like this any longer. Starla."

The signature belied any notion I'd had that this was some overlooked scrap, some inculpatory shard lying in wait for a vulnerable heel within the frayed shag of deception that had then carpeted my every step. I was taken aback by the force of cognizance, and the tray tumbled. The riffling anthology on its way down collected the untabled contents of a toppled glass of cranberry juice, and I too was pelted by an incomparable fruity fusillade that culminated in a gossamer glance of acidic pith: Starla deserted us.

We kept vigil at the spill, sopping up the surfeit of saturated stains and attempting to piece together Jupiter's heart by gathering the rubbery bits of riven ovum scattered on the floor, as though there was any undoing of these stains, as though the broken heart must abide the workings of the broken brain—here did the gnostic agnostic on hand and knee supplicate, cry out blindly for mercy before Genevieve, who had started to stir uneasily in my arms. We searched high and low for some erect and ersatz teat, throned upon its lactescent cylinder, to usurp, but alas was our scion's early reign marked enough by an exordial lacto-lack to scurry her lone loyal subject into the village for suitable and vital vittle. But here I was no longer the subject; mine was forevermore the lot of the indirect object, a derelict, objectionable agent of predicative matters, an aging aegis called upon only in the interest of Genevieve, of Starla, in the staunch defense of my reluctant rulers. But soon shall I lay down my shield, doff for good my helmet of pith—it has barely served me anyway—and drink in the mead of memory over my sins, lodge my gullet with the circum-crystallization of my failures. Ckoi the pilloried; Barb the pill, or really the indispensable succedaneum for the drug of an absent muse. An abject ruse, perhaps, but I assure you none of this would be possible without her at the ready. The red, the yellow, the blue, oh how I rue the erasure of her lovely hues, my self-serving consumption of her chimerical chemical composition; now we lie, now she lies, swirls and unravels in shivering shifts no more—her shift nearly over—in the tawdry throes of vivacity my fingers used to elicit. We have pulled from her turbid and vivid imitation of a tumid belly the vivid imitation of our ineffably viviparous spawn. It cries out for attention I cannot afford to give, for it now appears that for the roads that remain unmapped I must brave alone; I have just consumed what remains of the Barb for which I have paid. Sadly I failed to anticipate fully the extent of my need, and I fear it is the reader who may suffer if I now fail to heed this clarion call to acceleration.

I confess that because the hum and rattle of the engine seemed to lull Genevieve to slumber in her rear-facing car seat, I held off the hunt for her milk so that I might gaze after Starla. Hand-written notes of such ambiguity—might she not have intended by it that we could not continue this path of parentage without the sacraments of a conjugal commitment, the very promise she had unwittingly denied us?—may dissuade lesser laissez-faire lovers, but I practiced no such policy. We coursed the circuitous veins of town, on the beat like tireless agents in search of a fleeting pulse; we knocked against her parent's door, pried pedestrians for the slightest clue—certainly not even the supposed taint of a post-pregnancy pallor could allow her undetected passage past the hormonally-charged street-lining urchins claiming at the urgency of my vivid descriptions they'd seen no one of the sort—to no avail. When early winter's early dusk began to envelope the landscape around us, the palliative allure of her

car seat straps began to loosen and Genevieve's plaintive moans ramped almost at once to torturous wails. Informed by Starla's explicit prenatal insistence that naught but breastmilk sustain our babe, I was reduced to a surreptitious patrolling of the sidewalks and —streets outside the egress of the obstetrics unit hopeful for the emergence from among the parade of dry nurses pouring in and out some turgid-teated dour moue I could either prod by pathos or lasso by lenity au lait into playing on this catastrophic night the role of Rosasharn for the succor of my fambly. Oh, but what an act of utter temerity, of low cowardice, such a proposition would have been! Why not run the red-light intersection of illicit lovemaking and dubious lactation that doubtless thrives in this era of pervasive perversion, which gestates within this seedy, seeded underbelly of immoral neo-fetishism, if I were so ready to troll such dark avenues? Ah, I could have no more expected to happen fortuitously upon an effusive but bereaved bosom at this exact moment than I could expect the raindrops that had begun to collect on my windshield to be the spilled milk for which my Genevieve shrieked her unspeakable entreaties of hunger.

Across the street, within the glass-encased and luminescent foyer, a cube alive to the outside world, alight in the darkling eve, that harbored the security-enforced entrance via locked door and intercom, the hospital's electronically-charged chastity belt—a more prosaic analog of the wing's biological function, whereby a litany of expectants finesse or finagle (I am reminded at this of a portly, florid-faced freshman—name withheld—ribald and balding (Perhaps quite pathetically, were our hereditary fortunes reversed, I would have seized the advantages of the propitiously altered coulisse of college, gotten diligent with the razor and claimed congenital alopecia to prospective paramours, whereas he, curiously if not obliviously, donned and doffed his dappled pate to his sexless fate.), who had once interjected to a meekly sniggered round of approval, as I pressed for a student-led clarification to the confoundingly problematic lie-lay paradigm that had so plagued his contemporaries, this faux-grammatical epigram: "A lie is what you tell to get laid," before contracting in a gasping, ruddy pudding grossly ajiggle in his seat, a juddery demurring, I'm sure, to avoid my taking him to task for the promiscuous implication of his indecorous riposte. In fact I charge the instant of amusement I caught wrinkling Starla's face, where she normally sat diametrically opposite from him, and normally floated diametrically opposed to such crass chicanery, such facetious japery, for the fatuous tone of playful propitiation with which I have permeated this whole rotten affair. It is also, sadly, Starla's grin of approval that led to my subsequent, vicious tongue lashing against an entire generation despite that, truth be told, I had only suffered but a tinge of irreverence by the disruptive quip.) their ways in through the drum-tight measures in place and later debouch, babe-in-hand, from its clammy recess, I cannot

fathom—the fluorescent lights illumined a poster that notched the wall in a devilish didacticism to a score of perforated parents underprepared and overscared that a thirty-day window for mum returns remained open. Of infants! An indefensible defenestration that I appropriately abjured cranking my own window shut against the rain before absconding to the first pharmacy—procuring for Genevieve a cylinder of infantile and formulaic viands; though lacking the apotropaic qualities of breastmilk I supposed the cloying mixture preferable to starvation—we could find, the milieu of our arduous embrace to which I have previously alluded.

A second message arrived, this a letter by mail, some days later:

Ckol,

I tried calling. There was no answer. I tried but could not leave a message. To tell the truth I don't think I can talk about it now anyway. By the time you've received this they will be asking questions I'm not sure I can answer. Please come. I know you don't want to hear it but we have to remind ourselves this is God's plan. He does not make mistakes.

With love,

Starla

With love? With? Damn the extraneous preposition, these confounding avectations! How to deal with with? Strike it from the script! Erase that comma while we're making emends. Love Starla. Love Starla indeed! It is for love, Starla, that upon removing the epistolary stinger, this quixotic don arose so ready to battle the windmills of the church to which you'd exasperatedly resigned. Church, my imposing arched nemesis, always blowing its airs of confabulation and spinning its blades of infibulation. To think I would have willingly exchanged vows within the empty insides of its hollow halls! And this, as if to reward my show of good faith! How was I, in the throes of these errant nights, to suffer her absence; how long must my emblematic bedsheet have had to endure its problematic lack of Starla Moline—splayed fingers stretching her limbs; the relent of spreading calves, her legs hinged loosely at the knees; the estuary of her wild hair merging seamlessly into the twisted folds; back arched mid-rapture—the cruciform herald of my Elysian fields whose gilded rods of eternal bliss awaited my playful trampling? Were my will trammled so by an unequivocal directness in the letter, I would have, albeit begrudgingly, accepted a penal celibacy as penitence for my sidereal transgressions, but not under such pretenses! Forsooth, there must be better methods of emulating the invisible patriarch upstairs than by

the forsaking of one's December offspring below...but if you're feeling sinister, go off and see a minister, they say...

I flouted brazenly the agreement anent my permitted proximity to the old stomping grounds of campus so that I might first waylay the beldam who habitually haunted the theurgical bus stop where Cupid's arrows and Christ's errands dared once to comingle in queer confluence. I dispatched the liveried and diminutive dollface of their ramshackle storefront with the merciful purchase of brownie crumbles and a request to speak to her motherly superior, whom I could see loomed in the background, her hands pushing back against the air imported from the incandescent grille of a portable heater. The elder toddled on over and, sans-salutation, started to extoll the charitable benefits of the purchase of any number of crafts or comestible confections in the shapes of biblical bibelots, say for example this or that cross-cookie littering the foreground of their station of the crass; I snatched the wrists of her upturned palms as they hovered over their array of baubles votive, godly and gaudy, of goods baked, bagged and tagged, and I pressed her hands together to recapture in close-up something of the flailing mollusk they had initially formed before me at a distance. An upended steeple exposing a congregation of squidly squiggles, a cracking kraken over which I now presided as plenary Poseidon, an idol threat, a palpating pagan versed in cephalometry studying the creases of this cephalopodic palm. Was this not the slimy face, were these not graceless tentacles once consecrated by my Starla's kiss before mine own incredulous eyes? I knew that it was—how could it be? Like a seer I peered into the agglomeration of hands in my hands as though from it I might unravel forgotten runes nestled within that skein of fleshy ridges, uncover lost incantations-in-waiting for the hopelessly waiting, but I found nun, only mystery in the folds.

