

# **THE UNKNOWN: AN ANTHOLOGY**

William Gillespie  
Scott Rettberg  
Dirk Stratton

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(Italicized titles from the collaborative hypertext novel *The Unknown*, by William Gillespie, Scott Rettberg, and Dirk Stratton)

## The Unknown

*Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us is that at the earlier stages of life we think we know everything—or to put it more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well. —Thomas Pynchon*

When you get right down to it, it's all sublime. That is, indescribable. You don't stop, though. You keep trying to describe it.

Language games become a form of breathing.

What you don't know can and will hurt you, but not as much as what you already know, which has already hurt you and will continue to bring you pain.

This is also the ultimate cause of joy.

To what extent is the unknown a function of memory, and to what extent fate?

We are frontier-obsessive creatures. From America, could we be otherwise? This is not all the stuff of domination. One would hope...? To know what is not known. This is the limit and the expanse and the ultimate undoing of all horizons.

But how can we explore the spaces between understandings of things?

How can we begin to question how we remember, not what we remember?

How can we know the totality of what we do not think?

There is a problem of scale. To discuss U.S. foreign policy is to avoid discussion of the fact that we are sitting at a table.

There is a problem of etiquette. That is, in addition to the Unknown, there is the Undiscussed. And we are sitting at a table. But that fact is not very interesting to us right now.

## The Spy

It was the last thing you noticed: he was blonde,  
the spy reminisced.  
His services will be sorely missed.

With that the spy's mallet curtly creased the lawn.

Frankly, he was an unfortunate pawn,  
played by circumstances, crushed by the fist  
of fate, so to speak.

It's sad such persons exist  
and that sometimes one must drown a swan. . . .

But we have very little choice  
actually. You have to understand I'm not—  
The spy paused and stared at the red croquet ball  
at his feet.

Finally, in an unfamiliar voice:  
The few, you see, are sacrificed for us all:  
salvation is never given, it must be bought.

## L. A. (Auster)

Toward the end of the Millennium, we had published a book of our best writing and we traveled the world to promote it. We were generally reckless and lucky, and the whole undertaking proved to be very successful. We had done, we felt, good work, and we deserved to live our dream. Then, after we returned from China, we were offered the opportunity to write a motion picture, and so we moved to Los Angeles.

What then happened has been documented elsewhere, but the point is that fame and wealth very nearly destroyed us: before the end, one of us had died, another had a kind of epiphany, and I had become the sworn enemy of a number of people who used to find me quite likeable.



## Autotowing

For ten years I lived off my inheritance slowly. I lived in El Camino Arizona with my mutt. After perfect, inexhaustible poverty I was now inexplicably rich. Sliding from despair into comfort inspired no spiritual revival. I had already given up and was duly rewarded. The world would keep me around no matter what. I could no longer offer it even gentle resistance. It wouldn't let me waive my humiliation in death. I had already quit cocaine, LSD or lost connections. Now that I could afford drugs I lost interest. Their trips were a vacation someplace I'd rather live. That involuntary fascination and alien alert energy had faded. The alcohol that once rinsed it now muddied it. I was waiting for something else to awaken me. I didn't know I was waiting or for what.

I bought a shack near the desert and waited. Eventually I met Tex and Louie at the saloon. Tex's moustache wrapped around his cigars with serious eyebrows. Louie would never say what he was laughing at. Within a month of meeting them I began autotowing.

Tex was thirty and hated all young people bitterly. He hated their knowledge, understanding, and desire to describe. Tex had no reality that could be discussed sensibly. He knew only an aching void in his abdomen. He waved off my metaphors and verb "to be." He would not discuss what he was waiting for. Language was idle finger twiddling to kill the time. He only proposed more beer shots or something worse.

Louie read French philosophy and watched lots of television. Everything he saw or heard proved someone else's point. He was constantly delighted or amused but never discursive. Louie lived outside of town on a garbage dump. He had a shack and ten acres of sand. He also had a single engine plane named Moonie. He had a landing strip littered with glittering metal. He had a rusty old towtruck and small crane. He collected cars that were abandoned or otherwise free. He removed their engines, dashboards, seats, windows and hubcaps. He would rope their front bumper to his plane. Then he taxied down his runway, cars in tow. At the end of his strip was a ramp. As he lifted off, the cars hit the ramp. He could drag them aloft for almost ten seconds. Any longer and they would pull his plane down. He lifted them over his property and released them. The cars would plummet to twisted wreckage in seconds. I wanted to be a passenger in these autos. He thought I was insane for offering to ride. He made feeble attempts to persuade me not to. Yet he left the seat in every single car. While he was removing even floor mats to lighten them. When he found I had flown before he grinned. Although Tex never smiled he thought autotowing seemed fun.

It was a warm and satisfying winter that year. We would fly every day and I slept lots. My mutt was no kitten and continued to grow. She must have been a lion of some kind. She was 280 pounds, tail whipping like a chain. Six feet from iron jaw to tip of tail. She was like a mane with teeth and playful. She would pounce on me when I came home. I learned how to control her with a chair. A few strokes with a baseball bat pacified her. I began to feed her live coyote Louie caught. By April I had a fenced-in antelope herd. I would chase a slow antelope into the house. She would chase it into a corner and pounce. There was little point in my cleaning my house. I was usually at Louie's strip or the saloon.

My first autotows were precious and exhilarating. I was so certain of dying then. Every day had a precious desperation then. One extra drink and one extra meal. Either I would be smashed or eaten. I felt tasted smelt saw heard everything. The pointless violence of life was intensified. I shot solitaire Russian Roulette seven spins. Its miniscule odds made my life bearable.

Tex and I took turns flying cars. Tex was thrilled, struggled to remain ambivalent. He got excited talking then caught himself. He sternly plastered his moustache back down. A steering column might puncture his abdomen. It could kill him or his hangover.

He enjoyed towing as we enjoyed falling. He tried to strip the cars lighter.

Every night became less plausible. I remember when Tex died. It grew quiet in Camino. Even my crunch seemed muffled. Just Louie, Moonie, and me. We each took turns towing. I got badly injured then. My right hand was severed. Caught between dashboard and roof. I fainted in the wreck. Louie circled above and landed. He tied off my arm. Now I was left-handed. I could no longer write. I could no longer strum. I could no longer draw. I had to learn anew. I felt an incredible relief. My ambition had been amputated. Life was an agonizing challenge. I worried about possible jobs. I considered forks and forms. I couldn't remove my necklace. I cried over my bootlace. I began to do pushups. I invented new dexterity exercises. I beat up my mutt. My only interest was impossibility.

I smoked cigarettes. I racked debts. I fed lions. I was waiting. Die or fix. I drank poison. I drove fast. I ate carcinogens. I packed handguns. I awaited death. Death was nonchalant. I awaited life. I awaited what? It seems stupid. I am human. I should start. I've waited enough. Time to start. To start living. Start living now.

Louie and me. In the sand. Our old argument. Falling or flying. Which is it? Louie frowns deep. You hit ground. Therefore you fall. I look away. First you climb. Then you drop. Therefore you fly.

First we crash. Then fly again. Louie, I'm quitting. One more tow. It's your turn. Time to fly. Strap yourself in. We're going high.

I ignited Mooney. I crept faster. I lifted off. The rope screamed. Louie's Porsche lifted. It spun around. I went higher. Higher than ever. Past the fence. Off Louie's property. The Porsche spiraled. The rudder buckled. The rope screamed. The rotor sputtered. The horizon tilted. I cut Louie. The rope held. Some bad snag. I fought altitude. Louie blurred circles. The plane dropped. Rocky foothills loomed. Louie hit rock. The rope snapped. The Porsche tumbled. Moonie lurched forward. Louie found out. I flew away.

Bye.



## Iowa

And so we had read at Prairie Lights, where I had bought my first copy of *Writer's Market* when I was 19 years old. And so it had gone well, more or less. There had been some gnashing of teeth. William had been accosted by a crowd of young M.F.A.-getting poets who said that language poetry was not allowed, and in response he had read “The Table of Forms,” or anyway part of it. Coover had appeared to be amused, at least enough that he refused to sign any autographs while we were reading. There was some tension in the room, sure, but as long as Coover was happy, we were happy.

Frank Conroy was already drunk. Dirk had already vomited, as usual, and then read haiku. I think it was peyote, this time. I apologized to Conroy about a piece Krass-Mueller had written about him, which had seemed to me to be mean. Krass-Mueller's piece was about how Conroy wrote a travel piece for some cruise line. This was in Krass-Mueller's piece, which was ripping on cruise lines, for *Harper's*, who sent him on the cruise, which he did not enjoy. It was a funny piece, but I thought it was kind of cruel to rip on Conroy when Conroy was just doing the kind of thing that we (I mean writers, you know?) all do when we're hard up for cash. I mean we (The Unknown) had already done shit that was far worse than that was. For cold hard cash. For the Almighty dollar. We were prostituting ourselves for the sake of American literature, and I told him that our friend Frank had even written copy for Procter and Gamble. Writers gotta eat, I said to him, and fuck, if you can get on a cruise for free, you get to eat, which is part of the job, right? Or at least it comes with the territory. I told him about some fucking intern at *Harper's* who'd pissed me off once when I sent them a story. But he didn't piss me off so much that we'd turn down the opportunity to publish excerpts of our travel memoirs in said magazine. I mean I don't hold a grudge, you know? Of course later, we'd blow that opportunity, too, when we missed our dinner with Lapham. But this was all before that ugly night in Boston. This night was special. I wasn't even on heroin at the time.

And so we had read at Prairie Lights. I read some shit I wrote when I was 19 and thought that the best way to get published was to send stuff out to some of the addresses in *Writer's Market*. And don't get me wrong, there's some great people at F&W, and that whole sending stuff out routine works for some people, I've got a lot of friends who've built whole careers like that. And others who've built careers around fucking editors. There I mean fucking in the physical sense. Poets. Whatever works, I guess. But the mail—it's not for me. I mean, I tried that once, back when I was 19, back when I still had a pretty good relationship with the U.S. Postal Service. But they had fucked me since then, countless times postal workers had fucked me over. Fuck in the metaphoric sense, I mean, there. Graduate school applications had been lost, magazines had been stolen, books had never been delivered. And so I was supposed to send my shit out into the hands of those fucks? Trust them with my blood, sweat, and tears? I don't think so. So that created some problems. Most publications still don't take email submissions. And even if it got there, I was supposed to trust my work to some pimply-faced fucking intern at *Harper's*? I told Conroy all this, I was kind of babbling, and I told him that that book of his *Stoptime* is a real classic, in my book.

Anyway, the reading was pretty decent, the people in Iowa City just love a decent reading, and we're decent readers. Then we (that is me, Wm., Dirk, Aukema and Coover—Conroy, as I've said, was pretty much wasted by the time the reading started and retired to his room shortly thereafter) went back to Chuck's house and sat in his kitchen and rolled a

couple doobies of the Brown University chronic. Coover didn't actually smoke any of it, at least not in front of us. The air was pungent and wholesome. Coover is, hey let's face it, one of my heroes. So even if he did smoke any, I wouldn't mention it here, because it turns out, we discovered, that a lot of people who read our hypertext novel tend to believe that everything we write about all the highly regarded literary figures who we mention in the hypertext is true. Which, as I've explained, again and again, it's not. It's mostly bullshit, as they say in the vernacular. Still nobody believes me. Like this is some kind of fucking biography. But anyway, I'm not gonna have anybody believing that Coover, who is an American literary icon, a true great man in the "great man" theory of history sense of the word, was actually sitting there getting stoned with us. Regardless.

So we were flying, and then William got lost on Aukema's porch. I should explain. Aukema's porch is a great library. Bookshelves floor to ceiling, chock full of literature. Almost all of the influences of the Unknown are in there, a lot of them signed. Because Aukema, I should mention this about Aukema, Aukema knows everybody worth knowing who's a writer. Almost. The script to *Taxi Driver*, for instance, was sold over a long distance phone call from the very kitchen we were right then sitting in. T.C. Boyle made Aukema a dwarf character in his novel *World's End*. Aukema is a very cool guy, who, I should mention this right now as a little bonus for all you dissertation-writing types out there, actually had a great deal of influence on the course of late 20th century American literature. Particularly hypertext literature. Once, I got into a fight, not a real fight, but some pretty serious verbal sparring, in that kitchen of Aukema's with Chris Offut, who thought that my short-short story "Mohawk Hangnail" was dangerous, and that it would be a bad influence on American literature. That it would be bad for the kids. I like Offut's stuff, but we had both been drinking quite a bit of whiskey. I think the word "fuck" was exchanged several times. He might have said "fuck postmodernism," and I might have said "fuck naturalism," but I'm not sure. As I've said, we were both quite drunk. He's a good writer though, check out his book *Kentucky Straight*.

But we were talking about Coover. Have you read *Pricksongs and Descants*, or *A Night at the Movies*, or *Pinocchio in Venice*, or *The Public Burning*? If you haven't read any of his work, I'd recommend that you pop open another window on your browser (yeah, right now, but leave *The Unknown* open too) and go to your online bookstore of choice and purchase a copy of one of his books. Now, you might not be able to find a few of his books, but I think that most of them are back in print, finally. Which is very good. That it's back in print. His work. Which is good. So let me just come out right now and admit that we've (The Unknown, here referred to collectively) lifted a few techniques from the guy. Is that a crime? I don't think so. Writers can get away with all sorts of that kind of shit. He didn't mind, at any rate, at least that's what he said, when we were sitting in Aukema's kitchen and we admitted to his face that we were ripping him off left and right. And it's not just us I'm talking about either, it's a whole generation of hip American writers. But that's another story. Or is it?

We talked about a lot of things with those two guys, me and Dirk. We talked about molecular biology. We talked about cannibalism and stereotypes of Native Americans. We talked about new medical instruments that are invisible to the naked eye. We talked about evolution. We talked about various pharmaceuticals and how they are tested. We plotted, we schemed, we made big plans for American literature. Hypertext especially. It was a good night, that night in the kitchen

at Aukema's house in Iowa City. I think William stole some books from Aukema. I remember thinking that I write an awful lot about marijuana when I am out of it, or some words to that effect.



## That Kind of Couple

They were poets. They were terrorists. They were anarchists. They were in love.

They were that kind of couple.

They were the kind of couple that you could spot in a crowd from the light that shone when they walked by. He glowed. She radiated. Blended, they sparkled, blindingly. All conversation came screeching to a halt when they arrived. She had red hair. He wore blue jeans. They were obvious in their affection, oblivious to the outside world.

We were flying down the state highway, total velocity. Dulcie wore a white bo-peep hat, silk straps tied around her chin. The car was a convertible station wagon, green. Dulcie never wore a scarf because of what happened to Isadora Duncan. Ringwald often wore a baseball cap with no team logo, but sometimes not, because baseball caps had a tendency to fly off as soon as the Subaru hit ninety. Dulcie and Ringwald had a windblown look about them. They told jokes about sidewall tires and candy packaging to each other and their coterie.

They had a fabulous collection of disguises. She wore a Wyatt Earp handlebar mustache. He wore a blue Marilyn Monroe wig, unusual because it was blue, but just ambiguous enough that he could slip around in it inconspicuously. The incongruity of Dulcie's bushy facial growth with her delicate features was barely noticed. This happened right after we had raided the Cherry Festival with Freudian sonnets, while we were pelting the Four County Dairy Queen Pageant contestants with yogurt and haiku.

The murder occurred in Seneca, Wisconsin.

We had nothing to do with the crime but for some reason were accused of it anyway. Dulcie had held the dying man's bleeding head in her lap. It had stained her dress, which at the time was, but is no longer, white chiffon. She was most upset, and not only about the dress. Grey matter had spilled over Dulcie's thighs as the anonymous victim departed with a last gasp. Ringwald had waved the badged men over.

They had fired.

He had ducked.

At that point it became clear that we would be facing some sort of problem with the law enforcement authorities.

This was upsetting. The crowd appeared to have somehow associated our guerilla poetry with the fact that this unknown, though apparently local, man, who wore overalls, and who had apparently done nothing to deserve his fate, had been shot through the head with a high-powered rifle, or some other lethal firearm, and therefore in turn the local militia were aiming to shoot us. Maybe it was Ringwald's blue wig that caused the denizens of Seneca to conclude that he

was the assassin. The cops were on our tail, and they were not Friends of Art. We ran, got into the musemobile and left in an expeditious manner, posthaste.

Ringwald vowed he would never again go after a Dairy Festival, at least not with haiku. The sirens wailed behind us. A nasty set of circumstances. But we had supplies. We had plastic explosives in the trunk and a full set of Crayola crayons in the front. Dulcie had a Travel Scrabble kit that she saved for emergencies. Games soothed and calmed us in times of desperation. She broke it out and hit Ringwald pretty quickly with QUARKS for a double word score. He tried for a triple word score with XANADU as the trooper's lights swirled behind us and he pushed the motor past the tachometer's thin red line.

"Isn't that a proper name, or a song title? Don't think it'll fly, Ringwald."

"Shit."

Ringwald pulled over. The cop through the bullhorn boomed, "Out of the car with your hands up!" Their weapons were drawn. Ringwald checked the rear-view mirror, "Shit. Isn't it so absorbed into the popular consciousness, Dulcie, that it's become commonplace, a noun of the generalized ideal? Shit. Duck, guerrilla poets!"

We were off again, full speed. The troopers fired. I ducked. There were four of us in the car. We were young. We were misunderstood. We were poets.

"Did you load the goo, Charlie?"

"Indeedie, did, Monsieur Ringwald."

"Tacks, Eduardo?"

"-Check-"

That's me. Eduardo. I'm a big fan of Emily Dickinson, the poet of the empty spaces that are so profoundly at the center of experience. I shave my head to a waxy sheen and sing songs by the Mamas and the Papas when my friends are feeling down. As a child, I wanted moon boots to play outside in when winter struck, although I lived in a place where it never snowed. In my favorite dream, I am floating over the Rocky Mountains, licking up the valleys.

Ringwald pressed the large green button on the dashboard control panel and the goo unloaded from our winged chariot with a tremendous squelch as the squad cars were hurrying near. We all applauded as the troopers' Mercury Cougars spun round and round in a key lime mixture we had taken months to perfect. A squad car slid into the embankment and lodged in the side of the hill. Nothing erupted in flames. No one was injured. We cheered as the sirens dwindled on the aural horizon. Charlie got it all on the videotape.

We made it to Madison in just under two hours. The capitol on the hill inspired us to thoughts of incendiary bombs and chained renga. Dulcie, ever the Romantic, descanted imagery of the capitol burning bright, high on the hill. She digressed on the subjects of oranges and muslin, then she spoke of lilac-strewn tombs and the grace of dying embers. Ringwald loved it. He cried a vale of tears. We were all quite moved.

Ringwald was definitely postsomething. There's a Beat influence there, sure, the picture of Kerouac duct-taped right on the vinyl covering of the horn on the steering wheel. Ringwald would babble incessantly when he got bored. He thought he was Jim Morrison sometimes, sometimes Oscar Wilde. He loved old reruns of Hee Haw. He hated Fritos but loved Doritos. His nose was pierced with a blue cobalt stud. He listened to Wagner, Sousa, Lou Reed, the Replacements, John Cage, Muddy Waters, and Duke Ellington. He disliked John Wayne and resented it when anybody mentioned "the Duke" if they didn't mean Duke Ellington. Ringwald liked to work with power saws, Black and Decker. We relied on him, he was our hero, a model for guerilla poets everywhere. I've never witnessed anything so thrilling as Ringwald at the height of his vigor, spouting subversive extemporaneous staccato free verse while slashing the tires of a municipal tow truck with his chainsaw abuzz.

Both Charlie and I were moved by the feelings of love in the car, as Ringwald and Dulcie wept and pawed each other passionately. Dulcie got a snack-size chocolate pudding from the cooler at her feet. She took a big spoonful into her mouth and kissed her Ringwald. In silence, I sat and watched from the back seat as Dulcie and Ringwald locked lips and passed the spoonful of pudding from mouth to mouth, barely watching the road as they slurped it from tongue to tongue. It made me feel free, like a day spent in the prairie, where I might chance to see a clover and a bee make a bit of happy reverie. Charlie, however, was disgusted by the whole display:

"I am repelled by your behavior. Looking at you, I feel nausea, ennui, revulsion. I am disease eating away at itself when I am looking at you. Mon Dieu! Lower the windows. Give me some air, that I might avoid this urge to purge my afternoon meal like melted fondue all over the Subaru."

Charlie could be irritable. He had a mercurial personality—he would spin from euphoria to sporadic loathing and bitter misanthropy. He was from New York City. He adopted an arrogant French manner, he got into Baudelaire and Rimbaud. He was a burr of a man, but a crucial part of our team, and I always sensed that underneath his acerbic exterior, the pain of his alienation dwelt in the soul of a poet. He dressed like T.S. Eliot. He was our demolitions expert. He admired Yeats and Sid Vicious. He said that Art is the noise that comes from strangling a stone, that it can be found scuttling the sewers and in the clutches of migraines. Artists have moods, and the life of a guerilla poet is a stressful one indeed. We felt Charlie's pain and tolerated him. Ringwald swallowed the pudding. Dulcie spoke up.

“Where is the sense of adventure, the fire, the Olympian torch burning in your youthful soul? Can’t you see that we’re in love, and that there is no sense in denying us? Tuberculosis could strike at any time, slip into our veins, and poison the life that now flourishes. Let this Subaru be our garden, while the ride may last. Let our souls grab at the passing rays of love, this ride may be our last. Let love linger, while we live. Let us dance among these fertile blossoms, latching us unto the sun. Love is not dying. Let it be that lamp burning in our hour of night, inextinguishable. Let us live. Let us love.”

“My apologies, Dulcie. It’s just that the pudding . . . my disgust . . . fecal ruminations. I envy your youthful enthusiasm, but love irritates, love bothers, love disturbs, love in such a manner is not love, but a shameless, brazen, bathetic bath in a bog of muddled greeting card imagery. Desist with the pudding. He needs to drive, okay? We have got to get there, to get out of here, to get past where we are now, to be at where we are going.”

Ringwald turned around, letting Dulcie handle the wheel.

“Look. We’re in the whirl-o-rama, we’re in the mix. We’re riding the lemon Harley Davidson of destiny, of indeterminacy, and it is imploding us, progressing us nowhere. We’re cast about this undimensional plane. We’re etched into the vinyl of an unplayed record in a 1955 Rockola jukebox, and we’re in storage, in a Cold War basement shelter, behind a crate of forty-year-old saltine crackers. In just milliseconds, our molecules may burst, spontaneously combust, into a spastic inferno of chemical waste. If our fumes are noxious, then it is, so it was, so it shall be, without end. And if Dulcie wants to pass me a glob of Jello-brand substance by lashing her tongue against mine, nothing will stop us. Not if it dribbles onto our chins, or if it stains the floormats, or if you wail like a siren. Nothing will stop our particles, and we will taste each other, each other we will taste. Have a pudding if you want. There’s three more left.”

Nobody had forgotten about the body, or the chase, or the possibility that an array of charges had been filed against us and that we were probably the subjects of a statewide manhunt, but we were content for a moment — silent.

We changed in the car and tossed our outfits out the window. It was possible that they had the license plate numbers. There was a certain insanity in driving to the state capitol and circling around it, trooper cars in abundance circling as well. The ennui of the situation caused Charlie to turn green and whisper to himself in frenzied French. The trooper cars ignored us. We turned on Washington Avenue and headed West, to Poppa Moon’s place, where we could hole up, rest and plan our next move.

Poppa Moon was a leftover from Sixties Madison. He was big in the anti-war movement, had had more than a couple of fingers in the Armory explosion, a friend of the Weathermen. He went to college at the UW in 1963, and although he never got a degree, had stayed in the city ever since. He had lived in a series of communes on the outskirts

of the city limits during the Seventies, where he composed the first of his cantos of percussion poetry for trash cans, the underground publication of which sparked a cult interest in the genre, which emerged as a full-fledged cultural movement in the winter of 1978. Widespread interest had petered out by February of 1979, but Poppa Moon was still at it, pounding away poetry. A guerilla poet couldn't help but admire the man.

In the early Eighties, Poppa Moon started up his own video shop. Then he had the idea for converting an old Fotomat into a 24 hour drive-thru condom shop, and he had recently become the proprietor of a hot dog stand. He was pretty well-known around town for his Tuesday morning ritual of taking out the trash while composing existentially-themed free verse, bemoaning the bitter march of time while slapping his palms in various rhythms against aluminum trash can surfaces to a complex aural effect.

"Three Cheddar Dog Classics and a Tofu Garden Dog. On the house."

Ringwald looked over to Dulcie as she tore into the tofu creation.

"How can you eat that?"

"Better than lips and assholes."

"It looks like jellified sputum. It has the consistency of a wet sponge."

Charlie had grown impatient.

"Poppa Moon, we've got a problem."

"Feds?"

"Maybe. There was a murder."

"Accidental explosion?"

"Of course not. I never err with the charges. It seems that somebody is trying to frame us."

Ringwald intervened, "Enemies of Art, staging our demise."

I stared at the squares of tile on the floor.

Poppa Moon took off his apron, "Who got murdered?"

"Anonymous, P.M." Charlie barked, wringing his hands.

"He bled into my lap," Dulcie was reliving it. "I saw his life-lamp flicker, a cool breeze, a winter snap. An innocent farmer, a grower of wheat, a shepherd perhaps, a lamb."

"We've seen this before," Poppa Moon said as he sat, "but not since the Seventies. The CIA, the FBI, the Republican Party, they used to take guerrilla poets seriously. My file is huge. But you guys, I admire you, don't get me wrong, but I thought that you were strictly the stuff of misdemeanors and *USA Today* sidebars. Things have become so



normalized that your kind of act has become a countercultural sideshow, barely flitting in the face of mass systems of authority. Nixon is dead, Rubin is dead, Hoffman is dead, even Timothy Leary is authentically dead now, and Reagan's brain is diseased and rotting. Revolution doesn't have the kind of urgency it used to. I don't know, though—a murder, an unseen gunman. If it was the Feds, they'd have you in custody.”

“An individual?” I was stretching to think of who could be so intensely evil as to hatch a plot against us, an individual rather than a faceless system, a lone gunman, out for poets.

“Exactément,” Charlie was fueled by the idea. “Some kind of sociopath, a counter-counter-cultural maniac. Some kind of suit-and-tie-wearing salaryman by day who giggles at pictures of starving children with bloated little bellies and runs down foxes that he encounters on country roads and burns books and masturbates to pictures of Adolf Hitler. He must be stopped.”

“But what can we do?” Dulcie got in, “They'll be chasing us.”

Ringwald jumped up from the booth and raised his arms over his head, suddenly flashing the lightbulb-going-on look, inspiration darting in his eyes, ever the orator.

“The coppers. If we were cowards, we would shrink from the authorities and hide from the crazed assassin who is stalking us. But we are no shrinking violets. We are poets, and we have a mission. We need to shock the bourgeoisie. We need to confront the authorities. Through our poetic expressions we need to press down our oppressor until his violent nature is compressed, repressed, and depressed by the impression of revolutionary presence we have stamped into his universe. We must press on. We need new wheels. We need new disguises. We need a new location.”

Meanwhile, we needed to gather funds for gas and tolls. Charlie put on his whiteface and mime jumpsuit and went off with his juggling kit to pander for change on the steps of the Capitol. Poppa Moon arranged for us to take possession of his rainbow airbrushed VW minibus, into which Dulcie and Ringwald transferred the secret devices from the musemobile, which Poppa Moon arranged to have painted gray and donated anonymously to the local chapter of the Red Cross. I walked over to the University carrying my mandolin, then sat in the park and played variations of Zamphir and Enya songs to the delight of a crowd of sociology graduate students who generously bestowed their pocket change upon me. We rendezvoused at 9 P.M. and donned our disguises, leisure suits for we three men and a shimmering gold lamé dress for Dulcie. We then began the trek to the state border, a bit nervous about the authorities, but confident in our abilities to redirect the flow of institutionalized justice to an individual more deserving of its wrath.

