

Linda Harvey
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Underbelly

I know it's a sin,

but I can't stop.

I'm addicted.

—Jonathan Canady

Golden sun beam part the slitting lids to breach these twin retinae and rouse the still unconscious portion of my soul, with that pure light warmth which is to me everything sublime.

What spans two poles of eternity—originary in the sense of the uterine, or repetitious in the sense of those brief invocations of paradise men are sometimes afforded. Rub the crusted eye, adjust and rise again from the shallow cave of dream. If only I could go under once more and catch a better glimpse of it. Make sense of it. Commit it to memory. Something about my mother. Mother Sun. Awoken from and by, in and through, in and with. If only I could dream forever. Oh well. Consider daybreak's duty done.

I woke so early this morning, having made the five-or-so-hours drive back from Johns Hopkins. Baltimore. Greatest city in the world, I'm told. The sheer white blinds do little to hold the sunbeams at bay, and so graciously allow the room to take on that holy glow like a gloss God spreads on sight's surface. *Scheinen, erscheinen*. I know being only once it has appeared to me—once it is all and done with. In this case, what *is* appears to me as an olive-drab wool sofa, with scratchy little fibers catching lightspecks off their blurry edges. They are radiant halos to my eyes as if the ring rims so finely sharpened could pierce my flesh, but count my body safe from all light under Sarah's knitted blanket all mended yarn soft yellows and greens, with my asshole tucked away, sequestered only to know a dull and comfortable darkness. I'll be no woman, no Schreber today, and thank Christ above God has nothing to do with me by consequence.

It really does seem like I've had nothing to do with God lately. Nothing to do about God. My savior, my judge, my teacher, my deliverer. Never to deliver me anywhere at all, be it over or under. I've been terrible, I suppose. Throwing away the ring and cursing it so. Maybe not lately even at that, maybe for a long while, associating with ne'er-do-wells, floozies, and tramps;

neglecting the responsibilities of my university post, not once paying the rent on time, and very rarely making it a habit of calling her. Sarah who has so much, far too much faith in me for reasons enigmatic, a tease for knowing, that oh-so-demure an unveiling. That I could even tell her each and every detail of an affair, and she forgive with passion all the while I sorely truly did not care at all. I have no cares in the world, no attachments whatsoever. It is all only a pool of possibility, for which any determination of my own would be but a drop. But the lady gives it an honest dive, makes a splash and leaves me to wade all through that womanly wake. Women are just so earnest. They drive me almost to jealousy, how one could so easily take the world at its face and establish any investment or return. Care is something to be left into, and she surely took that leap in stride. Even now, she must be sitting at her parents' in that worn wicker chair she keeps on the porch thinking thoughts of sweetness on subjects of marriage and commitment. There with her pretty pale head tilted and resting on her palm with fingers wrapped around those long black strands which have escaped the messy mass of her bobby-pin bun.

I wonder what she thinks about in those moments of reflection. I wonder if she doubts at all, concluding surely she must. But it must be such an earnest doubt, which by nature leads to glintful hope. She must have some fear eating at her, at the back of her head whispering whether-or-not on the topic of our plans to move in together, or perhaps more so the engagement. She surely must be in anxiety, knowing these sorts of arrangements would prove make-or-break; if make she has a happy marriage on the horizon, while if it breaks she has a pit to fall through, so bottomless and bleak that black truth felt at dusk alone. I wonder if when she tells herself that it will all be okay bar none, whether or not that constitutes a lie. But if she believes such a thing in the purity of her heart, it must be no lie at all. Through purity the most atonal melody is transposed into the key of faith. Moreover, it is a lie she tells to and with me. She lies with me.

Never have I caught myself reassuring her in such a manner, that I would promise only rosy cheeks and pleasant evenings. At any fear expressed I simply take a vow of silence, and with my tender gaze redirect her mind to make the promise herself for me. Not that I'm akin to any John the Seducer, for I have no end in mind for such means dispensed with little rhyme or reason. That would require some investment, after all. A strategy. Yet often I lie to myself, a lie with no suspension or reality. I lie to myself and tell her that I love her, or that I could even manage to find within myself a reason to care about the whole thing. My untruths are spun not *with* her, but *at* her. There is no investment that brings her from her being-for-another, to her returning-back-to-me. I will hear her knocking, but I shall not let her in. Thus, I tell lies only to myself! I would present this as my predominant theory on the concept of lies and belief. When we lie to ourselves, it is only a delusion. When we tell lies together, that is what we call belief. That is faith.

Far too long I have lied to myself then. All that's left is to sign my contract with pure doubt itself, a signature I've so slothfully penned for years and years on end. At the final stroke my soul will collapse into the bottomless pit, and my life will be but a dream in which I am always in the right.

The television is still on, playing some Chuck Jones piece on tape which I've had since boyhood. *Lepus townsendii* makes a flirtatious escape from the ignoble *Homo sapien*, stopping now and then for sideline rapport with the clumsy *Anas rubripes*. Oh so lovely a romp through every corner of the Chordata in tune with Merrie Melodies, and what a merry time it was, that time I've had in Maryland to now. Down and up. Up and down. Pray Herr Nietzsche never frowns. Though he did, no doubt. Never met a happy Hellenist, and speaking of the Bacchic, or rather wondering, I can't help but reach to my breast pocket on prompt of the pleasurable

mnemotechnic so to recall the eight-ball bestowed upon me on behalf of my friend and colleague Swooney Loving-Strauss. I feel its mass above the fabric to remind myself it's really real. The boom and crash of Mr. Fudd's double-barrel rings through the room as I make the rotation to my body's side, the pastel threads drooping off of me and onto the hardwood floor, in search of my choice hobby's implements, tools of techne. *Zzzzing!* My tired hand fumbles around the surface of a crusted cabriole-leg coffee table, with those charming whorl feet of black walnut that seldom charm lately on account of the accumulation of druggrime. *Phhheeeuum!* Thank the lord my hand is unpricked by any needle, out uncapped and used, that escaped my weary morning gaze. Only did I graze the tape-player's remote control—that long, black phallus of plastics and rubbers which so spits signals across the living room, the undetectable ray gun of home entertainment. Still I grab a syringe and pair it with one of few rusty spoon, reaching 'round my person to discover the lighter's placement. Felt o'er the deep navy denim pocket and under slip my hand. *Boooiing!* Grasp with grubby fingers. Got it. Check the time. Five-forty-five in the eye, *ehem* stutter *ermm* cough cough cough. Nearly drop the Bic. Sliding to be seated erect or slumped over resting the curvature of my spine on the prop of elbow-to-knee. *Whhoosh!* Syringe tucked between my left ring and pinkie, a pressure against the ring which feels alien now sans the band which once protected it from any other touch, bronzing-silverware trembling clenched by index and thumb. *Hissssizzleizzle...* Right hand grasping with two lowly fingers the lighter against my palm while diving into my breast for the plastic dopesack, retrieving it gently and holding it before me pinched, and then gently rubbing the knot undone with the rightmost remaining fingers three—a moment's mental picture of the knots in Sarah's back and shoulders, which for years I would rub away so methodically at the beck and call of those nonlexical signal of groanings, layings down, and grumblings, which played pretty hymns

of call-and-response from those pained tones to touch, from pleased moans to *touch-again-and-thank-yous-very-much-so-sorry-I-ask-so-very-much-so-often-dear's*—pinching bits of powder to the opening held now to float above the sickly silver which receives the every speck and clump like an hourglass filling, though not without some droppings making way to the legged woodtop below and base of board still lower. Barely twisting the top and releasing grip, the now just-shy-of-an-eight-ball drops down down down towards the table. *Peeeeeeiiiiuuuuuuoooooh...* To be received at the meeting point between two almost perfect perimeter coffee cup stains, on impact spurting white across the all of everything and shaking the very earth, causing cabrioles to tremble, almost buckling at the knees, cupboards filled with china made to clatter and shatter, a sink full of dishes to crumble to dust, every floorboard to shimmy all about and shake with fear or maybe glee like pure ecstasy, every veering vehicle in motion on the tight streets below to crash into one another and into their parked immobile counterparts, national spirits of manufacturing colliding, American to Japanese, Japanese to German, German to Italian, a full reenactment of the whole of worldly woes those times circa 1939-1945, every siren to shriek and cry, fires to break out, somewhere even a volcano erupts, fiery magma discharge in geometric unison with the dope propelled, whooshing upwards and curving down so suddenly like shells to trenches. *A flick flick flick* and fire is started beneath and held to start the sintering paired with metal hues shifting from reflective grays to red, orange, white, all in that order. Melting down down down melting changing shifting changeling substance (while motion is made to relinquish Bic and pluck the needed implement from the wobbling leftmost grip to right, making sure to keep the brown pool's basin absolutely parallel with the floor below and the ceiling fan above). To be seeped up at the surface by that atom-thin proboscis, up on into that measured chamber of plastic thorax, in perfect harmony with the

abdominal plunger's gentle suction. Now drop the blackened silver to the table as well, and *flick flick flick* to be sure there's no pockets of oxygen and release some excess, discharged in mind to swerve a case of embolism and watch the dew drop spring. And I, *oh um hum*, no tourniquet at the ready. Scan around to find one strand of pink beneath the bed of olive, unpropping elbow from knee to allow myself a bend and grab down there. *Bonk!* I slam my forehead full force against the table's corner edge just as my left hand pinches pink, letting go the grip of my right. Microscopic sounds, *ticktapticktip*. See a starry halo swirl around and static flurry dots of white, I know it must be duller now, the needle. But I make haste to recover it beneath the couch, coming to and wrapping 'round that rubber band tight so tight across the lower end of my left bicep, biting one end between pre-and-post-molar, and pulling with my jaw's force. And aim that piercing thing towards my crook my median cubital—to pierce me, to pierce the mind of God—to make the motion but only to prick at first in my dreary hesitance, but then to aim again and plunge...plunge...plunge...Porky's stutt-utt-uttering. *Th-thh-th-thha-th-the-uhwell-that's all folks!*

Warmth, slow warmth. Love. This feeling. Sense. All's sense that makes sense. No choice. No future. But now. That warmth. Wombwarmth. Lovely. Tape, still playing. Another. There's a knocking far off. *Canis latrans*. Pink band released. Back to floorboard. *Thud thud thud*. Less pressure. Peace. Inner peace. No restlessness. Restlessnesslessness. *Geococcyx californianus*. Running. My arm, now limp and bloodless. My arm now falling with the rest of me. *Meep meep!* Falling flesh. Contact with the raygun. Sounds cut short to buzzing. Vision frozen in place. Head on couch cushion. *Thud thud thud*. Humm. No care, no bother. Can't tell where. So warm the light, so warm my soul. This going under. So still the warmth. *Amor matris*. Either way you'd like it. But the nausea. Creeping stomach bug. *Thud thud thud*. What is it?

Head propped on pillow. Stare forward, still dizzy. How long has it been? The television. Roadrunner caught paused on a smear frame. That's all of life, isn't it? Smearing. The in between. What is born and dies away all at once. What appears has appeared. Is appearing. Itself but other. Other than itself. But itself. Other. I feel it. Retching coming on. Feeling sneaking from my belly. Clenching eyes. *Thud thud thueeeuuuaagghrghgh!!!* Spilling off the couch. Pooling on my face and neck. So so warm. So sweet mother sweet mother wombwarmth embrace. Embrace me. Bring me back under. Under and into. Her.



Deep brown oakwood knocking split and rouse the twin drums which stir my mind a' marching from den of dream to peak of waking day. Sour smell and thickly caked face await me. I come quickly to disgust, nearly retching again. Leaping from where I lay past the foyer and through the leftmost egress to the kitchen—subsequently headfirst into the kitchen sink, to the tune of dishes' clatter. The ceramic crashing causes my ears to sting deep within, and wincing all the while my tremor-struck hands pull one faucet towards me. Soothing waterglass against my skin, ne'er a same drop twice, and surely the stream each moment must be one entirely different as cool turns from lukewarm to warm to...My brow retreats but my skullcap strikes the spout, before I stumble back splashing thin pools all around my feet. Repose, return, and turn the faucet's opposite. Return again. Clean up the winedark crust. What about the knock, has it stopped?