I had yet to even look upon her face when I asked where they were holding Starla. Oh, the first insistence was but a docile request, but when she tried to slip the shackles of my grip before feigning uncertainty, I felt my hands tense. At her shaking head I instinctively demanded the whereabouts of a headquartered someone somewhere with a more cooperative spirit. A couple miles that way, at the church up on the hill, she conceded, I could talk to the father. It looked lovely this time of year, naturally. I dropped our tangle of hands, visibly no worse for the wear, and lifted from the ground at my side the portable car seat from within which my Genevieve, nearly invisible for the bundle of blankets, observed obliviously the sordid sort of business that is extracting from the Church's clutches one's munificent tithe once unintentionally donated.

I entered the Catholic church in search of confirmation but ended in confession. The priest in his vestry-best, fresh-pressed, shrift-vetting vestments absolutely could not, or at the very least refused to,

divulge the names of any anonymous sororal religious, novitiate or no, who had cloistered herself within the lurching vice of the church. How virtuous! But then he had somehow with disarming demeanor and placid intonations, neither vainly nor genuinely invoking the name of his ubiquitous neighbor, the amaranthine high-high-high-rise-dweller always with His nose and finger transparently pressed upon life's pane, exhibiting early on none of the customary cant of his occupational wont—though not completely forthcoming, he employed a tacitly apostrophe-free colloquy, thankfully—inveigled effortlessly from me a recapitulation of the events—with a judicious omission of the couple gratuitous bits of biblical violence with which, judging by the penological scenes depicted upon blood-stained-glass adorning his workspace, the cup of his vocation had long overfloweth (not to imply that such morbid or apocalyptic imagery of somatic suffering found in his chosen tome was any great revelation (It came long before that.))—that had led me to solicit with neither script nor scripture the wisdom of his ferial counsel. He listened intently to my elevator pitch and then silently, inscrutably crunched the numbers in his head and asked to peek in on my babe silently snoozing in the blanketed embrace of her own manageable manger, where she had spent so much enveloped time since the scene of her nativity, as though here in this house of totem and idolatry she might represent the ineffable tipping point from tight-lipped secrecy to the afflatial deluge of transparency for which my parched soul thirsted. At my insistence he peeled back layer after layer and soon the anticipatory smile that stretched his face gave way to the austere gravity of anchoring gravitas—the child, innocent lass, irrevocably linked to the ribald raconteur, in a sense lost, spilling volubly before him the juices of a sieved and sliced history. As you well know he held tightly his urn of taciturnity in regards to identities of the dead-to-the-world monastery, but his turn to the wonderfully secular world of wordplay endeared him to me when at last he parlayed effortlessly his perception of my Starla-this-and-Starla-that as crazed heliolatry into his pastoral peroration about sun-as-god that I've long since (How long has it been now? How many days have I subsisted on nothing but Barb and word?) dispensed. It was thanks in large part to that perspicacious bon mot, and not some kindred spiritual hokum, that I felt something of a connection to the man under the cloth (and why I felt such a tinge of discomfiting sorrow when I recently read that he had facilitated his own demise in the dark seclusion of uncertainty via an exhumed clandestine firearm he kept buried like some glaring term(inus) among the lexical reseau of The Word (search puzzle), despite that when he first attempted to attenuate my Starlamania stating that it was after all in the beginning God who literally inspired life into man with a stoking huff, leading me to quickly quip the quasi-tautology of, "Savior breath!," and thereafter upon delivering his directional benediction-as-valediction that I "needed to get truly right with Him," I instead got slowly up and promptly left.

I cannot seem to get through to you. Mother even stopped by. Where are you? I don't know if you received my last letter. Greta visited and told me about the spectacle you made in the grocery store. Please. Come here quickly. For us both.

Starla

I am exasperated retreading this ground of Sisyphean tracking. Was I the target of some vengeful razzing? Why insist upon these equivocations, more pestilent to my well-being than would be any outright *au revoir* (well, maybe not)? What to make of these demands to see her without the slightest clue as to where? Of G's grocery plaint, at least, I can expand: I was perusing the infant aisle with infantile Genevieve in tow whilst from a background passel of passersby conducting quietly the *en masse* quotidian jaunt of their commercial wont she presented herself solemnly, mournfully. As stated, per normal, she'd about her a dour air, of poignancy and of genteelism, but of the few nubile friends I'd known Starla to keep, I found her for obvious aesthetic reason the least threatening. And perhaps because of this, and in lieu of any other adultish shoulder upon which to lean, the rather banal banter or passing persiflage with which I intended to engage and dismiss this, to me, quick acquaintance dissolved almost immediately into a paralyzing and soppy refrain from my mouth of: "Oh but we have lost her, we've lost her..." to which she responded with an undercurrent of blithe viciousness: "And how is Starla handling everything?" In spirit, or maybe corporeally, I crumpled at such brazen insensitivity, so far removed from her usually anodyne plasticity, as if to breathe below the toxic plume emanating from an old flame. I scurried away, hurried, harried, beseeched by beep and ding of a serpentine jungle of register, out through the labyrinth of a scattered-cart-stocked foyer, into the lot, where I numbly keyed the lock of my driver's side door, and there was revealed by its opening to an overwhelmed papa, to an absent-minded professor, that while he parsed madcap arrays of varicolored shelf-stock and endcap encounters that left him shell-shocked, he'd neglected to even spring Genevieve from her back-seat restraints, from where she lay cooing and clucking, blissfully sheltered from the virulent acrimony of these malicious misses but sadly deprived the visitant alimony of my would-be, missing missus.

And now, as Starla's brusque monitions have so pointedly illustrated, I could see that it was from my laconic act of flight that G must have been lent the wings of industriousness and gumption. I wondered: Had she successfully decrypted similar ciphers of Starla's fabrication as those mailed to me? Or in lieu of that, was this chance meeting a ruse of fortuity? Was her line of questioning merely a

gambit for some inculpatory confession? Were these two orchestrating a trial for my fidelity? Had Starla been fishing for a forthright *parlando* only to reel in the sodden boot of my pusillanimous *pas-seul*, pathetically balletic out of the grocery, one can easily surmise the feelings of failure with which I pulsed!

I had to subpoena G, to exam crossly Starla's satellite acolyte, but I'd no means to summons her. She, however, likely had access to my day-to-day routine by way of surveillance or conference with Starla, increasing the likelihood that I might be accosted thusly in an as-yet undetermined instant. I simply could not afford to forge onward entangled so by depression's loose embrace of lassitude, mired and attired in the tatters of the quasi-lubricious lot under which I had been pilloried before the ol' obloquious bloke, John Q Public, Esquire. In order to obviate any further charges that would reduce ours to mere *mésalliance* of misfortune, and also to present at the next such encounter a more suitable *Ckol*, prepared to throw himself dashingly upon the mercy of the courtship when called again to take the stand, I patronized the passable haberdashery "...Or Sew Its Seams," whose tailor-made equivoque evoked something of the fill-in-the-blank mystery I find so irresistible. Whereas the more discerning of my ilk normally find distasteful the prevalent predilection of so many of these comic entrepreneurs of cosmetic maintenance to dabble in plebeian wordplay—*Shear Volume*, *A Cut Above*, *The Follicle of Man*, *A Common Thread*, *Pleating Gilt*, et al.—I communed in queer comfort with its elliptic invitation to personalize the experience by prefixing, essentially for your consideration, the sartorial appellation: *A Frayed Wear*, *With All To See...Or Sew Its Seams...*

Under the cuirass of my "new duds," dubbed so by the colloquial quip of my tailor, with my mane frame just slightly touched by the Barbering reach of *Shear Fantasy* (Reader, I am not crassly inserting these plugs for the sake of my own depilated narcissism (though I suppose that's debatable)), I roamed the countryside daily and knightly in dutiful search of my damaged damsel or even her unfair maiden jest with her tawdry adjudications and thin airs of pretentiousness. Along the way fending off the expedient advances of myriad debutantes, whose charms enlivened within the purlieu of the sizable purse purported by my finer threads, and shunting prophylactically from before Genevieve the audacious cheek-pincers of middling spinsters, whose biological hands threatened midnight confluence upon their own watchful faces. But to no avail. A trip back to the campus to locate G was, after my last risky run-in with the meddlesome, peddlesome sisterhood, an unquestionably ill-advised effort from which afterward I, upon skulking nocturnally out through its sinuous system of doored corridors and dormant concourse following an unsuccessful rap session with her dorm door, could not shake the parietal and parental fantods with which I shook when I considered the custodial ramifications that awaited had I been spotted by knowing or suspicious eyes, pedantic resident assistants, etc. Additionally

Genevieve and I peeked in from time to time through the windows of the widow's abode, where we saw each time the same unchanging Q-bertian landscape—these sciolistic attempts, arcaded and dated, to connect an anachronistic author to a youthful readership, arcane and mundane, must loom so terribly transparent and avuncular—of stacked boxes in the same cubical permutations that it finally became evident the trained trollop had absconded, deserted happily all ephemera of a past life chained to a trepidatious troll from which she must have once feared there was no escape. Oh shackles of matrimony, how you tighten and chafe! And how would I have cherished the excoriations of your trammels! How have I slipped your grip so?