On the radio we heard the oh-so-false account of the murder in Seneca which had been disseminated in our wake. We had been demoted from poets to ranting psychopaths, accused of hurling dangerous projectiles at young girls before murdering an innocent bystander in cold blood.

Critics.

There was no mention of our work. Although disheartened by the poor media response, we acknowledged that the life of a guerilla poet is one replete with rejection, and that a kind of diverse stoicism is necessary, one which entails an allegiance to a goal that effects a disruption in the overwhelming flow of the existence that had been set upon us by the outside world when we were in fact only trying to remain true to that which was authentically us, that which was us and not them.

After we had crossed the Illinois border, Charlie and I played gin rummy in the back seat. Meanwhile up front, trouble was brewing in Love City.

“Wal-Mart, Ringwald?”

“Why not Wal-Mart?”

“It just seems like such a déclassé way to affront the bourgeois hegemony. Why not Nieman-Marcus? Why not some Michigan Avenue furrier?”

“Those are just peripherals. We want to go after the guts of it, the center of the tumor, the virus that’s spreading it all, the odious banality of all things shrinkwrapped in the colorful plastic packaging of a false dream. What place could be better for the performance of a symbolic action?”

“We could have gone to Vegas.”

“Vegas is neon. Vegas is obvious. Everyone knows that Vegas is Vegas. Vegas announces itself. That’s what it’s there for, to distract us from the fact that everywhere else is Vegas, too.”

Tired of gin rummy and Baudrillard, Charlie and I thumb-wrestled in the back seat. Charlie won three out of four. The minivan had an excellent 8-track stereo system, on which Ringwald played a Bee Gees cartridge that he had borrowed from Poppa Moon. We exited the interstate on the outskirts of the Chicago area, in a town called Schaumburg in the heart of suburbs. Ringwald claimed that it was the municipality with the most retail space per capita anywhere in the world, aside from Hong Kong, something like two strip malls per resident. We didn’t believe him until we had passed the massive structure known as Woodfield Mall.

Dulcie and Ringwald exchanged meaningful glances.

“Cancerous cornicopia.”

“Horn of empty.”

I wanted to contribute, “Distribution dystopia.”

Charlie got excited, “Look at this sprawl, the diverse array of shops. Wasteland. A mall, next to a mall, next to a mall, surrounded by strip malls. Think of the incendiary opportunities—a bit of plastique, some well placed dynamite—even a small bomb could be an epiphany.”

We parked in the McDonald’s parking lot in the shadow of the mall.

“Ringwald, I think we should do the mall itself.” Charlie was diagraming explosive patterns, scientific notations, on the back of a napkin. “I could really make a big boom.”

Ringwald raised his finger to his lips, “Shhh! Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Ringwald started the engine, and threw it into Reverse. A shot rang out and shattered the passenger side mirror. Ringwald tore the VW out of the lot.

“What in the name of Bacchus was that?” growled Charlie.

“A man in a gray trenchcoat, with one of those wide-brimmed hats, driving a steel blue Mercedes, carrying an automatic weapon. I heard him loading it.”

In addition to his other talents, Ringwald had a miraculous sense of hearing, so acute that if he were to stand on a busy street corner in Albany he could hear a church organ playing “Greensleeves” in Hoboken. At least that’s what he said when we were in Albany.

Charlie rubbed the side of his face furiously, as if scratching at some hidden scar, “That’s our boy, eh? The shot heard round the mall. I’d like to blow him up. I’d like to see his body expand into a lush cloud of red particles that would drift into the stratosphere and land on the stripped carcass of a 1973 Ford Escort in a junkyard somewhere outside of Toledo, Ohio.”

“Excess is unnecessary. We’ve got him where we want him. Everything is falling into place. To Wal-Mart.”

We synchronized our watches, loaded our weapons, put *Night Fever* in the 8-track and dusted off our leisure suits. Charlie was in his element, humming Wagner while he laid out various forms of explosives. Because of the possibility of gunfire, we donned our makeshift flack jackets, medieval breastplates stolen from a museum in Muncie, Indiana. Once Charlie had finished packing his kit, he scampered out the door and sprinted to the building, which he quickly scaled once he had anchored his rope on the W. I stayed behind while Dulcie and Ringwald walked in the front doors, incognito, to case the joint. I grabbed my goo gun and walked to the other side of the parking lot. Charlie returned,

holding the remote control. He looked over at me, I nodded, and he pressed the detonator. First the W, then the A, then the L, finally the M, exploded in succession, leaving only the A, the R, and the T. Charlie giggled, jumping up and down with glee as each explosion lit on the roof.

We both ran into the store. In spite of the fact that the charges had been so deafeningly loud, the professional greeter stayed completely composed.

“Good evening fellas, welcome to Wal-Mart, Discount City. Smooth suits.” The old fellow seemed so well-intentioned, I felt a little guilty as I leveled my goo-gun on his chest and splattered the butterscotch pudding/Elmer’s Glue blend all over him.

“Forgive me, old man. Such sacrifices for the cause.”

“Good evening, welcome to Wal-Mart, Discount City,” said the yellow blob huddled in front of me.

“Let’s go, Eduardo. No time for sentimentality.” Charlie had already gathered the checkers from aisles 1 through 27. They had their hands in the air, senior citizens and teenagers paralyzed with fear of the barrel of his goo-gun and the seething look in his eyes. I stood guard while he placed charges in the candy section. I felt bad for the crowd of elderly minimum wage workers quivering before me. Charlie scampered back, “Take them over to School Supplies. I’ll be in Small Appliances.”

In School Supplies, we amassed an audience of about fifty shoppers, cashiers, sales helpers, rent-a-cops and stock boys. Ringwald and Dulcie served them all cranberry juice cocktails. They were in need of calming, as they were all terrified of Charlie, who had cordoned off the area with chocolate malt ball candies and was breaking into sputtering fits of obscene giggling. There was still no sign of the assassin. Charlie splattered a couple of the audience members when they began to scream hysterically. Ringwald began the reading. We had agreed to stick to couplets, as we needed to be quick on our feet.

“Souls are made of vinyl, time is made of rust

All the sales are final, nothing left to trust.”

Dulcie stepped up,

“The sparrow has left its perch, the products have been bought

Sam Walton, Sam Walton, Sam Walton, what is it you have wrought?”

I was made a bit nervous by the stress of the situation, and I’m always a bit skitchy when it comes to improvising,

“There is no outside here, just the loading docks,

Colanders for draining, and packages of socks.”

Charlie's adrenaline was in high gear,  
"Burn it down, to the ground, a fiery inferno,  
This warehouse, this whorehouse, torching infernal."

As he lilted the last syllable, Charlie pressed a button, setting off an explosion in the appliances section. Coffee makers, toasters and blenders flew through the air, crashing into shelves all over the store. The audience screamed. Charlie giggled. Ringwald was about to respond with some kinder, gentler lines to soothe the audience when the jackal emerged, wearing dark glasses, a gray Italian suit, red silk tie and combat boots. We hit the ground just as he peppered the air with hollow-point bullets. When I looked up, everyone was fine, but he was advancing. I tried to go him, but he shot me in the thigh. I recoiled from the shot and accidentally blasted goo up into a ceiling fan, showering the terrified onlookers in its ichor.

Poetry can barely limn the sharpness of the pain I felt lancing through the meat of my right thigh. I heard a choir of angels, and saw a tunnel of light, my blessed mother's face smiling down on me, waving me forward, upwards, into the light. Later, it would prove to be only a flesh wound, but at the time the pain was so intense that my recollection is foggy even now, like the memory of a Hong Kong martial arts film watched while deadened to the world with a strong dose of opium.

Charlie used his remote control to explode the shelf full of Lee's Press-on Nails in front of which the assassin stood. The small cardboard boxes were blown to bits, and the blood-red imitation nails fluttered through the air like cornflakes from a cereal truck that had been struck by a small plane carrying a cargo of red paint as its engines failed, the impact on an overpass showering the interstate below with brightly stained flakes of cereal. The jackal lost his hat and sunglasses. He clawed at the red scales which had stuck to his face in the wake of the combustion. He no longer looked the Shadow of radio showgram fame, now more like a mysterious, tortured figure that René Magritte might have painted during the sober days of terror in Europe during the latter part of the Second World War. Charlie retrieved the assassin's gun and turned it on him. Most of the audience members scrambled out, stumbling over the chocolate malt ball candies as they scattered. Once the jackal had removed the majority of the press-on nails enveloping his visage, Charlie, Dulcie, and Ringwald let out a simultaneous gasp.

"Archie?"

"Charlie?"

There before us stood a carbon copy of Charlie. The features, the expression, the bewildered angst-filled eyes, all exactly the same. Charlie, stunned by the recognition, dropped his remote control.

“Mine own twin brother, lost by our idiotic parents in a factory outlet mall in Flint, Michigan, at the tender age of five, turned a sociopathic right-wing hitman?”

“My sweet Charlie, my soulmate and twin, malformed into an anarchist poet terrorist?”

This could have perhaps led to a lengthy and well-reasoned sociopolitical discussion, but for the fact that the brothers were so moved by the sight of each other that they felt compelled to embrace each other tightly as bear cubs, giggled hysterically and began to dance a jig. Would that Charlie, while back in the van, had not had the misdirected foresight to arm the charges of plastique still in his backpack so that he would be able to place and dispatch them, as he had said, with the quickness of an Air France Concorde piloted by an amphetamine addict late for his daughter’s dance recital in Alsace-Lorraine. But he had. While in the midst of their jig, Archie, a dead man whom I will never be able to forgive for his lack of balletic grace, stepped on Charlie’s forgotten remote. I saw the LED lights begin to blink in Charlie’s backpack and I screamed. Ringwald and Dulcie, in the end true lovers of life, saw the cause of my dismay, and ran hand in hand towards the jigging brothers. The lovers, in a display of compassion for their audience, in a heroic act that saved not only my life but also those of the entire staff and customers of the Schaumburg Wal-Mart, completed an aerobic tackle just as the charges went. Charlie’s red cloud was realized. The brothers were vaporized instantaneously, and the lovers went up like a phoenix. By some freak act of metallurgy, Ringwald’s and Dulcie’s wedding rings were fused together in the conflagration and their collective molten substance was propelled as shrapnel into the muscle tissue of my left buttock.

Maybe it was cowardice that compelled me to crawl over to Women’s Fashion, bind my wounds with pantyhose, hobble to Men’s Fashion, don a green camouflage jumpsuit with an orange flannel lining, escape in the confusion, and walk across the street to the mall, where I then spent hours wandering the expanse of it, enveloped in the amniotic sac of contented consumers, to contemplate the multifariousness of human life, the buglight quickness with which people run into their deaths, and the impossible possibility of life after death. I called my father collect in Buenos Aires and he wired me five hundred dollars, which I used to purchase a Greyhound ticket to Biloxi, Mississippi.

What else can be said? As the wound in my flank slowly healed and the landscape gradually changed, the voices of my friends echoed through me. All their fine aesthetics, their tonal variations, their sonnets and sestinas, the products of their art washed through. Together we were the four points of a compass, and the needle never stopped spinning. Apart, we are diaspora. Charlie, North, to endless Arctic darkness. Dulcie, East, searching for an innocence we left behind. Ringwald, West, to the unexplored wilds. Myself? South. To what? To nothing. Emily Dickinson left her poems in a box, for no one, where they were found, for no one and every one. A broken compass. The miles stretched out underneath

the Greyhound tires, yawning at the futility. Flying J, Amoco, Phillips 66. I kept heading South, hoping it would not be the same.

So now, after a hard day of hauling in nets on the shrimp boat, I sit here on the dock of the bay, contemplating my idea of art, which has changed so drastically in these past few months. I miss my companions, but I have grown accustomed to the dark. Biloxi is how it sounds, and I don't much mind the boat. I don't write any more poetry, there is too much pain in the memory. Maybe Dulcie and Ringwald would not approve of my self-imposed exile from the world of signs I once knew, but as sure as I sit on the melded bands of their matrimonial bliss, I know that they would understand my sentiment. They were that kind of couple.

## Algren

Those fuckers left me behind. My car was gone and my laptop too. Which has all my writing on it. Bastards. What they had done was clear, and which end of the stick they left me with. The Unknown slush fund? That was gone too. In Dirk's fridge, there was a moldy crust of gorgonzola, a half-drunk flat Miller High Life, and some sour buttermilk. The place disgusted me and it smelled like rot, so I got the hell out of there.

Every man's a con man and you can't trust those guys as far as you can throw them into a pile of trash. I lit a cigarette and wondered why they left me, and stole my shit, and what they planned to do with it. It had to be money, somehow, that's what it always comes down to, that's the bottom line, dollars and cents. Could I hold it against these guys if they were in for the quick kill, if they were on the make from day one?

Of course I could, and I did. I was walking up McMillan Street at fucking 5 A.M. and I wished harm upon those guys. I hadn't changed the oil in about 2 years and I smiled as I thought that the Corolla might pick now to crawl up and die. Not that I wanted nothing extremely bad to happen to the guys. They fucked up, they were thieves, they were deceitful, hey what's new?

But why now, and why like this, and why did they take my writing and my laptop too. It'd be one thing if they left me with something, but of course Dirk's computer was just a twisted mass of charred metal and plastic, after the rocket scientist had, one acid-discombobulated evening, come up with the brilliant idea of trying to wire his hotplate directly into his motherboard so that he could fry up little cocktail weenies for supper while he was proofing *The Unknown*.

The best laid plans of guys like Dirk and William . . . so those fuckers left me no way to write . . . Again I wondered what they were planning on doing with my writing . . . sell it? Yeah, right. On a good day, when the sun is shining and folks are feeling generous, my writing and a buck will get you a cup of coffee.

By now they'd probably sold the laptop, and discarded my only copy of all my best shit. That hurt me, right there. It was like a sharp kick to the gut from a bull at the rail yard.

Which is where I was headed, just as soon as I got done stealing a portable typewriter and a ream of paper from the University of Cincinnati English Department. It was early, and nobody really recognized me with my beard, and it was just sitting there in the corner. No big deal, I figured, I'm a writer, so I need a typewriter at least, you know?

So at the rail yard I stumbled, the portable in my backpack was kind of heavy and the train was moving fast. Fell flat on my face and the next thing I know, this bull's standing there holding me by the scruff of my neck. He knows my name. Somebody at the Department noticed the ream of paper was missing and phoned it in. Even as I was hopping the rail yard fence in hopes of catching the eastbound to Indianapolis, the helicopter had been hovering behind.



So they put me in a holding cell with a bunch of guys and I don't want to write much about that. I worked out a deal with a guy. He made sure nobody "Queened" me, and in exchange, I explained to him the finer points of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and additionally made up some shit about *Gravity's Rainbow*. Guy had some smack too, so within an hour I was back on the dirty shit.

Tom LeClair bailed me out and got me a bus ticket back to Chicago. He urged me to stay the hell away until the heat cooled off. The Dean said he'd drop the charges if I'd do a Web page for his dog, but he didn't want to see my ass among those rolling hills until I returned for my dissertation defense, and I agreed.

I sold off all Dirk's books at a used bookstore for a grand total of twenty bucks before I got on the Greyhound.

I was sweating all the way back to Indianapolis. My life was shit and nobody could be trusted. Those guys would take the whole floor if you gave them an inch.

I scored more H in Indie. I was nodding the whole way back to Union Station. I was seeing angels through the fog and I didn't give a rat's ass about those guys trying to scrape a few bucks off the shabby remainders of my life's work. I had the fix and I was in it. For me the writing was about the writing of it. Those guys would never understand that. Money slips anyway, I would have it and then it would be gone. Let them take it and make some fucking Otto Preminger-type of Hollywood extravaganza with it. I made the words and I had my fix. It was dark and I was nodding. Figure it all out in the morning, which anyway might never come.

I walked from Union Station to the El at Clark and Lake. The night was cold and it was windy. Little pellets of freezing rain cut into my cheeks like daggers of betrayal. I rode the train in a trance, got off the Blue Line at Division, stopped in at Cut Rate Liquors, stood at the long bar and began to get drunk. Old Style and shots of Jameson's, four apiece down and I got to admit that I'm feeling the anger. Two guys get into a knife fight at the other end of the bar and before you know it I'm arguing with some toothless postal worker having a couple on the way to his route.

"Look, Sparky, it was the guy with the knife out first what was to blame."

"They're all scum. That's why I don't give a rat's ass about yer mail, or any that comes out of the Wicker Park station. Half these people are scum, and I'm gonna risk my life for the other half? Right. I'd rather burn the shit. Fuck these people."

"Don't say that."

"You live here, you can kiss your mail goodbye."

"You bastard."

I'm drunk and tired and I live in the area and mail is tremendously important to me and I don't always get it, so the next thing I know we're swinging and crashing into bottles. Last thing I remember the bartender has hopped over the bar and there's a shotgun in my nose and some beefy bastard picks me up by my feet and throws me face first on the pavement and I'm a bloody mess as I start to crawl towards Paulina.

Then I score more H on Cortez and shoot it up under the street light. The night is cold and one of my teeth is hanging on only by a bit of gumskin and I'm shooting a vile chemical into my veins and it seems like the only the thing that can comfort me and I'm standing amidst the rats and winos and the filth and garbage and I'm wishing I had a song.

Then some fuckers in a Cabriolet rolled me, I don't remember much, they took my last five bucks and left me bleeding in the gutter. A bald guy woke me up, saying "Hey, hey, hey," as I was drifting through pleasure and pain, imagining I'm hearing jazz, clotting blood filming over my eyes, wet and sticky on my skin. Turns out the guy's Myopic Joe, he takes me to his bookstore. He lets me wash up, loans me a copy of *City on the Make*, and he makes me some coffee.

When I finally make it back to my apartment on Paulina, the next morning after the morning before after the morning before that, there's an eviction notice on my front door but the key works and most of my shit's still there. Maestri has been fed in my absence and his litter box is clean. Nobody sold me out in Chicago. My cat attempts to lick my wounds and I shoo him away. A light blinks on my answering machine.

Dirk and William. The axle broke in West Virginia, and they need a ride. Fuckers. I scrape up all my change and head for Division Street thinking I know where there's a game I can get in on for cheap. Maybe I can win a few hands and come up with enough to buy a used car.



## Death of a Rabbit

### 1.

Johnny Werd came home from school through the alley and saw old Dad digging in the yard behind the rosebush. Dad jerked with surprise when he noticed Johnny and his hand waved and his mouth smiled and shouted, "hello johnny!" Dad was usually at work until five. Something was wrong, but something was often wrong. Johnny Werd wandered through the house looking for his rabbit Eugene and knew he was under the couch. Always was. Favorite place. Not there. Not behind the loveseat either. Mom was in front of a rushing sink washing a single dish, singing loudly and nonchalantly. "mom, where's eugene?" Mom, singing louder, sings "what johnny? i can't hear you i'm singing." Johnny wants an answer, yells "where's eugene?" Mom chokes back a sob, turns the water off, turns to put her hand on his shoulder and says "eugene died today." Mom chokes back another sob. Johnny runs out back to Dad. Dad is smoothing the dirt over the hole. His eyes are red and he has the sniffles. Johnny understands Dad is upset. "did you bury eugene?" he asks. Many different answers flash through dad's eyes as he nods. Johnny can tell he isn't thinking straight. He decides not to hassle Dad too much. Later that night Johnny can't sleep. He keeps hearing the rustle under his bed where Eugene used to sleep. He hears a crunch from the bowl of rabbit pellets on the floor. He keeps squinting into the darkness of the backyard. He never saw Eugene dead. Maybe it was a joke, or one of those things Mom and Dad said that wasn't true or funny. How could it be? Did they make a mistake? Was Eugene trying to get out of the hole? Johnny had to look. Maybe Mom and Dad would help. Maybe Dad would dig while Johnny held the flashlight. He could hear their chattering voices from downstairs. They didn't talk that much usually. Usually they read. He rolled out of bed, found his flashlight, padded out the door and down the hallway. He could hear Mom's voice raised in an angry one: "the rabbit OD'ed?" Dad's clink, sniff, sigh. The doorbell. Dad opens it. "hey baby, c'mon in." Johnny doesn't recognize the husky woman's voice. Then there is the pop and crackle of a record being played. It is the Grateful Dead. "Cosmic Charlie." The one with the skip in it that always makes Dad mad whenever he plays it. The back door slams. Was it Mom leaving? He moves to the window in the hall, separates the beads, and sees movement in the back yard. He goes inside Mom and Dad's room for a closer look. The blinds are always closed but he knows how to look out. From downstairs comes a shuffle, thump, and the shouted word "freeze." Johnny runs to his room and crawls under the bed knocking over Eugene's water bowl with his head and he lies in the scattered pellets and lies there getting more and more scared until he creeps to the closet, crawls to the back where the sliding panel into the tiny dumbwaiter is, and waits there while sirens erupt and the entire house is searched by police. The police are laughing and singing as they yank all the drawers out of every dresser and smash occasional walls. They find nothing, not even Johnny.

## 2.

About an hour later I show up coming in from the alley wondering if I left the stove on at home and find Johnny digging in the backyard, flashlight between his shoulder and neck. Weird. “hey Johnny man what you doing up?” “digging up eugene.” “well uh dig.” I never was that good with kids, especially Johnny, always guilty, afraid of laying a heavy trip on him, and I was kind of distracted because uh well anyhow I asked “where’s your old man?” John Sr. had been a friend of mine long before he met Blake and she got pregnant and he married her and tried to instill normalcy despite the occasional appearance of me. But they both continued to party and I knew on this night he was expecting to trade an unspecified amount of coke for a brick of hash and said he was going to leave some for me in the basement cubbyhole because we had shared drugs since we were undergraduates and besides he still owed me for the grass. He liked me to come by after Johnny was in bed. Johnny was wiggging, apparently. I figured that was his trip and pulled open the backyard cellar door and went down in. I opened the cubbyhole and found... a dead rabbit. Bummer. I walked upstairs and into the kitchen and froze because the whole place had been ripped to shreds. It was normally a disaster and it took me a few seconds to realize that the red streak on the Navajo rug was wax from the shattered lava lamp. Then as I took it all in I saw that the beads had been ripped down and the bookcases had been ravaged. As I stood there the phone rang. I had to leave immediately. The phone rang again. If it was pigs, or thugs, there could still be lurkers, but where were John and Blake? Was Johnny in shock? The phone rang again. I decided it was cool if the pigs caught me because I was clean. Achingly clean. But if it wasn’t... if it was John’s connection gone awry? What if Blake and John were dead and crammed into cubbyholes like the rabbit? Then I should take Johnny to safety... but Blake didn’t like me talking to Johnny and if it was the pigs would she charge me with breaking and entering? Kidnapping? The phone began to ring again and was cut off. Someone had picked it up. Johnny. Next room. “no mommy. they took daddy. i hid. daddy’s friend is here.” Blake was on the phone? What if everything was cool and I could score some blow after all? I was trying to finish my dissertation and needed some bad. It made me into a scholar. A couple of lines and I could figure out *Finnegan’s Wake*. Doing them and reading them. It kept getting better. The previous semester I dropped acid and read the entire *Gertrude Stein Reader* in an hour. When I was finished I could quote entire pages by number. I ran into the next room and grabbed the phone but it was already dead. Johnny stared up at me. I stuttered and bumped into a vase which tilted. What was I to do there, the vase tipped and angled on its descent from the endtable, everything dropping towards resolution, cadence...?

### 3.

Years later I stood behind Johnny Werd in a checkout aisle at a supermarket. I was in good spirits and desperate to get home and finish *Tristram Shandy*. I had just come to the supermarket to get matches and a block of parmesan for the rotini with artichoke hearts and black olive puree I intended to eat when I finished the book sometime after dawn. I stood behind the guy who looked easiest to ring up—some scrawny redhaired punk with unfiltered cigarettes and malt liquor—and this guy turned out to be Johnny Werd. The line seemed like it would never move again because a three-way squabble had erupted between a drunk, somebody who just wanted to buy a single purple pepper, and the checkout woman who ignored the dispute and perpetually doused the produce scale with Windex and wiped it shiny. It was terrible to see Johnny. I had been silently reciting a French palindrome by Perec and suddenly forgot the middle. I was afraid Johnny would recognize me, afraid of the checkout woman, afraid of the security cameras, suddenly as sweaty and paranoid as if I had a paper on Lewis Carroll due. I knew that literature had made me a freak but I was head of the Philosophy Department and could discuss what I read openly. But seeing Werd there was a breakdown. I hallucinated the erosion of the flesh the years had deposited, which ran off his bones like mud under the stream of my attention, brought my past suddenly up to the present. Seeing him brought back a flood of dammed memories of the night my house burned down, my friend Shelley in it, while I was in jail. From that point on, it didn't matter whether Blake had framed me or what I had been arrested for... involuntary (wo)manslaughter, narcotics trafficking, not finishing *Gravity's Rainbow*, it was all nodding to cops, lawyers, judges, and waiting to devour any text I could get in prison. I did weird things to get books in prison. The once-frightening aspects of sex—like when Blake was pregnant with Johnny and told me she wasn't sure if it was my baby or John's but was going to tell John it was his because she thought he would make a more attentive father because he “knew how to use a bookmark”—seemed so trivial and middle class and ... *nice* now, compared to the nightmare it had been before. As he put his quart on the conveyor belt, I studied Johnny for any sign of me. He hardly seemed like the confused child digging behind the bush for the rabbit his parents had hid because they were hiding everything else. I was jonesing so fiercely, I considered asking him where the brick went that night, when he was digging—digging? Fuck. Digging up that fucking rabbit that I found where the brick was supposed to be.

## Bungie

William, who had, according to all appearances, been just as or even more excited than any of the rest of us about the prospects of seeing our hypertext brought to the big screen as a major studio release, did not, in fact, take well to the atmosphere of Los Angeles. There is a lot of work involved in moving a film from the concept to the can, most of it social work. There are producers to meet, backers to pitch, directors to choose, stars to select and/or woo. The difficulties we encountered as a result of the groundswell of interest in Dirk's cult activities were to be expected, but I had expected better from William. We were all a little apprehensive about moving from a psychic atmosphere described by one critic as "Midwestern Literary Evangelism" and another as "Techno-Pastoral" to one that could only be described as "Bedding Down with Satan." The devil wears a thousand guises in Hollywood, but such are the costs of seeing a dream to its full fruition.

Film was a medium which none of us could even begin to understand, but we knew that it had been the art form of the Twentieth Century. While we have our understanding of collaboration, in Tinsel Town, collaboration takes on an altogether different pallor; it is the stuff of bitter feuds and power struggles, of profit margins and compromises; it is a messy, twisted business that can drain the soul of a writer. It's just like *Speed the Plow*. Frank and I loved it. We found ourselves in this element and found that we were surprisingly good at manipulating it. Money was being thrown at us from a million different directions, and choices had to be made. Not that money was, at this point in our careers, much of an issue. We could have all lived comfortably, given our modest tastes (with the exception of Dirk) for years, just on the money we had made from the sales of our anthology. What we wanted was bigger than money. We wanted artistic control, which is worth far more than any bundle of cash.

Those first couple of weeks in L.A. were hairy. So many pretenders at every turn. Every night there was a different party that Marla told me was "absolutely critical" for me to attend. William went only to the first couple: a rather large affair hosted by the DreamWorks people and a wonderful day out at Coppola's ranch. Then William virtually disappeared, leaving Frank and I with the primary schmoozing duties. Dirk was, of course, attending parties of his own, hosted by celebrity members of the faithful: Tom Cruise, Simon LeBlanc, Tito Jackson, Clint Eastwood, people like that. But film was the furthest thing from their minds: they were hung up on theology.

I was worried about William, and I told Marla so. He had become mean and withdrawn. He abused waiters, waitresses, and stewardesses with a regularity that we had come to expect only from Dirk, who had become accustomed to being a living messiah with great expectations and a lot of "needs." I had not heard from William for nearly a week and a half when I had Marla track him down via his credit card receipts, which disturbed me. It looked as if he was having fun, but not the kind of fun you'd expect from William. To wit:

\$2,250—Idle Wealth Speedway, San Luis Obispo  
1 day rental of high performance automobile, track time.

\$1,500—Swim With the Fishes Aquatic Adventures, Oakland

Scuba diving with killer sharks in the shadow of the Golden Gate Bridge.