Gripping the soiled neck of my shirt and pulling it over my head, I make way to the foyer towards the door, noticing the golden glow which graced the room before had ceased. Nearer to the door I wonder what time it must be. Brushing aside my brown leather satchel with a

still-adorned foot and making the doorway open, I poke my head out to look down the dusty corridors of the dimly lit staircase, which separates my apartment from the man who lives below. Same as always with those black streaking scuffs every step or so, made time and time again by either my black oxfords or his steel-toed boots. Recoiling from the space, I catch sight of it in my peripheral. Sheets of stapled paper stuck to the door with a square of scotch tape at the top, which creased in the middle and bent leftward, away from the page. I peel the pamphlet off, step back in, and close the door shut snug, shut tight.

Civil Court of The City of New York. County of...Queens County. Index Number seven five three three seven slash twenty-twenty-three. Petitioner *Shylum Kinetikos* against the respondent *Arthur M. Abrams*. Notice of Eviction. The Landlord has legal possession of these premises. Pursuant to Warrant of Civil court as of the second day of June, twenty-twenty-three. For information, etcetera. Addressed to twenty-thirtyfour, thirty third street, Astoria. I stop reading there and crumple the whole thing up. Toss it in the corner by the door, along with the inch-thick clumps of dust bunnies that hop about when the overhead fan turns on. I knew the day would come without fail, when my eternal vow of doubt would force me to my last descent.

These would be the days I once and for all chose absolute unfreedom. To forego the call of Christ, and share a firm handshake with the hissing garden snake on my shoulder. I imagine for a moment a chimera of snake and man, with hands sewn on crudely. What a laugh.

Furnishing my shoulder with the bag below, I'll make way to the bedroom, the entrance to which has hinges only and no door. Removed it myself to match the kitchen's doorway. Always changing things, making sure I never get bored of the place. Flick on the lightswitch to compensate for the windowless dim, and toss the contents of my satchel all over the bedspread, with ungraded papers splaying about—interpretations from middling to proficient on the moral

and political theories of Locke, Hume, Leibniz, and Kant flying hither and thither, a few pages twirling in the air which I identify quickly by their smearing terms of social contract theory as a defense of Thomas Hobbes.

Pulling out the drawers from the bedside table I begin to take inventory of the last worldly possessions I'll bring along with me on my descent. I fill the bag with a stainless-steel Zippo lighter engraved with the likeness of the Madonna and Child, a pocket-sized bible gifted to me by my late paternal grandfather (a family heirloom...generations passed and received...you know the kind), a boxcutter I've kept since moving in what must have been over a year ago now, a small plastic bottle of lighter fluid, a palm-sized pocket-sized mirror with a hairline fracture all jagged down the center, a spare rag I would use to masturbate into, washed recently I hope, a small tub of half-emptied vaseline, and finally my maternal grandfather's fourteen karat gold pocket watch, which was used by him to check the time during the quiet hours of his service in the western front, and which I had stolen from my bitch mother before leaving for school in the Berkshires, checking it presently to affirm the present as half past nine, without a doubt, knowing I keep it wound with scrutiny.

—The bookssssss, Arthur, says Man-Snake, who's clinging tight to my left shoulder.

—*Jawohl*, says I.

I begin to empty the bookshelf onto the bed, atop the scattered papers. The bed becomes heavy and full with copies of *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, The Modern Library Classics edition of *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, a short compilation of pre-socratic thinkers, the Cartesian Meditations, a short biography on Saint Ignatius of Loyola, along with his fellow Jesuit Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, of which I had only a very old printing from the sixties, and shamefully I must admit there is no Husserl in my collection to pair with him,

The World as Will and Idea, as translated by Jill Berman, along with a small collection of Schopenhauer's essays, the first ten out of twenty-four volumes of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, which I will forever lament not collecting in its entirety, a Hackett Publishing edition of *The Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, the A.V. Miller translation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, along with the fresh Pinkard translation published with Cambridge, *The Science of Logic* both big and small, Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and *Minima Moralia*, Wilhelm Reich's *The Function of the Orgasm*, Anna Freud's *The Ego and The Mechanisms of Defence*, *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche* as translated by Walter Kaufman,

—Take thissss with you, Arthur, said Man-Snake, pointing towards a Penguin edition of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

—Rather not, says I, bewildered.

a Cambridge press edition of *The Critique of Pure Judgment*, Howard & Edna Hong translations of *Either/Or*, Volumes I and II, both hardback with that split between ocean-blue and stark white down the middle which I adore, Princeton Paperback editions of *The Concept of Irony With Continual Reference to Socrates* paired with Kierkegaard's notes on Schelling's lectures in Berlin, *Fear & Trembling* paired with *Repetition*, *Philosophical Fragments* paired with *Johannes Climacus*, *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, *Stages on Life's Way*, Kierkegaard's *Early Polemical Writings*, *The Sickness Unto Death*, *Practice in Christianity*, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (which was unusually translated by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson, not the Hong's), all of which were designed with varying colors divided down the middle and paired with black, which I despised, Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, an absolutely beat-up edition of Spinoza's *Ethics*, which I had actually

never touched and was lent to me by colleague David Gull, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, a few books by Foucault, who I didn't care for very much, and lastly Jean Baudrillard's *Forget Foucault*, all of the above having been sorted with no consideration of historical chronology, alphabetical ordering, countries of origin, or general schools of thought in mind whatsoever, not to mention all the secondary and tertiary literature omitted in between for lack of time or care.

With all that, I pour out my lighter fluid over the whole lot and drop the bottle atop the pile, to the tune of squirting splashing and a creaking bed frame, soon to give in to the overbearing weight of spring mattress, Et al. Time for a fresh start. Retrieve the Bic from the living room, light an old tee-shirt, toss it on as well. What a relief. I'll make my way out the door, down the stairs.

—You see? Mr. Kinetikos stops me to ask.wwwwwwww

—Yes, of course sir. I'll be out quickly. All apologies.

—What's smell? He speaks in only monosyllables, for lack of intact English.

—Just the cooking, sir. My last supper. Breakfast, rather.

You have to ask yourself what's to be done sometimes, or what I ought to do. Or why do anything at all, maybe. Things seem to be changing all around you without ever stopping to ask how you'd like them to be. Life is such a steady stream of change, but at least the stream is steady. Thank God for that. Makes you think that could be why people so naturally settle around rivers. You wake up every morning, and at least that's still there. The river, I mean. Maybe it's about security. But there's lots of other things that can be steady and secure.

Had coffee last week with a girl I went to highschool with out in Westchester. Haven't talked to her much since. She's almost thirty-five now, and she's had a couple of kids. Seems impressive to me. I haven't had any kids. It's tough, you know? Finding the right person. But she had them early. Right out of highschool early. Cradle robber situation, I'm told. Seems like a vulgar term. Ten years her senior, though. Now her kids are all in school, how cute. Makes me smile. Ask for their names and she says Cass, Adam, Benjamin—in that order, oldest to youngest. You ask about Cass, how old she must be. She says eighteen. You ask if she's thinking about college, and she says yes of course, mainly local for the in-state tuition, you know James' line of work was hit pretty hard by the recession and we can't promise her much. You ask which schools, she says this, that, and the other. You ask if she's applied yet, or if she's gotten into any. You didn't really remember what the timeframes for things like that were, it's been a while, and she says yes she got into here, there, and everywhere, and you see she's smiling about it. She must be so proud, you think. You ask if Cass seems excited, and she says yes, so excited. You ask when she starts, and her face changes. She tells you Cass passed away about a month ago now. You tell her how sorry you are, and put your hand on top of hers as she starts to cry. You don't ask how it happened, because that seems uncouth, but she just starts to tell you anyway as you keep caressing her hands and arms from the other side of the table. She tells you she got in

with the wrong crowd, that she started doing a lot of drugs, and one night she just came into her room and found her lying there. Not responding. You pull your chair over closer to her and hold her tight, put your arms around her. You say Mary, Mary, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry. It's okay. You don't take the time to notice whether or not people are looking. It wouldn't matter either way. You wonder why she kept using the present tense, and figure it has something to do about security. You figure change is hard.

That was last week, though. It's the first of June now, and I'm at work, and there's a guy in holdings who may or may not have been witness to a shooting, but it's dead certain that he had enough on him when he was arrested to qualify for possession with intent to distribute, and it's my job to talk to him now. You figure he must have it pretty bad, and it's thoughts like those that put you in charge of softening people up in interrogation.

Fellow detective, Chet DeFuria, is standing outside the room we question people in, leaning his back to the wall with a toothpick hanging off his lip. You wonder about people who do that, have a toothpick all the time. Is it some kind of identity? What does he want me to think when I see that? Seems a bit forced. Not to mention the aviators. Everybody has their thing, I guess. I'm walking up to him, down this green and white checkered-tile hallway lit up by harsh fluorescent light bulbs in long straight lines above, wondering when they're taking the guy from holdings to here.

—How long we waiting, Chet? I ask.

—Give it ten or twenty, Chet says muffled by his closed teeth chewing at the woodchip.

I don't really answer, just lean myself on the other side of the door he's on and let out a breath. There's a bench on the wall opposite to us, but I always get too antsy to sit before this kind of thing.

—You gonna fuck him? Chet asks.

—Huh?

—You're gonna give it to him, right? Put the whole fist in.

—Well...I'll give it a shot, for sure.

I can't help but smile a little, maybe nervously. What do you say to a guy like that? He's just playing around, I guess. That's just him. You have to laugh. He laughs too, loves it when you're nervous. Takes the pick from his mouth to laugh and keel over a bit, almost creasing his pastel blue dress shirt, with his deep navy tie dangling straight down. His face nearly crumples all the way up like a ball of scratch paper, at least you would see it doing that if it weren't for the aviators-indoors look. Funny guy.

—You crack me up, Orson. You're a real funny guy.

—Try my best, believe me. I'm gonna grab something to drink, anyways. You want anything?

—Why dontcha grab me a Coke, Chet requests after giving it a little thought.

—Can do, I say turning towards the end of the hall where the stairs are.

—Diet, if they're out.

—Diet.

I take the stairs down the hall and pass by reception on the lower floor. The lady at the desk, Missus Cassandra Agamen, swivels in her chair just a bit as I walk and gives me a toothy smile. Real white teeth. You have to wonder what a smile like that could mean. Probably nothing. We've never spoken, just exchanged smiles. So I smile back and raise my palm to face her. Nice lady. Caribbean immigrant, I think. Feels cold for a moment, to remember the name. Cass. You have to feel cold when you make those connections. Not like you choose to make

them, most of the time. Hoping the receptionist doesn't notice my smile fade, I rush to the vending machines.

Drinks to the left of snacks. One Poland Spring. One can of Diet Coke. They do have regular Coke, don't they. Huh. Oh well. Unfold another dollar and feed it through the whirring slit. One Coke. I hide the bottle of water snug inside the inner pocket of my mac, and hold the two cans double-fisted. Walk up to the front desk.

—You drink? I say, presenting the silver can flat on the surface nearly level with Cassandra's head.

She swivels again, away from a straining monitor and towards the red calligraphy facing her direction. I'm staring at the barcode on the back. The nutritional facts. Zero calories, how about that. Carbonated water, caramel color, aspartame, phosphoric acid, and so on. Sounds great.

—Oh love, Cassandra chuckles out. Almost thought you was askin' me out.

—Oh-ah-no-um, I blurt, nearly blushing. Just bought one extra by mistake.

—Think I should lose a few pounds?

—Ah-well-no-um-no-just—

—Aaaehaheha just ribbing you hon'

—Officer DeFuria doesn't take well to aspartame, ma'am.

She slides the can closer and cracks open the tab with a finger. *Ththssss*. Faint sound of bubbles bubbling. All the while, she's still snickering to herself just a bit.

—Thank you kindly, love, Cassandra smiles and widens her eyes in a silent moment. Eccs-scuse me, thank you kindly *Officer Iphig*.

I give her a nod, smile back, and walk away wordlessly. Nice lady. Face feels warm. Mine, I mean.

Back up to Chet, step by step. He seems more serious. I hand him the can. He thanks me with a nod and leans back against the wall with crossed arms, holding the cool aluminum to the fabric over his forearm. Getting into character. No smiles no more. I have to do the same. Doing this sort of thing, I play the role of the sympathetic friend. Not like I'm bubbly, of course. You can't imagine a friend would see you in handcuffs and think everything is just peaches and cream. No, I'm sad for him. I'm worried about him. I really am, in a way. For this sort of role, I usually try to think of some serious things before going in, to make sure I seem serious. Sad things, though. There's a tinge of tragedy in there. I'm thinking of my mother right now. Five years ago today. Countertops covered in scratch-off tickets. Endless tries at playing the numbers. Over and over. Please ma. You gotta stop mom. Empty bottles of Jameson in the cupboard over the sink, laid on their sides. Can't afford a nurse or anything but who sends their folks to a home? Not me. How can you do that to somebody you love? Not ever. TV's always on, but her eyesights long gone. She can't hear like she used to, so it's up real loud. Your voice is competing with the talking heads, you're pleading ovetop some riot coverage. Ma you *police have apprehended* gotta stop *seventeen-year old suspect* you can't live like that *involved in an alleged stabbing* anymore. You can feel it. You're in it.