Years passed indifferently past as the lane lines laid by my best-dressed intentions faded. I was forced to face that I had failed the lone test afforded me, me, a spurned applicant just turned away from the pearly gates and already all ready to extol the gnostic virtues of metempsychosis: Had I not Genevieve—a heavenly reverberation to fill the hellish dell of my soul resounding from my erstwhile anechoic strum? Yes? Then I had reformed, reborn a father. Father. Resurrection. My emulation of Starla's God. But mine would not be a fatherhood spent in silent watch from the distant confines of my clouded garret making grandiose demands of devotion whilst transmitting signals of conditional love in impersonal accounts and third-person parables exclusively via tellurian intermediaries fallible, fallacious, mendacious...oh, Starla...The next mailed message happily coincided with a joyous milestone of my little millstone. Genevieve had penned her first complete sentence: "I love you Daddy", sans comma and missing her period—upon receipt but before reading the letter in Starla's hand I foolishly entertained the notion that this periodic omission symbolized a sort of sophistical, reciprocal bookend of some arbitrary cycle of Genevieve's life, from conceptus to reconciliation, perchance as a divine punchline straight into my temporal imaginings, but as we have come to know hope is the currency of the madman and words are the toys of the masochist—where probably an exclamation point would work best. In the intervening few years between the formation of my precocious mite and the reformation of my pedagogic might, I had logged countless hours on Starla's trail on the strength of few leads, and though I would never give up, I had been forced to relent the search until I was provided this clue:

I have given up hope that you will come. I am sorry. I'm so sorry. I have failed us. The doctors tell me it's in everyone's best interest that I stay longer. Mother agrees. But if it were up to me I think I deserve to lie here and bleed out. I have to remind myself something good can come of this, that this is all part of a greater plan, but it feels like blasphemy to even think such thoughts.

Like I could expect you to understand! I have no one! We have some decisions to make and I don't think I can do it alone. At least I have the doctors.

Bereft of even a signature, sincerely, though the only person besides Starla who could have produced such a passable facsimile was the one reading, and despite that I, at my self-saboteur-worst, very well might have hypothetically sent myself a scathing letter of penitence—sans return address—as motivation, I'd been conscious of the fact that while whipsawed by those very painful peregrinations of futile nearing and the domestic demands of child-rearing, all for me was quiet on the literary front. In fact the closest I'd come to scratching any creative itch were the list poems of grocery lore drudgery. Beset by none of the pecuniary problems of my cart-clutching, aisle-trundling brethren, mine was a crisis of budgeting for

Uncracked eggs

Whole milk

Rash of diapers

Heavy cream

Starfruit

Unsalted butter

Thyme leaves

Melon,

though I know what should have immediately arrested my attention was the apparent collusion of corroborant Mother's pressing presence. Once again a mountainous impediment, pushing through the open water of Starla's and my oceanic expanse. Here stumbled I, tripped up on the residual scree of inaction, the colluvium of mother's spared life, which made angrily effervescent what should have been an eternal tide of lapping, suckling placidity, but was now a crest fallen, crashed upon the sullied shoal of her devising within which I was now forced to find footing. And I stomp and splash in vain truculence: Why had I been so diffidently deferent in the matters of her deletion? I cannot even recall anymore. Why did I bend so lithely to the winds of normalcy rather than unfurl my sails into the eolian roar of rage? Oh how did my salubrious concern, seeming once so prescient, so conscientious, allow on the sly the blossoming of my laborious consternation! Alas, I've none to blame but this circumspect suspect, the catoptric ass wagging his told-you-so, recriminatory finger from the looking glass—I vowed then and there that never again would I shrink from the execution of pending orders (though I confess 'twas a

deep-seeded appreciation for the beatitude of the parent-child bond that kept me from the swift completion of such duties, that until the tether of my Damoclesian mobile had severed was I finally moved to clear the docket and submit my minutes and loop the noose.)

It is an oft-overlooked injustice that those steeped in a plenitude of possession will cling like pedants to the letters of law when necessary to deprive the have-nots even a hint to the very rungs upon which they might dare ascend from deplorable depths to their rarified air. Such is the essence of these hypocritical oafs with their Hippocratic oaths and inhospitable decorum, doctors, nurses, even the switchboard lummoxes, bewitched or bored or flummoxed by the spirit of the rules to which they've pledged their dumb allegiance each time I'd phone a hospital receptionist for just a modicum of census access. Unable to find within the calcified walls of their hardened hearts any of the goodwill for which they'd apparently been immunized, inculcated as they were by the unbending lines of their static yet metastatic rubric, they would invariably parrot their HIPAA invocations at each innocuous inquiry for the whereabouts of my Hippocrene, even when I deigned to frame my expiable plight within the romantic passe-partout plotlines of those passé paperbacks of which they could not wait to re-open and which bore slovenly, clandestinely, I'm certain, those very salient dossiers they puzzlingly, slavishly refused to. Who then were these helpful doctors upon whom Starla so desperately relied, who was this conniving committee of so-called professionals conspiring to keep her from that most blessed vocation of motherhood?

With my lovely passerine perched upon the bowing edge of the uncooperative branch of medicine and passing along her elegiac songs from high, so high above the water, and singeing from below her tail feathers was the volcanic mouth of orgulous, orographic mother agape...breaching...in breach not only of Starla's and my interminable sea—whose horizons on all sides blended seamlessly into a sky everazure, whose encompassing body rose and pulsed and crashed in a molecular comingling of infinite perpetuity that could forever sustain our every need and desire, whose fortunes would outlast every miserable inhabitant of earth—but, and most egregiously, in breach of the tacit parental obligation that requires one to loose the tether girding the feathers of her chick ready to fly and to embrace even begrudgingly the empty nest of her nightmares...It was in daymares of my own, when my stultified soul lay willfully bare and vulnerable to the brazen, ravishing succubi of mayhem and murder, though, that I pondered freely the fleeting joy of a power wanton and anarchic, when the inception of striking aimlessly against their empire with deadeye aim took its vicelike hold upon my mind. I had only recently at this time come into possession of the fateful revolver, often discussed, quite by chance, with nary a reason for its unsheathing until the eradication of these endless frustrations at last provided the

premier venue for its grim unleashing.

The car lurched to a marionette halt under the tenuous strings of my control. Something had clicked—I tell you it was the discourteous receiver at the other end of a curt conversation, after the final receptionist, whom I had petitioned pettily for the first time in weeks, suggested that her exasperation suffered at my persistent pursuit might necessitate alerting certain authorities. I understood then intimately the plight of the powerless, ashiver in the long, cold shadows cast insouciantly by the cold monolith of control, and at this affront to decency I saw two options: To lodge my complaints into the deaf ear of the great machine, I'd only to deal with the depression of the redial button; likewise I could combat depression altogether and circumvent these anodyne avenues by instead injecting the upset contents of my tumbril of umbrage into the turbid and tumid open veins of its patient hallways. Something had snapped—I spent the duration of the rote route that led to the familiar strip of painted parking rectangles just outside the obstetrics unit door consumed by bloody reveries of bloody revenge, imagining ruinous machinations like some hostile hospital rival hellbent on monopoly. 'Twas by exposing the threadbare wear on its patch of security that I rationalized I would facilitate the end of its imperial reign of red tape and prim propriety. Let me dispense with poetics for the nonce: Someone was going to die. I was going to walk in and shoot someone. My nadir, ladies and gentlemen. This was the plan I hastily devised: to remove the shroud of safety their scant security measures offered. For no other reason than to bring about the demise of one tight-lipped hospital, to tighten the tourniquet of public scrutiny and distrust until their lifeblood of capital would clot. In hindsight, if I'd gone through with this my post-Starla era would have authored a legacy of lunacy and nothing more, a phantom flash fiction whilst my chapped chapbook lay cracking, and a bio degrading and putrescent from some other's bloated fingers would endure the ages; might that not be preferable though to the spineless sheaf of unrulled and disconnected foolscap, loose-leaf and steeped in madness, that this path permitted if it meant our destinies might have been reversed?

Among the din of hushed bustle was my will dun as the darkling backdrop into which I had warped from the futile wiles of my car-seat reconnaissance—there was no exit strategy, nor could there have been. I sliced through the throng, beyond the reach of the limbs of family trees joyfully stretching, while I tried to recall the corresponding triumphant march of our newborn Genevieve, newly borne by the external embrace of Mommy and Daddy. When I faced the glass entrance, menacingly resistant in its mechanical coldness to my unabated passage, my head was a gyroscopic top, a flip-flop farrago rotating about taxed axes of desperation, compassion, wrath, vengeance, swirling, clouding my judgment with the emptied contents of Pandora's package, components of my unboxed orgone that ridiculed from

their proximal coordinates along a cyclonic nebula out of reach, or out of touch. What was uncomfortably within reach, however, replacing those bygone therapeutic parcels of myth, was a very real revolver, an exogenic executioner gophering the nook of my back and clandestinely corralled by my waistband. An inhuman voice like some robotic theurgy suddenly thundered from above with a “May I help you?” at which I instinctively parried, though through the distorted lilt I quickly recognized the inimitable vocalizations of my phone-call tormentor, mechanized.