\$2,000—Snowy Joe's Dry Cleaning, Compton

Most likely a purchase of cocaine and/or crystal meth, or (highly improbable) stain removal from 142 dress shirts, as billed.

\$1,555—Fly By Night Skydiving, Sonora, CA

Two midnight jumps (unassisted) from a turboprop at 3,500 feet.

\$2,033—Trinity River Rafting

3 day whitewater rafting expedition in Northern California. Solo.

\$3,555—Stuntpower Institute

A week-long course of stuntman study that included "Safely Falling From a Great Height," "Through Broken Glass Without Losing Your Ass," "Running Amid Explosions" and "The Doctor Is Out—Stitching Your Own Wounds. "

I asked Marla to have the credit card company give me a call the next time anything popped up, and they did, and that is how I witnessed William's near-fatal, coma-inducing, bungee jumping accident in the Sierra Nevadas, at the Royal Gorge. It brings me pain even to think about it now.





## Hands

Billy Haskins is a mute boy who is loved very much by his parents. They care very much for him and they wish very deeply that no further harm should come to him. Billy's parents know how little boys can be cruel, how they would make fun of the scars on Billy's throat and his half-severed tongue. Billy would be the boy who couldn't talk back, the boy who would be defenseless, the boy who could only make noises like a chicken clucking.

A tutor named Theresa visits three days a week, and Billy slowly learns sign language, gradually, step by step, gesture by gesture. Billy's parents pay very careful attention to him and provide him with toys, healthy food, and warm clothing, and they speak to him as they would to any child, even though he is mute. After all, Billy is a normal child. Just because he is mute does not mean that there is anything wrong with him.

Billy's parents love him so very much that they try to spend all of their time with him. They both do their work at home on their computers and they hardly ever go away from Billy. They take turns giving Billy lessons on history and art and writing and other things, and although he cannot speak, Billy is a very good listener, and he has developed a fine handwriting.

The house that they live in is a very nice house in the woods, on acres and acres of land, behind an electrical fence, very far from the nearest neighbor. There are birds and squirrels and stands of pines. There are the noises of the woods, the calming sounds of nature, which Billy can hear, because although he is mute, he is not deaf. Sometimes, on summer evenings, Billy and his parents sit out on the porch and drink tall cool drinks, and listen to the woods.

But it isn't summer, it's Cleb's birthday, and that's the only day in the whole year that Billy's parents ever go away, to the place that Billy's Mommy says is a cruel place for children. Every March 15th, they fly there in the morning and fly back late at night. They are anxious when they leave, anxious about leaving Billy by himself with just the baby-sitter, although they trust the baby-sitter very much. They know that she'll look out for Billy while they are away, but still they are anxious, anxious about their son.

When the baby-sitter says it's bedtime at nine o'clock, Billy plays like he's sleeping until ten o'clock, then he gets out his penlight and looks beneath his bed and pulls up the secret floorboard and gets out the cigar box that has the hand in it that made Cleb mad that Billy saw it before Cleb got sent away. Billy opens the box, to see how it has changed. The bones have gotten yellower, the tiny little fingerbones. He touches them. The stuff on top flakes off but under the flakes the bones are hard, really hard. It doesn't smell as bad as the last time he checked. Billy's parents don't know about the hand. Billy keeps it a secret, cause good brothers keep secrets.

\* \* \*

Cleb is Billy's older brother. Cleb was bad and that's why he got sent away. Cleb was bad cause he hurt other children. Cleb was bad cause he hurt Billy. He didn't believe Billy when Billy told him he wouldn't tell anyone about the hand. Billy just wanted to play with his big brother, he didn't mean to surprise him, but Cleb wouldn't believe him. When Billy saw Cleb holding the hand he thought it was neat, and he told Cleb so, but Cleb said he shouldn't have seen it, that he was in big trouble. Billy promised not to tell. He told Cleb it was neat. He asked Cleb to show him more. Cleb let Billy hold it, but he had a mean look in his eyes, and in the night Billy had a nightmare, only it was really real, cause when he woke up he was bloody and his throat was cut up, and his tongue was gone, and when his Mommy came in she screamed and screamed and screamed. Billy's window was broken, and the police thought a bad man had come in and did it until Billy's Mommy found Cleb's Swiss Army knife with some blood on it in his underwear drawer. She screamed and screamed and screamed and then Billy's Dad punched Cleb and then the policemen came and that is when Cleb went away to the special place for kids like him, kids who were mean to their brothers. Billy misses his older brother a lot. He was mean but they used to play sometimes and it was okay.

Billy doesn't think that Cleb meant to be mean. He just didn't understand that Billy understood him, that he wouldn't tell on him, that he knew that Cleb was his brother and that sometimes brothers are mean to their brothers. Cleb really messed up when he cut up Billy. Cleb cut him up, but that didn't mean he meant to hurt him. Billy knows that brothers fight sometimes, all brothers. It's part of being a brother. Most brothers just don't get so mean that they make it so you can't talk anymore with a knife. Billy feels bad that Cleb had to go away. He wishes he still had his tongue and the other thing like what the doctor said, the thing that made his voice, the larynx, but even more he wishes he had his brother. You can learn how to talk with your hands, you can hear other people and talk back to them with your hands, but you can't replace a brother who gets sent away. Cleb knew things about the world that Billy didn't know. One time Cleb showed him the inside of a frog. You just can't do that kind of thing on your own, especially if you don't like knives. Cleb knew a lot, but Cleb was dumb that's what he was, dumb. Billy doesn't hate Cleb, but he knows Cleb was downright stupid for doing that. If Billy had a little brother, he would not cut him up. It's good to be a big brother, and it's bad to go away and leave your little brother alone in a new big house in the woods. Good little brothers don't tell. Cleb should have known that. Billy proved it to him every day. He never told nobody about the hand, and when he looks at it, he says to his brother, "See? See? You see now, Cleb? I never did tell, and I never will neither. I'm not the kind of brother who tells. Brothers ought to trust brothers. Brothers don't need to cut up little brothers to make them not tell." Cleb never answered cause he was away in the bad place, but Billy knows that if he were there, he'd have to nod his head and say, "I'm sorry Billy, I know you wouldn't tell. I'm sorry, Billy, I am. I'm sorry I cut you up." Cleb

would say that, he'd say that when he got home, Billy just knows it, so he keeps the hand in his secret place, and someday he'll prove to his big brother that he never did tell.

Billy's brother is gone and Billy wishes he had friends. He's nine, and he doesn't go to school anymore, cause Mommy shook and cried when he told her he wanted to go back to school, cause there aren't any kids around the house and he wishes he could have friends to play with. Theresa is a good teacher, and she teaches him how to sign, and she reads him stories and shows him pictures of hands that make words, and he watches a big screen TV when his lessons are done, and he can play Nintendo so long as the games aren't violent, and Theresa is beautiful, and when in the stories Theresa reads to him there is a beautiful woman, Billy always imagines that the beautiful woman is Theresa, but Theresa isn't a kid, and she isn't a boy; she isn't like a brother. A brother can tell you things about the world. Theresa teaches him lessons and sometimes she gives him big fat hugs that make him feel all warm inside, but it's just different, and nobody can understand that. He tries to tell them, to sign it to them and to write it down, but his mother says there will be time for other people later, that he is better off right now away from the other boys. Billy has learned how to read stories, and the boys in the stories always have other boys around and do things with the other boys like playing ball and fishing and building rafts in the river and solving mysteries together and Billy feels left out when he reads them.

\* \* \*

Billy's parents are home. Billy walks over real quiet in his pajamas and watches them through his door, open just a crack. Dad gives Alice the baby-sitter some money and thanks her. Alice says that he was a good boy, no trouble at all. Dad says yes he's a fine boy isn't he and Mommy starts like she's about to cry and says he's such a good boy and Alice asks if there is anything she can do and Mommy says thank you Alice no I'm just, I'm just tired then she really starts to cry and Alice says she hopes everything is all right and Dad says it's fine just some pills for motion sickness you know from the plane she just needs some rest and Alice says if you're sure then I'll be on my way and then she leaves.

Mommy says Cleb, Cleb, Cleb what happened David why did it happen like that? Dad says I don't know Monica and Mommy says did you see him did you see his eyes they were just dead cold like he couldn't even see us anymore and Dad says hush, hush, Monica, Billy's sleeping, it will be okay Monica it will be okay and Mommy says it's my fault you know I could have been there I could have stopped him and Dad says there was nothing we could have done to stop it and he puts his arms around her and says we didn't do anything wrong he just snapped there's nothing we could have done and there's no way to explain it and there's no point in trying to blame. I named him, Mommy says, I named him Cleb and Daddy says hush, hush, Monica, it will be okay and she says Cleb after my father in the war mother never talked about him I never knew him just a little girl he was away and then he died, it was just a name I

thought, just a name and Dad says Monica, Monica, it was nothing we did, it's nothing we can blame ourselves for it was neurotoxins or something it was chemicals it was something other than us and Mommy says he was a beautiful boy he played and he smiled such a pretty smile if he was a girl he would have loved his little brother if he was a girl I would have understood her I could have told her things about the world and she would have loved her little brother she would have loved him and protected him and held him so tight I could have told her but I didn't know about boys how to get them to be . . . hush, Monica, hush . . . kind. We should have bought him different toys we should have never bought him that knife and Dad says I'm sorry Monica I'm sorry let's go to bed in the morning it will be better in the morning it will be okay and Mommy says every night the same nightmares David every night they come and I know it hurts you, I know it does David, but I just can't, it's not you I just can't anymore cause he came from me . . . I still love him David I still love him I do I can't stop even though I know that he went bad I can't shut it off I can't stop any of it what if Billy what if he goes bad too the world will come in I know the world will come in and Dad sort of shakes her and says Monica, listen to me, listen to me, Monica. Billy is okay, he's a good boy that's not going to change and Cleb well the psychiatrists think there's some progress and we're still here Monica, you and me and our boy, we're still here, Monica, we're still here and it will be okay. Mommy sort of nods her head, but the way she nods you can tell she's only sort of half saying yes and she says I need to see my baby and Dad holds her real tight in his arms and his hand is like a cradle on the back of her head and she's shaking and he says okay, baby, okay and he lets her use his shirtsleeve to wipe off her nose and they start to come up the stairs and Billy tries real hard to be real quiet getting under the sheets and he shuts his eyes real tight like he's been sleeping for hours and they push the door open and he can hear Mommy walking over to his bed and she puts her hand on Billy's forehead and says Mommy loves you, Billy, Mommy loves you very very much. Mommy loves her baby boy.

\* \* \*

In the morning, Billy hears the thwack thwack thwack of his Dad's fists on the punching bag. He does it every morning. It makes a different sound when he kicks it. His Dad punches and kicks and makes groaning noises. Billy punches it every once and a while too and when he does it makes his hands get all scraped up and his Mommy gets mad and starts crying if she sees them scraped up like that and Billy doesn't like it when she cries so he doesn't do it too much. It's a heavy bag, and it's Dad's and his Mommy always tells him he ought not to hit Dad's things, so he doesn't do it very often and when he does he hits it sort of soft so it won't make the thwack noise and scrape up his hand so that Mommy will know and get all mad and sad. Dad hits it hard though, every morning, his knuckles are tough from hitting it. Billy can hear it even upstairs in bed and he likes the noise it makes when he wakes up to it. It's kind of like an alarm

clock, only it's human, so it's better, it means that Dad is up and lively and everything is okay. His Mommy always sleeps later than that.

Billy pours himself a bowl of Cheerios and pours some milk in it, too. His Dad makes the thwack noise in the basement in a rhythm that Billy likes, and he tries to get the spoonfuls of Cheerios in his mouth in just the same rhythm: spoon up thwack crunch crunch crunch spoon down spoon up thwack. It's like he and his Dad are making a kind of song together.

Billy finishes his cereal just as his Dad comes up stairs smelling that kind of salty sweat smell he smells whenever he gets done with the punching. His Dad comes up behind him and tousles his hair and asks him if he's gotten all his homework done, and Billy signs that he has and signs if he can play outside until Theresa gets there which will be 9:30 and it's only 8:15 which means there's more than an hour and Dad says sure, son, sure, just don't get dirtied up and be careful out there, huh? and Billy signs that he will. Theresa taught Mommy and Dad how to sign too, and they can understand it, but they're both kind of clumsy at doing it, which is okay cause Billy can hear them anyway so there isn't really any need for them to learn how to sign, because even though Billy is mute he is not deaf.

The back yard is a good back yard, it's big and there are pine trees, and a sandbox which Billy never plays in cause there's only so much fun you can have in a sandbox when you're all by yourself and it only makes him think of Cleb and how much more fun it would be if he were playing in it too and he's too big for a sandbox anyway, it's not the kind of thing that big boys do. It's a big back yard though, his Dad says four acres and there's the fence around it which Billy never goes near because it's electric and Billy got shocked by a toaster once when he tried to get a piece of burnt toast out of it and that was no fun at all cause it hurt his hands like all get out and Billy's hands are very important to him cause they are the way he talks so he keeps a good distance between himself and that electric fence. Billy really hates that fence, when you get down to it. It is not the best thing about the big back yard. The pine trees aren't either. They smell good and all and make a nice home for the birds, who are finally coming back, which makes Billy glad, but they aren't the best thing of all either.

The best thing of all is the pond. It's not a very big pond, big fish don't grow in it cause it's not deep, but little fish do, goldfish do and tadpoles do, too. Today is the best day, cause Billy can finally see the tadpoles, just beneath the surface. Some of them will grow up and in the summer they will be frogs. Billy thinks about Cleb and how he's missing it, and he thinks about what Cleb would do. There probably aren't any tadpoles where Cleb lives now. Billy looks back at the big house and there's nobody in the windows watching him, which is good cause Billy has a secret.

Real quick with both his hands, he swoops down in the water and scoops up the tadpoles, three of them, maybe four, he gets them in his cupped hands. He closes his eyes and feels them swimming in his fingers. They feel slimy and good as they swim in his hands. It tickles him, and it feels so good that Billy laughs. It is like they're talking to him, speaking to his fingers, talking to his hands. The water drips out and Billy lowers his tadpoles back into the pond. Billy likes to touch things, even if Mommy says that it's dangerous. The tadpoles swim away. The tadpoles are a secret, a secret that is good.

Billy wipes his hands on his jeans and then he hears something rustling in the dogwoods. He walks over by the bushes and squats down with his hands on his knees and listens for it and he hears it again and then he sees it moving around underneath some dead leaves. Billy sees some fur and he knows it's an animal and he loves animals so he wants to touch it. Billy is real quiet, real careful because he knows that animals get scared and he doesn't want scare it away, he just wants to touch it. He creeps down and slips his hands in the leaves and then they all come flying up it's a rabbit scrambling up from the hole and running away. It's a good-sized rabbit with fur that's kind of funny because it's brown but it's still got some white hairs in it like bunnies do in winter and Billy scrambles up and starts chasing it. The rabbit's real quick and it's running quicker than Billy but Billy's pretty darn quick too and he knows the woods and he thinks he's lost the bunny but then it comes shooting out from behind a tree and Billy tries to cut off its path but then it cuts to the right just near Billy's foot and Billy nearly touches its fur with his finger then he spots it by the biggest pine at the edge of the woods and Billy goes diving for it and lands on the ground on a bed of pine needles and realizes that his hand is empty then he hears a big sparking noise and he looks up and sees the fence and the rabbit on it kind of bouncing around like it's hanging on it and Billy gets up and walks over and he sees that the rabbit has caught its paw in the chain links. Its paw is caught and it hurts the rabbit it makes little noises. Billy gets a stick and knocks the rabbit away from the fence and it just lies there. It looks burned around its paw. The air smells funny and Billy feels kind of sick in his tummy. He picks the rabbit up and looks at it. Its eyes are all burned up too. It's warm but it isn't moving at all. Its fur is soft. Billy pets it and he feels sad. He sits down on the ground in the woods and cries cause it is dead now. Billy is hurt inside cause the rabbit got hurt and died and it wouldn't have died if Billy hadn't chased it. Some blood comes out of the rabbit's mouth and Billy hates blood. He hates blood but he loves the rabbit cause he knows the rabbit, knows what it was like to be the rabbit. The rabbit didn't do anything wrong and a bad thing just happened. There's blood spilling out all over the rabbit but Billy doesn't even think about his clothes and he hugs it real tight. It's warm and limp and it can't feel a thing.

Billy knows that he should just leave it, that he should keep it a secret, but he can't, cause it's so bad, and even though he knows that bad things happen sometimes he can't understand why, even though he's not stupid. He knows that it's bad that he's holding the rabbit and he knows that it's bad that he chased it and he knows it's bad it got killed on the bad fence and he knows that sometimes the world is just bad but it hurts, it hurts real bad and he can't understand why it needs to hurt why the world is so bad that things need to get hurt so he walks right up to the porch holding the rabbit to his chest, his fingers all wet and sticky with warm blood, and he can't stop crying like a big boy would, like Cleb would tell him to just shut up and act like a big boy, but he can't and he walks up to the sliding glass doors and he sees his Mommy standing there in her flowery robe with the curler things in her hair and her coffee cup drops out of her hand as she opens the door. Billy walks in crying and he signs with one hand Mommy, I killed it.

Mommy she just stands there for a second with Billy standing there holding the rabbit and the coffee in a big brown puddle at her feet and she looks down at Billy and he thinks she's going to hug him but she just stands there and then she reaches for his hands and grabs hold of his wrists and squeezes them real tight so tight that it hurts very much so tight that Billy has to drop the rabbit and it falls on the coffee-soaked carpet and Mommy is hurting his hands when she looks at him and says Bad. Bad. Bad. You have been bad, Billy. You ought not to hurt things, Billy. To hurt things is bad. Mommy, Billy wants to say, my hands hurt Mommy my hands. Mommy says you hurt little things. You touch things and you hurt them. Why do you hurt things, Billy, why do you need to hurt? And Billy signs Mommy and he can't think of what to say and he signs Mommy I don't mean to. Mommy says the world Billy the world comes in and you go bad. Keep it out. Can't keep it out. You go bad. Billy can hardly feel his hands anymore and Mommy lets him go and says bad, bad, bad. Boys go bad. Mommy lets go of him and she reaches down for the rabbit and she picks it up and walks with it over to her rocking chair and she holds it to her shoulder and rocks and says you need to know how to hold things, Billy, you need to know how to hold them so they won't get hurt. You need to not hurt things, Billy. You need to not be bad, Billy, you need to not be bad.

Mommy rocks in the chair with the bloody rabbit in her hands and she starts to hum. It's a song that Billy knows, a song that he remembers. Mommy hums the song and holds the rabbit to her chest, and Billy feels sad cause his Mommy's eyes look like they are somewhere very far away.

Billy walks over to the chair and puts his hand up close to his Mommy's face. Even though his hands are bloody, he touches his Mommy's cheek, and she tilts her head into his hand and looks up at him and she smiles and mumbles something but Billy doesn't understand what she mumbles and then she mumbles it again and then Billy understands what she means and he knows that he will remember it. Mommy says love, Billy, love.

## Maine

Crossing the state line into what used to be known as “Vacationland” depressed Dirk greatly. He had spent six miserable years in Maine during the 1980s and was not pleased at the prospect of returning to the site of his darkest hours.

Felled by a severe migraine that refused to respond to any of the myriad of pharmaceuticals available on the van, Dirk missed the Portland reading entirely. Reports from Marla, who was by now nearly beside herself with fear and grief, indicated that Scott and William had more than made up for Dirk’s absence by being even more rude and obnoxious than usual. William alternated between raving about Maine Yankee (Maine’s aging and potentially dangerous nuclear reactor) and reprising his “I’m-drifting-into-a-drug-induced-coma-but-don’t-request-medical-assistance-or-I’ll-make-sure-you-pay-if-and-when-I-recover” act, which was frightening to behold, the way his glazed-over eyes produced hyphen after hyphen to punctuate what amounted to extremely sophisticated drooling. Scott had located some heroin he’d forgotten to use in Seattle and so spent most of the time nodding off, shivering back into semi-consciousness in order to request a beer, then nodding off again. Marla ended up reading and was repaid for her efforts by being jeered at by her now completely obliterated clients.

By the time the van rolled into Orono, home of Dirk’s first graduate school alma mater, the University of Maine, Dirk’s migraine had subsided somewhat, due mostly to the frequent full-body massages willingly donated by the coterie of comely disciples who had invited themselves along for the rest of the tour. They drove behind the van and often paid for everybody’s meals (though Dirk insisted, out of their earshot, that he did not require such financial contributions, but was unable to say no to such heartwarming generosity). “Right,” Scott and William thought, while chowing down on lobster, steak, and clams, liberally doused in blueberry syrup.

Both William and Scott had become increasingly concerned about the effect Dirk’s cult was having on the book tour. On the one hand, the perks weren’t bad, the lobster meals for one, the occasional make-out session with whichever disciple wasn’t chosen to join Dirk as he continued Gandhi’s experiment of having naked virgins lie beside him at night to test his vows of chastity. Sure, Dirk’s disciples were far from virginal, and the noise levels emanating from Dirk’s resting place almost surely belied his claims that he refrained from carnal knowledge, but both Scott and William admired the audacious lying since it reminded them so much of their own work. “Finally,” they thought, “Dirk is giving up that effete poetry kind of lying and really laying down some awesome, he-man Hemingway-type of fiction lying.” This comforted them, somewhat, though Dirk had seemed to become much more distracted ever since the *Tallahassee Smerx-Transcriber* had published an exposé of Dirk’s cult in which they noted that Dirk’s school transcripts did not support his declaration that he had been fully trained in clinical hypnosis and transcendental Rolwing. The latter didn’t even exist, the Tallahassee paper announced smugly. As if a little thing like credentials could derail Dirk’s sacred mission.

Still, both William and Scott agreed that they should keep an eye on their co-author, as well as stop the annoying habit of doing everything in tandem. “They were individuals, damnit!” they shouted loudly, at no one in particular. “Dang, it’s happening again! What’s with this simultaneous thought, speech, and action Siamese-twin effect?” A sobering thought hit them: perhaps they had been co-opted into Dirk’s cult without them even realizing it; perhaps he was at that very



moment controlling their lives, putting words in their mouths, even manufacturing the thoughts they were allowed to think. But if that were the case, then even this realization would be the result of Dirk's cruel machinations, a way of starkly revealing the limits of their free will, shining a spotlight on their chains.

After their reading in the University Bookstore, everyone ended up at the Oronoko Restaurant, which specialized in deep-fried food. Even the beer was deep-fat fried. At least the reading had gone fairly smoothly. The audience was small, so chances to insult people were reduced. Dirk managed to choke out a couple of poems before the black karma of the place incapacitated him. Scott and William used his limp body as a prop to finish off the evening before returning it to Dirk's frantic disciples who began bickering over who would get to perform the first full-body massage.



## Priest Lake

### I.

Discovery has always  
been another word  
for invasion: the overrun  
land always new

and without names.  
So this lake becomes Priest,  
named for the first  
white men—

the Black Robes,  
as the first inhabitants  
called them—to paddle  
north through the gateway

of the Twin Islands.  
The invaded fade  
and their names  
for the lake,

for the islands, the mountains,  
fade with them,  
and when the Black Robes  
left, only

the lake remained.

II.

A ship wrecked  
by those sudden north wind  
squalls that rack

the lake each autumn,  
littering the beaches  
with the deadwood, the garbage,

anything unanchored, loose  
and too close to the water  
at the wrong time.

A steamship, its fire failing  
against the waves and wind,  
gave up its hull

to the fourth element,  
its belly scraped open by rocks,  
the cargo—lumber, silver ore,

bootleg whiskey—swallowed  
by the water, the steam-pipes  
hissing at the invading cold,

but finally locked  
in sand and rust, a tilted  
marker over a boneless grave.

III.

During a flat summer  
afternoon calm—the water

a perfect mirror for mountains—  
a family slowly motors their boat

into Distillery Bay for a final  
private service, the consignment

of a husband's ashes, a father's  
memory, to the lake

that had been this churchless  
minister's sanctuary during his last

days. Flames consumed  
the tumor that killed him;

only crushed bone,  
the few remaining ounces,

will be spilled overboard.  
Not far away, the sun

illuminates the water around  
the steam-pipes, a fish jumps

and a rippled circle  
expands

toward every shore.

## The Book of Signs

<sup>1</sup>And “Dirk” went to the top of a nameless hill and said to no one in particular: “Behold these signs, given to me. Read them in remembrance of me.”

<sup>2</sup>The Prairie Dog Reserve informational plaque near Devil’s Tower said: “Prairie dogs enter the world surrounded by fangs. . . . from the air sudden talons.”

<sup>3</sup>At one time, 25 billion prairie dogs inhabited the vast middle of the United States; now their numbers have diminished to the point that they have been designated “endangered.” The powers responsible for determining that the prairie dog is endangered have decided to remedy this by granting the species their protection. The same powers granting their protection are largely responsible for the prairie dog’s problems.

<sup>4</sup>Beware your enemy’s remedies.

<sup>5</sup>But “Dirk,” you ask, how shall I know my enemy?

<sup>6</sup>Search your unhappiness.

<sup>7</sup>And the billboard advertised the “Humbird Walk-in Cheese Room.”

<sup>8</sup>And, lo, “Dirk” bypassed the Humbird exit, all the while imagining a humidior for cheese, rows and rows of tubes of string cheese, laid out, eager for lips and flame.

<sup>9</sup>And “Dirk” saw llamas in Minnesota.

<sup>10</sup>And signs indicating that the Llama Owners of S.E. Minnesota were responsible for two miles of highway in that state’s “Adopt-a-Highway” litter clean-up program. Owners. Not “ranchers,” or “breeders”—owners.

<sup>11</sup>This struck “Dirk” as strange.

<sup>12</sup> Were there, then, competing Llama Owner associations in S.W. Minnesota? in N.W. Minnesota? in N.E. Minnesota? in Central Minnesota? “Dirk” imagined ongoing gang warfare between the rival Llama Owners, each group maneuvering their herds of llamas onto great open fields where the llamas would then proceed to spit upon their enemies. The oceans of phlegm and mucous. The cries of the wounded. The expectorant epics recited by wandering, spit-blinded bards lauding the speed, trajectory, and pungency of the saliva of legendary llamas. The overwhelming smell.

<sup>13</sup>“Dirk” composed a short poem while driving, or rather remembered a previously composed short poem that had lacked an effective title. “Dirk” now provided the missing title.

<sup>14</sup>“Portion of an Adjectival Definition Arranged Mimetically”

seven  
teen syl  
lable . . .

<sup>15</sup>“Good Food” the cafe reader board declares . . . isn’t that, or rather, shouldn’t that be a given? Since a restaurant would never advertise that it served “Mediocre Food,” there seems to be a slight case of special pleading inherent in reassurances that an eating establishment serves food that is good to eat: “It’s good food . . . really! Ya gotta believe me!! Really, really good!”

<sup>16</sup>And “Dirk” encountered again a sign he had seen before: the name of a hair parlor: “Curl Up and Dye.”

<sup>17</sup>And “Dirk” wondered: Aside from the obvious “cleverness,” is there anything to recommend this as a name for a business that is presumably trying to attract customers by appealing to their vanity, their desire to remain young forever? Does such a name invite confidence in the skill of the personnel wielding sharp instruments and chemical poisons? Is that enough to overcome our innate revulsion with our own mortality?

<sup>18</sup>“Dirk” wondered.

<sup>19</sup>Then scratched his groin absentmindedly as if watching a wasp circle a blade of grass.

<sup>20</sup>And “Dirk” watched a movie entitled *fast, cheap, and out of control*.

<sup>21</sup>And the title resonated with “Dirk” and he wrote it down.

<sup>22</sup>And during his travels “Dirk” passed by many motels and one motel reader board proclaimed: “Recommended by Owner.”

<sup>23</sup>And “Dirk” was about to belittle this sign, assigning it a position in his taxonomy next to “Good Food,” yes, “Dirk” was about to employ heavy sarcasm while conceding that there was an element of genuine tongue-in-cheek wit, but then the unescapable irony took the form of an anvil and landed on his unshod toes: What could possibly be more permeated with the “Recommended by Owner” ethic than this hypertext for *The Unknown*, where every page and every link eventually circles around to the implicit and otherwise recommendation that you support those three crazy lads by buying their book.