—Ready?

—Ready teddy, Chet responds with flat affect.

Hark! Anon the green approacheth. *Hardy-har-har*. Astoria's park for I, a lark so early in the morn. That place with view of bending bridge o'er that gentle river of the east flowing bay by bay, sound by sound into that thirsty ocean's lips agape. Agape, God's heart and holy spirit flowing free unto his children. Save for me, whose soul is all but absolutely closed. Spirit wills naught but my flesh is strength. No feeling but my senses immediate. Seeing block after block pass me by, sea of parked cars and fellow pedestrian automatons of flesh animae, smelling some crisp brimstone flame consumed with paper sheets loose or bound, in conflict with my tweed lapel with the vomit soaked in deep, my tongue detecting cavernous dryness with that so-stale taste that comes with it, rubbing the tip against the backs of my teeth methodically to feel each crevice met by tender gum, feeling the impact each time my oxford-clad feet caress concrete, with their hardened soles transmitting soreness up my left calf, hearing shrieking horns and sirens across all corners of the world that day, as well as idle chatter from the automatons that pass me by on and on,

—What's that smell?

—Burning?

and so on and so forth. All my experiences lead me to believe that man is a kind of machine. However much I have argued in the past for the existence of the immortal soul, some immutable logos drifting indivisible and irreducible, I still come back time and again to the habit of humming thoughts such as these—that the flesh before me is determined, that there is no freedom, that there is only input and output, that every spirit is but string of if-then's and reaction. Reaction is the fabric of reality. The base consciousness which struggles with that universal fascism of the world. Our binding force is the immediacy of automation. My compulsion to think in this way is in itself a proof.

The concrete beneath me is caked in splotches of chewed gum, pressed so deep into it becoming black spots of tar. The black reminds me of nothing and the tar reminds me of heroin. Left in the apartment. What a rush I was in. An automaton passes me by with ink scarred into its hide. This is one of the few things us cogs of flesh do to distinguish ourselves from one another, perhaps more fashionable here than anywhere else. The woman passing has this written in ink on her thigh:

HEAVEN

IS

REAL

Wonder if that's true. Must be some truth to her. Truth is subjectivity. Substance is subject. Non-Absolute in hand with Absolute taken into itself, a part of itself not merely dead. Another passes with a white rabbit drawn on the back of her forearm. At least I think it's white, it's only linework. She's white after all. I'm inclined to follow. Back of her calf, a bloodied dagger. I remember what I dreamt of before the golden hour struck me. Mother is there larger than life, I a child grasping hand so tight, being led as if my arm a leash. Must be Manhattan, around where Father's office used to be. Former cosmetic surgeon. O' Mother, where are you taking me this time? Ice cream, she says. Always treating me. Eye scream. The roads seemed glossier than usual, but it wasn't raining. Mother's hands feel clammy against mine. Sweat on my brow. I remember an erection. The ice cream truck is parked just down the street, lucky me. But quickly we turn to what seems like a back door entrance, and she opens it with confidence. She must know the place. Leads me down a staircase, down a long long hallway. The floor now must be

subterranean. The hall seems like forever, endless path, the infinite. Beneath the earth she finally stops at a red door. Wood engraved with some pretty embellishments, little details of wolves chasing hares around blooming bulbs of chrysanthemum, painted all over with that chipping red. Circling chrysanthemum-mum-mum. Turning golden knob and leading me in. Pure illumined orange effervescent, the room is lit all by one large window that looks over a rotting sky. Nothing there but an unmade bed half-dressed in white sheets, she leads me on. On her lap sings a lullaby and beneath me I feel her hardon. She produces garden shears, tells me *look look*. Down to her crotch cutting, unaffected, quickly castrated and pouring all over crimson staining every corner I nearly begin to wretch but the sea of blood is oh so warm, though she senses my disgust for a moment and strikes the side of my head before I lay there in the pool of calming womb warmth hello hello awaken golden light ecstasy. Strange one.

When I think of mothers I think of truth. I suppose truth to be a woman. The problem with truth is that one finds no difficulty in giving it assent in brevity. Truth is absolutely enticing—an excitement without comparison. There may always be a rushed affair with the truth, heavy breaths over shadow and cloth, with dim room for lamplight and curling bodies ever-panting. But the aftermath is another thing altogether. The morning after is one of quiet contemplation and difficulty to integrate the events prior. Struggle with retroactivity. The many words I've absorbed from my dear Søren without taking them to heart. Sure I agree with them, I agree a leap must be made, that before God I am always in the wrong, that the religious subsumes the aesthetic and ethical—but deep in my heart there is no strength to be earnest. My inwardness is but a wind-egg, bleeding yolk of cynicism. I withstand no trial, bow before no God, live for nobody. Despite every attempt to accept the truth into my heart, any alteration of my habits and actions are in the end zero-sum.

It was then, growing nearer to the riverside and dangling skyway, that I wondered how long it had been since I first chose unfreedom, or rather when I had been consumed by the impulse of the demonic. Whether it was that first holiday with Sarah, when her father Henry delivered ear-piercing belly-laughs at some jabber on the radio, each burst of air causing me to wince and furrow further the brow, driving from the airport to their slice of life in the Arizona cul-de-sacs, or maybe on occasion of my graduation from Williams in the Berkshires with my very own bachelors in philosophy (what a waste of time and mind that was, for the bestowing of my diploma left me feeling only nothing), or rather my first-of-many-firsts, a celebratory shooting up with my beloved nonconsanguineous brother Swooney on his visit from Baltimore to my shabby Brooklyn tenement. Surely the last of them, and now that must have been oh say two or three years prior. Taking it to be the first, surely five years since my anxious heart fled the good. But could that really be? A sin so ordinary left qualitatively to be by an ancestral act. Oh Adam, dear Adam. The demonic must have been with my heart all along! As Christ always already rested in the bosom of the Lord. After all I was oh-so-very-young when I first heard those sick words sung on my father's radio.

When I was young people spoke

Of immorality

All the things they said were wrong

Are what I want to be!

Those words always rung around my skull, bouncing off each wall, my cavern of bone. Bouncing along with the trembling of his sedan's suspension groaning along a riddled road. So

young then I didn't know much of anything regarding the subject of drink or smoke, but still I knew it turned the cross all topsy-turvy—the rest of my days would be goings under and over. Lord, was that a message you meant to send my way? Or was it just the work of Jimmy Page? *Hardy-har-har*; O Lord you know I only jest! But surely it is revelatory of the metaphysics of the demoniac aesthetic. That base metaphysical principle underlying the universal fascism of the world—pleasures of the flesh, sought to consolidate. In contact with the good but only to a point. Only up to the point where I flee from a choice, that choice to deny my approbation, and I choose no thing at all but the unfreedom of tacit indulgence. I fear to cut away the pleasure, to cauterize so that I may be healed. Cut my tongue alone, so that I may speak no more and deliver nothing unto truth at all.

Men and ladies graze in their twin lawn chairs planted on spots of splotchy shade where old elm trees cut bright limegrass into myrtle. The R.F.K. cuts right through it all, painting streak of nearly-black in line out towards the river, atop the river, and past it to Randalls. More or less out than usual. Warmer than is characteristic of this early June. Two men out there are even shirtless, baking. Their hides are all brown and oily, and they wear baseball caps to cast a shadow over their eyes. They are faceless, indistinguishable, and just like everyone else. Maybe if I was more like them I could be just like everyone else. Maybe I am. Everyone could be exactly the same and there would be no way to know.

There is another pair of men far off overlooking the river and smoking something under the bridge. Puffy clouds of white or moreso gray, being withheld from most of the light of day down there. Rising and dissipating. They are souls reaching up to heaven, evaporating so long before making contact with the firmament. The siren smoke compels me to approach, and very rarely do I reject the call of siren's song. Step by step, so close the bending waves are now to me.

Limp grass beneath giving to each press of sole and tamped to flat impressions of motley, twisted string shoeprint. Newly woven strands of mother nature, now tangled into one another. Beneath two grand bridge pillars, men with backs to me. Rather indiscreetly they pass some glass thing, extending arms to space betwixt one another's person.

—Hello there, I greet them with a tinge of nervous vocal tremor.

Turning and twitching to me, eyes bloodshot. Raggedy coats going all down to their shins. The man on the left is entirely unkempt—the hair on his face a wicker bush, covering his chest. A woven cap of tight fabric clamps his long gray hairs tight to either temple. The other is all cut short, albeit with a thick stubble on his chin and cheeks. Teeth permanently grit, and peaking from his chapped lips. One eye so pink it's half shut, with the bag below inflamed and bulging.

—Whatchu want man? Fuck off man, says Lefty.

—Dandyass faggot, says Righty.

Fair enough. Eying the glass pipe now held by Righty, the basin of it covered in some mix of nightblack and some fecal tone, my mouth swells up and salivates. I being to produce my wallet.

—I'll take a hit, what is it?

—For real? You stuh-stuh-stupid man?

—It's rock, bro.

—For real, man?

Both stanced now. Twin bucks at the height of mating season. Caught in the brush. Standing ground with antlers displayed. Flashing bone, decayed bone. Browning teeth with spots

of death, pure death. Some even missing, with blackened gum in their wake. They smell awful. Feet away, but I can smell it from here. Like sewage. Slip a Franklin from my leather.

—I'll give you this, I say flashing the founding father. Just two or three hits is all I need. I've never tried it.

They're looking all shocked and jittery now.

—*Shieet!*

—A'ight man, says Lefty, ai-ai-a'ight man aight.

They come closer to me without hesitation, and Mister Lefty offers the pipe. His long, brown fingernails seem to almost curve around with the pipe's glass, like a wave at its apex, before crashing to the shore. I replace the apparatus with the hundred, which he hastily stows somewhere in an inner-jacket pocket, his breath uneven with excitement to the extent he is almost hissing. Righty shifts around a bit, confused.

—Light me, I say.

—Gotchu', says Righty, gotchu'.

He flickers flame beneath as I hold the thing to my lips. Once inhaled and held, twice again quick succession letting fumes release so gently from my open nostrils, a third time holding deeper, deeper, deeper, feeling some feeling so quick some quick feeling so sharp so quick a world becoming sharper each corner jagged thin thistles there to thorn my torn skin tearing so quick quick quick, still holding holding breath as if in lung of God, Christ's lung so strong and full thin thistle thin tin breath breathing into me trembling Holy Spirit, Christ's breath tototototo every follower quick a gust touch me touch me touch me corners of each tinsel moment touch my eyes like tiny infinitesimal tetrahedron turning dagger to my spine tingling bleeding deep deep deep the world so cold cold cold tell me Lord is this how I see you tamper

with the qualia through this is your touch only qualia there the quick thing thanks a thorn a touch of tinny tin tears the tearing skin the tips of lips and fingers nails skin blood—

—Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

—*Shieet* man.