I stood up and by the mere unwavering utterance of my name—almost comically I hadn’t even in imagined storyboard précis or propitious presentiments of the proceedings prepared a pseudonym—averred concretely the abstract of my peaceless thesis, but still she countered from behind the counter, “We’ve been wondering if you’d show.” And remotely she effected the reluctant slide of the opening door before me. In the brief flash that the glass passed I caught the crazed gaze of my portrait reflected in Dorian Grayscale. Suddenly there lay between my visual grimace and visceral catharsis only the sterile specter of hallway agape, like some dental view of the milieu of maw, baring its tile-toothed walls rife with showy plaque, capped in the center by a seated woman cradling the unctuous fruit of her uterine cavity. The path was clear before me. Woefully simple, eerily easy. There was none to stop my progress to the front desk—its horrific ruin had been as much obsession as fascination since I’d received Starla’s last letter and the first receptionist’s refusal—were I able to stay my rage to spare the wheelchair pair or the pusher behind...with two rapid shots I could have stained those white walls with the crimson taint of terror, unwashable, indelible, exacting a mere modicum of vicarious revenge...but here did the levity of a leveled and emptied barrel crush at once my lawless cowboy fantasy into the powder of western romance in the effete hands of a foreign art house wrangler. I couldn’t. Much like the singular bugaboo of one punctilious receptionist who’d catalyzed my wrathful cathexis, I had come to accept that we each have our own hang-ups with which to deal; for me, it seems, the blind murder of innocents was the unimpeachable threshold I could not cross. And I stepped back, back as though mine was a magnetized revolver, pulling me back to the moral ore of my car, replete with the invaluable-begat, invisibly-bejeweled diadem that crowned my eminent minor.

I descended into my seat and looked into the central mirror at Genevieve sitting there as blissfully unaware now as she was when we’d first peeped in on her in pixelated ultrasound animation. She caught my eyes. “Let’s go now, Daddy,” she ordered, at which I battled back convulsions and tears to shift into gear and acquiesce: “To where?”

“Home.”

Oh, but that numinous automaton-voiced warning, the hospital’s ominous expectations, or lack

thereof, of my impending arrival—and it bounced sonorously against the walls of my cavernous mind not so unlike some haunting quatrain, mixed by the uninspired hands of any number of sophomoric so-called poets who used to, in lieu of sprinkling, dump into their prosodic porridge the rudimentary seasoning of repetition, might—delivered at the mortal precipice I toed did not dismiss without the benefit of didactic benediction: I left in divine possession of the invaluable knowledge that it was not just a sizeable sibling but rather an Orwellian fraternity that had been keeping tabs. And because of the unknowable range of this astringent contingent, the place to which we headed could be home no more. Thus, dear bohemian reader, were we forced further from our idyllic and representational pastoral of a father-daughter portrait into the absurdist progression of my Dada movement. And thus was Genevieve swaddled into the itinerant skein I thought I'd myself escaped. We found a vacant second-story apartment for the time, at least until I figured we'd lain low long enough for our doings to appear on our tormentors' radars as inconsequential blips.

Considering the suspicious yet auspicious navigational advantages the same system unwittingly provided me, I took a great risk by putting in a forward order for the mail once again, though once I had calculated the risk that Starla's next letter might get dropped into some dead-letter abyss, the mass grave into which all lost letters with no return address must be shoveled, I found the risk an indispensable gambit. But in the novel spirit of escalating tension, things could not have been so simple: while rereading, shuffling, collating the first three letters, hopeful that by some reorganization I might uncover some secret sylvan cipher, a clear-cut forest overlooked for my deep study of the repurposed pulp of its trees, I caught the series of postmarks stamped across the mysterious perfin on the three consecutive dates immediately following Genevieve's birth. This discovery made salient two points. The first, how Starla had unbeknownst to me not only penned and mailed the letters whilst in the vicinage of her intended recipient but also sent them somehow knowing they would not arrive until after she'd stolen away in the night—that, I was willing to chalk up to the skewed and traumatized timeline in which I've been operating since the departure of my muse had left me spiritually bruised and chronologically bemused. I can accept that the ephemeral shock of our new filial arrangement was enough to usher a scared Starla into familial estrangement, but in order to quickly stifle any presumed extension of this dissonance, to suggest my sense of time was so warped that Starla might have only left days prior, I had only to present as evidence the precocious but still five-year-old toddler at my side. Which leads to the second quandary, not as easily reconciled: Why would the reasonably servile and civil postal service conspire with such complicity to delay the liveried delivery of licked and stickered mail of first class import despite its rote rubric to the contrary? It was just this question, generally speaking, that I posed

to my window clerk, who, after parsing the envelopes, then boisterously relayed it to her growing pack of co-workers gathering behind, standing idly in paralyzed patronization like lackey posts, a totem pole of faces dissimulating their laughter with the lassitude of quavering slack jaws, whilst I scribbled and submitted my forwarding order. The committee-sans-comity dispersed in a head-shaking and sniggering stupor when at last the unfortunate clerk—of course I recognized she was largely blameless but by uniformed association (not to mention I recognized the ineffectual post “master” among the coterie exeunt)—assigned only by some fatal arbiter of chance to my plight, offered as meek rebuff, rife with subtext, that, “I can’t really say what the problem is.” I reciprocated with some fractious static of my own and stormed out, raining down upon a deaf earth with a tempestuous temper that at the mercy of that lot I knew I’d never receive the key pieces of my puzzle already long, if not lost, in transit.

By then it was perfectly clear I’d none on my side but Genevieve, to whom I would from then on devote every second, upon whom I would dote every superlative. And from the postal episode until the receipt of the last letter we survived, we thrived in an inert interim of relative seclusion—save for some inspired sojourns (aliased “business trips” for the sake of Genevieve’s listless soul in regards to my Galilean scope) to discover Starla or the cavalcade of hired tutors and babysitters whose lone measure of success seemed the salvo of corruption they cumulatively launched—when by our circumstantial symbiosis did we each grow exponentially, learning the epiphanic value of life that fortunate others, spared the ecliptic darkness of a cherished son or daughter or lover snuffed out prematurely and without explanation, might never have to vet, or worse yet, a hard-won reconciliation the supercilious of us might wrongly and cavalierly christen a mere tacit matter of inborn intuition.

Oh Genevieve! Apotheosis of my every latent virtue realized, personified, sculpted immaculately into an unfathomable aesthetic idealization, pulling from mother’s pulchritude, shunting Daddy’s shut-in pallor. Omphalos of my every sense, center of the universe with a gravity unto yourself, discombobulator of all chronometry! How often had I dreamt of halting the earth’s rotation so that I might never suffer the cruel acquiescence of your growing up, of forfeiting your once tiny hands to another, doubtless as worthy of your blessedness as was I! And now the world has stopped so I won’t have to...and in this vacuous beaming I feel a nebulous unraveling of my insides, a fragmentation into the anacoluthic bloviations of my earlier fears, for without—curse my blasphemous tendencies!—Barb to finger, to spread, to engorge myself in the stygian pit of deplorable dependency...Still the obscurantist persists, endures! To the end then! Till death us do part! Barby, baby, wouldst thou do me the honor of plucking from its ruinous and sinuous descent the anusward annulus fallen like some picayune plashed futilely into a wishing well with no pretense of hope? Let it ring for the ages your captivating capsule

digits. The bell has pealed. The belle has peeled herself from this burden. So I put it on you. No, nothing is sacred anymore! If Starla was right, then let the anachronistic antagonist jostle in the agonistic anarchy of a struggling throng about his own ring divinely comedic, tragic, the innermost row in a velodromic amphitheater matriculated by the enervated spirits of Orpheus, of Pyramus, of Antony, a circumambulating throng of skin-riven and kindred romantics, who, for the seeming veniality of loving too madly, now plod their uroboric track of punitive mortality too deeply.

Chapter XXXII

So let's get back to today, well three, four, ten days ago, I don't know now, when we set off on the reunion tour. Genevieve seated laconically at my side. A late-morning mist had descended, choking this neck of the woods, like a veil stretched in the murderous clutches of some lunatic groom beyond the threshold. The honeymoon suite. A sunblocked sonata. My minimalist pianist striking the essential chords, nothing more, whilst I blathered solo. We kept under the obscuring fugue of fog, rolling undetected past Sue's driveway, within which I could just make out the reddened, furtive eyes of brake lights. Squinting and widening in pulsing scintillation. Like a demon come to raze the hamlet. Oculi angrily aglow among the ashes of destruction wrought by another's hands. Genevieve made no remark and we passed. The diner then emerged from the translucent bowels of the gossamer apparition that collected in globules across our windshield as the diminutive residua of evil. Police teams teeming. Inside: a kitchen jam-packed with spattered gray matter. A counter-cum-cutting board-borne carotid. A backroom, backlit imp limp and rubbery carpeting linoleum to memorialize with factitious tears the sodden and downtrodden. These images loiter now in phantasmagoric vignettes inside my head. Silhouettes of apocrypha and from whom, from where, I cannot tell you. Only when we cruised by the taped-off perimeter of peddling, puddled Floyd's olde shoppe did my periphrasis taper off to the metronome by which Genevieve's in-love improv lifted the complicated electric singsong of her Electra complex. "Maybe we could marry," she bebopped, scatting all over the matri-melody I'd been humming with, "You know she isn't coming back with you—"

"With us," and there went the roadside brush wherein I'd days prior jettisoned my cat carry-on carrion for the fleeting aim of misdirection. Oh, what to say to my proposing poppet as I prepared to hurl myself headlong into an unknown peril! "Nothing would make me happier, Genevieve, but—"