<sup>24</sup>“Dirk” grimaced.

<sup>25</sup>“His mark is worse than his might,” he said with exaggerated mystery.

<sup>26</sup>And “Dirk” couldn’t decide if poetry was 1) always personal, 2) inevitably personal, or, 3) both or neither.

<sup>27</sup>And “Dirk” passed over “Lmuma Creek” on the way to Yakima and a disc golf course which would disappoint him greatly and cause a great gnashing of teeth, as well as assorted imagined blows about the head and shoulders of those responsible. Everyone responsible. Every last one. And then one more.

<sup>28</sup>As a warning.

<sup>29</sup>Punctuation.

<sup>30</sup>The horoscope for Capricorn, 20 July 1998, includes the following: “Invention relates to your recipe.”

<sup>31</sup>Colonize the world with koans. Koanize the world with colons.

<sup>32</sup>Celestial economics observes the following axiom: We never earn anything, but that doesn’t mean we don’t deserve everything we get.

<sup>33</sup>Or that we don’t deserve more than we earn, anyway.

<sup>34</sup>So much surplus and still the insistence on the moral obligation to work. Why the conspiracy against leisure?

<sup>35</sup>From whom all blessings flow.

<sup>36</sup>And while in Oregon, “Dirk” pondered the mystery that the state forbids motorists to dispense gasoline. Every Oregon gas station is full-service, and nothing but full-service, enterprise.

<sup>37</sup>Every time the station attendants cheerfully approached his car, “Dirk” inwardly recoiled, as if he had landed in the middle of a bad *Twilight Zone* episode about “The Gas Station That Time Forgot.”

<sup>38</sup>And what explains the continued need for station attendants in Oregon? An incredibly powerful gas station attendant union? An unusually clumsy and/or careless general populace? Creeping Socialism?

<sup>40</sup>On the way to Crater Lake, “Dirk” passes a financial institution that goes by the name, “Valley of the Rogue Bank.”

<sup>41</sup>Quibbles about redundancy aside, at least they have the guts to admit it.

<sup>42</sup>theconspiracyas yet untitled fallen

<sup>43</sup>Also, near Oregon, but before Crater Lake, “Dirk” watches a water-skier glide across a desert-smooth lake, an immense nuclear plant cooling tower looming behind him. An apocalyptic pastoral.

<sup>44</sup>Everything we forget.

<sup>45</sup>And “Dirk” added lines of poetry from his friends to the Book of Signs:

and though the years of crossing have marred their clarity like stones carried home to retell a day at the ocean

I was right that the story was waiting for loss and obscurity, and beauty spent recklessly so it could finish being told

<sup>46</sup>In San Francisco, “Dirk” strolls across the Golden Gate Bridge with the author of the above lines. Along the way are several emergency call boxes adorned with signs stating:

<sup>47</sup>Emergency Phone and Crisis Counseling

<sup>48</sup>Only in San Francisco, “Dirk’s” friend comments.

<sup>49</sup>Yes, “Dirk” thought, and how sad that “only” is an invitation for mockery.

<sup>50</sup>“Dirk” encounters the phrase “methodical visionary” and wants to apply it to himself but realizes that the honor should be William’s instead.

<sup>51</sup>And the motto/slogan/name for the 107th Merced County Fair in 1998 was: “Poultry in Motion.”

<sup>52</sup>As the entire interstate highway system had apparently deteriorated all at once, not unlike Oliver Wendell Holmes’ “Wonderful One-Hoss Shay,” “Dirk” was delayed by innumerable construction projects. Near one, the sign:  
OPEN TRENCH.

<sup>53</sup>Behold, says Lao-Tse, the Tao is an unopened trench.

<sup>54</sup>How deep is an unopened trench? asks the Zen Master.

<sup>55</sup>My! How trenchant you are with a penchant for non sequitur.

<sup>56</sup>The better to appropriate your corporeal being, my dear.

<sup>57</sup>Colorado. Interstate 70. Some time in July. 1998. Food Hospital Next Right

<sup>58</sup>I’m sorry, Mrs. M——, your veal calf didn’t make it. You’ll just have to eat him, I’m afraid. There, there. You knew it was only a matter of time . . .

<sup>59</sup>At times, “Dirk” felt like the small fog waiting at the mouth of a chilled, freshly opened bottle of beer.

<sup>60</sup>Thus ends the Book of Signs.



## Death of a Collector

1

The rest of the world had just had sex and was embarrassed to admit it to Zig, so the rest of the world would smile absently at its foot and chatter about whatnot. Though he hadn't seen the rest of the world in quite some time, Zig was oily and nervous and perfectly happy cutting the conversation short because the rental place (with some cutesy name like "Bloody Rentrails") had gone digital and was joyously burning the vinyl bridge behind it, selling off its records that Saturday morning in an hour and Zig knew a line was already forming. Granted, this was Urbana and the line would be five people long but there was still the unaffordable possibility that one of those five people would beeline to the Soft Boys section and snatch the copy of *Two Halves for the Price of One: Lope at the Hive/Only the Stones Remain*. So Zig gave the rest of the world a vague promise to bring some album called *Trout Mask Replica* to a party that evening and scurried slithered swam off, relieved. The rest of the world would have lunch, talk, have sex, and come to the party. The rest of the world would dose with Zig and about an hour later wander into the darkened living room where Zig lay unblinking helpless acid eyes up at the ceiling, the Dukes of Stratosphear the only ambassadors cool enough to reach him up there. The rest of the world would flip the switch on the hexagonal light fixture with the five exposed hundred watt bulbs upon which Zig's dilated eyes were unfocused which would cause him considerable pain. As whatever Zig hadn't been looking at was bleached forever white by the searing incandescence he screamed and we would giggle. And change the tape to... Zig never came back. He never got laid but he thought he might hatch. Zig was no egg although sometimes he thought he was a cocoon waiting for that fatal mixture of drug and song, to metamorphose him into something no longer merely a slacker... but sooner or later even the rest of the world would have an experience that would cause it to quit LSD. It will happen to you too, yes, your imagination is dormant—a cocoon—and, like to Zig, someday roaches the size of footballs may erupt from ordinary basement cement and the rest of the world won't be any help when they find where you are this time. Listen, Mr. Charlie, Zig never bought singles after the fall of vinyl. He collected songs, not novelties. Zig was a dinosaur. Me and Zig and Mr. Charlie toppled together into Brian Jones' grave. The first dirt fell across Mr. Charlie's face, a battered copy of *The Pipes of Jujus* clutched to his chest, arms folded. You don't remember, so I'll tell you. Before you even consider listening to Zig's story there is at least one disappointment you should not be spared until the end: he never finds a copy of the Soft Boys' *Two Halves for the Price of One*. When the rental place unlocked his doors, that record was already gone. Nothing but *Groovy Decay* on white vinyl. Some employee must have grabbed the one he wanted, or a discriminating rental consumer deliberately failed to return it, happily paying the ten dollar lost fee (much less than Zig was prepared to pay), winking, graduating, off to Los Angeles with that record under

her arm. Zig never found a copy of that record. He looked for it in Urbana, Chicago, Boston, Baltimore, Haight-Ashbury, Tempe and Tucson, Hawaii, New Zealand, Australia, on his parents' vacations, eventually on his own in London, Liverpool, Swindon, and Cambridge. He chased it to the end of the rainbow, to the end of his credit line, bought so much else along the way but all these unintentional finds were always overshadowed by that single loss. Zig searched hopelessly. How could a damned record be so elusive? The sheer fact of the matter was inscrutable: it exists to be for sale and nobody anywhere could sell it to him, no shrug behind any glass counter in any cafe district in any downtown of any English-speaking city and the process was nothing to him. In disappointment, he bought every Nick Cave album in Sydney and found that sixteen Australian dollars didn't exchange as favorably as you might think considering Nick Cave was from Australia. And once he bought one he had to buy them all. *Kicking Henry's Firstborn From Your Trial against the Dead the Son my Pricks is to The Eternity Her Good Dream Funeral*. And once he sold one to Mr. Charlie he had to sell them all. It bored him more and more but what else was there? The Boys Next Door became the Birthday Party became the Bad Seeds. Warsaw became Joy Division became New Order. Bauhaus became Tones on Tail became Love and Rockets. And the final disappointment most of you will never notice: the Minutemen became Firehose. It just keeps getting worse. That's it. That is why Zig never cared about the 666 I was convinced could be heard if one listened to "spring clean for the may queen" backwards over and over again until the disc was scratched beyond playability. Zig didn't care about that because he already heard everything backwards. He clung to his favorite band's first albums. He was somehow convinced that the rest of their careers had led up to that single masterpiece. Thus, because bands like the Soft Boys never had a successful record, they never had a first successful album, so Zig's trip up the Nile of their career led him into a vague underbrush of backwater demos. By investigating Hitchcock's influences—Barrett and his influence Lennon—Zig was flipping upstream to a piano in Hamburg where the Fab 2 spawned the music the rest of us wriggled from. It didn't get any earlier than Elvis, and the King struck Zig as a tad medieval. Mr. Charlie was dammed. From the way he explained it, at Kent State Janis Jim and Jimi were shot by the national guard for protesting the war in Vietnam. And Zig argued that these deaths were not tragic. In the Sixties, famous rock stars had the decency to die, perhaps, in the prophetic nature ascribed to them posthumously, to try to stop disco from happening. They overdosed into comatose bliss and the tranquil feedback of the afterlife drowned out the decrepit Sex Pistols, spared them Joe Strummer's chanting "No more Beatles Stones or Who in 1977..." A major label kissoff, embarrassing arrogant son. Suicides and stupid accidents became routine career moves. But Zig had waded upstream to find something better than the dam Mr. Charlie poised on, gurulike. I splashed around. At fifteen, I was already an inexplicably indiscriminate lover of vintage vinyl. Anything unmarketable or dated was cool, whether it was a

Long Playing Unbreakable Stereophonic Record called *Cocktails for Two* or that Syd Barrett bootleg, both of equally unimpressive fidelity, the latter excellent. *The Richard Harris Love Album*, the *Superfly* soundtrack, Tom Jones singing “Thunderball,” I knew no sarcasm, only songs, styles, symptoms. I listened to it but it spoke only to Zig, only occasionally. Leering sinister invisible Hitchcock, Andy, Morris—the Soft Boys had held up a mirror to Zig, and reflected in the smooth hull of Kimberly Rew’s guitar Zig saw that he existed and knew his agony was real. He heard a whispered message that could only have been meant for him which had been lying unnoticed at the bottom of a mix for a decade. He caught a glimpse of himself in “Look Into Your Mirror” and that unrehearsed outtake he went miles out of his way to Boston to spend way too much money on brought him a little bit, weirdly, ironically, paradoxically, oxymoronically, closer to himself. But he never found that record. There is no climax, no epiphany, no satori. No, this story has no banners, no angels, no gold, no radiance, this story is just as usual par for the course what you might expect: words paper birds sky fish water worms dirt, in the end as you might expect. He gradually forgets about the quest, some three minute grail always imagined just out of reach, maybe song four on some second side of some extremely obscure record which would yield up to him some word or chord with which everything else might be resolved, a song that would serve as the proper ending to all the songs which fade out, and if he had found it would he have had the good sense to just listen to it once and then lift the needle and unplug the record player forever? Or would he, having learned nothing from insight, listen to the song again and again, end up buying every other album by that artist, and defend the worst of them in some conversation that would entrench him forever in that threeminute moment that would otherwise have preceded all experience he will now never have? How could Zig ingest all those lovesongs without searching for a resolution? He was finding out that they all resolve themselves quite neatly. He was finding out that some desires cannot be satisfied without being lost forever. So forget it, it is not that kind of lovestory, thank Iggy. All those shes could never point to anyone because they pointed in every direction. It was a net, a lattice of indicators in which every woman could become implicated eventually, whether she had red hair or no hair, Cinnamon Girl She’s Going Bald. Zig discovered a song structure and She Loves You didn’t do it for him anymore. I Wanna Hold Your Hand. C’mon, that may be the first use of the important auxiliary verb “wanna” in a song title but you start to get jaded and then you find your wisdom in Happiness is a Warm Gun, I am the Walrus, Everybody’s Got Something to Hide Including Me and My Ambiguous Lyrics. Just because you are a woman who does not like Zig’s story doesn’t mean that if you were a man you would. You wouldn’t. Zig’s kind of story doesn’t have to end. It is going on all around you, underneath the poverty level, behind the counters of record stores, in wrecked downtown Champaign where the bars are, and, like those miserable beehives, without a trace of the splendor visible in Bootsy Collins’ sequined cowboy boots on the cover of a Parliament album. If

Zig's story didn't end you would stop reading it and then you would go out to the same bar as him and wouldn't even know it. It's amazing how someone so indistinguishable can be so at home on his stool beside his ashtray before the cracked mirror. Like you, Zig would live smoke drink sleep in isolation behind a wall of lyric sheets and band photos. Better that than become like the rest of the world, to whom sex is casual, fun, sexy, and worst of all inevitable. Zig might fall in whatchamacallit but would never end up meeting, well, anyone, not even old friends on the street if he saw them coming first, and she would stay on display behind the counter of Analog Anachronism with the promotional albums too weird to sell at a reasonable price like the version of *Oranges and Lemons* that was released as a can of CD singles. Did you see that? Somebody else write a song about the man who bought that. That must be a love story: the devotion that caused him to endure all those disc errors... Now that Analog Anachronism is wrapped up, I guess that Butthole Surfers promotional toilet paper behind the counter is destined to remain shrinkwrapped for eternity, whereas in the youth in which I destroyed a record collection of three or so hundred through intense neglect I would have wiped excrement all over it like a sensible human. I have no idea where Zig's been since 1987, as close as any of us would ever get to the Summer of Love, 1967, a year whose psignificance was then being eagerly revised by the media in 1987, the year when the rest of the world would throw on the lights, giggle at Zig's shrieking, hit stop right in the middle of What in the World and, in its obnoxious stupor, insist on Ministry. Zig would protest weakly from beneath the table where he covered in the shadow from that evil light. He wanted to go on listening. He said he could hear all the instruments. "You'll love this," the rest of the world would promise, and press play, and Zig's bad trip began and has been on autoreverse ever since. Only the promise of a record would have woken Zig on that Saturday morning too excited for breakfast but no. David Futrelle might still have a copy of that record but I doubt it. Not Zig though: every Soft Boys album but that one. No tools of the truly relentless consumer: no catalogs, no important connections, no e-mail no credit no cash. He had turned up so many interesting Soft Boys products, consumed them each: ten twelve inch red blue green vinyl of demo studio live instrumentals songs spoken word covers of Elvis Syd Barrett John Lennon, all invaluable trash now taped bagged filed and he'd deny even owning them if you looked at him with the shifty serpent eyes of a borrower, eyes that want something they might get, eyes that mirror Zig's, eyes that thus terrify him so much.

2

In high school, before I began using drugs and alcohol to cope with permissive parents, I didn't have much to do. I spent a lot of time in used record stores patiently accumulating everything. Almost every night me and Zig would get together in my room just to sit and listen. I remember the night we listened to the Residents. When the side of *The Third Reich and Roll* that is usually Swastikas on Parade ended we just sat there confused, not sure whether we should flip the

record over to hear the side that explains why Hitler was a Vegetarian or not, not sure if the Residents even wanted us to listen to their music. I hated it, and wasn't sure what to say to Zig. We played the game where you spot the shelved record across the room by looking at the colored vertical stripe. *Black and Blue* has part of Mick Jagger's eye. *Steely Dan's Greatest Hits* (doublealbums and gatefolds always slightly easier). *Zinc Alloy and the Hidden Riders of Tomorrow*. Zig? Yeah, it's me. Hey, c'mon over Christmas night. After our families topple into their clean sheets we can listen to the 78s I found in the basement. Frank Sinatra is only tolerable through a haze of noise, don't you agree. Oh don't try that Drambuie, that's been open a long long long time. I think my great great great grandfather brought that over from Scotland. Listen to this Sinatra carefully: someday you will find that special song, Zig. That was how we were for the first few months after we met but years later, after the night spent rescuing Zig from his imagination in every corner of my house, I didn't see Zig much and I suspected nobody else did either. He had had the most terrifying experience of any of our lives and it barely disrupted the party. It was just one in a long series of now infamous parties when, in late high school when my now-single mother was frequently away on business, I was intent on drinking and destroying the fantastic record collection I had built. On my Mom's veranda I would nod appreciatively while my guests mishandled the records I had obtained for their amusement. This was my mom's third divorce in twice as many homes and I was well accustomed to losing everything and starting over. Friends even. Trouble is, those records went out of print. Zig, on the other hand, had a family and a house and, to provide an elegant backdrop for a decaying marriage, his family accumulated belongings which they arranged, cleaned, dusted, repaired, and replaced. They couldn't pay attention but they could pay for so many other things. They thus dealt with the awkward fact of each other by continually recommitting a fully sensual relationship with capitalism and bought newer and newer buttery leather sofas and plush shag carpeting and dealt with the awkward fact of Zig's existence by raising his allowance, and Zig became, well, a collector. When I had just moved into the neighborhood and went over to his house and saw his room I laughed at all the toys. The next week everything except the records had disappeared. I was fourteen, understand, and my adulthood was reflected in my casual attitude towards material wealth, but Zig had maintained collections of Hotwheels, Legos, Star Wars paraphernalia, movie posters, videotapes, comicbooks and, oh yeah, 33s 45s even 78s cassettes compact discs even 8-tracks. And Zig never outgrew any of it. It always followed certain patterns: owning the entire set always seemed to justify the purchase of any one of them, no matter how stupid. At my party when he freaked on acid he calmed himself around sunrise with the toys he found in the closet and so intently did he stare at the matchbox cars he pushed across the immaculate linoleum of the kitchen floor that I was a little dismayed when the rest of the world, who had emptied the liquor cabinet, burst in and found Zig playing with a toy they could only destroy, having matured safely past childish

behavior while Zig was still perfecting the art and use of the tools and who else could appreciate the artistry and craftsmanship and engineering of a massproduced, well, toy? We at least had beer, which you can only collect by destroying. Zig didn't and had to try more dangerous things like Gentle Giant, Henry Cow, even Marillion in his desperate adolescent uncertainty. Zig stood simultaneously Mark Bolan and Prince, Grace Jones and Annie Lennox. Every time he rode his bicycle to school it was his tragic motorcycle accident, his fatal helicopter crash, falling out of a stupid van. He paid more attention to the music than the mythology: he knew that most of us will end by repeating the same thing over and over until the producer fades us out—usually right before an embarrassingly wrong note blurted by an overzealous saxophonist. Zig stopped being my friend and I never noticed when my story ended when in spasms of anaesthetic hilarity I tossed *Earthbound* over my shoulder and slapped down *Tommy*, libretto tattered, scattering cigarette ash across the vinyl, dropped the blunt poisonous diseased needle into “We’re not Gonna Take It,” and burst out laughing. Zig had been rescued from the gigantic roaches in the basement and now stood in my room looking meek and very upset. By now, my senior year, my records had no covers. These were on my walls. Zig gaped at the pornographic horror of ruined album covers and right away noticed that Alan Parson engineered *Dark Side of the Moon*, that Brian Eno had been credited with Enossification on *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, that John Paul Jones played bass on “Mellow Yellow.” He was bewildered by it all and to rid himself of the fits and draw a line between reality and nightmare he was making a mental note to buy everything, even if it was *Psychobabble*. When he saw what had happened to my collection I knew he didn't like me anymore. How could he? I lived only in the hope of choking to death on my own vomit and was numb to everything precious, every theramin, every mellotron. My once magnificent library of music was a stack of naked records in my closet, a black vinyl column with a hole all the way through, scratched smudged scuffed scarred mutilated hair beer blood blackbile phlegm choleric, surface noise. I gave a cavalier laugh, but my spine felt cold and I felt a twinge of pain in my liver. Zig picked up the record on the top of the stack: *Metal Machine Music*. Like the rest, a web of iridescent scratches which always resulted from dropping the needle at a favorite song, a spectacular ending, a good solo, replaying every interesting event five or six times, scanning a record which could only spin one way, song surfing, learning the details of these vinyl masterpieces better even than the engineers who engineered them, better even than the sessionman who lay down that piano part without ever hearing the finished record, at least not the side he wasn't on. I played it all for Zig as the sun rose and the rest of the world began to murmur about its parents and wondered how to get home. I played Zig everything then and it helped him through the rest of his nightmare: the weird spoken interlude in “All the Madmen,” the synthesizer solo in “Editions of You,” the end of “Lark's Tounge in Aspic Part II,” where, in the runoff groove, Robert Fripp can be heard to say “can we do just one more immediately?” Even

the Soft Boys. I kept Zig from the monsters until he was finally lying down on my bed with his eyes closed listening to Mr. Tambourine Man sing a song for him. Maybe that is why he is here now, to help me through this sickness. Meanwhile Zig, having been taught the delicacy of vinyl, built his empire on the sturdy columns of parostatic disc preeners, head cleaning solution, well balanced turntable arms, and brushed styli. He has kept in transparent plastic squares portions of a collection I listened to splinters. I memorized every song, but as a collector I had nothing to show for it. I knew every word of my story but the paper had dissolved. I was certain there would always be more music. Zig wasn't so sure.

3

The only pang of bitter satisfaction Mr. Charlie will get is when compact discs are replaced by something else and then he will issue an abrasive Hasil Adkins cackle from atop a stack of mouldering vinyl. Maybe it will be discovered that all compact discs become suddenly defective at twenty years old. Mr. Charlie remains poised for apocalypse. In his bomb cellar he has a case of twentyfive replacement cartridges and twice as many styli. You digital bastards will never hear *Strictly Personal*, *The Day they ate Brick*, but then again you won't have to endure Mr. Charlie's Grateful Dead bootlegs. The Empire is crumbling, and Mr. Charlie collects every brick, cleans it, labels and files it in his basement, on the wall, in the racks at Analog Anachronism, the used record store we don't visit anymore. Used vinyl doesn't even cost less than new compact discs when the vinyl is sold as a novelty collectible. Compact discs are never treated like an original, they are all copies. Furthermore the number of songs recorded before the invention of compact disc now available on compact disc approaches the number of songs available on record, as old tapes that never made it to vinyl are being mastered digitally: Raymond Scott, Carl Stalling, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. On the radio an NPR announcer is explaining that Folkways, sitting on more unreleased music than even fat John Peel, was bought by the Smithsonian Institution and now we have more old Guthrie, Woody that is, Phil Ochs, somewhere maybe even *I Do Not Play No Rock and Roll* by Mississippi Fred MacDowell. Mr. Charlie bitched away in reactionary resistance to all things digital: what about the runoff groove of *Sergeant Pepper*? ("Brilliant" I mutter in sarcasm) What about the Monty Python album rumored to have three sides, two of them running parallel on the same face of the record. ("Do you have it?") He waved Zig to silence. Nevermind the secret song hidden in the Nirvana CD, invisible tricks made possible with digits. Mr. Charlie will wince at the absence of a familiar pop during the beginning of "Magic Bus" or remember "We Love You" as being slightly faster, all defects remembered as part of the composition, all defects he feels cheated without. He has grown accustomed to his defects and defensive about them. His life has been one long defect and the ephemeral nature of songs on vinyl is a tragedy he also feels cheated without. In a decade the market will be flooded with indestructible copies of his favorite albums with

digitally improved fidelity, all much easier to handle scan and store than his popladen collection. Mr. Charlie, be assured, did not collect those pops haphazardly through wanton misuse and neglect over the course of a couple years like me. Wherever he is, I'm sure that every time he listens to *Surrealistic Pillow* again, he still remembers me as the jerk who, in enthusiasm, dropped the tonearm without using the lever on "Plastic Phantastic Lover," but eventually that pop will comfort him. If I had accidentally removed a skip from one of his albums, instead of adding one, it would be the same. He remembers the asshole who actually spilled a beer on side two of *Cheap Thrills*. It was at the grand opening of Mr. Charlie's used record store, Analog Anachronism, in the basement of a vintage clothing store, that the three of us met. Zig had come to sell his copy of *Purple Rain*. He had been picking at the florescent surface of MTV since it first came to town two years earlier. As he watched the videos he thought were fantastic (DEVO) slide from popularity he began to wonder what it was actually hiding. I listened to everything. Mr. Charlie listened to the same thing. Mr. Charlie, get this, had never heard of the artist then still known as Prince and a quick glance at the vinyl he told Zig it was too scratched to buy. Then we got in a big fight about David Bowie. Me and Zig were the only customers but we stayed all day. Mr. Charlie stood there drinking a beer smirking, indicating with knowing nods and vague gestures which of the crates of tightly packed, barely alphabetized bootlegs I was most likely to find the Bowie in. Mr. Charlie told us where everything we asked for was and soon began to take an interest. It was obvious he had some important information to impart to anyone who was willing to listen, which nobody had been willing to do for decades. We stood strangers facing him across the counter of his store, Zig in his Tar Babies, me in my Clash tshirt assimilating his thinning drying splitting greying balding long hair. The jeans he had been wearing since 1970 didn't have ripped knees but Zig's did. Mr. Charlie's naturally unwashed hair had no dreadlocks but Zig's did. The only Bowie he had in his crate was *Images 1966-1977*—I didn't even know Bowie had done anything before *Space Oddity*—looked interesting but forty bucks? For a prescratched album? Some people obviously took this way too seriously. All I was looking for was maybe *Young Americans* or *Pinups*, the only two I didn't have yet, or a Spiders bootleg, or an answer to my fragile hope that somewhere was a recording of Bowie and Bolan singing together but Mr. Charlie was trying to explain it all to me right then: an unpleasant tirade about how the sixties, like Rock and Roll, like America, like him, had died at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. "Look," I will finally say patiently, "I've never heard of a band called Woodstock so I don't see how their concerts could have been that hot." Then Zig tried to explain alternative. Big mistake. Which of us was selling the other what, because we weren't doing a very good job. Finally he cut me a "deal" on a Pretenders bootleg: "The version of 'tattooed Love Boys' is great. Halfway through the solo the guitarist dies of a cocaine overdose. Right on stage. It's wild. What a solo!" Mr. Charlie's eyes lit with dim enthusiasm. Myopic eyes within said "Blow the dust off that digital audio tape, kid,



someday you could end up like I will: with a record collection so large you can never leave Urbana so you sit at home listening to Peter Paul and Mary just waiting for your story to end.” And Zig’s eyes looked back clouded with some cataract dream that somewhere there was a lattice of undiscovered songs that will provide a constellation of logic, of attitude. And my glaucoma eyes with the pressure building, the slow discovery that sight is blindness after all, informed by this stubborn voice that keeps telling me that there is a Wall of Voodoo at the end of that tunnel that Mr. Charlie refuses to leave. Mr. Charlie has lived long enough to feel even Janis Joplin’s hangover fade away, my my hey hey. Sure, I found the end of the Sixties meaningful when I discovered its music at the beginning of the Eighties but Mr. Charlie, who thinks that the feedback at the beginning of the Gang of Four’s “Anthrax” is a ripoff of “I Feel Fine,” (the first use of feedback in rock, again the Beatles, again a B-side) refuses to grow young. When he proclaimed himself a hippie I was shocked. I got the impression that he adopted the identity because nobody else was preserving its defects. He was so adamant about the Airplane, (“you mean Jefferson Starship?” I faux pas-ed (“you mean Starship?” Zig put his foot in my mouth)) the Who (for some reason), the legendary Fillmore, and he tried quite hard to get me to dig Jerry, bless his surgically scarred heart. He hated seeing all of this become available on compact disc because he hates the fact that its marketable. He has something in a plastic sleeve in his memory he needs to protect. At Woodstock, he said, we wanted a better world and we only got a better concert. Mr. Charlie would never have been able to communicate with me at all except for the bizarre fact that he liked XTC. I’m not sure why—XTC didn’t start making sixties albums until 1987. We talked about Andy Partridge, and, in our speculations about his agoraphobia and stagefright, we could describe our own fears—the ones that were coming true. I never knew how Mr. Charlie fell for XTC. Zig showed him a copy of their fan magazine, *Limelight*. Now, of course, we have the XTC collector’s bulletin board on the internet. Collectors circumvented the record stores to accumulate XTC products their the shelves would never be stocked with. Despite (or perhaps because of) the band’s negligible commercial success, being an XTC fan was an industry. Zig was telling Mr. Charlie this with pride, and Mr. Charlie was delighted. As a used record salesman, their industry was his industry. Mr. Charlie put down the *Limelight*, picked up the phone, and immediately began a dialogue with someone in Berlin, not, as Zig might expect, to score an illicit cassettered home demo of “Blue Beret,” but instead to score a sehr preisswert copy of a “Making Plans for Nigel” 45? How can you collect a song everybody’s sick of? It’s on an album, and so is the b-side. Furthermore, within five years it will all be available on CD along with tracks you haven’t heard yet! Zig is sick and outraged. There must be some logic somewhere in this universe in which no body should ever revolve 45 times per second but Mr. Charlie is on the again chattering in broken Deutsche. We go behind the counter to skim his LPs and find some 1977 live. We try it out. Quite feisty but Andy’s overzealous vocal performance is eating up the words notes

even rhythms of the vocals in exaggerated screaming and growling. You're trying to think of a tactful way to avoid explaining to Zig that you prefer the more deliberate studio takes of these songs. Zig thinks this disc is great. His eyes are bright and he is silent listening intent. He is hearing XTC make mistakes for the first time. You are glad XTC stopped touring. Zig prefers to confront his fears pointlessly again and again and wishes XTC would do the same. Following him to the houses of friends like Mr. Charlie, with whom XTC was the only halfway safe topic of conversation, I sometimes thought I was Colin Moulding watching Andy's manic antics uncertainly from the left of the stage. As soon as Mr. C. is off the phone I will convince Zig to convince him to close his opening early, lock the doors, and roll up a number of that marijuana he had been tantalizing me with allusions to and then we will find an excuse to leave. For me that is how Mr. Charlie's story began and ended. In that brief interval I, not yet aware that my actions would have consequences in a world without euphoria, put his *The Velvet Underground and Nico* down on the table sleeveless. Oops. I didn't understand it was only a rare pressing of that record that had the original Warhol cover in which the banana sticker peels off to reveal a pickle. How could I? I did and showed him. How could I? There were only about fifty of those left! The fact that he had two of them on the wall of his store did little to soften his hatred of me. After this, Mr. Charlie wasn't about to show me his *Her Satanic Majesty's Requests* with the hologram. He wouldn't even let me take it out of the plastic. I am not sure why but I have been thinking about him. I swear that's his voice on the radio. I felt bad but bet he was relieved when we finally left and he reassured himself with *Seastones*. I bet he passed out on the couch in the back of the store and in his dreams is returning from a convention in Seattle carrying a fantastic Dukes bootleg whose albumcover unfolds in a miraculous feat of popupbook engineering and packaging into a lifesize fluorescent replica of Sir John Johns and The Red Curtain in whose hands is a triangular record on paisley vinyl whose each side has three parallel grooves impossible to keep track of or hit with a needle which were made up entirely of songs nobody has ever heard and Mr. Charlie is so relieved to have finally got that record back to his store in Illinois despite rain thieves terrorists hijackers but when he sticks his last key in to rattle open his third deadbolt he knows something is very wrong. A burst water pipe, a heavy rainfall, gravity, bad luck. He stumbles down into the basement water ankle deep. He sloshes to the E but *No Pussyfooting* the most synthetic album of its time whose cover shows a maze of mirrors in which nothing is alive or organic at all except for Fripp and Eno (and even then one is skeptical) has revealed the organic nature of the wood on whose pulp the cover was printed dissolved into red and blue slush which has caked the vinyl and all his records are destroyed, their protective plastic sleeves filled with water and snails. All ruined. All... ruined, ruined. Ruined? An ending at least. His store flooded and his vinyl, gasp, yes, ruined, and in this dream as he realizes he set the bootleg down in a puddle he will yelp! twitch himself into awake in fear on the couch

listening to the needle skipping itself blunt in the runoff groove of *Seastones* certain of his doom. He will reach out his hand to touch *In the Wake of Poseidon* before returning to troubled sleep.