blink blink blink, convulsing absolutely terror terror terror at the jitter tingling sense the men here back away to touch each other tell me tell me where to go atop the bridge anon Christ tell me atop the bridge I go shall I go tense so tense my tight chest and pounding tick-tock heartbeat beat beat, the men are leaving left and right they leave me with the pipe and rock to stand alone beneath this behemoth this spirit this stone knowing tell me where to go Christ tell me, pace around once to touch the floor of green and thinking Sarah are you seeing I know you're not but just think Sarah if you say, pace around a second time to think a thought of thick rubber-gloss strands of snot genitalia touch touch touch lady lady met you in Massachusetts miss infidelity miss lost fecundity semen on the glasses' rim, thirdly a pace to touch to feel crotch over tweed slacks crotch and love love love, to touch to sense to tingle tackling thorns of thistle feelings sweet confusion tell me tell me tell me more this excitement God fuck Christ fuck Holy Spirit fuck we all fuck together and how do I get up there on that bridge to move on to move forward my journey down down down I'll surely need to go back back back to Hoyt Avenue there I think the walkway thanks my thimble thumping feet aways me there it calls me there it calls me knowingly knowing I am blood I am skin I am victory this is heaven calling knocking answer me now take the sheers to me to my crotch I'll keep walking on I suppose suppose supposing somethings there the other side some predestination some predetermined path to destiny to Christ fuck to turn on truth to go go go past the river past the veil, the absolute, the knowing leaping on the rotting horizon like wild stallion after stallion rushing running on the skyline runaway and

sneering pushing great Godly breath out each nostril guiding me forward forward forward with blood rushing to every muscle I am strength I am victory I am lightning shooting onward onward onward think the sharpest thing the tip of tinsel piercing too that pierces me that tincture pierces you passing thing and thing again the automatons have new faces no more neutral now only fearful on way to Hoyt the fear mounts the fearing things seem and look to me to stretch the qualia the qualitative leap to disgust how soon I'm nearing at pace it feels like lightning at pace it seems like teleportation, an instant and I almost feel telepathy, no I do feel it feel the thoughts piercing me not gently with force with passion, thoughts start to touch me *sick* their tinsel tongues taunt me *disgusting, the smell* think I don't see the face you make I do I swear I see everything *freak* I know the way you look I know everything *the demonic is anxiety about the good* I know I know I know everything the good is but a burden I need no good no good things here my wake is steady my path is victory *hardy-har-har* thank me chuckle out loud laugh and lark lark lark chirping *the demonic is an unfree relation to the good* some bitch thinks that passing me on the bridge that bitch that bitch that bitch you think I don't think I know I chose this choice to choose no thing at all I am satan satan satan sick with sounding rods that rape urethral orifice of spirit, each bridgecar is flashing by another thought and passing me with *whoooooshhhhhh* like dull needles to my eardrums that abstract sound like a quickness that abstract speed a future coming so so soon the futurism bound the fasces bound the *spazio vitale* the space for quick cars to speed on like track marks running veins running forever *cars and girls are easy come by* the requisite *lebensraum* for true love for true light for true true truth *in this day and age* things are rushing by me a biker nearly grazes me while the world is tinted brown and flashing *laughing joking* each blur of automobile only makes me more erect and *drinking smoking* I spit and spat at them producing every slime saliva a man passes bikeback I grit my

teeth and spit spit spat the spit that pulses out of my grid of bone to splatter on his unsuspecting face he squeals and wipes and tumbles off the rods and gears his helmet scrapes against the structures surrounding shrieking *'till I've spent my wage* relation to the absolute so absolutely space is given for me now some sliver of eternity en route to Randalls bless me bless me bless me.

The room's atmosphere is tense and coated in sweat. It's a tight space. Couldn't be more than six feet wide and twelve deep. There's a table attached structurally to the center of the west wall, with a ring on the top surface to loop the handcuffs around. A camera is running. People are watching. I can picture it how they would see it. The back of my head, Chet slumped in the chair he brought in, and a perp at the other end with his head rested on arms akimbo. Must be uncomfortable with the cuffs, though he hasn't moved an inch since we got in here, so it must be more comfortable than looking at us.

At this point, Chet's job is just to be there. My job is to clear the air.

—Hey there Mister Buoy, I start, I'm Detective Orson Iphig with the N.Y.P.D. This is my friend, Mister, uh. 'Scuse me. Officer DeFuria. We just wanted to ask you a few questions. You get in alright? You look tired. Never fun to spend a night in jail, I know. Just stick with me, and we can get everything cleared up. Just want everything to be clear. Can I get you anything? Snack? Water? Anything you need. Really. Must be tough with the food in jail, I could head down the street and pick you up some MacDonalds. Anything you want. I'm your guy. Would you prefer I call you B.B.? I hear that's what your friends call you.

B.B. shuffles a little in his stiff steel chair and raises his head, finally. His eyes are all red and irritated, and his irises are so dark they seem black to me. I try to grin for him, though he looks pretty much dead inside.

—I appreciate you giving us your time. You need anything? Want some water?

—Water's good, B.B. says.

—Of course, I say, I can go get that for you now. You let me know if there's anything else you want. Just stay put.

—Course I'ma stay put, B.B. says tugging his cuffs against the table's ring.

—Excuse me. Just a turn of phrase.

Standing, I imagine what the camera catches as I turn to the door. A barely-overweight man in his mid thirties with prickly fuzz on his face and a plain white button-up fitting just a bit too tightly. I see myself glancing for a moment at Chet, awkwardly pressing my lips together to make a straight line with them, and giving a knowing nod before leaving the frame.

I wonder what Chet will say in there while I'm gone. Whether he'll be giving the silent treatment or chew on his pick louder to make him nervous. Sometimes you can hear his molars gritting if you listen close enough. He may lean back in his chair and relax. Making small talk about where he grew up. *You grow up in the city?* Grasping for threads that would relate them. *Oh, me too. Look at us, two Brooklyn boys.* Taking it easy, just a bit, before he lays it on thick later. Just conjecture, though. When we work together I leave things like that up to him, supposing he's not screaming his head off by the time I'm back in.

I head to the same machine downstairs and pass by Cass again. This time she doesn't notice. I unfold a dollar and change and buy the same bottle of water I've been drinking from in front of him. Sewing threads of relation. Look at us. We both drink. Both flesh and blood. Human. I really think he's human. Some people don't seem to think so. I don't think Chet thinks so, not about people like this. Calls them 'pondscum' or 'sewage.' Things like that. But I just think he's a person caught up in something. We're all just people caught up in everything. Sometimes you may wonder if that's true, but at the end of the day, if you want to keep living how you live, you have to come to that conclusion. You have to have some kind of faith. I try to have faith in people. I try to stop a second before I come back in the room and give B.B. the water. Jesus Christ, son of God, please have mercy on me, a sinner.

Navigating in a crescent around chet, awkwardly sliding between the back of his chair and the east wall, I hand the bottle to B.B. with an informal *here you go*, which he responds to with open hands and closed lips. There's a high-pitched hum if you listen closely between the sound of my footsteps and Chet's chair squeaking against linoleum in anticipation of my one-two shimmy behind him.

B.B. screws off the plastic cap and takes a sip, with these tight little movements constricted by the cuffs. I take a sip too.

—Okay so listen, this is just a formality. Just a few things I have to read for you before we get going. First off, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you can't afford one, we can provide one for you. Plenty of public defenders around. If you decide to talk to us now without an attorney, you still have the right to stop until you get one. So you just let me know. You understand all of that?

—Ye, B.B. mumbles.

—Sorry, could you just repeat that more clearly?

Hate having to say that. Ruins the flow. But it needs to be clear for the record.

—Yeah.

—Alright then. So you want to talk?

—Yeah.

I take a sip from my bottle with one hand and loosen my tie with the other, making some ungodly gurgling sound on accident. He looks dead in the face, but I wince from the embarrassment.

—Okay. *Ahem*. You were picked up around one-in-the-morning last night, correct?

—Yeah, he says.

—Around the border of Ridgewood and Bushwick, right? Near Madison?

He nods and directs his eyes to the table, casting shadows over his sockets.

—Alright, I spout under my breath, so I know what must be going on. I know it's hard. But I just want you to know that we know you're not the one who shot the gun that night. That's pretty much certain on our end. It's just that you were in the wrong place. I can sympathize. I can't say I'm always finding myself in the right places. We've all gotten in our share of trouble, right? You understand what it must look like. Or what it *could* look like. But I just want you to know we aren't seeing it that way. So you can help us out with this, right?

B.B. is avoiding eye contact, with his face still overcast. His Adam's apple lowers and rises with the force and swiftness of a bolt-action's cocking. Clammy palms rub together oiling silver with sweat. No answer but a cold silence, a silent knowing.

—Listen. You know I don't want to do this, but we're gonna have to talk somehow. My associate here is going to grab something real quick, and he'll be back. You know we have the best intentions here, but the rubber's gotta meet the road. Capisce?

Chet's making his trip while I'm still smiling.

—Okay B.B., I understand. Let's just sit tight for a bit.

You would likely be inclined to picture interrogations like these, in the way you usually picture your fantasies, as a sort of sweating-bullets melodrama with a clean-cut start and finish. That is if you were the average layman who asks me about the work, at least. Maybe you're educated. But the reality is that the sweat comes, more often than not, in pretty thin layers, and the only bullets you'll find are stored away in their chambers and magazines, never to be discharged into another man's flesh. Even just moment to moment, the whole affair is drawn out

and boring. There are no quick-cuts and continuity. No snappy story drawing nearer to the point. The breaks could last for hours. So many hours spent in dead silence, looking at a man who's not looking at you—someone who keeps the windows to his soul shut tight with black-out curtains—listening to breathing and building ambience together. There is an intimacy here. You feel a sense of closeness. The space is so tight you could almost feel your souls touching. Rubbing up against one another. Wonder if you could feel me the way I feel you. Could you sense the fear in my heart the way I do yours? You wonder if he even knows what time it is. You know there's no clocks on the walls, because that would provide him with a sense of grounding in his environment that would be antithetical to making him talk. You know his chair must be killing his back because when you're just a little uncomfortable you're more inclined to say anything that gets you comfortable. Comfort is the enemy of compromise. You know this must feel like forever to him, the same way it does for you. But you've been through this before, and you've learned how to wait for an eternity. I have the luxury of checking my watch now and then, after all. I know how long it takes to mosey on over to evidence to strike up some banter with Tom or Larry Wates or whoever's in charge today, and stroll back leisurely after having received satisfaction. It takes a while. And lord help Mister Buoy here, Chet is a hard-boiled professional when it comes to stretching out small talk, even regardless of his affinity for the Wates brothers which gives him the opportunity to ask for updates on every-which family member, extended or otherwise. You could picture it now. Grand entrance into that windowless and grated room, genuflecting here and there. How's the Ma', How's the Pa'. Tom, It's been too long, even though I saw you last week, same day. Or maybe Larry. I don't keep good track of the guys in evidence. In spite of that, I do know that their mother has a heart condition and had to get a triple bypass maybe about a month and a half ago. I must have seen one of them last week, but

forgot to ask about how it went. Can't even remember if I saw Tom or Larry, they look so alike. You have to kick yourself when you forget things like that. That's all life is. Remembering.

About forty-five minutes must have passed. Then the door creaks again. Chet's got something in his hands.

—Who's working evidence right now? I ask, aloof.

—Richard. He always works Thursdays.

—Right.

He slaps a vacuum-sealed bag of evidence right there on the table, which B.B. is obliged to witness. There's a beige fanny-pack inside of it, zipped up halfway. Some plastic colors peeking out the open part. Dates and numbers written out in thick sharpie. Chet reaches out and slides it forward an inch with his middle and index fingers. Leaning back in his chair, he brings his hands together on his lap and presses both thumbs together tight.

I follow, resting my hand gently on the seal. No sudden movements. You oughta be gentle sometimes when the times call for it.

—Okay buddy. We both know that what you had in here could get you in a lot of trouble. I don't want you to be in a lot of trouble, personally. Me and officer DeFuria here don't think that this had anything to do with what happened. But still, it's here. I can't ignore it, in all good conscience. You understand that, don't you?

No response. He is absolutely still.

—We just want to drop the whole thing. We want you out of here. You told me you wanted to talk. You still wanna talk, right?

Nothing.

Chet reaches into a pocket and, one by one, tosses three dime bags on top of the sealed fanny pack. One red, one teal, one bright yellow. All of them translucent. The red is full of white powdery mounds. Teal looks like some sort of microscopic crystals. Thumbnail sized shards of deep purple seem like they almost burst out of the yellow.

—Why don't you tell me what these are, says Chet.

Silence.

—You know what, B.B.? I had this real nice dream last night. Eerie one, too. It was right here in this room, and we were all sittin' just where we're sittin' now. No coincidence, a dream like that. But there was one thing different. Last night you weren't being such a fucking *pussy* like you are right now. It was like a miracle, the way you talked and talked. You just wanted to tell us everything you had to say. But now you're sitting here and you're trying to fuck me. And let me tell you something, pal. I am a *real* classy lady, and I sure as shit ain't putting out on the first date. So why don't you just man up for me? Try bein' a proper gentleman for a second, and make this little lady's dreams come *true*.