"I would never leave." Suddenly we reached a clear patch in the midst of the cloud, which was proven to not be fog at all. Those weren't droplets but clinging soot making fuliginous our windshield! I slowed as we paralleled the great wall of our destiny. Two palms pounded frantically against my hood to keep me from absent-mindedly trampling the yellow-bellied fellow who'd sentried the gateway to Luther Place. This saint peter motioned angrily before the consuming and calamitous backdrop of billowing smoke for us to move along, so I detoured without incident to my bucolic backroad lane of

severed brakeline lore. We stopped. An insidious urge welled up inside much like last time. But this urge could not be allayed with the perfunctory dexterity of a self-serving single piston. In the interstices of rising smoke there curled upward in rigid penance, stretched in angular supplication, the blossomless limbs of the beckoning apple, beyond the fire engines and fighters with their phallic hoses and the charred skeleton wilting where Luther Place once imposed its stately will. Past those there winked the shimmering promise of our crystalline lake, like a miniature massif mirage, an ebullient range of wavering golden peaks gulched and valleyed by a reticulated lattice of seminal rivers, popping, mocking the smoldering sprawl so close, so out of touch, daring me, brakeless again in a widower swivet, plagued by the plangent call of the siren—could that have been, was that not Starla I spied gliding under this sonorous din and over the ashen remains, gilding the fallen with the lambent glow of her fluorescent mercy? Forsooth! What else could have brought me so near the edge of this felicitous precipice? I flung open my door, unilaterally locked the interior mechanisms of door and stumbled out, “Stay here. Don’t move. I’ll be right back,” tumbled into the abyss of happiness that awaited our clement conciliation of forgive- and forgetfulness. Darted between trees, scrambled among overgrown underbrush, snapping twigs, tripping over the reedy roots that seemed to spring up underfoot, I crashed heart-first into ground zero, rose to my knees clutching the ribs of my aching cardiac cage and the bars of her incarcerating rage. I spluttered out to Starla, invisible now for the thick smoke, in gurgles and coughs. My lungs burning. A crackle, a crepitating swoosh, a fallen beam crashed nearby and unleashed from a bed of fulvous gleeds a sparking, arcing swarm of fireflies, fleeting, fugacious, disappearing into the wall of an ethereal plume...she had left me. I left her. In the car. A guttural wretch to Genevieve, I heaved. Starla had missed my return. She wended the welter of hollowed halls while I inhaled the noxious smoke of her freedom. Here, where the ground scorched soles, where within the lowly view of the hilltop overlook that the reverend, humble servant of the Lord, had putatively plumbed the depths of ell to exhume the implement of his own destruction, I plucked in the midst of my own hellish maelstrom a familiar foe from a frame of blackened laths and I fiddled the filter while Starla’s home burned, my throat burned my eyes burned the world burned oh Genevieve...and tither flashed the inexorable scamper of red kittens, escaped from some Charonic docking bearing uncharred stockings, my chthonic stalking, roaring, flitting coming undone in a swirling burst of curling flame into the flaming vulpine curve of a mocking fox that blazed away as I sunk into the oncoming enlightenment of my Kareninan terminus, the chauvinistic faithfulness of my damned bovarism, steeped violently into the envelopment of my Chopinistic awakening, a carapace of smoke swallowing me...and I truly believed I could save us...

...And what is belief but the whim of experience and circumstance? The fire of man’s destiny

engulfs without regard to it, to history, to principle, to desire. Bending to the vicissitudes of wind. Dying when the winds cease. As will everything. So too must your small beliefs die when there blows nothing to hold them aloft. But you know this. You know the rigid board burns the same. Beams buckle and splinter if they refuse to bend. And still you cling to your rigidity. Your futile pedantry. I tell you the difference between the starving and the sated wafts outward from the putrid bits of morality decaying and lodged like rotting fugitives in the lacunae between his teeth or the maw of a society that provides for the stench of his satisfaction. And his sustenance is made palatable by the very conflagration that will consume him. So it goes. Morals in molars, of course—you know no situation is so volatile that it cannot be defused by facetious quip or inane levity but you should know better. That there is no creator is your reconciliation for the ambivalence the wind offers for your suffering. As though because it cannot be understood or predicted the wind must possess no direction, serve no directive—this is merely a fabulation that allows untied ends to flap in the mad undulation of the wind. Your tattered ensign of truculence and obstinacy. The mighty hurricane begins as the lowly zephyr. And likewise must every tickling breeze begin anew, like everything, from nothing. Unstirred until there plunges into its stillness from above or below the rousing implement of quickening. A starless vacuum. A placid lake. A blank page. For each a god. For each a purpose. If not by design, how do you suppose this confluence was authored? By chance? Ha. There is a fatalistic enterprise known to most as God and the sooner you learn to accept by virtue of his timelessness and omniscience that not only is it impossible to disappoint him but that your every illusory choice is but a fulfillment of your calling, the lapidary narrative to which you're only privy in gravestone retrospect, the freer you will be for it. How have you not yet tired of your emulation of him? Of the incessant pleas for distant acceptance? The supercilious missives for aggrandizement? The ostentatious reek of vengeance, the petulant sanctimony, the peremptory collecting of doomed souls, the one-sided correspondence of cryptic epistle? Or of the misguided altruism that has justified the forsaking of your lone child? Search within, draw him out. He feasts upon the visceral and infects the cerebral. An invasive agent that finds passage through the interstices of doubt as easily as through the ingress of belief. Pluck the gnawing parasite and see the damage it has wrought. Look not upon its face lest vanity well up to stay your crushing fist. Survey the ruins. Your pillaged and plundered soul. By these you shall conclude as I have: the path that ends with the stilling of those mad undulations begins invariably at decide. Hence we've found ourselves among these blackened ruins, a bed of ash laid out as pyre and commandeered for obsequies extempore. But it is a ceremony for which I haven't the script to recite. Rites I haven't the lead to pen. An interment for which I haven't the mettle to spade. Fickle creator. Contemner of your creation. You may print pages of the meretricious currency of life and spend it thriftlessly without regard

to value but you are no god (no capital). You have no authority. I command thee. March to the scaffold. Expose your jugular. Gush forth no more with the vain sputum of mythomania, of megalomania, but prepare to spill freely your untethered insides, to table your contents. Your revelation shall be written by another. Pray...Alas, I know these are but the meek invocations of an impotent apostate against a haut hauteur...And so, forsooth, we sink inward from the edge, entwined eternally and predictably and helplessly into the suicidal slump of a blood-filled bathos...

...But those were not my fate, literally, obviously. I sat up from my inhaled stupor. Singe-sheared pages and the unrecognizable char of toppled wooden things heaped together in crests that flanked the furrows ending at each of my heels and dissolving somewhere unseen within the soot. Ten paces to my right an otherwise occupied fireman fired blithely in my direction a splayed and gloved palm that pulsed in a facile display of paternalistic reassurance, followed by the avuncular okay of a skyward thumb before receding back to the periphery so that he might dutifully reengage the feral and fiery beast he'd come to tame. Perhaps he'd hoped to allay with these relatively anodyne gestures the burn of my smoke-soaked soul, but with all the fluttery force of a butterfly flap against the air between us did he effect its reignition. Ballooned the sagging sail within so that my coarse and rudderless stern turned from its rutward course, and our once dashing hero suddenly sputtered in some unknowable lexicon as the torn tmesis between love- and -lorn, abutting a wayward and unwelcome adnominal rather than its hopeful noun, thrashing madly along the choppy shoal of fire-ashed and fighter-sodden wash that lay between Genevieve and me on my knees and forearms treading scrabbling fighting the pull of the undertow extending from the petillant pool of lacustrine lust in my rearview reaching to trip me up beseeching besieging besmirching my whipsawed heart until I, the penultimate neck of slain Hydra, moribund, hunched against the hood coughing up an expulsion of the gray matter lodged inside my blackness, labored through the herculean task of wrenching free the door and the smoke the tenebrous billowing smoke black blinding suffocating pouring outward upward hovering hanging haughty nebulous net and I coughing slapping sliding in behind the steering wheel, fickle helm final modicum of control whose fatal impression upon me had become and remains forever, reduced to the pretense of three smudged arrowheads pointing to my smoky center, a radiant feint of bruising cerulean xanthic rubicundity, contused, confused like some chevroned salvo or salve of preserved penance of eternal inculcation of iridescent truth and when seated I could only offer to Genevieve rasped throat raked words of solace but they reached, bounced off a deaf cataract of locks that spilled away from the parted bolt crafting a gothic vault over the virginal ivory sanctum of her exposed nuque and I reached over to

tuck her hair behind an ear to lean her back into the seat was when I felt the knockout the wind knocked out blackening black and I tried but I could not I couldn't I'm trying but I I cannot just can't

Chapter XXXIII

He shifted from Park to Reverse to Drive and when he had to shift no more he reached over and they deserted that wretched scene with her hand inside his. She jostled to the rhythm of the road and he tightened his grip as though that fatherly gesture might steady her. Was he a father still? What condition could be more essential to the nature of fatherhood than to have a child? He did not look over again. He could not. But as long as he held her hand he had a child, he told himself. He was a father. He depressed the accelerator, controlled the car with a numb nimbleness. Bitter. Cold. Defeated. Resigned. Consumed by a realization he would be deprived after this of his every paternal duty to come. The diligence of tomorrow with which he had imbued in his mind a feckless joy now rendered as immemorial ephemera. The elegant dances. The elaborate bedtime story he'd plotted but not penned. The innumerable and winsome wincings that he would have one day elicited with ostensibly desultory equivoques delivered in the company of her incredulous clique. All of this duteous glee, rightfully his, purloined without ceremony. But still he was driven not by vengeance but closure. Retaliation could not revitalize her nor could it immortalize her. So he obviated the temptation, refused to look back. Resisted the driver's impulse to utilize any of the mirrors at his disposal lest he glimpse the mien of the receding assailant, catch sight of the craven thief who had taken from him everything.