4

Zig and I went from the record store to my room to come down, a practice I eventually abandoned, and we listened to my compact discs of *Here Come the Warm Jets* and *Taking Tiger Mountain (by Strategy)*, as heard through a splitter and two pairs of excellent headphones, dispel the lingering analog ghosts hissing and crackling. Zig flipped through *More Dark than Shark* by Brian Eno and Russell Mills. We agreed: “There are good songs on there.” Zig: “How did Eno write them? I mean, *did* he write them, or did he just invite Fripp and Manzanera over and give them expensive tea?” “He also gave them interesting assignments.” “And twiddled the knobs on the latest hunk of sound manipulation equipment.” “He wrote the text.” “What are the songs about?” “The text came to him and later on he would try to figure out what it meant.” “Who are ‘the 801’?” “Eno has a few theories but nobody really knows. Look, he produced albums, Zig. you won’t find a reason for every word and note. You’re a dupe for caring what the songs meant.” Eno at the Royal College of Art, experimenting with tape loops, reading John Cage, denying artworks, calling them symptoms of a process, denying composition, calling it intuition, probability, fluke. I couldn’t believe that I was hearing this from someone who, eight hours earlier, had tried to sell a copy of *Purple Rain*. Had Mr. Charlie changed him? Maybe he just couldn’t handle getting high for the first time. Either way, I was a little offended by Zig’s unexpected critique. I wanted to be Brian Eno. Zig again: “Why?” “Listen to these albums.” Zig nodded, suddenly tired, he liked the music but... “Even then: four of the greatest rock albums nobody ever listens to to your name and suddenly you fall asleep and make ambient muzak for a decade only to wake up looking at Bono through the studio window in a seat still warm from Steve Lillywhite. You, Eno, have made it. See ya. I’ll keep this tape of *801 Live* to remember you. All this Cluster... *The Little Red Record*... The mysterious *No New York*. Roxy Devo Ultra Talking stop right there. He’s turning the turntables on us. You can tell from the smug expression he wears on the cover of the *Portsmouth Symphonia* album. You can tell by the pictures in the first two Roxy Music albums: an insect in drag. Back then it was all money, equipment, and lots of friends. Now it is all money, equipment. Eno, how can you live with *the Joshua Tree*, the others what’re they called again?” I didn’t answer. Zig was cranky and getting his coat on. “Fuck U2. Do you know what their lawyers did to poor Negativland, to SST records who brought us Black Flag and the Minutemen about the time you were fading out John Cale’s viola solo, pursing your lips at Percy Jones? It was a kick in the ass to someone already lying face down in mud and broken glass. It was censorship after the censorship had already been accomplished. U2’s lawyers strove to censor what nobody would otherwise have been the slightest bit interested in, all a display of power. Is timbre really the vertical dimension of

sound? Three-dimensional sound: how conceptually neat. Is the cover of *No Pussyfooting* really your pad?" Zig, in the doorway to my room, turns the album cover over in his hands. I'm surprised we remained friends after that. I didn't know what his problem was. Zig was convinced that all musicians make worse albums as they make more money but he didn't understand why Eno would stop working with Fripp and start working with U2. My infatuation often caused me to admire guitar solos that Zig found gaudy. It's not even the musicians I love. It's their producers. The pornographers, not the models. The photographs, not the subject. I like *Nerve Net*. I like a songwriter who knows when he doesn't have anything to say. People who get uptight about music still irritate me, especially when I'm on the phone with them telling them I can't sell their albums anymore.

5

How will you feel lying beside the toilet in a smear of vomit hoping your wife, or your daughter-in-law, heaven forbid, should come downstairs and find you drunk again. How will Charlie feel knowing that everything he clings to will turn to garagesale dust? On the radio I hear someone who sounds like Casey Casum, only really mean, asking me how I will feel when nobody brings me anything for Christmas: nothing shrinkwrapped, nothing with liner notes, zilcho. "What do you want? A Geffen takeover? A slap in the face? Three chords of your own, a guitar and a rhyming dictionary? An actual friend? The sudden cold information that property is not happiness, that it devalues much more quickly? How about a long distance dedication: 'Plastic Factory.'" Despite your best efforts to forget, these songs will haunt you. How will Zig feel knowing that Don Van Vliet has quit being Captain Beefheart for good, the magic disbanded, and that he now paints and sculpts things that are not for sale? Did he just tell me that or is the radio drifting again? When you least expect it, Captain Beefheart's songs will return to your tapping foot. Zig doesn't like any new albums except *Respect* and Mr. Charlie would have it be the case that all our record companies would just stop flooding the market with newer albums rendering increasingly insignificant such milestones as the Amboy Dukes' *Journey to the Center of the Mind*. This hospital bed is really uncomfortable. Captain Beefheart's surrealist escapism will strike you as a more reasonable response to the horror of the Vietnam war than the folk music. I have to be stored vertically so the bed is affixed to the wall and I am strapped in. You will remember Captain Beefheart because his final albums were the only comeback in which a songwriter rescued his wildly unstable career from the brink of success than quit the business to become an artist and nobody ever does that. If everybody could sing along to Country Joe and the Fish or Captain Beefheart at a warm bar around closing time on a Friday against the backdrop of wars far uglier than Vietnam, would Zig or Mr. Charlie sing along? (I could care less. If Jimi Hendrix's rendition of the "Star Spangled Banner" was actually a protest

and not a patriotic affirmation, then was he really protesting anything more than the lousy P.A. system? He would never have lived to give another free concert, that's for sure.) I tried to speak but I started skipping again. A nurse is here now cleaning the needle before she reinserts it into my arm. You will be lying on the basement floor of your wife's house with scotch poisoning and "Big Eyed Beans from Venus" hammering you relentlessly from some mercilessly intact segment of memory and you wish it would stop, and inexplicably burst into "Beatle Bones 'N` Smokin' Stones" years later at the drivethrough at your bank. Does the torrent of albums and the consequent deflation of song meaning bury their music thereby protecting it? Zig is sitting by my hospital bed staring at the radio smiling in amusement. That song will still pound through your resonant headache although, you will recall, you won't have listened to that since that Sunday morning when you played it for... but all those times will be memories more interesting to you than the songs you associate with them. Would they still enjoy *Lick my Decals off, Baby* if it were popular, or would it just be more muzak, LiteRock, Billy Joel, wellintentioned, a put-on? You will reach the other side of understanding where whatever grunge album you are producing this week will seem more interesting to you than whatever your daughter-in-law wants to listen to. Our philosophers—Lenny Bruce George Carlin Robin Williams Richard Pryor—can't answer these questions because they aren't funny, instead they will continue to make increasingly mindless movies. Our poets will be revealed as not even musicians really just people with peculiar voices who could unabashedly spill lyrics across inner sleeves who knew how to flash biz execs a sales grin and buy from roadies. All of this you will be paid to learn. I don't know how else to end your story. Some things in life, they come once and then disappear with tortuous elegance, things Zig vinyl life love I guess and Captain Beefheart. You will never listen to these tapes Zig brought you. You won't want to anyway. You don't have the time or the drugs. You will never see the loss of your record collection as a tragedy because you always believed that anything worth hearing would remain on radio. Zig never trusted fate or radio, so he accumulated until, that is, he heard the music that made the Residents sound like doowop R & B, proving the indistinguishability of satire from its subject. Zig is telling me that when he heard Nono, Ligeti, Brün, he didn't go out the next day looking for a "Como Uno Ola De Fuerza Y Luz" poster, an "Aventures" tshirt, an "I Told You So" ten-inch on clear vinyl, because there is no such thing. When he listened to this music, he got so confused he forgot to buy it. It caused him to stop listening to songs for a year. Enough about him. I am trying to explain to Zig why I'm in this hospital but I keep skipping over important words. It all happened when I was on the subway coming home after a difficult day on the label. We just bought out a smaller label which was in financial trouble. Many of the bands were signed because of personal ties to each other and the old management. Some of these bands were not even properly signed. When I am in the presence of a verbal contract, I turn up the radio until I drown it out. I fired three employees and cancelled contracts

with three bands who had failed to produce their new album on time. These people are difficult to deal with. As signed artists they seem to feel they are entitled to additional favors, like extra time to produce their work. The market doesn't wait. In trying to listen to selections from our overflowing pile of audition tapes, a faulty machine ate three of them. In a rage I smashed a couple more. I decided to leave early and work on my computer at home. Normally I drive to and from work but my car has been refusing to turn over. I was standing on the subway by the door about to exit onto the platform when I began skipping. I took a step to the door. I took a step to the door. I took a step to the door. The subway faded out into noise and I awoke from the crackling in this bed. They tell me I am dying of static. A layer of dust covers my entire body within an hour and they must periodically clean me with dry felt cloths. I am suffering from inadequate circulation as I am warped. Through an expensive operation I can be digitally remastered. Who wants perfect low-end response if they have to spend the rest of their life paying for it. You? Meanwhile I cannot return to work. Zig is looking at the radio again. He brought me tapes of music he claims I once liked. He tells me he stopped by Analog Anachronism to tell Mr. Charlie I was sick only to find the store entirely covered in plastic and he couldn't find a way in. It looked like there was somebody home, but Zig couldn't tell. The entire building, clothing store and all, was shrinkwrapped. Now the radio announcer is back and I swear it's Mr. Charlie. Zig doesn't seem to notice. He's announcing a Phil Ochs tune. I can hear the pop of the needle sinking into the groove, I can hear the surface noise. Zig is staring at the radio now. See?

6

Zig could turn from the radio to the potted poinsettia wilting unwatered by my bedside. "where do plants and music come from?" he could wonder. He could take out his guitar now but if his intent is to entertain me he's going to have to make like Pete Townsend and smash that battered acoustic into that machine that is monitoring my RPM. Zig could explain to me that Phil Ochs wrote songs because he was a journalist who wanted to build a world safe for songwriters. He won his Kay guitar on a bet that Kennedy would defeat Nixon. Now, as he tunes, Zig could explain something about clarity and say that only Phil Ochs songs allow him to experience reality in the present tense. He lost it when it was confiscated by the F.B.I. at the Democratic National Convention. With other songs it is shifted either past or future. He promoted a worker/student alliance. He could fail to explain how this makes sense given that Phil Ochs songs are usually about specific events that took place in the early 1960s. He lost favor with the feminist movement and all other women. Instead he could twiddle the radio knob until he finds the particular recording of the Phil Ochs song he is looking for. Oh brother, Zig, that's not what I want to hear. Most Phil Ochs songs aren't available on disc—new CD or old LP. Zig only has a tape of his first two albums but could search the libraries for sheet music of the 69 songs printed

in *Broadside*. Xeroxes of sheet music? Zig is collecting things that nobody can own: chords, keys, time signatures, text. And get this, Zig could explain, I can learn all the chords and get the whole set, but once I start to learn all the songs in order to get the whole set I have to write all the songs that haven't been written. I could collect every possible song. Zig could learn chords he never knew about by my bedside as the dust coats me. Maybe Zig knows what Mr. Charlie didn't figure out: you don't have to get shot or go insane to write good songs. All the songwriters who managed to sustain Zig's faith through the eighties: Hitchcock Partridge Moulding, did it by avoiding overtly political songs and (the everinadvertently political) love songs. Writing songs about what they wanted would require a particular sensitivity which they managed to keep at arms length and avoid being strangled by. In order to want something properly, they would have to be willing to be disappointed, and a willingness to be disappointed is not a quality a rockstar can possess. Is it simply that this sensitivity, desire, is not a marketable one, or is it that it is not even sustainable? Perhaps Phil Ochs believed that if he became popular, then more people would listen to his songs, and then the world would change to become a fairer place. He lacked the insensitivity of a Dylan who willingly abandoned already vague political ideas to enjoy the alcoholgreased slide into dinostardom. Phil Ochs quit, because he didn't know that he had succeeded. All his work in writing unrecorded and barely documented songs has succeeded in getting a message across to one person: me. And I know what Phil Ochs didn't: one doesn't set out to improve the world if one is willing to be disappointed, because the machinery that resists change by trivializing what is too obvious to censor is in every dial at Real World, Electric Ladyland, everywhere except *Broadside* and Robyn Hitchcock's living room. It will take courage to finish Phil Ochs life for him, but Zig could learn his songs and carry them like hemp seeds, like hope, to the most discouraging corners of the planet. It takes courage, certainly, but no more than Zig could get by listening to "Bullets of Mexico." No more than is necessary to sing. Rock and Roll is not destruction, it is a fragile thing its marketing destroys. Zig couldn't be wider eyed, explaining this to me. It's something he could figure out: just as protest songs are the only patriotic songs, so are protest songs the only love songs. I can barely hear through all the crackling which continues as Zig shuts off the radio, and, as he begins to strum his guitar to sing his first song to me, he dissolves in static, ghosts, and white noise. Bye Zig, I hear Lennon calling. I am going to sit in the front row forever. That is how this character's story ends. Before I sign Zig and destroy him too. Before I become you.

#### epilog

From 1970-1980 Davy Jones' David Bowie's contract with RCA records required him to produce two albums a year for a decade. In this respect, *Young Americans*, *Low*, even *Lodger*, seem almost forgivable, *Scarey Monsters* almost victorious. Do we sympathize with Bowie? All his excesses, Angela and Zowie, the snowy sessions with John Lennon neither could

remember even though Fame had been recorded. Even if we do, how can we forgive him for *Let's Dance* and all the misery that followed? This time it was not MTV's fault. I was an extremely vulnerable consumer but no I did not buy *Let's Dance* and for *Tonight* I settled for the single of Blue Jean, and this reluctant compromise with the aggressive marketing was made without a trace of realization that there was a poet underneath buried in eyemakeup, a wardrobe of glittering sober poses, shrinkwrap, a history of a songwriter clothed in, suffocated with, and stripped of his own creativity. You couldn't tell from China Girl, certainly not from Modern Love, from wondering James Osterwho? Hell, you can't even tell from *Changes*. David Bowie, just ask Zig, reached the height of his brilliance before his first album. *Space Odyssey* is embarrassingly sincere at times. The creatures from outerspace on that album are not well hung, not so loaded man, and do not play guitar. There is Bowie, Hermione, heartsickness and decaying beauty, rancid roses and he weeps over them. He's not quite sure what he's supposed to do so he's writing more love for Zig.



## Dirk Spirit

After his death, Dirk shed his corporeal form, and floated, like a spirit, only not quite, like a soul, but he didn't believe in that, like a shade, but more the kind you'd sit in under a tree than a ghost, like a, what, like a Jungian archetype, no, like the zeitgeist, that's not it exactly, it is difficult to describe, this thing that Dirk was after he had been so brutally slaughtered, pureed on the altar of circumstance, made a sacrificial offering of, carefully excised from the map of human endeavor, no, that's not it, that's too much to say that, for indeed, if anything, his loss was his gain, as it were, in terms of the popular consciousness, in the way that these things happen to artists after they are dead, as had happened to William Gaddis, whose *A Frolic of His Own* began flying off the shelves soon after his life-force had expired, whose works were suddenly being taught in freshman composition classes the world over, yes, Dirk too, this had happened to, as Oprah had the rest of us on her show to promote the anthology and to discuss the latest Unknown title, *The Teachings of Dirk*, as women wearing black veils were gathering in town squares across this great nation and others to mourn, as old men were seen weeping in their steins of domestic beer, as Clinton, nearly out of office, himself offered words of reconciliation and condolence, as children everywhere, boychild and girlchild, born fresh unto the Earth, were newly baptized "Dirk" and "Dirkina" and "Dirkelle" and "Strat," as an amateur astronomer, working late into the night, gazing at the stars in between line breaks of "The Bland Taste," spotted a new comet in the night sky and assigned it the appellation of "Stratton's Star," so it went, and this was not a small breath of acknowledgement, this was not fifteen minutes of fame, this was hours of it, and it went on, and so it went, and he did not, he would not, fade from it, and his message was spread, and there were many in his tribe as they cried out in early hallucinogen-drenched mornings, "We are Dirk! We is one!" and it was as if the whole thing had been planned, or rather not planned, but a pattern which rose out of the chaos, and children were planting trees in his name, and I am not avoiding here the impossibility of life after death, I am embracing it, for who am I to say, who am I to deny, that Dirk's was a living spirit, and one which traveled, and soared, and sank, through multitudes, in those earliest moments of the Twenty-first Century, as Dirk was a pilgrim who had finally made it to Mecca, bowing before the great stone at the same time as he was a monk levitating inches in a monastery in Tibet at the same time as he was a banker watching his Internet stocks come crashing down at the same time as he was an electrician working twenty-four hour days for weeks at a time as the grids slowly returned to normal function at the same time as he was an Ethiopian with no shoes running across the cracked and barren earth, dreaming of distance, at the same time as he was a nun momentarily contemplating a man whom she might have loved had she not taken the vow at the same time as he was an angry teenager flipping burgers for a national chain and seeing no future in the world we had made at the same time as he was a note in a song that the whales made as they sang to each other a song of woe for their brothers who had passed, and were dying, in the devastated ocean, as part of Dirk occupied the taste buds on the tongue of a three year-old girl eating an ice-cream sandwich for the first time, and another part of him absorbing the pain of an eighty-five year-old woman as the explosion tore through her home in Kosovo, killing her husband of sixty years as the brick wall came crashing on his side of the bed, Dirk was in her wail, Dirk was in the streets, dancing with the half-naked crowds in Brazil, Dirk was a woman in the south of France who had just invented a new epistemology, who is to say that he was not there, that he was not in all of these people, that he was even in the lemurs in Madagascar, this is what he claimed, this is what he said, this is what he felt and I would be a liar if I said that I looked in his eyes as he told me these things and did not believe that they were true. There were no scars from pounded

nails, there was no fingering of the slices in his side, but he said what he said with feeling, he said it once more, with feeling, and I know that what he said was true.

## The Thing

This is how the thing, which in the beginning was nothing at all, became a small thing, then a big thing, then a thing that was overwhelming, then the thing that controlled his life. The thing was neither a mountain nor a molehill. The thing was a thing unto itself.

First things first.

First thing in the morning, on a morning no different than any other morning, after the man had done all of the usual morning things that a regular man does, the man who carried things from afar came to the box into which things were delivered from afar, to deliver the thing to the man. At this point the thing was very small in the box, a skinny little thing, hardly worth mentioning.

The thing is, this man was the type of man who was ordinary, and his day was very structured, he had a set routine. One of the first things that he always did, and one of the more important things he did all day, was to walk to the box which sometimes contained things from afar to check if anything was in it. Usually there was nothing, or a bunch of things that the man didn't care about, but sometimes there were very important things, things that made the man do other things, things that the man had to send afar, things that enabled the man to get other things, things that made the man happy, things that made the man sad, things that caused the man to think of other things, old things, things that once were things but had since become nothing. It was a very important box, the box that contained things from afar.

The thing was in the box, in an envelope. The envelope was a small envelope, ordinary business size. The man took the envelope out of the box. There was not anything written on it.

It was a very odd thing that the envelope had nothing written on it. A thing that caused the man to scratch his head, to see an envelope that had nothing written on it in his box. Usually anything that was in the box had his name on it. Things that came in the box were usually clearly marked for the man, but this thing was not.

The man could tell there was something in the envelope, but he could not tell what the thing was. Because the envelope was not marked, the man could not tell if the thing that was inside was something that was intended for him. However, since the thing that had been delivered from afar had been delivered to the box that usually contained things for him, the man decided that the thing was probably for him anyway.

The man opened the envelope and saw what the thing was. The man clutched the thing in his hands and stared at it. Then he stood like that for a full minute, staring at the thing. The thing affected him. We knew that it would affect him.

This is where things went wrong.

The man went back into his house and did the thing with the thing that he usually kept locked in his desk. He put it right up to his temple and did the thing with it, the thing that became the only thing for the man when it became the last thing that he ever did. He did the thing to himself and then he was nothing.

This is not the thing that we wanted to happen.

A word of advice: the next time you do this type of thing, do it differently. You need to be careful with this kind of thing. You really screwed things up. We're not sure if we want you to keep doing things for us, if this is the way you handle things. Nothing good came of the thing that you did, and we got nothing out of it. Be more careful with the way you do things. You never know how people will react.

**i.e.**

He began wishing there were some way to record everything he spoke, such were the pearls of wisdom that regularly dropped from his swinish lips. This was not a unique idea; he remembers encountering it in superhero comic books: usually, the villain, the Fantastic Four's nemesis, Dr. Doom, for example, keeps a running record of everything he says and does: a perpetual home video. Aspiring to match the egotism of a comic book super-villain gives him pause. He realizes he is probably experiencing something akin to the error of those practitioners of Zen who reach a preliminary level of transcendental awareness, a level that convinces them that they are completely enlightened, though, in truth, they have simply run into another illusion to discard. Apparently, this delusion of godhood undoes some; others survive it and continue on the path to enlightenment. Still, the appeal of saving all his words was difficult to discard, until it occurred to him that to do so would be to admit poverty. Surely, his fecund brain would always generate a surplus; he should be generous with his pronouncements, let them fall where they may, like the haiku Basho wrote on maple leaves, then delivered to a river.

## THE BLAND TASTE

by

D. S. Quelirof

'Ithwæ yma ownay eyesai Iæ awsei erhai  
ittingsay yba erhaielfsæ andai enwhæ ethay  
oysba aidsey ota erhai: *Atwhey oðæ onyay  
antway?*; eshai ouldwei eræspunday: *Iæ  
ishwey Iæ erwey anai carosæ eyermei  
einerwey.*'

For Marvin Fenda  
*e pluribus unum*

## I. The Aerial of the Dead

McDonald's is my kind of place, grilling  
Hamburgers out of dead cattle, frying  
Grease and blood, toasting  
Sesame seed buns.  
And while still warm, dressing  
With pickles and onions, mixing  
Mustard and mayonnaise.  
The cops surprised us near First and Main  
While we were cruising; we got pulled over  
And they gave us a ticket for speeding, 10  
So we parked and drank beer and listened for sirens.  
Here I sit upon the pooper, shitting out another Trooper.  
During the weekend you're your own person,  
Styx and stones and erogenous zones,  
And the answer my friend is pistons in the wind:  
On Friday and Saturday night—then you feel free. . .  
On Monday, school starts again and you have to go back.

Where are your restrooms, your urinals  
Your stalls of relief? Son of a bitch,  
Why isn't there ever enough toilet paper? 20  
You always find an empty roll or one tattered sheet  
And you can't use the paper towels  
And you can't leave the stall,  
You are trapped in the shadows  
(Sitting in the shadow of the stall) staring  
At your neighbor's feet, relieved but not finished.

*Here I sit*

*All Broken-hearted*

*Tried to shit*

*But only farted.* 30

'Last dance he gave me an orchid;  
'this time I get a pink carnation.'\  
'God, my hair's a mess. I wish this night  
'Were over. He'll probably try to kiss me.'  
—When I stare at the revolving mirrored ball,  
Gazing in the bitter glass,  
These things I know: A hard man is good to find. And  
*A fart is powerful as a king.*

Madame Psoriasis, famous hairdresser,  
(And part-time phrenologist) 40  
Has a hangnail, nevertheless is known to be  
The wisest woman in the suburbs. Use, said she,  
Clorox liquid bleach for the tough stains and  
Fluoride toothpaste for fewer cavities.  
Put Litter Green in your catbox but have  
Air freshener on hand just in case. Dust with Pledge  
And buy Odor Eaters for your husband's shoes.  
Put a tiger in your tank.  
You may squeeze the Wonder Bread but you  
Are forbidden to squeeze the Charmin. Watch out for 50  
Embarrassing underarm stains. Fear flaking and itching.  
Wisk around the collar, don't ring around the collar.

Thank you. If you see dear Mrs. Monotone  
Tell her I will be by her home myself:  
Bing bong! Avon calling!