I wonder if Chet really had a dream like that last night. Probably not. I always feel uneasy about that sort of thing. Lying. You can't really feel comfortable with a lie, can you? Even a lie as facetious as that one. Just doesn't sit well with me. Dreams are so special, after all. There's something sacred in them I can't really put my fingers on. I wonder if Chet dreamed at all last night, and if he did, I wonder what it could have been about. Does he dream about his work? I had a dream last night, one of those dreams you keep having. Where I'm in a hospital bed, being rushed through some blurry hallways with sick folk on all sides of me. Wearing some kind of respirator. It feels like forever I'm being wheeled someplace. But when I get there, it's always the same people. Doctors start hooking me up to some machine, thinking I must be dying. But

those three are standing politely in the room's back corner. My parents and Amber. After a while of panic they come over to me and tell me that everything is going to be okay. That they love me. Then everything is calm, and I feel like everything is going to be okay. I feel loved.



Later, I'm back by the vending machines. Dust has all settled. Mister Buoy's back to detention. Didn't talk much, not like I thought he would. You have to give it an honest effort, though.

Having worked up an appetite, I get myself a Twix bar and sit on the benches by Cass's desk. She isn't around right now. Must be using the restroom. Maybe it's her lunch break. The golden wrapper is crinkling between my pinches, which pull the light seal of glue at the edges apart. It makes me feel like shit sometimes, how much I have to lie. How I promise people a safety I'm not in any place to provide. How I wear a mask to keep men calm. To keep them from calling an attorney. Just hoping something slips. Something we can use after the Mirandas are all said and done. I guess it's all in the name of some good, but that fact alone fails to put me at ease. The caramel sticking to my teeth is helping a little. That sticky sweet mix of biscuit caking to my gums. Distracts me from the lies. It allows me a moment of silence. Lord, I hope you can forgive me. I have trouble talking to you. It doesn't come naturally the way it feels it should. Father Jim said his sermon last year, that having a connection with you is supposed to be like breathing. The way you breathed your life into us. The way Jesus blew the spirit to his apostles. I hold my breath too much. Places like these make me feel so far away from you, Lord. Is it terrible, what I do? Or am I just trying my best to find the truth? People tell me you're the truth.

This truth doesn't feel like you. Not that I've uncovered anything at all, wiping a chocolate smudge off my cheeks with a sleeve. Starting on the second in the wrapper. Lord, when all is said and done, is there anything I can do right? Is there any good I can do? If I found out who shot who, would that have been good? Maybe there's nothing I could do that would be good enough. There's nothing I could do that wouldn't start with a lie. But I still want to breathe with you. I'm breathing so heavy. Please Lord, give me strength. Let me know what you know. Licking the crust from my teeth, I swallow. Cass is almost at her desk again, back from whatever she was doing. Balling up the gold plastic, I shove it in my coat's inner pocket. We make eye contact for a moment, and she stops. She says it's going to be a long week, Officer Iphig. I say yes. No doubt. She asks me how the talk went. I say *so-so*.

So so so long the draw of vial to syringe to meet each measure line, parallel sequential increments of point-oh-one-oh-two-oh-three and be sure to, certain to pause for flick of finger, rearing drops of nothing (or something, namely air) to the very tip-top, lest they fill the yearning vein all streaming blood with oxygen—embolism, perish the thought—returning to the task with a push before pull, as those little nothings fly though the needle into the heaven pool above, then pull again to point-oh-six to allow release of excess before producing the intended dosage of point-oh-five milliliters pure Midazolam. Could have chosen just to poke a muscle if he weren't lashing about in the wheeled cot, shaking the damned thing, now restrained for access to the crooks of his milkchocolate arms that now face my eyes. I see the vein is big and visible—the sort a phlebotomist would describe as ‘good,’ if there is such a thing as a good vein—oh happy me if only just the sight would not force me to stifle my own convulsions. I can't help but feel it on myself. Imagine if it were I to be pierced and let my pure oh so so so pure blood be tainted. Vampirism. That's the truth, that all the world is draining me on the face of this fleshy real there are corpuscles of spirit receptacles draining every thought and vital essence from my little oh so so little head like mother from father—Christ come—drained me then took away from me then all I could have given to my darling Edward at home now resting while I wade here through the sea of needles, endless vampirism, and drain drain drain oh my head turn pale lighthead dizzy now and spin spin spin is that a father's touch—semen—or my neck's back all burning numb and spreading warm fear down until I...

—Allisa? Spoke the concerned affect of a one Terence Abrams, M.D.

—Is she falling? Fainting now? Nurse Hoon spurts and rushes from her post restraining the maniac to catch the trembling Allisa.

—Crashing. Oh.

The swooping skull of Allisa Antigone nearly meets or cracks against the pleading surface of sterile polyvinyl chloride, were it not for the swift and caring (perhaps more aptly described as obliged) arms of Sophie Hoon, R.N., which braced and broke the fall with all the force their fatty thickness could muster—sagging bat wings all a flutter in the panicked motion of it all. The syringe of sedative clatters beneath her. Allisa's bobby-pin bun of body-length, silkblack hair nearly grazes the floor and collapses in on itself. Implosion. Snapping of the elastic grounding. Strands whooshing helter skelter over her shoulders and glossy eyelids, closed so gently now you could imagine her a perfect picture of endless sleep.

Terence, looking down in awe, witnesses in his mind the invocation of several images, if only by some compulsion to thought which so often slings mud at the notion of free thinking—the ideal of mind never truly to tarry with the will, only to be a minefield of synapse and connectivity bursting at each and every call to cognitive habit—first of the John Everett Millais Ophelia and subsequently a blurred conglomeration of every representation of Madonna and Child he had ever witnessed, regardless of style, artist, or period produced. Ophelia makes him nervous. On the one hand, only out of that trembling sting most men must feel when faced with the dead, but on the other, out of his being conscious of the tranquil beauty he so intuitively found in the girl so dead and drowned. He also feels strange imagining Allisa as a baby Jesus. Guilty, maybe. He more often than not thought of her as Mary when she cared so lovingly for their more calm and conscientious patients, and perhaps more so as whore when he caught glimpses of the bruised black neck markings her husband had left the night before where her shoulderflesh meets the clavicle. He'd be thinking more of whoredom were it not for the Madman's spurious interjection.

—Fucking bitchass white bitch *fuck* an' lemme ou' this *shit*, screams the Madman, struggling against the hospital bed's restraints.

—Sophiepleasenowifyouwould, Terence blurts and struggles.

Nurse Hoon clammers for the needle now beneath Allisa's nightblack locks of luxury, resting her head and back gently to the floor as another graveyard shift worker out of eyesight begins to make his rush to intervene. With the help of Terence's restraint on one end, she is able to pierce the arm's crook on the other. Unbeknownst to either Sophie Hoon, Terence Abrams, or Clee Poiesis (the male nurse now holding Allisa's head and scouting for another cot to rest her in), the needle, having been dropped along with the syringe it was so attached to the depths beneath the Madman's cot, had been made just that much duller on impact, which was cause for the injection to be exceptionally, excruciatingly, painful. The Madman did not appreciate this.

—*Yeeeeeeoooooucch!!!!!!*

—Christ almighty, says Terence, wincing.

—*Fuck* fuck'n white folk gonna hold *me* down fuck'n *faggots* faggotass whitecape white nigger. You tryna take my *blood* all fucked up whitecoat *nigga* you's wicked. Thought's got *wings* nigga I ain't gonna stop *flying* whitecoat *nigga* Ima spread my *wings*, I *fly* I be *wing'd* I *think* you's white niggas ain't never find *love* you's is *wicked* nigga love ain't never *bloom* in you's is hearts fucking *bitch* whitecoat *fuckinn...man...think...I think...I a...Ima...*

He so slowly becomes a limp thing. Eyes rolling back. Calmness. *Ophellic*. Taking the tone shift to heart, Terence pats his brow, leaving dark pooling blots of fluid on his white coat. Nurse Hoon sets the needle down on a sterile steel tray and all the three of them join together to lift and carry Allisa's sweetly dreaming pseudo-corpse toward the nearest empty cot just a little while's way down the hall, which Clee wordlessly made known with the direction of his sight.

This is how they proceeded the entire time. Wordlessly. No need to mention the embarrassment. No desire to compel any invocation the mind could wander upon. She is laid down in silence, drooling out one edge of her pink pursed lips as would a newborn babe.

The three huddle to discuss thusly:

—How often has this been happening? Clee asks. I heard once a month ago.

—Every day. It has to be every fucking day now, Nurse Hoon spake all hushed and reserved in fear of listener's on.

—Not every day, Soph. Often, sure. I suppose too often all things considered, Terence says, providing a provisional if not measured defense.

They all take breaths individually, avoiding eye contact for a moment. They pretend to look at something else as their eyes glaze on fixed points only meant for the purpose of repose. Some comfort in imagining the Other gone for just one second.

—Not that I don't like her, says Clee, I mean we all like her.

—Of course, of course, Nurse Hoon interjects.

—Yeah we all like her. Yeah she's very *nice* but this is like. A liability thing, right? We can't just keep letting this happen, right? I mean it's urgent care. *She* needs some urgent care. She's supposed to be the one *providing* the care...*Urgently*.

Terence rubs his temples, removes his silver wireframe glasses with their inch-thick lenses, and massages the bridge of his nose so hard you would think he was about to tear the skin clean off.

—I am well aware that Miss Antigone's spells present a...an issue here. There's no doubt about that. But she's a sweet girl. She could do the work before, just a few months ago it was different. She was doing great. She was great help. Maybe she just needs a...uh...

—*Leave of absence*, blurts Hoon in hissing whisper.

—A leave, just a leave, Clee echoes. A break.

Brushing fingers through his graying mane and dawning eyewear once more, Terence looks up at the ceiling tiles and white rods of light. The light's purity makes him think of acceptance. He looks up there for so long that when his head turns back to the nurses, this glow of white and green halo is covering their faces, the both of them. The afterimage makes him think of rest—think of sleep. He looks down at Allisa, and her face too is obscured. But as the retinal blight begins to fade her eyelashes, so long and elegant all pitch black contrasting pale cheeks, become apparent to him again. His conscience tumbles from trench to trench, triggers an active mine between them, and the limbs of his spirit are shredded and blown away by thick mind-shrapnel, spread all over to rest on an endless number of invocations. Edna Abrams laying postpartum, disheveled. The open-casket restfulness and utter peace enjoyed by Nora, or rather simply known to Terence as *Mother*. The gentle tune of Jody Reynolds ringing:

I looked to the sea and it seemed to say

“I took your baby from you away”

I heard a voice cryin’ in the deep

“Come join me, baby, in my endless sleep”

—I suppose that would be for the best, says Terence.

—For the best.

—The best.

Terence was almost nearing his recollection of the song's second verse, as well as the moment Mrs. Edna Abrams began to cry whilst locked in dream, before a clang and crash could be heard down the hall. Silver pan flung through the air. Scattered now-used needles and vials of benzodiazepine. A wobbling IV pole circling, circling, circling, yet still managing to stumble back into place.

The three produce a storm of footsteps, with only restraint in mind. The Madman was now up and running for the exit.

—*Fuck you's, all's of you's sick. These's words is wing'd. Love ain'never be for the wicked.*

Rushing and running, Clee leads the pack.

—Please sir. Calm down sir. Just lay down, sir.

—Please sir, please sir, please sir.

Clee nearly touches him before getting socked straight in the jaw and crumpling in an instant.

—*Getch'o hans off me's, white devil! Demon! You'sa devil. You's so scared of the good you's runnin' after me bitch. I'm fuckin' God bitch almighty. He in me. Jes's Chris'is in me!*

Terence quits running after the Madman to aid Clee who much to his confusion was not white at all but, conversely, quite distinctly east asian, leaving Terence to wonder why he would be referred to as a '*white devil*' all the while he checked the nurse's pulse and breathing. Nurse Hoon pants behind the both of them.

—Oh God. Oh my Lord.



...around round round, blur blur blurry black bulbs bounce, *whee!* Awake-wake-waken. Waking weary while we wilt all over me, I so miss my dream already. From dream to shadow figures all along the rims beside me. Blurs to crispness. Focus, focus Ally, focus. They gather round the cot. That Doctor Abrams, who is looking down at me like a baby girl so sweet I wish he could be my Father. Missus Hoon, whose hoarse fatty ladyvoice I can barely stand, I could barely stand before, before I slept and must have fallen. And...erm...Nurse Humphrey, who is big and fat and black. Fat and smoothly baldheaded with one of those big lumpy rolls on the back of his neck. I hate fatties so often so ugly but when a man is so in the correct manner I feel safe around him, rather than disgusted. And and and ew fatty Hoon touch-ouch-ouch me on my left shoulder so I bounce so rightways.