The road opened before them and passed by in a phantasmagoric dreamscape unbroken by obstacle or darkness. They slipped past the diner and gas station and driveways Madden and Moebius and Sue, the precise designations of their arbitrary appellations notwithstanding, all seemingly bereft of any sign of the nefarious happenings that had once served to mark their existence. The police presence dissipated. Trees and houses and the hot horizon melted into a featureless void where the flashing orb suspended in the sky bled from moon to sun to some seething soulless eye and the clouds that surrounded it billowed and narrowed into the shapeless ghosts of once wondrous clouds until he was slammed from his transelike traversal into the concrete reality of his own driveway. He turned the ignition and the world juddered at once into the curt drab of hopelessness. As though the world siphoned color from his heart.

Her head lolled when he lifted her with one arm under shoulders and the other collecting that precious popliteal knock-kneed crook of twin parentheses and upon her seat there spangled a starry

firmament. A constellationless galaxy of nebulous gouts or undried tears or depressed finger-stabbings that threatened with a direct gaze an astronomical anguish he dared not chance. He numbly stumbled through rooms. They crossed the threshold and he laid her down in her own bed where she sunk gently into gossamer sheets like angel down and lay peacefully on her side. With closed eyes he kissed her forehead. He hovered dumbly for a moment as though she might awaken. He jumped at a sigh that he recognized as his own and found himself halfway to the door, where it seemed safe to look up. He watched the still slope of her back to shoulder, studied one half of the cordate figure for a beat. Held his breath for a murmur. His baby. From the doorway a slumberous little girl like most any other.

From one room removed he unsheathed a record and listened inattentively in a fatalistic languor. The ethereal vocalizations and sparse strumming under twee storytelling stirred nothing in him. He had to document her existence. To do what he was made to do. To memorialize his and the world's loss. When he could not gather himself, under the purpled auspices of his mended memento hanging overhead, to compose even one lucid sentence, he embarked on a final journey to procure at last the aid of the ineffable high of rhapsody and affection and euphoria from his final, and only, enduring love.

Chapter XXXIV

By a central quelling, a cathartic calm elicited by a final oral frisson, what started as a frantic phrenology via hardened and excitable extremity of Barb, I have replaced upon my enigmatic Gatsby face my Ekleburg specs—oh maenadic Barb, shall a humble Bacchus follow you tonight! I'd thought her long gone, but upon pushing off from the table to revisit the brumal marvel at my estival window, with the apparently danceable belch of my scraping chair legs enough to enliven the floor, I found the provocative vestige of her delectable bits wobbling and gyring in the perverse choreography of sensory seduction at my feet, under my worktable. And there I bent to gather her up, and she gathered me in the swallowing bobble of her soothing embrace, the evanescent cloud of ecstasy under, within which I currently toil. The price rendered for her services, as the probing reader can well attest, has been repaid tenfold by the satisfaction provided. She does not disparage my rigidity; rather she fosters it, works around it, draws from it with a magical vibrancy the ink of life. And so, while the synergy of my stamina and her performance, fluctuating each at dubious levels of sustainability, and my commensurate difference, ever-diminishing, that balances the tottering totemic equation of the subtrahend of lucidity beneath the minuend of perspicuity, must we forgo these heady equivocations and forge headlong without delay toward the finish tape of equatorial, equivocal destiny.

Of the fractured dartboard of literary theme I realize now with the tired flicks of my wrist that we've merely pricked the hackneyed felt of boy-meets-girl and the sanguinary vein of boy-loses-girls. And thus in the wake of my murdered darlings I have merely this paltry pasquinade of lovestory to offer: a dubious dissemination of incriminating insemination and its fatalistic fallout. Of the manifold maladies one at or of my prurient parallax might have contracted I have settled upon the fantastical services of a phantom and metempsychotic hitman, in attenuating addenda roused from the killer quiller couch upon which I've lain and dreamt in lieu of suffering the dark nights of a Starlaless bed. Still I beat on against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past: Who could have imagined that out from the parochial schools of novice novelists and provincial poets—expressly endowed with little more than a chesty sense of entitlement and a hope that I'd an expedient penchant for grading on a curve (or two)—that there would have emerged the victorious tortoise with a harelike precociousness and fecund breast. Or that by my dilatory and aimless emulation of her chelonian march toward some ineffable Ananda there

would spill from my own turgid breast this galactorrhea, this logorrhoeic concoction of fathomless depth, of the sacred and the profane, immiscible, admissible, permissible only within the romanticized reek of cloying rosy remembrance in such hermetic, putrescent quarters of sub rosa memorial...

(Sidelined damsel; attack-cat tales madden; I led 'is)
death march...

As the peripatetic passenger enters finally the station, the stationary conductor of his loquacious locomotive must announce with valedictory levity: In case you forgot, I'm terminal...and now I am the posthumous portent: Beware the chartreuse-faced sub-critic who wrests from the periscoped gestalt his perishable pericope of brutally bruited inconsistencies, for despite his efforts to disparage, I promise I have not forgotten Selina (or forsaken whomever has in her stead undertaken the creation of the accompanying component of finer artistry); I deem her work complete. Throbbing blissfully in the enveloping ensconce of Barb, I have saved for the finale an inimitable entelechy. Fear not, however, I am leaving no messy tableau of a faux-fellatio maxillofacial gun-in-mouth pose—I know too well the disheartening task of collecting the intractable spread of pink gobbets streaked by the eraser's drubbing—the paralyzed picture I've bequeathed my discoverer is the polarizing mimesis of my last days: a quiescent acquiescence in every sense but of those on the page, where I have doubtlessly loosed a pandemonium of erratic errata and solecistic polemics—accepting the devilish compromise of minimal titivation in favor of maximal titillation—to soar madly among a regimented skein of windborne prosodic beatitude on its instinctual southbound trajectory. I bequeath to thee the snapshot of my lasting physical lassitude, juxtaposed so by my marathon of erumpent mental exertion. A tableau after all: a tabled tableau replete with checkered cover, an unafraid end fringed by the frayed ends I'd once hoped to goffer with the seamless selvage of closure, not this rumpled scroll positively crimped with appositives, a restriction-free ruffle of alliterative literature and dissonant assonance, and rhymes near, eyed and feminine amid a backdrop of end times fore-conveyed and imminent. In lieu of the hot iron of full, abject disclosure we will have to make do with the truncated and cold clamp of my sprawled stamp. Is this justice? How have we arrived here? Have I been unfaithful? Did I not faithfully tend to Sue's side—now may the more perspicacious among us interpose for the woefully obtuse the implied phonetic anaptyxis; interject with that grandiose but little tittled syllable of authorial assertion, softened and lowercased and placed in the elided center now wisping away as the fleeing plume of apostrophe—at every front? Alas, of happiness there is naught, for I am the pompous Pompeiian pig—resorting in these fey moments of extreme desperation to the inutile and puerile porcine vivisection of conflated

rime and splayed onset in chants of puling Pig Latin: ease-play...arla-STAY—preserved for posterity not by the lava of love, as was my wont, but instead paralyzed, incarcerated haplessly in hagiography, a fulsome prison, a panegyric avalanche of lexical bars. But engorged on the sweet meta- and physical bliss of Barb, it is not for some tummy-bloat gluttony of some extravagant last-wish repast that I plead, but through the openings in this suffocating grille of straight talk crossed, alloyed, galvanized and made doubly dense by double entendre, I've submitted my appeals to the ubiquitous and wordless wardens of populist lore in vain—Hey Zeus! Jesus! Yeah Yahweh; hello Elohim/her, canst thou see me in all your mercy fit for some grand reward in light of how I've prepared to abjure for eternity all brazen affronts of worldly pleasure?—for neither the commuted sentence nor its subsequent decomposition they are powerless to deny me but for the simple request that I cannot myself conjure of a conjugate visit:

Starla has come to Ckol

Starla came to Ckol

Starla comes to Ckol...