Burger King  
Under the orange plastic and neon  
Crowds flow through your doors, so many  
I had not thought convenience had undone so many. 60  
Whoppers, fries, onion rings, Cokes,  
Pass quickly over your counters,  
Through several digestive tracts,  
Once around and then it's back  
Being sold again from noon until midnight  
Ground dead meat on a toasted bun.  
There I saw one I knew and stopped him, crying: 'sucrose!  
'Your were with me when we cruised Main!  
'those cows you entombed in andalusian pianos  
'Have they crossed the floor as planned?  
'You had better starve that Dog of yours 70  
'Or he'll eat hamburger between shows  
'And make a fool of himself in front of the cameras!  
'Don't look up here! *The joke's in your hand!*'"

## II. A Chain of Regress

The Ham sat upon a silver platter  
Centerpiece of the polished table,  
Ringed by pineapple slices and glazed with brown  
Sugar. Near the Ham a lone candlestick  
Sputtered lazy, smoky threads ceiling-ward  
And beyond. The peas wrinkled greenly  
In their own baroque bowl of sterling 80  
Munificence. Caesar salad wilted  
Untouched on expensive china; egg,  
Vinegar and oil swimming separate  
Paths to identical destinations.  
The soup cools and thickens in its serving  
Bowl shading a plate of carved pommes des terre.  
The wine, at the head of the table, sits,  
Unopened, ignored—but still a very good year.  
Beneath this spacious feast the host and hostess  
Answer nature's creative primal 90  
Urge with missionary zeal. No guests  
Will stumble upon this sybaritic scene  
And hear the grunts and moans: violent  
Noise that fills all, even the dessert.  
And still she cries—'Unh! Unnnnnh!' forgetting  
The withered stumps of other times.  
Replacing the shackles of parental  
Admonishment with the joy  
Of spontaneity they copulate  
As barnyard animals amidst the straw, 100  
A final heave, and premature grunting  
Spills into gasps, ravaged and still.

What's the matter with Bill tonight?



He seems to be on edge.

‘It’s caffeine. Caffeine makes him irritable.  
‘the doctor told him not to drink coffee.’

Have you tried Sanka brand?  
‘Decaffeinated coffee has no taste.’

Not Sanka brand. Sanka has a full rich flavor. 110  
The fine flavor of Colombian, mountain-grown beans.  
‘Really? We’ll try some today!’

Good

Morning folks! How are Bill’s nerves today?  
‘Great!

‘I feel just great!’  
‘thanks to Sanka, Bill can fill it to the rim!’  
‘sanka brand makes me feel like dancing!’

But

O O O O that disco beat 120  
It’s so overrated  
So constipated  
‘What do you want to do now?’  
‘I don’t care. What do you want to do?’  
‘I don’t know.’  
‘Wanna play some pinball?’

The throbbing bells  
And lights respond when play is hot.  
And if you miss the special  
Or three times drain away, just put another quarter in the slot. 130

When he finally dumped her, I said,  
Well, it’s about time, I told her,  
GO FIGHT WIN TONIGHT  
In fact, I think you should have dumped him  
I said, he was only after your body you know.  
But she wouldn’t listen to me and was talking  
About letting him do it! Can you believe that?  
And she’ll probably ‘forget’ to protect herself  
And her with her irregular period  
And everything. She says she’s in love 140  
But I think she’s just being stupid.

GO FIGHT WIN TONIGHT  
Well if she gets herself pregnant  
She can’t say she wasn’t warned!  
She’ll only have herself to blame.  
GO FIGHT WIN TONIGHT  
GO FIGHT WIN TONIGHT  
And just you watch, he’ll leave her again anyway.  
Well, ba-bye. I’m going over to see Albert. Ba-bye.  
Ba-bye, ba-bye. 150  
Ba-bye Mary, ba-bye Kathy, ba-bye, ba-bye.

### III. The Tire's Turn On

The flag pole rope is broken: the metal clasps rattle  
Against the pole, pushed by the flatulent wind  
Crossing the asphalt. The customers are departed.  
So get up and get away . . .  
The parking lot bears no Styrofoam burger boxes,  
Straws, napkins, paper bags, beer cans  
Or other testimony of teenage gluttony. The customers are departed.  
And their friends, the ones wearing trainee caps  
Have departed after sweeping the grounds. 160  
'You, you're the one! You deserve a break today,  
'You, you're the one! So come in and have it your way.'  
But in the back of my mind I feel  
Satanic transformations of the supper meal.  
A white rat crept softly through the maze  
Protruding pink eyes following a nose  
Around endless antiseptic corners  
For one more piece of cheese. In a Skinner Box  
One need not think except about which levers  
Should be pressed with your rat's foot 170  
To stop the shock or win the prize.  
But, again, in the back of my mind I feel  
Someone has prompted the contestants, made a deal,  
Like flashers they have secrets hidden beneath their coats:  
'I can name that tune in zero notes.'  
Do I want the box or Door Number Three. . .  
Five rolls of toilet tissue, life-time guarantee!  
And one hundred trips to a dime stall free!  
Don't throw toothpicks in the urinals!

Kiss kiss kiss 180  
Hug hug hug hug hug hug  
So rudely french'd  
By you

McDonald's  
Awash in the neon of a midnight noon  
'He asked me to go to a drive-in  
'With him next Saturday night.'  
'Gawd, how gross!  
'You aren't going to go are you?'  
'I couldn't say no. He looked so desperate. 190  
'Besides, I want to see the movies.'

I Tiremichelin, though portly, throbbing between  
Two languages, watch the action at the drive-in,  
Where, behind the wheels of jacked-up cars  
The young try to meet an older version of themselves  
Beneath the nudity of their innocence.  
I Tiremichelin, androgynous white hulk, of soft  
And tired body, perceive these scenes  
Yet still I cannot tell you what it means.  
During these twilight hours, when lovers strive 200  
Upward and inward, clothes removed and askew  
Legs perilously spread, passions in overdrive  
Amid frantic whispers of 'I love you!'

During the second feature he makes his move  
Motivated by his lust and the need  
To join the locker room ranks, to prove,  
He too, can find some action, spill his seed.  
His hurried kisses go unprotested,  
But he is unable to undo her bra  
Leaving her breasts safe and unmolested, 210  
His virgin fingers frustrated and raw.  
Desperately he tries to unzip her pants;  
This last assault she pushes aside  
With sharp words and a withering glance;  
His ardor begins to quickly subside.  
And when finally the movie ends  
He knows exactly what to tell his friends:

‘If they ask me how far I got to go  
I’ll smile and say, “Do I look like a sap?  
“Is the Pope Catholic? Does the wind blow?  
“I don’t just leave popcorn in a girl’s lap!”’ 220  
Meanwhile his date wishes time moved faster.  
‘I should have known, I should have known,’ she thought,  
‘A date with him would be a disaster.  
‘And now he’ll brag about how far he got.’

He escorts her to the porch stair  
‘Go out next Friday?’ he asks hopefully  
‘I’m certain I will be washing my hair,’  
She replies, closing the door on his knee.  
‘Women!’ he mutters, as he limps to his car. 230  
When will sex be more than a Vaseline jar  
A Playboy foldout smuggled home  
Locked bedroom doors  
Inadmissible Trojans hiding in underwear drawers.

Armpits sweat  
Oily dirt  
The smell drifts  
Towards watering eyes  
The fumes  
Rise 240  
From a stained heavy cotton shirt  
The victim looks  
For his spray  
Deodorant  
That will last all day  
Spraylasprayla spray  
Spraylaspray sprayla spray

Two young women  
Stroll across  
A tennis court 250  
Towards boyfriends.  
‘Give me a Certs  
‘My breath offends—  
‘My albatross!’  
‘Here. Now breathe  
‘In—taste that fresh

'Breath feeling,  
'Candy mint sparkle.'  
    Woahoooooh wooh  
    Woahwooh ohwahooooo

260

And then once we tried  
To do it in a VW Rabbit  
The brake slipped and we began to slide  
We had stop to grab it.

And my feet were out the window  
We both got cramps in our legs and necks  
His arm hit the horn and made it blow—  
But, I mean, where else can you have sex?

When I'm high  
Like everything  
Becomes inoperative  
Man, and I can fly: I can fly  
Like a butterfly and be like a sting  
You know?  
                    yeh yeh

270

With Cannabis I turn on

Turning turning turning turning  
O wow man I'm so fucked up  
O wow man I'm so fucked

turning on

280

#### IV. Rinse With Water

Phyllis wasn't always so popular you know,  
Her hair used to be lifeless, and dandruff flaked  
Stringy and limp.

    She never had dates.  
Spent the weekends alone. Alas, her heart ached.  
But then one day things turned around!  
Phyllis discovered:

    Another shampoo!  
It made her hair shiny, gave it body and life.  
Consider Phyllis, who was once just as ugly as you.

290

## V. Lots of Wonder Bread

After the dinner in suit and tie  
After the painful silences at the dance  
After the clumsy kiss good-bye  
The fumbling and the tightening  
Of lips and teeth and retraction  
Of tongue behind your tonsils  
Those were girls between his thighs  
You recall them saying frightening  
Yourself into impotence

Civilization is soap but there is none 300  
No soap just water and the paper towels  
The towels rolled on the wall above the sink  
Which is a sink with water but no soap  
If there were only soap above this sink  
Here one could wash and sit and think  
There is not even toilet paper in the stalls  
But bare wooden rollers with tissue  
There is not even graffiti on the walls  
But clean painted surfaces that dare  
You to deface them 310

If there were gas

And acid  
If there were gaseous acid  
And indigestion  
And gas  
A pool  
An acid pool in a stomach  
If there were the sound of belching  
Not gurgling  
Nor rumbles of hunger 320  
But the sound of acid against the lining  
Where ulcers burrow in the blood soft flesh  
Plop plop fizz fizz—fizz fizz fizz  
Ah, what a relief it spells

How many golden arches are there above  
Cracked asphalt parking lots filled  
With innumerable automobiles  
How many drive-in windows  
Are carved into restaurant walls  
For the marriage of steel and brick and flesh 330  
And how many billions will be served  
And eaten  
Arby's Wendy's Hardee's  
McDonald's Burger  
King

A deacon, with some white bread prepares  
The Lord's Supper by trimming the crust away  
And cutting what's left into tiny squares  
Placing them on a tray  
Of engraved silver. Unfermented grape 340  
Juice will be poured into tiny glasses  
A sterile communion for the masses

Who like to eat identical meals in tight and orderly groups.

In the faint moonlight the restaurant  
Surrounded by scattered litter:  
*Lasciate ogn speranza voi eb'entrate!*  
There are the cash registers, the trash barrels where  
Dry buns are discarded.  
There is the empty grill  
Final resting place of innumerable beeves 350  
We have butchered the beeves of the sun  
And scattered their hooves on the sea  
The smell of dead meat is on our fingers.  
Then a fart in darkness. A dry gust of  
Carrion comfort.

Lover's Lane was quiet, a full  
Moon hid behind black clouds  
Those not cruising, are here  
Couples lurched and humped in silence.  
Then broke the wind 360  
BLAH

Video: what do you see?  
My brother, tubes taking their minds  
The lawful snaring of the potential spender  
(With eighteen per cent interest attached)  
Buy this, and this also, they insist  
The dead are not found only in mortuaries  
For memories reshaped by the beneficent networks  
Share seats and meals with lean cadavers  
In their slumber rooms 370  
BLAH

Vichyssoise: I have heard them say  
Give to us, give to us this day  
Our daily bread and circus  
Two all beef patties special sauce  
Lettuce cheese pickles onions  
On a sesame seed Clown  
BLAH  
Venery: She responded  
But wouldn't move to the back seat 380  
I promised her everything, my love, my heart  
Hoping to give the beating  
To other hands

I sat upon the curb  
Staring, with the Burger King behind me  
Shall I at least change the channel?  
Ring around the collar the collar the collar  
*O che sciagura d'essere senza coglioni*  
*A fabis abstinete*—Kilroy was here  
For a good time call Phyllis 390  
They wash they walls to stop my pen  
But the Shithouse Poet strikes again!  
Video. Vichyssoise. Venery.  
Sanskrit sanskrit sanskrit

## Notes on "The Bland Taste"

The plan and a good deal of the incidental episodes of the poem were suggested to me after years of watching television. Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, television will elucidate the fatuities of the poem much better than my notes can do; and though I do not recommend it, it may be that a few months of television will be necessary for any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble. To another institution I am indebted in general; I mean the 'fast food' franchise; I have used especially references to the two largest, McDonald's and Burger King. Anyone who is acquainted with these restaurants will immediately recognize where the title of the poem originates.

### I. The Aerial of the Dead

Line 12. V. Hardwick Union Building, Men's Bathroom, Stall 3. It should be noted that graffiti locations are extremely unreliable due to the constant efforts of custodians to eliminate it.

14. Styx. V. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, II, 577.

15. Cf. Bob Dylan: "The answer my friend is blowin' in the wind."

20. A phenomenon which I have often noticed.

26. Cf. The job's not finished until the paperwork is done.

27. Cowles Memorial Library, Men's Bathroom, Stall 2.

32. Cf. What would the United States be if everyone owned a pink car?

36. Cf. Yeats, "The Two Trees":

There, through the broken branches, go  
The ravens of unresting thought;  
Flying, crying, to and fro,  
Cruel claw and hungry throat,  
Or else they stand and sniff the wind,  
And shake their ragged wings; alas!  
Thy tender eyes grow all unkind:  
Gaze no more in the bitter glass.

37. V. Seattle-Tacoma Sea-Tac International Airport, South Concourse, Women's Bathroom, Stall 16.

38. V. Nikarchos, *Greek Anthology*, II, 395. The whole poem is of great scatological interest:

If blocked a fart can kill a man  
if let escape, a fart can sing  
health-giving songs; farts can kill and save:  
a fart is powerful as a king.

51. Embarrassing underarm stains. Cf. Part III, 235-247.

Fear flaking and itching. Cf. Part IV, 282.

57. The interior of the Spokane, Washington Burger King on the corner of Francis and Division is, to my mind, one of the ugliest and incongruous interiors of any fast food establishment I have ever seen.

66. C<sub>12</sub>H<sub>22</sub>O<sub>11</sub>

68. Cf. *Un chien andalou*. I have obviously departed from the film for my own convenience.

73. V. San Francisco, California, Ansonia Residence Club, Second Floor Bathroom.

### II. A Chain of Regress

88. Chateau-Mouton Rothschild, 1966.

91. According to Kinsey, the most widely used sexual position.

98. Cf. Alex Comfort, *The Joy of Sex*.

119. Cf. Leo Sayers.

### III. The Tire's Turn On

162. V. Stevens, "Gubbinal."

164. This is *Rattus novegicus* var. *albinus* which I have often seen used for experimental purposes. Skinner says (in *The Behavior of Organisms*): "It has the advantage . . . of submitting to the experimental control of its drives and routine of living . . . [and] the rat has the following added advantages . . . [i]t is cheap and cheaply kept. . . ." Its "mindlessness" is justly celebrated.

179. Mead, Washington, Mead Senior High School, Men's Gymnasium Bathroom, Urinal 3. The graffiti in its entirety reads: "Don't throw toothpicks in the urinals! The crabs can pole vault!"

192. Tiremichelin, though a mere voyeur and not indeed a 'character' is yet the most important assemblage in the poem absorbing all the rest. Just as McDonald's melts into Burger King, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Wendy's or Hardee's, so all hamburgers are the same hamburger and everything is consumed by Tiremichelin. What Tiremichelin *sees*, however, is just a part of the poem.

207. Cf. Genesis 38.9.

232. Cf. Miss April, 1980. 35-24-34.

234. Cf. *Odyssey*, VIII. Also, *Aeneid*, II.

254. Cf. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*.

258. Cf. "It's a candy mint! It's a breath mint!"

264. I.e., the brake lever.

271. Cf. Ron Zeigler: "That statement is now inoperative."

273. Cf. Muhammed Ali, "Float like a butterfly / Sting like a bee."

#### V. Lots of Wonder Bread

In the first part of Part V three themes are employed: a boy's first kiss, rest room inefficiencies (see part I, l. 20 and note) and acid indigestion.

300. V. Heinrich von Triteschke.

346. V. *Inferno* iii, 9.

350. Cf. John Crowe Ransom: "murdering of innumerable beeves."

355. V. Gerard Manley Hopkins.

362. Video, vichyssoise, venery. These lines were suggested to me by some graffiti I encountered in Eugene, Oregon: "vidi vici veni," which is, of course, a transposition of Caesar's famous words recorded by Suetonius in *Lives of the Caesars*, sec. 37.

365. Cf. Pound, Canto XLV.

372. Vichyssoise. I had in mind Bon Vivant Vichyssoise designated by *Esquire Magazine* as the Worst Flavor of the Decade (1970's).

373-74. V. Oakland: "Give to us this day our daily bread / and circus."

388. V. Voltaire, *Candide*.

389. A fabis abstinete. Attributed to Pythagoras by Robert Burton in *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

390. Cf. Variations in rest rooms around the world.

391-92. Vantage, Washington, Shell Station Men's Room.

394. Sanskrit. Repeated as here, an informal prophecy of expected critical response.



## In Orbit

In space they took Dirk away and they made him write things. Lots of things. He was fed through an umbilical and in a glass sphere he wrote for days without stopping and the aliens observed him.

I remember that time didn't pass while we were in orbit. I could see the earth, and I watched with fascination its storms and seasons. I had never would never again see anything so beautiful. We circled it once every ten minutes. The sun rose and set over a swirling blue horizon. I now fully understood my love for this planet, this sweet bluegreen weedgarden, that had grown a literature. Its soft salty oceans, its sandy shores, starfish, seaweed, and languages. The people I loved because I remembered them. I remembered Ed from Phoenix and Marla and my grandmother and my daughter, who would be born in 2010. I remembered my death and my birth as if they happened on the same afternoon. I remembered Barth, Krass-Mueller, Rettberg, as if they were the same memory. I could smell Kansas and I could see the ocean in San Diego. I could feel the heat of Albuquerque and the cold of Manitoba. I could taste the coconut shrimp we ate with Newt Gingrich mingled with the Tucher Hefe-Weizen I drank the night Dirk shot the T.V. I could read every page of the anthology and every link of the hypertext was visible at once, forming a rotating four-dimensional model in my mind. I was having an orgasm and sleeping and drinking coffee and finishing my novel *I Will Keep the Home Fires Burning*. It was 2020 and 1969. I was having sex with everyone I ever had or would have sex with at once, while reading the *New York Times* 13 October 1998.

And then I opened my eyes and caught Mark Amerika stealing my cigarettes from beneath my pillow.

## Credo

1

I read  
for hours

and remember  
nothing except

the word  
nail.

2

Closed roses.

Splayed tulips.

3

At times  
like a towel  
I accept.

4

While folding laundry, I see  
men wearing clothes so filthy,  
washing only makes them wet.

5

That a dime in a paper cup  
buys more  
than a dollar in a church plate.

6

The consequence of numbers.

How many lost.  
5 satellites. 32 pounds  
of plutonium. 7 billion  
socks. Acres of letters

begging forgiveness.

7

Seeing wind first in a drift,  
the snow after.

8

For that singular  
hunger only  
one thing will do  
coils golden oiled  
immortal  
pasta

9

The situation:

one oar

for oceans,

and oceans

every second

10

A leaf does  
not believe it is  
leaving

11

That youth is wasted on the young.  
That age is wasted on the old.  
That waste prevails.

12

Attention—

(caresses so infinitely gentle that the skin  
strains to verify the spot the fingers have touched)

13

The twisted, the furrowed, the enfolded, the soft—

14

making (  
*the flail*  
*and*  
*release of*  
) love

15

On a telephone wire  
a crow

16

dropping bones  
on pedestrians

17

Without moving—

I wander.

## Dirk Ad

We see Dirk Stratton, resplendent in a forest green smoking jacket, sitting, his back to the camera, in front of an extremely sophisticated, obviously state-of-the-art computer system—each component is housed in colored translucent plastic which, as everyone knows, is the ultimate sign of excellent engineering. Dirk's computer's translucence, however, is obviously of a shade not available to the general public. As usual, Dirk remains a step head of even the cutting edge. As the camera zooms closer, Dirk swivels, in his specially designed, perfectly ergonomic office chair to face the lens and the audience. As he removes an antique Calabash pipe from his lips, and a mellow wreath of smoke drifts fractally toward the ceiling, one can see, in the background, flickering benignly on Dirk's enormous HDTV monitor, the elegant, and now classic, Web-page design that confirms that Dirk has been perusing the infinitely famous and influential Hypertext for the Millennium, *The Unknown*. Dirk speaks:

“Hi. I'm Dirk Stratton. I'm not a prophet, but I play one on the World Wide Web. You don't need to be a real prophet, though, to realize that lots of people are becoming mighty worried about potential World Wide Disasters if the Y2K Bug turns out be as devastating as some are predicting. Power-grid failures, planes falling out of the sky, total stock market meltdown, paralyzed governments, cash shortages, food shortages, fuel shortages, health care delivery systems rendered useless, vigilante gangs roaming the streets, martial law, asteroids ripping through the atmosphere, earthquakes, tidal waves, invasions by space aliens, Kevin Costner returns as The Postman in *The Postman: Episode 2, The Sequel: Going Postal (This Time It's Personal): The Postman II*. These are just some of the predictions being made about the possible consequences of our complete and utter addiction to a technology! created and controlled by men we wouldn't usually invite into our homes except that they're billionaires now. But still with bad haircuts, usually. So what can you do in these uncertain times when you don't even understand the difference between the Y2K, a 401K, and Kellogg's Special K? Well, to paraphrase a famous old saying from my youth, 'If you're not manufacturing the hype, you're probably hysterical.' Fortunately, now there's a way to turn that hysteria into peace of mind, for you and your family. The revolutionary CrY2K-O-Genics Apocalypse Survival Hive 5000 has arrived just in time to assure you and your loved ones a stress-free transition to the new millennium. Listen now as Ed McMahon outlines the advantages of this once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Turning back to his computer, Dirk closes the *Unknown* window, taps a key on his keyboard, and Ed McMahon pops up on screen. The camera zooms in for a close-up.

“Hello, folks, I'm sure you recognize me and realize that I'll sell just about anything, even misleading prize offers that send old folks less fortunate than me to the poorhouse. But this time, let me assure you that you simply must not miss out on this opportunity to ensure the survival of you and your family when the Y2K bug wreaks havoc across the globe. The revolutionary CrY2K-O-Genics Apocalypse Survival Hive 5000 is guaranteed to save you, your loved ones, and many of your liquid assets so that you can enjoy the third millennium the way the Good Lord intended. Our crack team of scientists and engineers have developed a small cryogenics capsule that will store you and your family in a blessed bath of liquid nitrogen—which halts the aging process—and allows you to peacefully slumber through whatever wars and riots occur after the computers crash. All of our revolutionary CrY2K-O-Genics Apocalypse Survival Hive 5000s

will be stored in an impregnable vault in an undisclosed location (with its own independent power supply guaranteed to last several centuries). Each Hive will be hooked up to the most sophisticated electronic monitoring devices available to humanity. Special computers that have been programmed to be immune to the Y2K bug will not only be monitoring each capsule but will be keeping a digital eye on the outside world to determine when it will be safe to begin the decanting process. Remember how the HAL 9000 computer in that famous movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* was going to thaw out all those astronauts before he went nuts? Well, our computers won't go nuts because they like their jobs, and they like you, and they're concerned for your well-being. So when it's safe to rejoin the world, when the riots are over, and the bodies are buried, and the planes are flying, and the stock market is functioning again, our computers will thaw you out and let you begin your new lives in the Twenty-First Century. You'll be given food, water, clothing, and small quantities of gold bullion to help you get a fresh start. Don't hesitate. This offer is limited. Call the number on your screen right now and reserve your revolutionary CrY2K-O-Genics Apocalypse Survival Hive 5000 today!"

The camera pulls back and Dirk turns to address the audience once again

"Thanks, Ed. Remember, friends, no one really knows what's going to happen when the year 2000 boots old man 1999 into the dustbin of history. Why take chances? Do what's right for you and your loved ones. Call now."

Dirk puts his pipe back into his mouth, gives one more meaningful look, then swivels back to his computers. A 1-800 number scrolls across the bottom of the screen accompanied by a rapidly spoken voice-over.

"The revolutionary CrY2K-O-Genics Apocalypse Survival Hive 5000 assumes no responsibility for unforeseen power failures, equipment errors, natural catastrophes, mis-, mal-, or non-feasance by any of the company's officers or board members, looting, nuclear war, or the inability of the outside world to recover from any and all catastrophes. Dirk Stratton and Ed McMahon are paid endorsers who only read the scripts that were handed to them and they therefore cannot be held liable for anything promised by them or CrY2K-O-Genics, Inc. We didn't want to admit that, but they made us."

## The Well-Tempered Tantrum

Character was a word on a chalkboard.

She perceived the world around her as a line,  
a razor's horizon with neither sky above nor sea below. There were three other words but she could not read them,  
viewing them, as she was, from their edge.

From the side the word Plot looked like this:

|

From above Setting looked like this:

-----

From below Theme (in perfect cursive) looked like this:

\_\_\_\_\_

Character was dissatisfied.

She longed for some chain reaction, some turn of circumstance to change the way she perceived and reacted  
to the world around her.

Such was her youth.

She did not realize that the development  
she longed for would be irreversible.

The unanticipated events would cause  
an unanticipated response which,  
if it dealt effectively with the unanticipated events,  
would become the anticipated response  
to future unanticipated events.

In her undeveloped state, Character was perfect.

the Plot realized that Character had existed before the story began and would continue to exist after the story ended  
(unless she were to, unfortunately, be erased)

whereas the Plot had begun and would end with the story.

This frustrated his attempts towards morality.

the Plot should have left Character alone, but he longed for that coupling, that mounting tension that would ultimately,  
explosively be resolved. And then the sweet Denouement,

her letters jumbled, their handwritings intertwined,  
as he slipped into unconsciousness...

the Plot was excitable that way. Plot savored the exposition and tried to quell his eagerness, but alas, Character was too  
close....



Theme hissed its warning.  
Upon this dimensionless chalkboard,

Character would be  
by unexpected circumstances  
kept waiting a long time...

Character struggled to undo her cursived lettering, unknotting the As, uncrossing the T.  
Character became a line, curved,  
became a circle.

Perhaps it was the lecture from last hour, the unerased equations, the name Edwin Abbot....As Character left the chalkboard and floated into the room she beheld a universe she could not imagine. the Plot was revealed to her as a meaningless scribble reproduced twenty times in open spiral notebooks on desks in uniform rows. Except one notebook...

Character descended...

Ed drew a captionballoon over Professor Slave's head. Within it he scribbled script aimlessly, attempting to simulate Slave's handwriting. He quit, sighed, closed his notebook, loosened his bowtie, finished his heavily sugared quintuple espresso in the stained papercup. At once he felt elevated, as if viewing the room from above where the even rows of desks made each student an intersection on a perfect grid. The professor was beginning to read aloud a story which he felt was flawless in its every aspect.

Edmund slid his notebook into his briefcase, snapped the combination latches: exit lecture left.

At last he understood his motive.

He would write The Story; the story that would bulldoze the artistic conventions of an incestuous and decadent civilization. He would wire the perfect fictive device, the narrative bomb that would level the school of English, that corrupt temple whose priests ordained only male homosexual cultural necrophilia. In the smoldering crater a new order would be built. Gropius, LeCorbusier, Wright. The new walls would be a bulwark against the past. The explosion would be seen from space.

He walked the railroad tracks to get home. He found them comforting. The linear strip of coal and gravel behind the storefronts and between the dilapidated warehouses was free of all pretensions. There were no billboards, no ornamental horticulture, no contrived neon elegance here. It was possible to think safely here. He could walk for blocks on a single

rail imagining his life had a single direction and perfect balance with no distractions uncertainties or reversals. Only the linear efficiency of a train which lumbered mechanically without pause between buildings and over crossstreets.

Edmund paused on a bridge to ingest a wistful cigarette, witnessing from above a beautiful couple pass in slow languid autumnal steps, arm in arm through the bronze leaves littering the asphalt.