—Are you awake now, Ally? Nurse Hoon asks me. You alright dear?

She says dear to indicate affection for the retarded. She thinks me a gimp or an invalid. Maybe maybe maybe. What am I or who am I to say.

—*Eeeuuughhhnnnnnnnyeahhh...*

I rub rub rub my little eyes, seeing black crumbs of mascara stuck to my hands as they pull away.

—*I'merm* wakey...I'm awake. Sorry. Where am I?

—You at the I.C.U. miss, responds Humphrey, who calls me 'miss' on account of not knowing me very well at all (I can't say I don't find some joy in it...makes me feel like a little girl again). The one you work at, miss. This yo' shift.

—Oh...oh. How long was I?...

—About thirty-five minutes, Terence interjects.

He lifts up a sleeve and checks his slick golden watch with that deep brown leather band so worn like an aged man like a man who's seen so much that elderly watchband.

—Forty-five, rather.

—Oh Doctor Abrams I am so so *so* sorry, I say profusely while attempting to contain an air of sensuality that haunts me whenever a man such as he comes round.

I am so so so sorry-orry-orry simply sorry sweet Lord—cunt—send me prayers now if you would...wonder what he must think of me, Abrams. Must hate me. Everyone must hate me 'cause of all the trouble I cause. All the trouble I've always caused and spread like a virus like the A.I.D.S. or the flu or Herpes, which I call *lover's pox* affectionately, 'cause I want it to sound something sweet as opposed to a mark of death so so so black on my life forever, as if it was my fault. Maybe it was my fault if I spent less time with Father alone if only maybe. God, oh—shit—my life must be over over over again like it has always been over and done with since the start. As if there were any life not an impregnable premonition of death.

—That's quite alright, says Terence. If you can stand, let's get you walking and have some water. There's another intake on the docket, and with Clee down we're short staffed now. I have to run and check on something. Trust you and Nurse Humphrey can handle this.

Doctor Abrams is making the motions you would imagine one makes to run and check on something.

—Clee? What happened to Clee?

—Nevermind that, you just try to stand now.

I blink and Abrams is gone. Humphrey takes my hand in his, which must be four times the size of mine, and helps me up out of the cot. My hair is all over, oh no...all down down down my shoulders to my knees my knickers the tight knoll in which my locks were bound must have

bursting. Pat pat pat my head from top to bottom hoping for a loose pin caught in one strand or another, but nothing. Oh Christ—come come come—what mess, what a mess. So messy I could almost weep. There I am, tearing now. Dew falling, making quick work of soaking my face. I brush it all away with my palms and feel steady on my own two feet, then stumble briefly to be caught by the giant Nurse Humphrey. I find myself being caught far too often these days.

Sensing my sustained stability, he begins to lead me towards the automatic sliding doors which separate the unit from the territory of the ambulances and ambulettes. There are four or five chairs around it, all in front of one podium with a tablet operated by a woman with no knowledge of medicine. The ambulance men tell her the patient's issue, and the woman subsequently logs this in her tablet, adding them to a cue to be served. Each chair is filled by another in the cue. One's a suited yuppie with his girly-friend holding a ziploc of ice wrapped in blood-soaked Bounty to his chin, aiding his skull which seemingly drifts in and out of consciousness in such a dizzy-izzy-izzy way he wobbles and groans to his lover *why why why* as she, standing as to not occupy a scarce supply of seating, pulls his head into her breasts which bosom fro in some low-cut rag of kitsch filth, feathered and pink with this cheap faux-golden trim that looked like a party favor, much to the distraction of the one-eyed man to the yuppie's immediate left, whose singular gaze is fixed on her udders alone, his other eye being fixed on nothing at all having been slashed with a knife, at least presumably, considering the scar from below his cheekbone up to his shaved-bald forehead which reflects the sterile light above so intensely it is at some angles blinding the man next to him, as is apparent from his frequent wincing on the occasion of the balding man's resting position being just right, who is a fatty old black man clutching his cane with a plaid golfer's cap covering the bare cranial top surrounded by gray wool taking shape of those old haircuts the monks used to wear, which must make the

man in the fourth chair, all breathing heavy and profusely sweating stains through his beater, think of those same monks I'm thinking of—I'm sure of it, he must must must—or maybe the man in the fifth chair knows my thoughts just as much. He is shirtless and twitching with titty-tit-tits sagging. Gynecomastia. They even flop around as he scratches concerningly hard with nails to shoulder skin. So so so hard he seems to almost slit the sandybrown flesh.

The tablet woman calls nurse Humphrey and I over to her, as my heart sinks and my blood boils again. She says his name is Lester, and she can't tell what's wrong with him. She says he's just *babblin' on about somethin'* or something like that. I believe her, considering he's babbling right now in a raspy near-whisper, twisting his head back and forth like an animal cornered. I can pick up some words he utters. *Christ. Me. Being. Quality. Leap man leap man leap. Pretty pictures. Red man. Green coat. White man. Niggers.* Edward tells me I ought not to think that word let alone utter it. He tells me if I ever think or say that word, that I would be in horrible trouble, and nobody at work would like me anymore not at work not outside certainly not any of his friends and oh how important his friends must be to him. But still I think it and sometimes slip it out beneath my breath upon arriving home. Still, I feel some kinship with the rambling man for a moment, as if he is closer to me than I am to anyone else in the whole wide world around me. I wonder if he would be upset if I said the word back. Just repetition. Echolalia. He probably would be very upset. Most probably. Upset. Certainly. With certainty. So I decide not to say it, not that I would, considering Humphrey and all...and I take no issue with Humphrey.

Nurse Humphrey begins his attempt at calming the man as I make way to the utility closet where the wheelchairs are kept all folded up. Clenching the silver-rust handle and turning it clockwise, the deep damp dankness of a poorly lit dungeon is revealed to me. There is mold on

the ceilings. There is mold on the walls. There is mold growing and gathering around the little crevices between each metal part the shelves consist of. Almost makes me gag, not to mention the glossy wet floor tiles reminding me of a public restroom's coat of urine. Sick sick sick—yucky, ew! Pulling out one folded chair I slam the door shut behind me and bury the thoughts. I must always be burying thoughts. Thoughts are like a living thing you nurture and cherish but I have far too few worth raising, rather rashly I believe they should all be lost in stillbirth, lest I think of something sick or silly for too far a length of time oh it drives me mad mad mad I would rather it all be dead my Lord—cunt—I would rather death than unfold the chair for Humphrey and the looney rambling man.

But I do. At least before he tells me there's something wrong. Irregular pulse. Immediate care. Swiftly sway from sweeping chair to wheeled cot as the rambling grows and grows. Telling us our hands ought to be off him and that we ought let him go. Ought ought ought to. What ought you do? What others tell you? If I did all the sickly people told me to, I'd be fucking myself, sucking cock on my knees, giving a discrete peck on the cheek now and then, lingering just one moment longer to allow myself to be seen, blowing my head clean off, being hit by bus or taxi cab, burning in the depths of hell, stabbed and beaten, blue and bruised, cut to bits, bled to death, dead. You can't always do what others tell you. You find the right people to tell you what's right. You find Edward—Father. Love is always correct. Love knows no wrong. Unlike this wasted weary wretch I wheel along and wait on with such patience, Godly—cock—patience. And patience draw draw draws me almost to the operating room, before we realize the rambler must be retrained posthaste, which of course Humphrey contributes to most of all, him being a man of weight, and I nearly a skeleton so brittle my bones could snap were I to try and pull the straps of this here cots restraints.

In the operating room now is Doctor Abrams, Humphrey, and I. The rambling man too, if you were to count him as a person. Sometimes I have my doubts. Souls can be ground down and drained to their death. Vampirism. I have to poke his vein now, just like before, just to get the IV in. Just very quickly, I should. Usually we try to make it known we are about to poke them, but he seems so panicked I know it would only make it worse. I'm clenching this piece of plastic that looks like a glowing blue butterfly with a stinger spurting out its silly little rectum. Sticking him fast, I attempt to reach for the gauze and medical tape. But I sense some sullen silent moment starkly gnawing slowly shifting air and space around me, sounding premonitions of a horrible terrible happening now to take place. Arms flailing, teeth gnashing, lips spurting and sputtering. Nearly faint at the attempted restraint by hand of ours and o' the crescent spray of crimson o' the eyes and ears and orifices present to play the droplet's surface raped. He had it torn out in an instant. My tongue could taste the tone of iron. My eyes could eat the ever-bleeding essential entirety. that essence eats away at mine. I too shriek or shout or barely out I pass the bout of sickness, in my health's drought, the dizzy spinning spinning spinning thing the horrid teeth the *round round round around around I taste the still of fluid...*



Humphrey and I are now waiting. Triage. Ingesting a patient's intimates. Fluids. Standard procedure.

I need triage. Need triage. I heard waking up. Humphrey's huffs. My hands were glossy smeared. I wondered if Mister Abrams would be upset with me. Mister Doctor Terence Abrams, M.D...I wondered if I was about to be fired or maybe put down like a dog for my transgressions

against the medical profession. Transgressions made by my temperament, my frailty. I wonder if I am too weak. I wonder if the rambling man had A.I.D.S. or Hepatitis or whatever else. I wonder, if he were to have A.I.D.S., would I then be weaker for contracting it. I wonder if I would rather take treatment or simply rot away. Rot away. Everything should rot rot rot and die. So ought I. Rot and die die die. Ticking in my face, closing my eyes tight enough to feel some pressure on the seeing bulbs out of sought compulsion for safety's sake. Pressure can be safe. Touch could soothe me so. Wind could cut me. Waves could lash at me. Taste could assure me. Scents could treasure me. The world could live in me.

We wait for hours, saying nothing to each other. Only staring at the blankwhite wall before us. Sometimes we check our phones. Edward hasn't sent for me. People still rush all around us. I am surrounded, alone.

Terence comes for us eventually. Says for now there's not much we can do. Says we should go home for the night. I stop myself from correcting him. Morning. Pulls me aside, he does. Says maybe I should be home for a while. Says it seems hard for me. Says maybe I could use a break. Indefinite sabbatical. Says I would receive a call about test results. Of the man's blood. So I would know if I had the A.I.D.S. or Hep-C or what have you. Says they would let me know when I'm needed back. So he says.

After having grabbed my belongings from the work lockers, I step outside for the first time in hours and hours. The sky is black. An eternity since the sunshine last saw me. Shunshine. There's a man outside the hospital's entrance. He asks if I would like to fuck him. I don't respond. Getting my bearings. What train to take now. Asks me if I would like to fuck him again. I'm already walking. He says it would change my life.

Orson Iphig took the metro up to Hasting later that day, clutching wax paper. By taxi service, he was taken from the station on the river, on Washington Avenue to a left on Broadway, meeting a five-way junction which hosted both Grace Episcopal and First Reformed, where the driver would take a right onto Farragut, which on the left had a driveway leading up to St. Matthew's Lutheran, and on the right Mishkan Ha'am, a local synagogue, eventually meeting Ravensdale Road, which turned into a modest bridge gracing the Saw Mill River—that thin affluent of the Hudson which in its bosom cradled many an industry—as well as the Saw Mill River Parkway below with its cool streaks of shade, finally taking a left onto Saw Mill River Road, leading to the Temple Israel Cemetery, where Orson arrived with a bouquet he bought from a peddler out front Grand Central in hand.

He told the taxi man, who was Arab, to wait for him. Walking, he thought about this plot of land that was divided in two parts, Jewish and Christian, the latter of which was conversely named Mt. Hope Cemetery. Thinking of the taxi man, he wondered if there were any Muslim cemeteries in Westchester, or if there was a mosque nearby, since he hadn't seen one on the drive. Then he thought that he ought not assume the taxi man was Muslim, just on account of him being Arab, because Arabs could be many things besides Muslim, maybe even a Sikh or an Atheist. Unbeknownst to him, there were mosques in Westchester, just not this far north where all the wealthy whites and Jews lived, save for a very sporadic few. If he were to make it further south into Yonkers, or the Bronx, he would be hard pressed *not* to see a mosque within any given one-mile radius.