But still: Ckol comes to Starla—this the anastrophe of my chanted anaphora, apostrophe of my epistrophe...Oh but could a symplote of such simplicity prove to be the incantation of transubstantiation for which I'd prayed? Could it? Easier to swallow that I've been duly duped, that the essential quiddity of Barb was that of hallucinogenic quean, of cheap fata morgana for hire, and now as I sit here beside Starla's disengagement ring—ultimately the one missed hope for making of Ckol an honest man—drowned in a once effervescent enceinte of tepid champagne, an ersatz marital toast for the erst milquetoast proposer, I can no longer speak to the veracity of the preceding—any of it—as anything more than filial delusion, for the final illusion I have just witnessed pass past my window of my lost vicegerent incarnate, long apotheosized through similarly fenestrated vidi-veni-viewings but lowered there now as some et-tu-brutish, base punchline of answered prayer but answered finally by a petty and patronizing punisher on high, jilted and jealous...(Lean in close, reader, as I suspect you have been this whole time: Let us imagine the whole of this torrid tête-à-tête told in secret against the parenthesis of my cupped hand at the corner of my oral oracle and the opposing, closing parenthesis of yours in concentric semi-circles about your own aural auricle. Let us treat this whole rigmarole as the inessential parenthetical palaver it is, subject to the crackshot eye of an editorial enfilade, a slicing line, an incising strikethrough from me to you straight through this apocryphal tarsal, supra-carpal tunnel; but no: Is there not something invaluable to be gleaned from what has come before? And if not: Should the de-clodding come not from the clawhammer of my own clawed, overwrought hand?)...So here I toss upon this damnable, inflammable mess for my coup de grace the to-and-fro glissando of a nigh phonetically

palindromic Volatile Molotov in the metaphoric meteor of an Astral matchstick fillip to conflag-, evapo-, disintegrate the entirety of this whole charade, raise hell, raze heaven...Like my graceless, effete fling, like my fetid feting of a scintillating star indifferent to the astronomy I'd so desperately attempted to apply to it, what I saw could have only been a hopeless simulation, some sad simulacrum of Starla, a trickery, chicanery, ambling gracelessly about the vacant neighboring lot not as the svelte deity of yesterday or desiderative Madonna she would have been today but as a frowzy and deflated afflatus, a piteous pitted cherry just plopped down from the dead branch of some unutterable religion straight into the simmering jam of its eschatology—is this to be her punishment then? To warren-wander as inedible fruit dangled pendulously outside these garret walls only to tease the hyperventilating hare within with the deception of hope before his existence is, as is the final fiat of Narrative regarding the plenary presence of its author, efficaciously effaced? But here is my indelible fruit-squashing footprint and there suddenly creaks the ascending footfalls and sighing steps outside my door, closing in, the rapping now a knocking onomatopoeic and entredred-doubly—were it truly Starla, could I allow her to see my soul in this depraved state of dishabille, descended so into this lacustrine lunacy, anyway? What shall I be to her, to them, to you, but a gaffe? A gaffed fish, flopping, my center stuck on the jagged Barb of my hooker, my expelled and dying milt as the drying silt of silent phonemes, of violent lexemes bequeathed and inked upon the riparian glyphs rising as the orogenic perimeter, the depleted word banks of my evaporating lake. Rippling...Still. The rapping still, reverberating as the percussive end to this whole cunning cunctation. Of those demanding raps: I reject them, their illusory offerings, their peremptory queries—and to think I must now eschew my long-planned peroration of recursive weight-as-allegory bon mot juste, unjust, etcetera, among so many others...But not before I rush to commit this: It must come as no surprise that I regarded even non-fictionalized paeans to technology from the stark perspective of outsider as Dickish sorts of dystopian hate-or-lovecraft, Orwellian, Orson-Welles-qua-Wellsian portents of the wrathful wraiths to which our longstanding and trusted, proven methodologies are doomed with a ghastly pallor otiose and odiferous; from one populist periodical I used to peruse I have come to discern and decoct from its monthly journalistic juxtaposition of ostensibly unrelated articles detailing science qua Science's furcated and unilaterally undeterred marches toward its manifold and respective termini of Panaceas and Automations—if only this unrequited rapping will hold off my duplicitous tormenter long enough to get this down—that the intractable tornado of Technology churns dichotomously, enigmatically over the putatively forked pathways, leading toward mankind's immortalization and simultaneously to its obsolescence; this then is merely my capitulating for posterity to the ethos of our times, my diving headlong into the maw of the flesh-threshing vortex of Time's

cyclonic and cyclical and staggering path, the inexorable advance, the chaotic dance of concentric circles of terpsichorean debris in the twisted limbo of violent tarantella, annuli acuminating like some gross prolapsed intestine toward the anchoring terminus of its ectopic golden ring: the end of the destructive, digestive tract of history through which I shall be consumed voraciously and disseminated extemporaneously and decomposed, respectively...Oh but while I'm hung up on the unspeakable destiny of my revolver's aim my beseecher's rapping intensifies rather than dies and isn't it the quintessential existential quandary of the human condition to have more than necessary but less time than we desire? And who has benefitted more than I from the praxis of that apothegmatic opening door that necessitates or causes by forced vacuum the closing of another—or vice versa? And now it is incumbent upon the febrile, vestibuled assemblage so immured to contend with the hurried, hermeneutic draft that has been let in, issued forth perhaps invasively without the legibly zephyrean chirography of an exegetic amanuensis whose inimically solicitous services I regrettably could not for obvious reason employ. Or failing that, some especial supernal someone to unfurl upon the wall this unabridged cuckoo quasi-Kerouac tract, rolled out as a lexical friezing of Hell, a tragi-comedic but artless articulation of sadistic couplings, torturous engagements, punitive entanglements...So then. An epistle epistemologically dubitable at last. A dubious past. But here and now I avert my atavistic gaze to again stare down a future where I, steeped in senectitude, robbed in one fell swoop of primo- and ultimogenitured beneficiary, opt to forevermore endure the hellish flagellation of publication in mortal stasis an unaccountable eternity a-, contin- and exigency-free—a recused seclusion so absolute as to make downright gregarious and garrulous the McCarthys, the Salingers, the Pynchons of the evasive canon—rather than deign to answer their knocks

Final Exam

First off, Dad didn't die tripping over some book. Unlike Ckol, playing kiss the bottle with dictionary entries while I was left alone to play the role of grieving parent. I don't have the time or desire to get into it all, so here it goes...Oh, Ckol, you dinosaur, tyrant, thesaurus-wrecks—Is that something you would have appreciated? Ironic that I never finished your class and now I get to be your valedictorian...Oh, Reader, you'll find if you keep on an appended, ahem "bowdlerized," syllabus that might prove somehow pertinent, but also let me warn you now that if you're the type who prefers the mystery of non-ending, please quit reading now before I, buoyed as if by a risen coffin, finally punctuate this thing with the vanishing period of this bloated ship's sinking bow.

Enough of this prepared spiel, this is not the venue for that...The last time I saw Ckol, or I guess the second to last time I saw him alive, he had just had our baby taken from his arms. Maybe the third to last time? I noticed the dread in his eyes as they placed her in the cart and the doctor and nurses huddled around it before wheeling her down the hall. He said he needed some air and would be right back. I guess technically I saw him briefly the next day sleeping in yet another hospital room in Lumen Point after his accident, as you're now aware, but after he later slipped out the window our story picks back up where his leaves off. I opened the door to the second story of his garage, where he'd just "moved," entering just in time to see his writhing body jerking violently on the floor amid his papers and broken glasses over a fresh splash of merlot, and a few blue and yellow pills. I ran over and knelt beside him and placed my hands over his chest to save him but his trembling hands pushed my hands away and gripped my hips and he held me down, dragging himself closer before his bluish face stopped shaking. His whole body just stopped. He spit up this horrendous bile or something all over me. He fell over and I saw the chilling, unblinking eyes of that hideously creepy upright doll he'd bought for the baby witnessing the whole thing. Oh, I'm just dreadful at death scenes. I screamed for Mother, who had driven me there and was searching the house again. She found me and we called the police. They confiscated the pages without letting me look at them. A couple weeks later they sent me the exhumed ring, the toxicology report, it came back showing nothing more lethal than unhealthy quantities of sugar...About the ring, that token of undying love which was his undoing, they reasoned that, per Ckol's written wish, it legally belonged to me if I wanted it. I signed for the delivery, just in case, but I haven't

opened the padded envelope. I doubt I will. I hold the envelope and just think of where that thing has been, where it was when I watched him die and shudder. I shudder.

I guess this would serve as my affidavit, if I needed one. After all I was in the hospital the whole time. That's verifiable. I only stuffed those pre-posted envelopes with my letters because he never answered my phone messages and Mother couldn't find him when she stopped. I would be happy to leave it at that—haven't I been through enough?—but when the publisher requested that I help concatenate this loose "document" I reluctantly accepted to do my best to be the requested amanuensis (and yes, I kept my dictionary close at hand). There was nothing I could do to stop its publication, they said, nothing I could do besides have them change my name. But since they found it so intrinsically tied to the work that altering it would damage the writing in an artistic sense that they suggested they might fight even that request in court, I decided, why bother? Why not put my own stamp on it. Perhaps this is my duty or my penance. And I'm sure you wonder about my almost blitheness here, my ability to attain the troubling equanimity required to even begin to write this without crumpling up into a trembling ball. What is my "Barb" after all? It is just that: my relative detachment. I'm emotionally spent. After losing three people of differing levels of intimacy in so short a time, I'm drained. I am numb. I've attained a level of acceptance heretofore unknowable. But I have so little time now and here I am rationalizing...