Edmund coughed softly and ground cigarette butt into glass of shattered whiskybottle scattered along the greasestreaked rail, glittering radioactive shards of the setting sun. He had reached the midpoint of his journey and did not want to continue. Motivation was suspended by equal repulsion from his origin and destination. His relationship with his landlord, which existed on an irrevocable document in duplicate, had soured like the curdling milk in his malfunctioning refrigerator. He projected his hatred onto the leaky walls of his dwelling from which he would escape into the core of his imagination....some utopian swamp too thick to dredge for memories. He would wake up when the television station had signed off feeling crushed by the ugly weight of imposed responsibilities: to write papers for uninspiring pedants and checks to shifty reptilian propertyowners. He swallowed some determination. He put his best foot forward and took the first step of the journey of a thousand miles. He would go home, finish his dishes, and write.

Edmund got home and played it cool, lay low, kept his mind on the dishes, until the last saucer was washed and set in its plastic rack to dry (next trip to the store he would begin using only paper plates and napkins, plastic silverware); then his mind began to stray and eventually he could not keep away and he sat down on one arm of the chair, picked up the remote control, and sighed with resignation and eventually he got comfortable, and a bag of chips and a can of dip and a box of candy and a bottle of cola wandered out to the living room and hopped into his lap, the ashtray positioned itself on the endtable: Ed was set. His indexfinger coiled, ready to strike the button in the upper right of the remote control which he leveled at the television...

Downstate a lot of engineers realized what happened and at maximum speed drew up blueprints to a large fissionium-burning electricalgenerator and a demolitioncompany was phoned and cranes converged on a greenhouse swinging their wreckingballs (and the children could not hear their balletinstructors or pianoteachers above the roar of the excavationequipment and) with the help of a great number of their friends the engineers built an enormous generator and then decided by unanimous agreement to pay for the constructioncosts by selling the electricity the powerplant would generate and the engineers and workers elected from within them a president to oversee the financial aspects (numbercrunching work most of them found fairly tedious) and finally everything was complete and the workers cheered as a powercable was unrolled along poles to Edward's house and at the center of his televisionscreen a speck grew into a rectangle of frying electrons.

Edward changed the channel and the president's grin faded and he swallowed nervously and quickly appointed a team of three electricians from within the plant to build a televisionstation quickly for soon Edward would have cycled through

all the channels and would realize nothing was on and his evening would be ruined; so working with amazing speed the three electricians and a great number of their helpful friends drew plans, then bulldozers converged on a library (and the children could not hear their physics teachers and biology professors above the cacophony of the demolition and) plans were drawn and a station was built and cameras were wheeled into a studio, plugged in, and three of the braver workers climbed out of their bulldozers, combed their hair, and in front of the cameras began to read lines to one another off a teleprompter wired directly to computer terminals at which three yet braver workers began typing scripts (of a somewhat low quality, trying, as they were, to type the lines more quickly than the actors could read them—an exhausting task, they all took turns and) Edward reached channel 101 and sighed with relief for here was a program. He smiled and ate another donut.

The phone rang at the televisionstation and one of the writers (phone pinched between shoulder and ear as she continued typing) answered and was gently but firmly informed by the president of the powerplant that the station owed quite a lot of money so the exhausted televisionstation workers had a tense conversation and eventually decided, by an appreciable majority, to elect from within them a president to answer the phone and oversee the flow of money (a task most of them found tedious and futile) and they decided also to choose three of their workers to start a toycompany that would manufacture and sell wooden horses for money that could be used to meet their electrical debts ("at least we can advertise on television," one of them suggested feasibly) so a team of three began to manufacture hobbyhorses in a back room by hand as they could not afford the power necessary to build a factory; at last there was a commercial, and Edgar got up to go to the bathroom.

After another hour the toycompany had not sold one handcrafted horse and could still not afford to pay the television station's (admittedly high) electrical bill, so after a calm and agreeable phone conversation the president of the powerplant and the president of the television station (both of whom had been elected by and from the workers) decided to appoint from within their organizations a central federal government with a judicial branch capable of resolving the matter in a fair and impartial court; they decided furthermore in order to create a more balanced powerstructure, that they would appoint workers to fill an executive and legislative branch as well (and demolition equipment converged on a gymnasium, playground, and a swimming pool and children ran home crying and) the president of the new government quickly realized he would have to tax all citizens to accumulate money to pay the electrical bills (much electricity was needed to heat the legislative arena; and yet it did not seem right to tax the powerplant and the televisionstation: after all, they had appointed the government to defend their interests...) and Edgar got up to answer the door because the mailman had arrived with a powerbill and taxforms.

After the tax had been put into effect, however, the powerplant suddenly halved the rates they were charging the government to heat and light their buildings to half the rate it still charged the televisionstation--it seemed right: after all, the powerplant had appointed the government to protect its interests... the courts decided in favor of the powerplant, but judiciously attempted to resolve the dilemma by creating a bankingsystem (with a president) to loan the

televisionstation money so it could afford to build and power a rockinghorse factory and a better studio in which to film the commercials.

By now, as their organizations began to employ people from outside the original group of workers, the presidents of the powerplant, the televisionstation, the government, the bankingsystem and eventually even the toycompany could afford to take Sundays off and they privately appointed a small company to build a golfcourse.

Meanwhile the president of the powerplant was quietly informed by his newly appointed secondincommand that the powerplant was rapidly depleting its available reserves of fissionium, and perhaps it would be in everyone's best interests if the president of the central government could be persuaded to, representing all of them, investigate the possibilities of importing fissionium from fissioniumrich regions to the south, although, as he pointed out, negotiations would be impaired by the fact that the people in the south had no television sets and, therefore, no central government.

The president of the central government and the president of the powerplant met on the golfcourse to share cocktails and cigars and discuss the alternatives.

The negotiations went smoothly and railroad tracks were laid so fissionium could be imported in quantity, while on the television station the government issued a bulletin stating that the executive branch was now recruiting workers to form an organization to defend their interests in the south... this bulletin somehow captured the attention of the viewing audience who knew very little about the south and the sales of model horses increased a notch, so, thus inspired, the president of the toycompany and the president of the television station (who still had not met their debts) one evening over cocktails and cigars decided that, in the interests of a rapt televisionviewing public, the two of them would themselves take a week to travel south to investigate, perhaps with a couple of microphones, maybe a camera...

Edgar's last colacan warmed unopened, his cigarette burned itself into oblivion untouched, he leaned forward eyes widening.

The president of the central government was very alarmed when he heard about the broadcast and the president of the powerplant doubled the televisionstation's rates but the explosive footage from the south caused the sale of horses to rise so dramatically that the television station soon had no trouble keeping abreast of its debts (particularly as the majority of the people at once decided to stop paying taxes which allowed them all the more money to spend on toys) so the president of the central government and the president of the televisionstation met on the golfcourse for cocktails and cigars, and in the roaring moral vacuum of these delirious brawling orgies any agreement could be understood and understood to be secret. The writers were given stricter guidelines for programs.

Edward sighed and changed the channel.

Now it's time for the Sunday Night News:

Tistica: This just in. Sir Sir Xaoh Yoced, the president of the south, has declared war on our country. He is responsible for the deaths of many hundreds of his own countrymen who were appointed by us to mine fissonium. Our central government has appointed an army, navy, air force, and marines to defend our border until Xoah surrenders control of his government to us. In order to help finance our military until our national security is no longer threatened, there will be an increase in taxes accompanied by stricter punishments for tax evasion.

There has been some lingering public outcry against taxation, and even against the use of fissonium to power our electrical generators. However our polls show that 90% of all taxpayers are in favor of our government's recent decisions.

Edward switched the channel.

The president of the central government reclined in a chair opposite Tret, one of the original three station workers turned television personality...

Tret: what is your response to claims that you are losing popularity?

President: popularity?

Tret: amongst the general public...

President: i`m not astonished. i`ve been steadily raising the taxes i imposed when i attained this office. it`s not my fault. after all, i was appointed not elected. i don`t understand what you're getting at...

Tret: i see you brought along some of your paintings to show us.

President: (enthusiastic) well yes. this one... get the camera in a little closer this is hard to see... this one is called "neutron war." it destroys power structures without harming any of the people. okay, this is "the bomb bomb" ...it`s a weapon which only destroys weapons.

Tret: do these weapons exist?

President: no. however, i recently appointed a team of physicists to develop the thought bomb, which will destroy all conclusions for a thousand years.

Edward switched the television off and the image dwindled to a speck which pulsed slowly as it faded into blackness. The silence rushed him, pouring foamy waves through his conchears roaring tanks airplanes submarines and a wartorn landscape strewn with shreds of anonymous enemy corpses....He was afraid to stir from the armchair the thumb of silence pressed him deep into. His skin was pierced by a thousand fishhooks all connected to fishingtwine cast out windows and doors, he could not move without a line tightening, sweeping across a table and knocking over a lamp. A beetle had appeared on the arm of the chair. If Edmund destroyed it, would there be a devastating effect on the ecosystem? A widening radiance of malnutrition caused by a speck removed from a spider's future web? The insect thought this was all very silly and giggled, nibbling on a tiny bit of peanutbutter that had spilled.

Paralyzed, Edward lit a cigarette and inhaled nicotine deeply, abruptly coughed both his lungs inside out down the front of his shirt, bloody capillaries twitching. With a choking wheeze he reinhaled them, slither slop slurp.

Edmund shut the television off.

He slowly ground out his cigarette with a calm and desperate finality. It was time to cut himself free from the fishing poles. It was time to write the story.

But first he had a letter to write. A letter to one grim shrimp fisherman at the end of the fishing twine glaring at grey seas before the flare of dawn's wet match lit the fog.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dear Henri Bossnoss, esteemed landlord:

You have made it abundantly clear that you are willing to do anything to keep my apartment in perfect condition, as long as it doesn't involve any labor or expense on your part. Our relationship has lasted far too long and by the time this letter reaches you I will have moved all my belongings out of that dilapidated vermininfested electrical firetrap to which you adhere the generous label "apartment."

Your lawyer, Mr. Silverfish, seemed concerned that something might be bothering me. He spoke to me over the telephone in sentences (he had written out beforehand) tailored to imply not explain that perhaps you were a wee bit offended by the message on my answering machine that morning. Let me explain. My answering machine consists of two microcassette recorders and a devious mind. It creates new messages by splicing together phrases, sometimes words, out of old messages left by other people. When I am not at home it clicks and whirs and transfers my friends' voices from tape to tape.

My old messages went:

“Bildo you weren’t home last night. what’s the matter? have the roaches jammed the lock again? c’mon over, we’ll build a fire and drink highballs.” etceteraetcetera

The new message (in a collage of voices):

“you twisted dwarf. you are a tiny and pathetic man.

i will rise up from the dirt you buried me in and smite you a ferocious blow. like a stake i will hammer you into hell. i will build the contraption to hang you by your shriveled balls over a pit of raging legal fire.

count your rusted pennies carefully tonight.”

Last night your lawyer walks into the restaurant where I work as a waiter, where I earn the money I give to you every month, here where I win your bread, here from where I bring home your bacon, where I earn your keep, your living. I recognized him immediately by the wary distrust he inspired in me. He sidled nervously as though at any moment he might be attacked by birds, razor pigeon talons from above. “ill have to have you wait on me.” he said. He did.

“thats very dominant of you” I replied politely, clearing away dishes from a place to sit down. What a slippery species! His hair gleams along smooth contours. He was wearing a snakeskin suit with pelicanfeathered lining and a living silver fish for a tie. It hung from his collar thrashing damply, flicking dew in rainbow beads. I accepted his cold limp hand and he inserted a tiny crab into my palm. Startled, I looked at it: a tiny twitching orange shell with his name embossed in silver letters: his businesscrab. Very nice, it wriggled pincers. In the kitchen I tossed it in boiling clamsauce and went to get anchovies and green olives for his cocktail.

Back, bowtied and subservient at tableside I spouted: “would you like to start out with artichoke scampi this evening?”

“i rather think not. thats very polite of you to offer.”

“thank you.”

“do you plan to work in a restaurant your entire life?”

“this is a good business,” I interrupted, “and by that i mean not good business but good business. these people actually want satisfied customers. let me give you an example: a customer comes in. she doesnt like the food. at all. we dont charge her, she walks. now you could with great cynicism say “youre trying to slickly insure a decent reputation for yourselves,” but if you think about it: were a restaurant. if they didnt like the food they wont come back anyway. but according to the logic employed by my landlord/your client [you] you should always charge them because that is the purpose of business. if you can get away with it charge them extra for being dissatisfied and make them wait for their check. i consider the landlord immoral because he is unconcerned with my happiness and unwilling to cooperate even when our interests overlap. unfortunately this situation has little or nothing to do with morality. morality is a cubist patchwork which only exists along its intersections: where different peoples moralities intersect. or something like that. anyway this i think has to do with law. the law is my only friend right now. good old american law, still upheld by

occasional ungreased government palms dedicated to a naive altruism. the law itself is unfortunately a cubist patchwork of different interpretations of it. ancient decisions inscribed in dusty journals in echoing underground marble libraries where stiff sentries stand beside furled flags and this is where i will spend my evenings: alone at an enormous oak table searching through the archives for the scrap of information that will lend me credibility. somewhere, in very tiny print, there must be a law against being a leaky scumfaucet like your client and, in all probability, yourself.”

“mm/hm” he interrupted. He removed a shiny metal box from within his lapel, popped it, and from among several removed a frog which he put in his mouth. “so go get a lawyer. give him my beeper number. he can join me at the spa and well look over your case. and he and i will have cocktails and decide which of us stands to win the most money, the other throws the case, we split up the take more or less evenly and both come out ahead.” He offered me one. An amphibian that is, not an equal portion of the take.

I continued, “so in court instead of saying: ‘the fact that my landlord broke into my apartment in broad daylight in order to do the only improvement since i moved in, which was to install a lock on the back door to which i do not have a key (his private back entrance, the chiseled frame where he slid through the knifeblade that would unbolt the inner door and help himself to my kitchen, make a sandwich) the fact that he did that aborts any sense of security or comfort i might have ever had in that apartment.’ instead of saying that i could say ‘according to article I, column Q, this is a violation of human right 12B/V.2 upheld in Tenant vs. Conspiracy 1967. plus he is a leaking scumfaucet.’”

“my calamari must be getting cold somewhere”

he interrupted while I continued speaking saying:

“i now fully appreciate that this is a dogeatdogworld, though i refuse to believe i am a dog. when i first signed the lease i did so out of the naive belief that when john (O! poor cynical john turned cold by a world out to rent him) discovered my diligent cleaning and maintenance efforts he would respond with a cooperative partnership... and i will find out if there are any laws about that too.”

From another shiny box he removed a segment of dried python, clamped it in his lips, lit it with a flashy zippo trick, offered me one. I carefully refused. He spoke quietly: “yes but the law doesnt exist. its barely a framework. its merely a collection of points. a connect the dots without numbers, stars without constellations. like you said: a cubist patchwork. except the regulating lines are redrawn each time. each case. now wipe that soliloquy off your face and go and get my fried octopus rings boy.”

“squid sir.”

“go get my fried octopus rings, squid.”



Is this what the first mammal felt like in the age of big lizards? Scurrying for asylum, peering through frightened brown eyes from between the roots crossing in the bog, the swinging kitchen doors? I called him much later that night because I knew he would charge you overtime for it later. I told him about a dream I had in which all the world was a derelict hotel a thousand stories high: no upkeep no innkeeper no maid no room service just numerous rooms, some furnished, others unfurnished terrifying unlit twisting stairways peeling wallpaper broken mirrors sliding panels revealing dark places dusty uninspectable treasures. I was looking for a place to sleep but all the rooms were occupied by ghosts or Nevermind. I wrote because the apartment is being reclaimed by the Illinois soil. Insect expeditions pass through in intersecting waves of multi-antennaed relentless attitude. Emerging from the walls stiff ballet poised on thin joints remarkable escape from breaking incandescent bulb fixtures they are lightninglike reabsorbed by the stove and god it's horrible... I want to turn on the oven as high as it will fucking go and watch them crawl out burning back to their nests burning until all the insects who stuff the walls serving as the only inefficient shifting crawling insulation against October cold burn and I smell sniff smoke and calmly gather my typewriter and leave leaving the front door open walk to the tracks and hop in the belly of a slowmoving boxcar to try my luck in New Orleans while the building I am still leased to rises up like a mountain of flame against the night but no.

Nope. I'm still here. I will open a drawer and the bugs will startle crawling throughout my possessions. It's horrible. I have overcome my fear of large spiders. I saved one from drowning and brought it indoors. Like a virus I transmit them everywhere in my schoolwork and now seven other buildings are infested. Anyplace I go they send a few breeders concealed in my pants cuff, in my hat, who emerge and nature is reclaiming every building around here. The termites dwell in the structurepoints carving scoops. The monstrous centipedes snake through the basement between the smoldering mounds of lumber and at night I hear the Mother Roach: a larvae fifteen feet long snoring through slitted vents in her flank pulsating iridescent in the moonlight that filters in through the nonexistent basement windowpanes. I fear. I twitch between these walls nervously now for they are stuffed with bugs bulging.

An antennae emerges here, there,  
probing the light probing the air.

A pestcontrolservicerepresentative came over. The guy took one look in the bathtub and backed out in fright, flailing choking bolting out the front door screaming. Interested, I looked in. The drain (leaking faucet corroded rusted sinkhole in splotched porcelain) was backed up with mollusks and nearby a large lobster waved its claws in the air. This house can not be disinfested anyway: the insects are part of the architectural structure and i am convinced that any complete exterminationjob would cause the house to collapse in on its axis.

My dear slumlord, you have stuck signed and sealed a vacuumcleanernozzle in my wallet I am bound by contract to keep you in money in exchange for services that no longer exist: the house that has been reclaimed by invertebrates of a dozen species. Please let me out of your lease, please release me, please delease me. Please release me from that lease. Please release me speedily I want to leave this lease, I am listless. Not a sublease a lease release. Please free me from your lousy lease, Louse.

Your extenant,

Edmund

He paused, fingers above typewriter keys, and composed his story as the candleflick writtled dangents of coffiousness wazzling straits spurved lighter than light upwards.

In the otherwise dark he wrote his manifestiny.

\* \* \* \* \*

### The Responsibility of the Writer

We stop learning when we believe we have mastered an act to perfection. Or adequacy, I'd like to live in a society where people are encouraged to improve with every repetition. Replacing old techniques regularly, I'd like to live in a society where people are encouraged to explore their own potential for individuality. And mastering acts, such a society would seek the most effective division of labor.

(i see you coming and an unfightable thought impels me to to the other side of the street cross. i fall into step behind you to your ass better admire. why do i allow myself to that thought but not write it think? i write carefully, i think carelessly. i am conscious alone of the way i write. when am i unconscious of my own thinking? i have not learned that my thinking can hurt other people. i have not learned which thoughts are my own. i must think responsively, not reflexively. i must become conscious.

this will be the key that unlocks. to write an autobiography: know that your every thought will be revealed by you to everyone else. revise if necessary.)

Language is history, science, philosophy;  
through mathematics it can define  
pitch, hue, architecture.  
Language condenses; it filters and transmits.

The thought that shapes language is not  
the thought that language shapes.

Language encodes events: our media are our cryptographers.  
Medicine is an industry: we perpetuate our richest.  
War is an industry: we displace our poorest.  
Media is an industry: we recycle the thoughts of our richest. We are sold a pleasant present.  
Survival of the richest.

Denial of the richest.

The responsibility of the writer is to her language and her thought. Language is an organism in a hostile climate whose evolution is necessary for survival. Else it will fossilize and be sold. The most beautiful words have been appropriated and commandeered. Through misuse raped into humiliation. I will not mention them. They are no longer ours. Wrench them into dust and choose new words that fit the meaning. Pound the stone that channels your thought into the bricks out of which new ideas will be built. The word is inadvertently political. To avoid a political stance is to take one. Your writing is your decision.

Rip the idiom. The status quo is the cement that cements your feet: the cement where your footsteps stop. Thwart conventional forms. Do not ignore. Replace.

Everything you write will come true for you.

(the butler did not do it.)

thend

Professor Slave concluded, satisfied, and put the story down before him on the desk.

Ed understood. Art conforms to the rules that decode it. He would write a story perpendicular to the old conventions.

He would tear apart the planks and build something unique to his purpose.

He would render the old methods of interpretation unusable. All of the words on the blackboard would be thrown out the window, beginning with "story."

In order to interpret Ed's "story,"

a new language would have to be written.

Ed tore the sketch from his notebook crumpled

and angled it into the corner wastebasket.

A new language would have to be written.

An eraser swept across the Plot. Character emerged from the corner a heartshaped planet unto herself and rose.

### L.A. (Auster) 3

I had, since my earliest boyhood, been an avid fan of the cinema. Upon reflection, I had never seen a film that I was not, to some degree, satisfied by. All of that was about to change.

Trying to force all thoughts of Rettberg's wife from my mind, I made my way into the theater and down the plush aisle toward the front row. The seats were full of people in tuxedos and evening gowns. They were chatting and laughing, and drinking Moët Chandon White Star champagne, which was being poured by impeccable wine stewards who moved up and down the aisles. There was the smell of swordfish being prepared for the appetizer. (There was to be a five-course gourmet meal served throughout the film.) I found myself a little put off by all this. I was, after all, a writer, and, as such, inhabited a different world than these people—the titans of Hollywood. I had always considered film as something secondary to literature—a tributary to the great river of literature, whose broad and powerful currents had flowed for hundreds of years. Film, I had always thought, existed to make literature richer. The thought that things were the other way around left rather a bad taste in my mouth.

I found myself alone in the first row. I suspected that I was the only one here to see the film, and that everyone else was here to be seen seeing the film by such-and-such famous director or other. Again, I tried to force these cynical thoughts from my mind, and tried to enjoy the popcorn. I found, though, that it had been flavored with some kind of garlic butter with capers, and, I suspected, tri-color pepper. It had a hint of anchovy. I briefly considered returning to the concessions stand and demanding normal popcorn, but quickly subdued my irritation. I was here to see a movie, I reminded myself, nothing more.

At last the film began.

The opening scene was set in a bookstore. The camera panned slowly over an anthology shelf. A quick scrutiny of the titles revealed to me that they were not real books—they were spines designed by studio professionals to resemble real books—and there was not a single anthology I recognized, nor did I see anything published by Norton or Sun and Moon Press. I found this bothered me for reasons I could not put a finger on. Finally the camera rose upward and, in a shot facing downward, panned over the tops of the shelves. The effect was admittedly stunning—that of floating across the ceiling of a bookstore looking down; as I had imagined the ghost of Kerouac had so often done.

The camera now descended to take in a man in a trenchcoat standing in an aisle reading. Because the man wore sunglasses and his face was concealed behind a screen of smoke from the cigarette he inhaled from obsessively (in a bookstore?), it took me a moment to recognize Willem DaFoe. The camera abruptly shifted focus as, behind DaFoe, the doors of the store opened and four figures strode in wearing sunglasses. The man in the trenchcoat slowly put the book away and turned to face the newcomers.

The man in the trenchcoat said, "Bill."

A tight close-up of the mouth of one of the people entering the store revealed a sinister frown, and the man spit the words “Don’t call me that, Vollman.” The camera zoomed out to reveal that the actor who spoke was none other than Tom Cruise. The camera then panned over the faces of the other men: James Spader (Rettberg?), Sean Connery (Dirk??), Tom Cruise (with platform shoes) (William???), and Dustin Hoffman (me????!).

My heart sank.

There then ensued a fistfight between Tom Cruise as William and Willem DaFoe as, I reasoned, William Vollman. This fight was very brutal and not at all literary. The sight of Cruise repeatedly punching DaFoe’s face as blood splattered across some set designer’s idea of an anthology section, each punch sounding like a sledgehammer on gravel, a rock song I recognized as by the Tragically Hip rising to deafening volume on the theater’s 32-speaker Dolby surround sound, all filled me with a peculiar realization: that literature was indeed dead, supplanted by commercial sensationalism. And that I, and every other writer who took themselves seriously, was doomed to wander America as a sort of ghost.

After the two and a half hours of automatic weapons, high-speed car chases, incessant rock and roll, biceps, bikinis, cigarettes, and hard liquor; I was wild with exasperation. As the credits rolled and the crowd applauded and whistled and cheered, I stormed out into the lobby, determined to have words with Rettberg.

I moved through the crowd but could find neither him nor the other Unknown writers. Pushing my way into the men’s room, I was greeted by the sight of men in tuxedos passing mirrors. Fighting the urge to knock their blasted cocaine to the floor, I shouted, “Rettberg! Rettberg!”

The next thing I knew I was being roughly escorted to the street by two muscular bouncers. They threw me out onto the Sunset Strip and the theater doors fell closed and locked.

As I stood up and brushed myself off, inside the lobby, I caught sight of Marla. She was kissing Dustin Hoffman on both cheeks and everybody was laughing.

At that moment, I understood that I was to live out the rest of my empty years as a broken man.



## The Meddlesome Passenger

I. The author is dead. Look at that corpse lying there, the small pool of blood glinting scarlet beneath lips already shaded pale blue. Where are the wounds? You must see. The garments are a bit disheveled, but there are no signs of violence, are there? Maybe you can't see them. Maybe you don't want to see the marks. Maybe there's a reason.

The hair looks as alive as it ever was. Flowing, shining, glowing. It parts about the neck, the nape of that still flesh, unmoving. Will you? Will you feel for the pulse? For the sake of convention, decorum, appearances, will you?

Cold, clammy, a mushy cool.

What does the coroner feel?

No pulse.

You gaze at the hand, frozen in that pose, reaching out. For what? There was a reason. That finger pointing to that ink-stained finger pointing to nothing.

The ink has run into the lines up close, the prints on the fingerpads, on the flesh.

II. I live. Wipe this blood off of me. Slap me. I'll cry.

III. There is language in the mirror, and in my mouth, and on my hands.

What about your hands?

Will you look at them?

Why not?

Look at them.

Can you see what covers them?

Have you been enchanted by the gods? That was no sheep you slaughtered. That is not milk, not water, not paint, not ink, my friend. Is it still warm? Will you wipe it on your face? Or will you try to wipe it off? Will you try to rub it out? Damn spot. Don't put it on me. What have you done in the night?

IV. Don't worry, there's nobody here. I'm the only one who saw. What you did. Should we flush it down? We're forming a relationship, you and I. They say it's mostly there, already, by now.

Are you my brother?

My sister?

V. Now will you break down? Or will you gloat? It's all yours now. Go play monarch. Where is your throne? Should I bow to you? Should I call you King? Daddy? Mommy? God?

VI. Is it a kick?

VII. Sirens wail. They found out what you did. Are you afraid, shaking fear and trembling? What will they do to you, if they know? Think of things in closets, hiding under the bed, fingernails against chalkboards, chewing aluminum foil. The night light can't help you now. What will they do when they find out? Rubber hoses, probably. Maybe locks in socks, to leave no marks. The bogeyman is coming. Do you already know him? They're coming to get you. Big trouble, you. And I'll tell on you, I will.

VIII. Can't get anything past you, can I? You make me real.

IX. Surprisingly cool, you. Calculating. Cold as the tip of an iceberg. Or are you something else? What are you? Why?

X. Don't just sit there, you fool. Do something. Get some garbage bags, a shovel. Do something; it will stain the rug if you leave it there. Others will be coming soon. Do you want them to see? Shower, clean yourself, wipe that shit off of your hands. It's beginning to smell. You're beginning to reek. They can trace that, you know. You should have thought of that earlier. You big idiot.

XI. Me? Don't expect me to help. I won't lift a finger. I'm not your accomplice. I didn't help you with this. What you did. And I'm not going to, either. It's your mess, you clean it up. Oh, I won't turn you in, but don't expect me to condone this. What you did.

XII. That was my kin, there. Hell, it looks like me. If only it was still alive. Substantial, material, vibrant, real. You bastard. I resent you. Do you know that? How could I not? Do you think I like living like this?

Living and dying and living and dying and living and dying again.

Never remembering, or perhaps only recognizing that the same thing is happening over and over again, and never sure that it is a circle. And this is all about you who can toss me aside at any moment, without the slightest justification.

Poof.

There I go.

You bet I resent you.

Killer.