Orson then thought about the Saw Mill River, and how he would always drive up and down its sister parkway as a young man, when he was all green and learning how to keep steady

behind a wheel. He always thought it was such a pretty little river, which is why it surprised him to read once in *The Times* that it was actually horrible polluted, so much so that an unnamed nineteenth-century poet composed a quatrain attributed to its filth:

'Tis now, at Yonkers's spreading feet,

A flow with odorous sins replete;

Its nitid bosom has become

A snake-like yellow scrawl of scum.

This depressed Orson, having never been close enough to the river to notice whether or not it was as disgusting as so described. He would console himself by wondering if it was any better now, since the poem must have been written over a hundred years ago now. He would wonder in search of no particular answer.

Despite the Jewish burial ground, Orson's mother was decidedly Christian for nearly all of her adult life. As long as he could remember, she was a devout follower of Christ. She wore a plain, silver cross. She would cite scripture. It was not until her death that Orson realized her parents were Jewish, when the will's executor informed him how she was meant to be buried. He had never even talked to his extended family on his mother's side. She would never put them in touch. Even their names were a mystery.

By that fact, the funeral was more confusing than tragic to him. He watched his mother's coffin descend among a pack of strangers. No attempt was made at rectifying that knowledge, either. For the sake of meekness, he was not one to impose. His father's side was entirely absent, on account of their all being estranged or long dead. Orson spent the ceremony alone in his head.

How could he not have known until now? She wasn't all there in her final years, he supposed. But how could she not have hinted to it, sometime before her mind began to slip? She had a lot she wanted to forget, he supposed. He only had room to suppose, never to be certain.

Nearing the gravesite, he recalled one of the last few happy memories he had of her, back in Westchester when she was a member of the *Palisades Boat Club*, where she stored and sailed a modest kayak on the Hudson. Atop the club's lower level, which housed the myriad of kayaks and canoes alike, was a dining hall, gameroom, and deck, which out its grime-fogged windows gave view to the glistening river, cutting its span between this manmade structure and the natural fortifications of mother earth—those stark cliffs lined at the top with mane of green growth.

The game room hosted a dart board and a pool table with mangy upholstery. Left of the stereo system were two even cuts of wood painted dull green. When rested on the pool table's top and pushed together, they would serve as the surface of a ping pong table, complete with a miniature net to be screwed on at each end of width. When his mother was still in good health, Orson and his mother would play with it frequently. They would take their shabby paddles with the rubber peeling off the wood in hand, playing sets of first-to-five on the weekends when Mrs. Iphig was off work, more often than not. Fishing through a pile of off-white plastic spheres atop the two-in-one radio-cassette player, they would find the ball most perfectly preserved, with each choice means-tested by a preparatory bounce on the wood painted chipping gooey-brown below. They would know the ball ready and unmolested, had it bounced back up to meet either Orson's hand or his mothers. Its bounce was found to be in accordance with the concept of a ping pong ball, thus proving those that did not make the ascent to be nothing more than mistakes, or aberrations in the form from which they derived their purpose.

Those were the same steps they went through that day, as they always did, but this time in particular on a balmy June's day about one decade prior.

Mrs. Iphig held her paddle with a penhold grip and leaned over the table all crotchety, never serving the ball quite right, but always having it returned by her son in the calm of their lackadaisical volley which would then ensue. They would continue these sends and returns over and over until either Mrs. Iphig fumbled or Orson failed to attend to one of her frequent cross-ups—rushing to the other end of the table and only grazing the ball with the very tip of his paddle's exposed wood. Orson would never attempt this sort of maneuver. He just enjoyed the simplicity of the volleys. He found it meditative. When the points were scored, and the ball would tumble to the floor, Orson rushed to retrieve, insisting his mother not strain her back despite her counter-insistence each time that she could get it. He would brush away the dust bunnies clinging for dear life onto the plastic, and prepare for another round with his relaxed shakehands grip. Each game they would play to eleven points, requiring a difference of two to declare victory, and each time they would trade sides around the table.

They would go on this way, set by set until it was nearly set-match, with four games to Orson and two to his mother. The light leapt from the river onto each of the pair's pale skin, mildly blinding Orson, who was forced to face it. His mother, having lost last, served first to that *tip-tip-tap* followed by his returning *tap-tap-tip* and so on. She would hit it quickly each time like a manic tic, her body close to the table's edge. To return he would stand two feet behind and lob the ball back with a downward slice, sending it off in the somber curve of a parabola, and each time endowing it with just a touch more spin, to be delivered again ad nauseam. A few more rounds of that, and eventually the miniature moon would make contact with Mrs. Iphig's paddle only to fly madly out of control, missing its intended mark on the table.

0-1

—Ooh darn...I'll get it, Mrs. Iphig said.

—Please ma, let me.

—Again with that spin. *Rascal*.

Ball in palm, they start over again. Mrs. Iphig is wholly concentrated, thinking absolutely nothing amidst the volley. Orson is thinking about Wendy, who he wishes he could make the new Mrs. Iphig. Points pass as he remembers the softness of her curly red locks, invoking pleasant scents of cindered firewood and pine needles; the fullness of her pout against his stubble poke; the warmth of her freckled young flesh; the jade eyehues which enchanted his own, mudbrown; the charming quality of her fat stubby fingers, that interlocked with his and felt like home; the words she spoke last they met; a love's declaration...

2-6

...her shallow breaths close to his; the gloss of saltwater streams running and smearing on her flummoxed cheeks against his chest; the stench of sex on her bedsheets, however dull to his nostrils from acclimation; the passing of her young mother by way of cancer, colorectal; the endless painful nights of moaning until a final waste away to nothing; the writhing and weeping; the *tip-tap-tap-tip*, hrm; the whirring of her ceiling fan, paired with that low static hum that stayed steady between sobs or gasps; the knowing there was nothing left but to remember what

was sweet and leave the rest surrendered to repression; the cursing *tap* slipping off her *tip* tongue on and on, still holding her.

3-9

Suddenly lucid, Orson takes note of the score as read aloud by his adoring mother. Despite the distraction of his inwardness, he realizes that for a long while he was having some good fun. He makes a point of acknowledging how happy he is to be spending time with Mrs. Iphig, remembering how few and far between such happy moments can be. *Tip-tip-tap*. He witnesses her breath becoming more shallow, with her chest expanding and contracting to greater extremes with each draw of air. *Tap...tip...tippy-tap*. Just a year ago, she would have been more spry at this point, even in spite of her knee growing more lame and acutely pained round after round. We only know health once it has slipped away from us. That's the innocence of the body.

4-9

He realizes, in tandem with his epiphany that he was having fun and that the fun was good, that when the score reached eleven, the game would be over. Orson didn't want the game to be over. He wanted to play forever. We all wish such finite things would reach into eternity. Maybe they do. Not in that fantastical way we would like, though. If only all of life could be the *tip-tip* tapping of this floaty, white fleck against a field of green atop the boathouse, atop the

Hudson, on top the world on its flesh and crusts of earthly layer. Wood was earth, and water was water, and earth was earth.

Mrs. Iphig limps, hobbling really, to barely graze the ball with the tip of her paddle, sending the thing flying to her left (our north, universally speaking), with that *tip* or *tap*, reflecting off the window panes which provide a perfect view of the far off Tappan Zee, then *rhrrrr* rolling under the back-to-wall black couch of the boat club's sacred recreation room. Point, Orson. She's all bent over now about to reach underneath into the floordust and thick sheets of cobweb.

—Quit it, ma. Let me.

—Oh...oh..., said Mrs. Iphig, weary and retreating. Forgive me.

—Cut it out.

Orson reaches deep under, feels his hand bathed in dust. Grunting and recoiling from the depths, he wipes gossamer webstrands off the pearl's roundness.

—What was that score, said Mrs. Iphig. Four to eight?

—Sounds right to me, said Orson.

4-8

Four and eight were good numbers, Orson thought. You could put a couple fours into eight, and you could cut up eight to get a couple of fours. Mutual exchange.

Volleys began again. Tinny, hollow bursts of cannon. Shrill little bounces. His mother was fantastic at keeping them up until the two of them exchanged the ball at breakneck speed.

She could keep up until a hiccup. Stray shot to the corner. She hadn't the spryness to leap and reach for it in time. Orson often unthinkingly used this to his advantage in years prior. That was just how the game was played—with mixups and angles unexpected. But now he was thinking. He thought about a lover. He thought about health. He noticed his mother fading. Her knees were stiff. Her game was slower. Besides the volley, which was pure lightning. He wanted to feel the electricity.

7-9

Mrs. Iphig often won those sorts of volleys, due for the most part to her unbreakable concentration. She couldn't rush to the other side of the table, but she could hold the paddle steady and push it forward with impressive consistency. Iron consistency. So steady it was, when Orson's mind was rubber, receiving impact, yet bending and wandering. Wavering in his mind. Where would he be at the summer's end? Would his mother still live where she was, and make it to the club herself? If he were far, could he still take care of her? And how acute the care? He would be at the academy. She would be running low on retirement funds. He would be down south in the jungle of stone. She would be here or, though he prays not, in a home. He would be learning to properly discharge a service pistol. She would be, God willing, off the bottle. I could go on.

9-10

In his heart he knew that this would be their last game. He wondered if he was losing on purpose. She deserved the last laugh, after all, she allowed him his first. Was that dishonest? Maybe he was being somewhat dishonest, throwing the game that way. But he still wasn't sure if he was throwing. He was just there. He was in it. It was. Each volley was love. A love so finite. So small. Slivers of exchange. He could see her eyes follow the blurring thing with such an intent, it could only be described as love. A love with such intensity. She gave him everything and in her he saw every breath of life, each moment lived flowing to eternity. Maybe he didn't think that—*eternity*. Not that word in particular. He just felt it. You can feel forever. When your skin stands upright and feels like a deep breath of some holy substance. It can't be spoken aloud, but you know.

11-10

Match point, Mrs. Iphig.



Here I am again. Middle of the lot, like every year. I've got flowers for you this time, since I forgot before and all. I'll just put them down here. It's a nice day out. Warm, but breezy. You can hear the trees rustling. Sounds like a tide coming in. Hope you've been well, ma. Don't know if I told you, but...well it's been a year so I wouldn't have gotten the chance yet. Only found out earlier today, silly me. Anyways, big case coming up. You'd hate it if I talked details. Every time we talk and drugs or sex come up, you start covering your ears. Always saying you

don't understand my generation. Fair. Not like I get yours either. But this'll be a big one. Huge ring. Distribution. Night life. Doing some espionage. Pretty risqué. Promise I'll stay safe. Work's a silly thing to come and talk to you about though. You hate work. Tell me to quit whenever I bring it up. I guess there's not much to talk about besides what's happening. Work's all that's happening. You're still here. That's what's happening for you. Being here. Your plot next to mine. Never understood why you bought it without talking to me first. Headstone is sweet though. Nice engraving of St. George. You always tell me when you see St. George fighting the dragon, you think of me. Didn't think you would peg me as a saint, with how much you tell me I'm sick in the head. You're funny like that. Bipolar, or something. Not like I'm a doctor. You either tell me I'm a dolt or start preaching at me. I remember the last time you were talking to me, you were saying something about the end of the world. What was it. You said everything was going to be okay, 'cause once the world ends God'll turn all the clocks backwards and rewrite it all. He'd go through history righting every wrong until there was no more sin. You could see bullets flying back into of robber's guns, lies being made truths, atomic blasts being absorbed into neat little pods of iron and flying up into airplanes to be safely stored away before being dismantled, gas chambers sucking all the poison out of people, guards telling prisoners they're free to go and walking them out the way they came in, dead countries being rebuilt, dead cultures being renewed, weapons being uninvented. Then you said it would all return to nothing, and we could all finally get some peace and quiet. I wonder if that's what the Church would say about it. What would I know? Not like I'm a priest.

Love you, ma. See you soon.