Greta and I would go most every night that I was staying at the university dorm for a few hours to The Writings On The Wall, the oft-smoky "club" at which Ckol mentioned spying on me...I know he called himself a poor keeper of time or however he put it, but how is it that he didn't realize that it was Greta who delivered that infamous desktop proposition he so gallantly denied and dismissed, when it was only the year before? It was there at Writings that she confessed it to me in a whisper...maybe she'd seen him watching us, maybe she had had a little bit to drink...and then she admitted to a subsequent depression, the understandable weight gain, which I guess possibly explains Ckol not recognizing her when he saw us together. Or even at her dorm room alone. Or the grocery store. But what can be trusted of Ckol's writing anyway? It just happened to be there, at Writings, that I discovered a couple poems by Sylvia Plath printed on or tacked onto the wall beside what became for at least a couple weeks my regular seat—THIS is serendipity. Now everyone and their mother, including my own, gets a peek at the awkward collision of my supposedly intimate attempts to assert my own sexuality with the expression evoked by my literary muse, but what can I do about that now? And who would have thought then that it was about Ckol's head that the bell jar would descend? Certain authorities have posited that something must have been shaken loose when he wrapped his car around the tree, but I

saw his eyes when they took “Genevieve” from his arms. I’ve never seen a clearer picture of distraught. Certainly not even Mother when Dad passed...So now I am Esther fishing out meaning from *Finnegans Wake*, Ckol’s wake, and I don’t know that I can do much better with this mess...this slop is solipsism to the nth degree...It feels like I can’t stop bleeding...All the serious readers were walking around campus with their conspicuous copies of *Infinite Jest* with at least two bookmarks hanging like tongues sticking out to ridicule me and my beloved copy of *The Unchambered Heart* tucked neatly away. And you know, it wasn’t even until I read it that I, what, two years ago at this point? had seriously picked up a pen or cigarette. Which I will be judged for. By God. And now by everyone. And all because of this silly little story about the turtles. My nod to *The Open Boat*, which we’d just happened to read earlier that year in English class. It was my stupid schoolgirl golden ticket to meet Mr. Hershbeck, for immoral reasons, yes I admit. Not to say I wasn’t taking writing seriously at this point, but when all your girl friends are regaling you with their own salacious tales of lost virginites, downright badgering, some sort of curiosity and envy wells up in even the most chaste. I am human, after all, right? And I was already smoking thanks to this man’s characters, right? So I quickly wrote this story, hitting the obvious allusions to classic lit, to pad my resume, even if I knew deep down I wouldn’t need it since Sylvester was making the final decision of who would go, and Mr. Hershbeck just crushed my spirit with his critique of it. So I went against Greta’s exhortations and took it to Ckol. And the rest is now history. Isn’t history supposed to be written by the survivors? And the great irony is that the little turtle to make it safely to sea was the one who just sort of drifted out, who didn’t try to assert its will over Nature, who became the sole survivor, has in essence become me. But I don’t need to tell you that, even if, and I’ve made sure of it, you’ll never see the story itself (it was never part of the confiscated suicide note and I have doubts about the publisher as any more than a vanity press, that there exist any more than those two copies...the other stories and voices felt awfully familiar after being around Ckol’s place and sometimes seeing his discarded stories...and I suspect the “crenulated” turtle in the front was so shakily drawn because he had no business drawing ANYTHING (remember, I’d seen his work)). And now I wish I would have fought back, lashed out against Nature’s advances. Because I admit it felt good to get that feedback. It was like a drug. It turned me into a pliable mess. And though, yes, I made it through to the other side, but at what price? I’ve read that the Puritans opposed the writing of fiction because creation is purely the realm of God, and now I can’t help but wonder if in the end it was my ambitions that put me in this position. That I survive not in spite of my vices but because now I may suffer for them. Of course Mother is still here. She is my only living confidante. She is the only one who did not collude with my sin in some way. She refused to permit it, them. So she suffers because of me and my weakness and my smoking.

Which I have given up, but what does that matter now? We control what we can. We pray to accept the rest. I'm not trying to be pious or sanctimonious. I am a wretch, indeed, but I'm paying my penance and trying to do better now. I hope I'm doing better by accepting this assignment, but like so many such gray areas, we never truly know...I went out and found Ckol's once-mentioned college essay of renown and to be honest it was touching. Since it's only briefly touched on I think I should disclose a little bit about it. It bears no resemblance to the Ckol we've witnessed here. His mother was an ambitious journalist; his father, unsurprisingly a philanderer who abandoned the two of them. She ended up killing herself, so I suppose Sybil's, oh of course her name was Sybil!, suggested warnings truly have been validated. And the essay is Ckol's reconciling the act with her integrity as a writer and mother after his discovery of disparate documents and trinkets she'd tucked away and from which he could extrapolate some intended message to him. It was his handling of the tactile objects, how they dissolved into liquid, into fluid meaning in the ink of the pen in his deft hand that had first begun to truly endear him to me. From a distance though. This was after I'd left and before Mother knew a thing about what happened beyond that something was amiss. By the time this "Selina" had found me and mysteriously handed me the crude watercolor with Ckol's new address, I was a lost soul though. I was a shark who had tasted blood but I hadn't yet gone off the deep end with my appetites. I rationalized that because I was already pregnant and that the man who'd written that essay couldn't truly be evil deep down inside that I could justifiably indulge my lustful desires. Would I have been so bold had I known these little escapades would one day be so facetiously brandished before the world's eyes? I cannot say. I can only tell you how it made me feel thrown back into my own face. Let's just say only slightly less pleasant than being rhapsodized for posterity in crass metaphors for my body parts in terms of esoteric geometry or bygone architecture or mathematical equation or the venerable fire hydrant. I have no doubt he exhausted his reserves of trivia with these cosmetic tidbits of botany, math, astronomy, geology, geometry, theology, etc. It's all flash. He wanted to sound so smart, like he knew so much about any random subject. He told me once he considered himself a "catholic man without the guilt." But little did he realize how rudimentary, how banal, how utterly exoteric the world would one day find even all his precious literary allusions, his one area of seeming expertise...So I deem the moment he put his hand into mine going into the clinic as the moment I most warmed up to the idea of him as potential partner and suitable father. And until he abandoned us, he did little to ruin that. Not to say that in the middle of things I thought he was ideal, but...getting this glimpse into the inner workings of his mind certainly makes me reassess things. In hindsight at least. Ironic how of all the tropes and conventions that he ridicules his students for, he never takes to task "it was all a dream" tripe, inconsistent points of view, the jarring

interjections of disturbing revenge fantasies kicked off with the uncredited work of “Damian” and shoehorned in, and for what exactly? To cleverly point from the grave his finger at the true culprit, as though I don’t already know and suffer commensurately? How much of Djimon’s or my friend Char’s fates can truly be gleaned from these dubious disclosures? And how long must the world wait for the remainder of Ckol’s proposers so desperate to make it as writers—Greta has her doubts—to stand up and be counted among the abused now that his fate has been widely engraved? What else? The clock ticks ticks ticks and I’m determined to see that Ckol’s will be the last missed period between us. I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry to everyone. To Daddy, I know you slipped that revolver into my crate for my own protection. To Mother, who stayed by my side no matter my affronts. The university, God...especially to Genevieve, whoever you could have been. I love you.

Propaedeutic Syllabus Page 2

three seats between.

ASSIGNMENTS

Your successful passage from Propaedeutic Matrix for the Prospective Writer into the more elevated strata of belletristic curricula offered within these hallowed halls hinges upon completion and submission of at least one substantial work accompanied by a number of shorter pieces ancillary and/or tributary and/or completely independent from but substantial enough on their own apart from your main thesis that exhibit each a capable deftness and portend a potentiality from prosy, as well as a noteworthy cultivation of a keen pen toward thoughtful critique and trenchant tongue in contribution to the discussion of the disparate elements that make up the concurrent works-in-progress of your coeval matriculates, which shall be freely swapped and duly returned like willing tyros at a swinging soiree—hint: Allow not the meticulously misplaced modifier, redounding to the ludic informality and fortuitous ambiguity so treasured by your transitory and hopefully transitional professor, to fall on deaf ears, rise to blind eyes, etc. They are as follows:

—You will continuously work toward and complete to the best of your abilities, given the deadline of semester's end minus one week, one substantial piece of indeterminate length in either prose or poetry and be prepared at all times to disseminate within one scheduled meeting period a unique excerpt in duplicate among your classmates for critique both written and discussed. You might choose to compile a short story or essay or poetry collection, complete a novella or epic poem or even construct a memoir. Mayhap you'd like to chance something more experimental than these traditional forms, and you're welcome to indulge.

—Select from some periodical—daily, monthly, bimonthly—an article or editorial or even advertisement related or not to the theme of your main composition that fails to reach a concrete conclusion and then provide for it one of your own fabrication.

—If you are toiling in prose for your lengthiest work, you must write at least one poem—its form left completely to the writer's discretion—inspired by it to complement or compliment or even reject it. We are not settling for examples of "found poetry" for this assignment. We are not callow prospectors now but rather alchemists. If poetry is your poison you must pen a palinode-in-prose to explicate, expound, expand upon, respond thoughtfully to its colossal counterpart.

—Write a chapter or significant passage from the perspective of some other character through whom something that otherwise could not be illumined may be. Re-write a poem through the eyes of another narrator. One simply cannot overestimate the empathic value of a vicarious viewing.

—Finally, in lieu of a formal final examination, we will ultimately return for a single ninety-minute period of extemporaneous response and ceaseless writing, where we will convene under a communal cone of silence with naught save a stack of blank pages and the requisite utensils at the ready, when we, after having read in full our own output, will each engage in a singular, intense "free-write" session to react honestly to what we have committed to page in these previous five months.

EXTRA CREDIT

There will of course arise opportunities to effect auspicious vicissitudes for the ambitious student willing to engage in