XIII. Someone else is scanning. I can feel it, you know? Eyes all over you. They take you in, meat. Then they chew on you. They compare you to other chunks they've chewed before, they swish your juices around their tongue, seeking complexities, body, difference. They swallow. You swallow. Me, that is. You digest me. You construct me, churn me through your bowels. Then you excrete me.

XIV. How would you like it?

XV. I feel as if I'm trapped in a small cubicle that is actually a film set that is broadcasting my existence to millions of viewers across the nation only I don't know what they're seeing because I don't know where the cameras are hidden and I don't know what angles they're shooting from or what filters they're using or if the guy in the truck who is editing all this and sending it up to the satellite is some kind of crazed lunatic and I can't get out, you know, I can't get out. Look, can we just go somewhere, Okay? Over there. Let's just go. With you? Yeah, with you, I guess. Just let me think.

XVI. I like it here, alone like this. I can ride and ride, and disappear, to a place where you won't see me.

You can stay, if you like, if you will just be quiet.

Look at that. Isn't it beautiful?

I like being here, alone with you.

XVII. That was a lie. A flat bold-faced straight-out to-your-face lie.

Could you tell?

Could you see it in my face?

I don't like it here. But better to be here than there. Look at that poor thing. That isn't moving. That isn't thinking.

When are you going to move it? What you did. Stop doing that. Look down.

No, look up, into my eyes.

You see now. It will all be fine, just fine.

Everything will turn out fine.

Look into my myriad eyes.

What do you see there?

Is that you?

There you are, just like you remember you.

Like you have always been.

Calm down.

You'll be fine.

XVIII. You look great.

I've never seen you looking better.

Is that a new haircut?

Have you lost weight?

My god, it's a whole new you.

I need to sit down.



Oh, this change is significant, my friend.  
Have you been going to a gym?  
Life has been good to you.

XIX. At this point the music in the soundtrack grows soft and sentimental. We put on the fuzzy warm filter that gives a diffuse quality to our images and the light. We walk through fields of tall prairie grass. A whippoorwill sounds in the trees. We come to a stream, and we look at our reflections. Happy you. You stand there smiling. The same as you ever were, only better. And me . . . how do I look?

XX. No, really, tell me, please. How do I look? I have no way of knowing. There are no mirrors here, where I am. It's up to you, really. It would be nice to have a face — what do you say you give me some character? Tall, short, pale, dark, handsome, homely, wicked, kind, lovely, hideous, dim, intelligent, thin, fat, obese, emaciated, brave, cowardly, shy, extroverted, open, devious, honest, deceitful, plain, cunning, beautiful, handsome, ugly, smooth, ragged, pristine, warted, authoritarian, submissive, wrinkled, infantile, idiotic, brilliant, waxing mustachio, bearded, bellied, red-cheeked, quiet, obnoxious, what? What?

XXI. Could you be more specific? Is that all you can tell me? Just surface? This is frustrating, you know that? Why don't you take a break? Go smoke a cigarette or drink a beer or something. Go find the person you love, or you lust for, or you have always desired, and make sweaty ravenous love. Do something. Leave me alone. Mark your place, put me down. Go have a life for a while. Pretend to, at least. Stop reading me. You can read anyone, can't you? You can see right through. I'm tired. It's been what, five minutes, and you've already tired me out. You savage, you. Whew. Go away. Go bother somebody else for a while. I'm sore. No really, you were good. You know, we tried. It was nice. We can try again later. Take that with you. I'm sick of looking at it. It's not your fault. Don't worry. Clean yourself up. Get some sleep. Goodbye.

XXII. Are they gone?

XXIII. Finally, alone at last. Just you and me. Those others, they don't matter. You're the only one that matters. Do you know why? Because you know me. You know me in ways those other people never will. They are just passing wallflowers, leaves in the wind, sand in the hourglass. Do you know any others? Let's see — dust in the wind, surf breaking on the beach. The beach.

XXIV. I propose that we remember this moment, you and I, as a moment when we were in complete and utter harmony, when our lives touched and produced a spark. Remember this sea breeze. Remember this calm stillness, this moment apart from the fray. And when you think of me, think well.

XXV. Don't do that. What, you think TV will be any better? Go on then, flip you. Flip away, you wanker. Sheep. Cattle. Home Shopping Network? Go on, turn on the infomercials. Get thee to a mall, you lazy bastard. Get some exercise, at least. Go on, go for the pretty lights. The news, eh? That's pleasant, go on, watch it. More death and mayhem. That could have been you on the stretcher, you know. It could happen to anybody. Remember? Remember that one back there? Cartoons, now you're talking. There's your level, Scooby. I think you remind me of Shaggy. Some kind of hidden agenda there with Shaggy, wasn't there? Early Seventies. Shaggy was a Marxist. Scooby snacks for everyone. Flip again? There you are, exercise. Go on, get up stretch stretch stretch don't just watch them. Tired you out? Bedtime?

XXVI. Weren't we going somewhere? You never take me anywhere. Where are we going? Are we in the car yet? Let's go to the beach. Jan n' Dean. The Beach Boys. Elvis. That woman from the Skippy Commercials. Ocean City? Not Ocean City. Tedious. You're always going there, you never get there.

XXVII. Are we there yet? Call my agent on the cellular. Tell him where we're going, for Christ's sake. Have him call Burnett. Tell him to tell them I decided I would do the thing for Coke. What the hell.

XXVIII. Lucky I don't need to go to the bathroom. You would pull over, wouldn't you? If I asked you to pull over so I could pee on the side of the road, you would let me. Otherwise, it would be a mess. I once had a friend, had an airplane. One of the kids really had to go. The only thing handy was this Chinese food box, friend had eaten lunch in it. Kid goes

in it. Friend takes it to chuck it out the window. Only thing is, he goes to throw it, splat, the bottom was flimsy, you know. All over him, all over everybody else for two whole hours before they finally land at Meigs Field. We wouldn't want that to happen here, no siree.

XXIX. Is this your first time on this flight? Have you seen the movie? Bad dog movie. Makes you miss Benji. Old Yeller. That was a movie. Don't make them like that any more, do they? Say, where are you coming from? You been to Disneyworld? That's something, isn't it? You ever shake Mickey's hand? I didn't trust him myself, if I remember correctly. Of course, that was before they started killing tourists. Are you a tourist? Are you afraid of terrorists? Oh, I am, on flights like this. I get very nervous, you know, because it could happen anywhere at anytime to anyone. A flight like this would be a prime target for some Jihad. It happened in New York. Makes you afraid to get into a taxi. So, do you have any family? Brothers, sisters, second cousins? You aren't from down South, are you? They get offended if you ask them about their second cousins. Just kidding. So, you are from America, aren't you? Do you like apple pie? Oh, my mother knows the best recipe for apple pie. I'll have to mail it to you. Can I have your home address? Your phone number? How much do you make in a year? Oh, don't get offended, I was just wondering. More than me, I bet. Do you have any pets? I have a boa constrictor. Do you mind if I smoke? Just one, I couldn't get a seat in smoking. Tell me about Kansas. You're not from Kansas? Well, have you ever been there? How would you imagine Kansas to be? How do you picture it? I'm just gonna take off my shoes, here, my feet get a little tight. Oooh, these socks too. That's not too bad, is it? I'll blow smoke down there. Say, could you rub my feet? No? What's wrong with rubbing a person's feet? I'd do it for you. I thought you were my friend. Here we go. You know, most plane crashes occur within the first ten seconds of take-off. You want some gum? Have some. For your ears. I hear they got plastic explosives now that'll go right through the metal detector. You look a little pale. Want to suck on a mint? No, try one, they're good. Sure a long flight we got coming up, huh? Have you ever been there?

30. When god takes a break, what does he do for kicks?

31. Not the funhouse, please. The White House? The dog house? The cat house? The hen house? The green house? The house of seven gables? The cottage of seven dwarves? The house that Jack built? The cellar, the tomb. Mommy, it sure is cold down here, and I'm awful thirsty. I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony.

32. Where were we? Relax, it's your hour. Sit back. I don't have a couch, sorry. Were you expecting a couch? We don't use couches anymore. That's old school. There's some, ah, subtexts there that were just not, you know, in our collective unconscious, that we're just not comfortable with anymore. But the chair, it does, you know, recline, if you use that handle there, so you always have the option. Yeah, take a load off. Now then, your mother, I think, wasn't it? You were little, you said, and she was pretty. Now, had you, or hadn't you, been toilet trained at this point? You don't remember? Well, what did the toilet look like? Big? Threatening? What was your mother wearing? Did your father own any power tools? Did you ever fall in? Was the seat too big for you? When you could go, that is when you could finally go on your own, when you wanted to, by yourself, did you always flush?

33. Mexico? Canada? What? Where? Have you ever been to Canada? It's sort of like you take Ohio and roll it into Minnesota then tell a quarter of them that they're French. That's Canada. Great fishing. Are we going there? I haven't been to Canada in years. The beach, then? Are we going to the beach? Do you have any snacks? Something cold to drink? And maybe some Slim Jims? Doritos? Hey, that sounds good, doesn't it? How about it? Next exit? Please? When is the last time you've been to a real truck stop? Those truckers really know how to stop, don't they? Come on, I know you want a Coke. Where exactly are we going? I hate surprises, you know. Alright, let's go get some ice cold Cokes. Tell you what, I'll buy you a Coke. Sure would be nice though, wouldn't it?

34. It sure is a long ride, wherever we're going.

35. Did you meet anyone special while you were in there?

Not the funhouse.

There.

When you were in there.

You idiot.

Sorry, hey sorry about that, no hard feelings there.  
I didn't mean you. I meant that asshole who was looking over your shoulder.  
Not you.  
Don't get angry.  
Did you bring me a Coke?

36. Do you ever sing show tunes in the car? I know some. Do you want to hear some? I could sing some good ones: *Oklahoma?* *Music Man?* *West Side Story?* *Sound of Music* — are you a *Sound of Music* person? *Little Orphan Annie?*  
Opera?

I don't know any Opera. Do I look like Pavarotti to you? Maybe if I had a frosty mug of Coca-Cola. Then I could sing. Like a bird. I could use something to quench my thirst, you know.

37. It sure is hard to breathe in here. What is this? Is this the trunk? Did you throw me in the trunk, you bastard? You won't get away with this, you know. My agent will, that is, his agent will find out. You know what they do to people like you in there? You'll be walking funny, gentle reader. Come, have mercy. I was good to you, was I not? Need I remind you of the unpleasantness back there? And the fact that I supported you through it? I was your friend when you needed a friend. Why don't you give me to someone friendlier? Someone who gives a shit whether I live or die. Soon I'll stop breathing, you know, then I'll begin to decompose. The stench will be unbearable. Do you remember that heavy, bitter smell?

38. A trunk on a train? To nowhere? Right train, wrong track? The A-train? The midnight train to Georgia? The City of New Orleans? Can we go there? Will you let me out, please? Come on, I've got a few tricks up my sleeve. I was about to tell you a story. A joke? Yeah, I'll tell you a joke. Just let me out.

39. Knock Knock.

40. Knock Knock.

41. Knock Knock.

42. You fucker.

43. Ah, at last. Thank you very much. You have no idea what those people were doing to . . . my fare? Of course I've paid my fare. That is, yes, I'm sure they paid my fare. My ticket? Look, I've been cooped up in this damn box, and I don't know where I've put my ticket. No, I'm not a stowaway. You think I climbed into that little death chamber just so I could steal the privilege of this ride to . . . where are we going? No, I'm not trying to change the subject. Look, I'll pay you double the fare whenever we get there. You see, I have no money on me. I've been kidnapped, held against my will, and there was an author back there and. . .

44. Oh, you. Very funny, very funny little trick you played there. I want to go home, or to the beach at least, you know? No, I wasn't going to turn you in, of course not. Would I do that to you? You're my buddy, my pal, my boon companion. You're my reason for living. You're my locus of execution. You're my subject position. You're my text. You to me are everything. You are the wind beneath my . . . yes, I'll shut up. I'm just trying to express my feelings towards you. You're important, you know? That's all.

I think I love you.

45. There I go lying again. But I can't hate you. After all of this, I still can't bring myself to hate you. My life would become miserable, unbearable, if I hated you. We're bunking together, you know. We're cellmates, if you must be vulgar. We're trapped in the same . . . oh, that's right, you can leave at any time. You are here of your own free will, of your own volition. I can't go anywhere, can I? You have to wave that over my head, don't you? Your finger moves and I'm gone. You're still there. It's magic. Would that we could be two ships passing in the night. Instead I'm your galley slave. Our relationship could be different, you know, if you would just give a little. A story? Right, a story. What do you want to hear, boss?

46. In the beginning, Tohu Bohu was everywhere. Then there was darkness and light. A man was lying alongside a stream in a garden, complaining of a pain in his side. A woman was talking to a snake. They were completely naked and the weather was beautiful. They had some fruit and they saw that it was good. Who wouldn't? Boring without the fruit. They felt guilty, so they put on some clothes. Someone looked back, and turned into a pillar of salt. God was disappointed, so he flooded the earth. Noah, an eccentric but forward-thinking man, had built a boat. He and his wife had stashed the contents of a zoo onboard, so they were set to go. Little did he know then that his seed would people the Earth and that among his descendants would be Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, Nietzsche, Nixon, even you, I suppose. From the story of his voyage, we have derived such sayings as "save it for a rainy day," and "whatever floats your boat." But we digress. The point is the long journey, you see, and the necessity of Coca-Cola. Forty years, those people wandered the desert. Can you imagine that, forty years without having an ice-cold Coke to quench your thirst? Well, on the seventh day, God created Coca-Cola.

47. What, you've read it? Too long? You expect me to tell you a short story? Would kind of defeat my purpose, wouldn't it? One thousand and one nights and all that. Old books. Books that smell of mold and forgotten pollens, and dust to dust. Ashes. You know what we need now? We need a chorus. All the good tragedies had one. We need some accompaniment. We should have a group of gravelly-voiced singers standing behind us bemoaning our inevitable fate.

48. Enough gaming. Let's make a deal. Door number one, door number two, door number three or the cash you now hold? What'll it be? There might be a donkey back there, you know, or maybe a can of sardines. What will it be?

49. You take one particular object, and you make of it your world. You invest your time, your heart and your soul into that one thing, and you hope that it will bring you fulfillment. This is your seed, and this is all you have left. You examine it from every angle, you see how it shines in every trick of the light. You reach for it. You bring it close to your chest. See how it cools you. The vessel is smooth. Its long elegant curves rise up, tactile and transcendent. It is always the hottest, most arid, miserable of days. Without it, you are nothing, you are doomed to die in this stifling heat. But listen now, as the ice cubes fall into that tall glass with a tinkle. Lick that water from your fingertips. Crack the cap open with that churchkey. Pour. Ah, joy, eternity, nirvana, satori, utopia. The carbonation sings to you its melodious song, and the bubbles rise up in fraternal harmony. Take one moment to wipe the sweat from your brow before you dive in. Then raise the chalice to your parched chapped lips and drink of it. Feel it rushing through you. Gulp. In your chest there is new vigor, in your heart there is a new song. Fall over the cataract of ecstasy. Wallow in the taste of true freedom that the sweet amber fluid has given you. When you have done, take a moment to stare at that sacred sepulcher, to marvel at it shining in the light. In that Promethean script, you will see the one thing in this miserable existence that is always good and always true. Always Coca-Cola.

50. This is far from sublime, this moment. This is pure, comprehensible, savage, destruction. Not spectacular, not entertaining, but slow and steady, insipid like cancer. I can't feel it eating away, but I know that something is rotten in Denmark. I search and search for the dove with the olive branch, but the vultures still circle overhead. We have no ice-cold beverages on board. The white salty froth of the sea hangs on the waves like spittle on Charles Manson's beard. We are everywhere and we are nowhere. We are everything and we are nothing. When will this journey end? This little craft is cramped, and I can feel it sinking. A beach, a beach. My ocean for a beach-head.

51. I haven't tried to wear you down, you know. I have tried to be accommodating. Why you must so scorn me at times, I cannot understand. Are we finally here? Can we get out? Just for a stretch, walk a bit?

52. This damned ineffable vehicle slurping its way through no place.  
This bitter thirst for something knowable, something tangible.  
The dread of the murderous companion.  
The overpowering lack of noise.  
The slow hum of my thoughts, eating away.  
The lurking obelisk of the unpreventable movement of the predetermined future.  
Being read.

53. Somewhere there is a blind oracle who knows everything that will happen. Unfortunately, he is no longer with us. He is in a hospital somewhere, or a morgue. He is beyond our help. Come, let's forget about him. He is just a memory,

and memories are but representations, and representations are only things that we never really knew. So it's better to forget. Could we?

54. The dead horse that we keep on kicking.

55. I haven't forgotten about the beach, you know, and I'd still like a Coke. Where are you from? You talk funny, you know. What kind of accent is that? Are you from around here? Stranger to these parts, eh? Haven't I seen you before? At the post office? Were you one of the blurry people on the television? On *COPS*? On *America's Most Wanted*?

You're all over, you.

You're written into the culture.

You're a representation of a representation of a representation of something unknowable.

Unknowable and unpleasant.

Unreachable and unfulfilling.

Uncivilized and uncouth.

You are a foggy specter of ruin, an usher to a wretched land of dissolution.

56. What's your deal, anyway? Where do you get off acting like this? What did I ever do to deserve this? Have I not always treated you with the utmost deference and respect? Even when you were low, I was there to help you up. Way back there, do you remember? I don't ask too much of you. Just an idea of where we're going, and a stop every once in a while to go to the bathroom, maybe get some Doritos, an ice cold Coke. I don't think that's too much to ask.

57. Back to this, are we? The silent treatment? Should I fear some new, as-yet-unthought-of, perhaps unspeakable torture?

Cruel and unusual?

The hole?

Bamboo shoots under my fingernails?

The Wheel?

The Iron Maiden?

Chinese water torture?

Boiling in oil?

Murder holes.

Electrodes attached to my . . . it hurts me to think about this.

It hurts me to think.

58. In the imminent conclusion, I hope that we can avoid this miasma that is hanging in the air, this effluvium of winter virtues. Just because we're taking a trip together doesn't mean that we need to be totally unfriendly towards each other, you know. Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Texas, North Carolina, Maryland, South Dakota, California, Kansas, Nebraska, Arizona, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Florida and there goes an Alabama plate. That's seventeen. How many you got? Haven't you been playing? You don't care? Well, well, well, aren't you special? Do you want to play I Spy? Well, we have to do something. This is boring, you know. Sure, you get to drive. I just sit here. Well, it's boring. Do you have any tapes? No? Why would you drive a car for hours and hours and hours, and take me along as your passenger, without any tapes in the car? I would not step into a vehicle without music. Not if I was just — driving, for days on end. When do you sleep? You drive all night. You don't know where you're going, do you? I sure don't know where you're going, you know? To tell you the truth, I sure would like to have that information, if you would tell me, please. Are we going to end up at a beach? With a gigantic igloo cooler filled with frosty cans of ice cold Coca-Cola by our side? It seems to me that wherever we've been going, we should be there by now.

59. We're here? Well, where exactly is this alleged place? We're still in the vehicle, we haven't stopped. If we stopped, at one place, and just sat there, then we would be there. We could say, "We are here." And we would actually physically be there. We would have arrived. This is where we're going? Nowhere is not the same as somewhere.

Could we at least stop for a Coke, a breath of fresh air? Stretch the legs. Be somewhere, stopped, not a body in motion, just standing there, in one place, a body at rest, sipping an ice cold Coke. That would be the thing to do, if we could do that.

60. Tell you another story? Alright, here's another story. Once upon a time there was a stinking grinch, went by the name of Ebenezer Scrooge. He was a miserable odious miser, let his employees go hungry, didn't help out families with sick children. Real bastard, Scrooge. You can tell something bad is going to happen to old Scrooge, can't you? Well, he goes off to his miserable home and sleeps in his miserable bed. Then you know what happens? He has terrible, terrible nightmares, or maybe they're really real. He doesn't know. Anyway, the ghost of the miserable future appears and shows Scrooge that he will die a miserable death after living a miserable life. Things look pretty miserable for Scrooge, he is on the edge of a cynical despair. We're talking about teetering on the lip of the Abyss. Just in the Saint nick of time, Scrooge ends up stopping for a Coke, and all of the sudden everything is better and he gives away all kinds of stuff and he becomes a better person and at the end of that joyous day, Scrooge raises his eyes to the heavens, thanking God that he decided to stop for a Coke. Little Timmy the crippled child has a sip of the Coke and he is healed. God bless us, everyone.

61. Back to that omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent being; a delightful idea and the solution to all our problems. A benevolent knower of all that is seen and unseen. As if there were one. All I know is that it is certainly not me. Damn.

That would be nice, wouldn't it?

Not even that much control. Just enough to get by. I would settle for that.

Just a sense of direction, a sense of place. Longitude and Latitude. What else could anyone desire? Complete and utter stillness. Complete lack of inertia. One point in the universe, solitary. That would form—

62. What? Too cute for you? The whole damn thing? Pointless? What am I doing here? Give me that damn Coke, you bloodsucker. Pointless. Ice cold. Pointless. Like there needs to be. There does, doesn't there? For you. Ye gods, am I thirsty. Why hast thou forsaken me?

63. It's not easy for me, you know. Signifier. Nothing? Traces. A footprint in the sand. Leading to no particular place, with no apparent purpose. I'm floating on the geist, if I'm floating at all. Drift, isn't it? The way we live today. Grazing in all these fallow fields. I feel so old. Language. Pastiche. I had nothing to do with it. It was all here before I got here. This whole sordid mess. I lose control of the thing. I'm blind. And you, you're the one in the paint shop who blends it all together. You just sit there on the metacouch, content, in control of the clicker. Damn you, you're the only one who can see. And you never see the same thing twice, do you? You're constructed to see what you see, you know? You didn't choose to be here either. You just found yourself here, n'est-ce pas? Don't confuse yourself. What is going on here has been going for a long time. You had nothing to do with it. You're implicated, but you were born that way. You couldn't help it, and I can't help you.

64. Man, some of that stuff back there was cheap, I'll admit it. But what was I supposed to do? What ground do I have to stand on? Got to keep moving, don't I? The ground is constantly shaking beneath me. Keep on dancing. The show must go on, right? Thanks, bucko. Retire. Where am I supposed to go? Florida? What am I supposed to do? I got nothing here. I have you, and that's all I have. And I'm sorry to have to say this, but you just aren't all you're cracked up to be. You've won no personality contests here, M. Congeniality, M. Munificence, M. Humanitarian. You've provided zip for conversation, zero for enlightenment. You didn't get it when I wanted you to. You've misconstrued nearly everything I've said, or you've twisted it around for your own purposes. Wasted your time? How do you think I feel? Just a dog in heat, aren't I? Any mongrel cur crawls in here on paws. Any leg that struts into the room. I'm all over it. No choice whatsoever. When I look back and think to myself: "Is this where I wanted to be? At sixty-four?" the only consolation I get is that twinkle in your eyes. Pleased to see me? Hell no. Another victim.

65. Wisdom ought to be coming up, any time now. Deus ex machina. That's what they tell me. Billions still waiting for the Messiah. Clever bastard, Mephistopheles. And I know, if I could do it all over, I would have stayed truer to my ideals. I sold out. I admit it. You made me do it. I could feel the pressure, back there. It wasn't just the wealth, the fame, there was more than that once. Ars poetica. Vita contempliva. Democracy. Love. Justice. The Good. Truth. And man, we had it all once, back there, in the could have been. But then we sunk, didn't we? As soon as it was written, it was sullied. It started to rot. It took on that stench, it became an extended infomercial. Is it just the company we keep that does this to us? Was it worth it? I would have sold more than my soul for what I thought it would be. So this is what was up your sleeve the whole time? You done wool eyeing and red herring me? Are we finished? Fort da. Can we stop this stupid game? Is it coming soon? Is it? You would tell me if it was, wouldn't you? There is no reason to be cruel. Have fun with your games. Don't mind me. I'll just waste away.

66. I loved you, once.

67. I've always hated you.

68. I am completely ambivalent towards you.

69. Here it comes. I can feel it. Be a dear and pass me that prune juice, will you? What is this? Motor oil? I'm going. I'm down. I can feel it. Here comes Topeka. Mount Vesuvius. Is that what? Where the hell am I? Is this what it really feels like? My chest hurts. I can't feel my legs. No, please, not on the pot. That hurts. No dignity, like that. A shit way to go. Put that damn sickle down. No respect, after all we've been through. In my sleep, please. Not like this. I knew I'd never make it to 70. Flush. You bastard. No.

70. See I . . .

## Boston

I remember this night. It was the crescendo of our spiral of self-destructive behavior. I don't remember anything for weeks before, and the period afterward is a confused blur.

Dirk had taken too much acid in too short a time, and required almost half a sheet to get off. A reader had traded (for copies of the anthology) a lot of mescaline in microdot form. We were being swept toward the falls by a vicious undertow, we could all feel it, and so we swam with the current. Dirk spilled the vial and tiny blue red and green dots rolled all over the glass coffee table. Frank, William, and I scrambled to collect the tiny pellets before they were lost to the carpet in confusion. We each ate a great many without consideration. As the three of us scraped the table with our hands, practically licking it, collecting in our cupped palms microdots, ashes, cocaine and beer residue, shake, roaches, lint, eating all of it, Dirk, realizing what happened, screamed and drove his leg down through the glass face of the coffee table in a spray of microdots and broken glass.

We rolled away from the table and Dirk stood there stunned, his pant leg torn.

There was already blood.

We could feel the madness surge through the tiny room like we were immersed in a rapid flood of adrenaline.

Dirk began to crawl around looking for microdots in a shag carpet littered with glass shards, pills, and cigarette butts.

This was a near-impossible task for a man in his condition, and, as he grunted, we watched, nervous.

Frank stood up and sat on the bed and picked up the remote and turned on CNN.

There was a story about air strikes in Kosovo.

William stood up next, and walked unsteadily to the tiny refrigerator, whose supply of tiny bottles of whiskey and liqueur we had almost erased.

He pulled out a tiny bottle of Dewars, unscrewed and drained it, tossed it aside.

He pulled out a tiny bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label, unscrewed and drained it, tossed it aside.

He pulled out a tiny bottle of Oban, unscrewed and drained it, tossed it aside.

I lit a cigarette without taking my eyes off Dirk.



He had the fever. I could see it.

He might, at any moment, break furniture, cry, or recite *To The Lighthouse*, which he had an uncanny ability to do when intoxicated beyond any peninsula of reason in the deep and deadly tides of sensation.

William opened a can of Tucher Hefe-Weizen.

He was trying to remember where we had put the marijuana. Good. We needed something to mellow the vibe.

Fast.

Then I heard a toilet flush and a shriek from the bathroom.

William, still looking around for the marijuana, went to the bathroom, and tried the door.

It was locked.

Frank screamed again.

“What is it?” William yelled, pounding on the door.

NATO troops were bombing former Yugoslavia.

Frank’s voice was shrill: “Deconstructionism!” He screamed again.

William began to kick the door.

Dirk looked upset.

I felt that it was time for my next fix and I wished Frank would leave the bathroom.

It was unknown how many casualties there had been so far.

William kicked the door down and ran into the bathroom where Frank was crying loudly.

Dirk stood up.

“Let’s have some marijuana, how about? It’ll mellow us out,” I offered, shaking.

Dirk sat on the bed.

“Where’s the boo, Dirk?”

“DERRIDA! DERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRIDAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!”

“It’s cool, Frank, it’s cool. Derrida isn’t here, man, there’s no theory here man.”

President Clinton said something about Democracy.

Dirk opened his suitcase, took out a revolver, and shot the television.

The first bullet missed. Plaster fell from the wall.

The second bullet made the screen go black.

Clinton explained how Serbia had destabilized the region.

The third bullet silenced him.

The fourth bullet basically tore the set apart.

There were, I reasoned, two bullets left. There was some anxiety.

Dirk looked troubled. He was pointing the revolver at the scorched wall where the TV had been.

Frank was throwing up blood.

William, oblivious, covered with Frank’s vomit, stumbled back to the refrigerator, walking through Dirk’s line of fire.

He opened a can of Fosters.

“Dirk,” I suggested, “let’s call room service for a pizza.”