The platform is above ground, and thank cuntin Christ for summer's breeze. If it were winter, I'd be walking up to freeze and die a fetal corpse. Corpse of Christ. Or maybe not, seeing as I never leave for work coatless, regardless of forecast. In the graveyard hours, you never know how coldly the wind will bite. The turnstile here needs a swipe. Thin plastic thing wiggling loose in my purse. False-leather black satchel thing with shit thrown in orderless. My fingers feel a metal nail-file, an unopened tube of lipstick, a plastic pot of lip balm in the shape of a cupcake, a half-torn bag of honey-flavored cough drops which rustle 'round in their wrappings, a tin of mints rattling, an array of velveteen scrunchies, and at last a tweed coin purse with silver latches at the top, which I clutch and hold before my eyes to open—careful not to cause spillage. With metro card in one hand and purse agape in the other, I start my swiping. Must be swiped again, no luck. Once more sounds an affirmative ring. Though just twice feels wrong. Sick number, two. Number of shit. Worth another \$2.90 not to be shit. God. One turnstyle to the right. Swiping. First try. Feels wrong again. Too simple. Feels like burning. Warm urine. Another. It'll be perfect this time for sure. Once more to the right, trying for the third and last. Swiping. No read. Swiping. Swipe again. Swiping to the ring and *oh!* What ecstasy that perfect perfect perfect thing. That father, son, and holy *sing* for me, the spirit. I'll push through the merry-go-round, but *oh* so clumsy me—*shhlcickclickclick!*—my purse my purse my purse. Tumbling, *oh!* Woe woe woe is me. Knees to the cold floor. What luck to be pinching pennies at this hour. Problem of numbers. It was two tries at turnstyle one, then only one at turnstyle two, followed by three at the third. That's six attempts nested in three turnstyles, but without the final nine no peace is mine the act is not perfect. I knew since I was little that acts outside of this structure were unsalvational at best and ruinous at worst. Three-six-nine. Gathering change back into my purse, the trains will wait for me up there if I'm lucky.

Pulling in with screeching wail and steaming exhales. It seems alive to me. A tunneling animal, living off these insects. Parasitic or symbiotic. Undecided. Two rings of affirmation as the creature's gills slide open. Its insides are nearly empty, besides one hooded moth at the far end opposite of me. The chest cavity is surprisingly well-lit, the garish whiteness of it notwithstanding. I had never thought to put up so many advertisements inside of myself, but I suppose you never know who could look inside. Maybe when I die, they'll cut me open to learn about an exciting new waterproof mascara, or an affordable college in-state that provides classes online. Maybe that sort of scholastic flexibility is just what my mortician would need to change career-paths. Or maybe they would be happy coating their eyelashes to look pretty for the corpses. Next time Edward comes inside me, maybe he'll learn about a new banking service with such fantastic interest rates that he would finally feel the requisite fiscal confidence to have a child with me. If only his cock had eyes to read the offer with.

On the fleshy walls in front of me, there's an ad for a dating service targeted at lesbians. Praying mantises. Is that what I am? Am I? Me? There was one of them in my dream last night. Lovely dream, it was. First there was a picnic basket laid out all for me in this wide-open prairie with puffy puff puffs of lavender out as far as I could see. Brother was there, and we ate those long things of bread. The ones the French eat. Frog bread. Bread bread...*baguette!* One of those. He had a bread knife. One he always had at home with the illegal ivory handle, plucked from his exploits in Europe one summer. Cut each piece and spread margarine on the top. Caressed my lips with the butter knife so I could lick off the saltcream flavor. Then there was a second act, in which we drove a winding single-lane road on the side of a mountain overlooking the river. The valley opened up to us and flocks of geese flew their arrows across the duskpink skyline. One of those old cars too. Like the nineteen twenties. I looky look looked at him, but his eyes were

focused squarely on the road. That was fine. Only wanted to know he was there. In the third act we picked daisies outside the childhood home to bring in to mother. *Oh* mother at one mere moment, merrily our fingers touched, his manish grip against my mousey shyness. I blushed and turned and felt some warm wet leaking something down my thigh and said *oh brother, let's forget*. It was all lovely up to that point, before the fourth act. Four is a disgusting number. Filth. Chinese understand this well. It sounds like death to them. They won't even build a fourth floor on buildings. I wouldn't either if I had any say in it. If I was in charge of buildings. But inside the house there was my mother by the fireplace, and my father beside her. As we approached, leaving the door wide open, father began to pop at every seam of skin, tearing tendons and spurting pops of blood. His flesh began to change color into this sickly corpsegreen, and beneath his meat there grew a shining carapace. His arms were split open by great front claws, like twin scythes swinging. From his cheeks, there popped out these wriggling mandibles. There was hissing and buzzing. And he arms together to pray. To say grace. *Dear Lord, thank you for this food we are about to eat. La-la-la. Twee-diddle-dee. In the name of your son Jesus Christ, amen.* Then mother's body was all torn up, her head was maimed and eaten, and her limbs crumpled to the floor as the genuine Persian rug below soaked up with blood in its porousness. I was so so so worried at it all, I turned back for brother's comfort, but he was nowhere. The door was wide open, so I ran there and saw outside Mount Everest covered in sheets of ice and snow. There was brother curled up dead, with his climbing gear in a mess around him and the length of rope tied to his carabiner all wrapped around his neck, strangling him. Waking up, I realized Edward had turned up the window-propped air conditioning unit. He must have torn the blankets off me turning away.

Cold, so cold. Coolness fills the carcass, with all the thin-metal cooing it brings. *Cuckoo* goes the trainbells in between halts and goings-again. I thought the whole car was empty due to my shyness, which often bolts my head straight forward in place out of some fear I would meet the gaze of another, but with newfound confidence, or perhaps more aptly identified as carelessness or a sense of safelywarm nostalgia, I now can crane my neck in both directions—proceeding to do so.

The other end. The hooded moth. Black figure. Obscured by distance. But he seems to be looking my way. That phantom. Averts now and then, though must be catching glimpses. Our eyes both pivot in a pendular motion, proceeding to catch one another for intervals as long as five or ten seconds, before breaking again.

The sun is creeping up over the ground's teeth with all their venom. Great black dentures which hover over the hovel world. Hell is made by man himself when he refuses heaven. How they catch the great star's light and turn that fiery devil's orange.

I can feel him looking at me. I can hear his hand grip the intestines of metal, hoisting himself. I can see him, out of my peripheral, stepping closer. Rushing.

Undoing something, nearly in front of me. Great beast tugged by its helper. *Oh please no*, recoil, recoil, turn. *Ready or not!* Fleshrod growing, rude and glowing off the sun. Casts a shadow on me. Tightly backing into my seat, to push right through and come out the other side. But its surface does not concede to me. Just look down. Look down. Look down. *Please*. No, oh. Clutching my black puffer-coat. Hearing huffing, panting, *breathing* for sake of Christ of cunt of cunt of each second spent *prayingprayingprayingplease Lord—shit, above—make amends to make it end to make me send me somewhere else*. He's there still glaring still with that exalted *in-through-the-mouth-out-through-the-nose* act of respiration cycling. Grunting and gnashing.

God—fuck—how you test me *so so so*...oh...the spray of dew deflowers the breast of the puffer, and melts down its side. He there, groaning, snare pole of fingers handles the thing back to its cave. Roaring. Stuffing. Muted whines. Hollering. Backs away.

Cuckoo, cuckoo!

Doors chime and slide, so he shimmys away off this stop, replaced by a massive crowd of commuters draped in all the regalia: all sorts of women draped in their affordable-yet-fashionable Zara blazers, blonde hussies wearing their pearl-lined Vivienne Westwood necklaces, angularly-faced men stepping in with their contrastingly smooth Rick Owens horsehair sneakers, handbags or purses with brandings of Louis Vuitton, Gucci, or Prada, those of stature wearing sleek Burberry button-downs, giggling schoolgirls in inch-thick platforms of Prada, the wafting twirling scent of Miss Dior Rose N'Roses Eau de Toilette, working girls in pretty little pencil skirts sewn in the name of Saint Laurent, hooded Balenciaga sweatshirts shouting in some nigh unreadable youth culture typeface, navy herringbone trousers produced by the Brooks Brothers themselves, fluted long skirts of denim pre-tarnished by Marc Jacobs, shapely dangling earrings plucked from the mind of Giorgio Armani, and funky black Fendi sunglasses, oh so thick in the frames. They all filled the space around me, some of them staring at the mess and averting their eyes at a moment's notice. This is a place where things are to be ignored.

The sun is hitting some divine angle, between the heads of yuppies. The whole costumed car starts glowy glow glowing gold as if Midas flew in to graze every corner. Gracing every inch, every surface grounding holy luminescence. God. Shit. Grant me strength. Lord, damned. Forcing eyes shut. So bright it blinds.



Strangely enough, the front door is unlocked. I shut the metal slab behind me with the weight of my back leaning, my hands below grazing the cool parts exposed by paint chippings to reveal a sullen bronze-bell hue. Gaze through the eyeport for a fisheye view of my building's hallway, catch a glimpse of the haystack welcome mat tinged at the tweeds with cakey mud. Close the brass slot and lock-unlock the door three times, each with a greater sense of importance, more significant than the last. I throw my coat on the kitchen floor which happens to serve as the foyer as well, nearly gagging as the smell of dried semen hooks into my nostrils. Wiping sweat off my palms and onto my scrubs. Tearing those off, throwing them beside the jacket before a rush to the washroom.

All I have are these steaming rays berating me. They bounce off my pale skin and leave their bright-pink traces. Irritation. This scalding is my greatest comfort. No matter what happens out there, I'll still have some peace in the warm womb of the washroom. Unbaren, like my own. Somewhere there is, for me, a guarantee of peace. Restfulness. *Slapslapslap!* Slapping against my face splashing lovely little dew drops all over hazel tiles, their transparency warping the opaque surface in the refraction of light. *Sshhcscchschh*. Scraping and clawing the scalp to send my winter wonderland unto the basin's running stream below, bits of snow sticking to my toes, nails, and places between. *Scrubsscrubscrub*. All around head, shoulders, knees, and toes—*kneesandtoeskneesandtoes*—like the *la-la-la* songs of childhood when the furniture was all made miniature just for me and after each ride home on the bus Father would remind me not to fool with boys or even look at them, let alone speak to them. Reminding me that I was his daughter as we waited for brother to return from his after-school activities, which at the time must have been try-outs for his middle school basketball team, the Samson Seagulls, who quite

frankly never accomplished much of anything by way of baskets, yet still sported a stylish mascot, that being a long-haired bird standing upright like a cross between a surfer boy and a beatnik. Samson the Seagull would spell doom for the team when, during the first game of the regional playoffs, a freak accident involving a pyromaniac schoolboy's backpack full of lighter fluid and a drunken policeman father's service pistol, caused Samson's long shag to burst aflame. The game was canceled, the Seagull's were eliminated, and the boy behind the mask of Samson suffered third-degree burns. Although the team was distraught at their technical disqualification, the whole student body, my brother included, were ecstatic to learn that the extenuating circumstances pushed the faculty to suspend classes for a week to allow the students a moment of recovery from that traumatic event, and to mourn the death of their beloved mascot—eventually to be reborn as Samson the Stork, who had a long mane made of rubber and a sack of Samson Storks t-shirts always at the ready to be thrown at a cloying audience.

Lathering shampoo with the friction of my palms, I catch a whiff of sweet lavender, like the scent of the body wash brother used before mother identified it as the source of her allergic reactions, which resulted in great red hives she refused to quit scratching at until they bled down onto the bleak-gray family room sofa. Spreading it down my locks and rinsing it out, I grab a porous shower sponge, wringing the coldness of yesterday's water out in time with the great puffy clumps of hairsuds, like the white rapids of a waterfall butting against the stone it cohabitates with. The saffron shower gel drips atop the sponge like drizzling honey. Watering at the mouth, I nearly take a bite before a self-rebuke of three Hail Mary's. *Bless't, blesstz, blessed art thou among among amongst women*, out loud like that in a murmur. *Oh brother...*rubbing semen-white conditioner deep into my flaking scalp and leaving it in a while to turn the faucet ten degrees colder counter-clockwise—knowing too well that the heat would dry my skin and

expedite the wrinkling process—to scrub twin cheeks in swirling circles the neutral scald of Cetaphil cleanser which rested on the shower caddy, that swinging canopy dangling from the spigot. Letting the lukewarm wash my worries away. A new baptism. I soak in it far too long, just standing there to savor every drop before I turn it all off. *Aquaskepsis*, Edward would call it.

Crumpling sideways the shower curtain, which bore the print of Gustav Moreau's *L'Apparition*, I step over the tub's wall and onto a molding bath mat, taking in some dank swampish musk. Having forgotten the switch for the fan, the room is thick with steam. Sweatdews drip from chin to chest. Below the sink I retrieve round cotton pads, soaking one in a Vitamin-C toner and swiping it across every inch of my face in quickly followed centrifugal lines, some of the fluid sticking to my eyelashes, glossing my vision with an oily smear. The world is a blur of vaseline. Twisting the dropper off my serum bottle, a mixture of collagen and hyaluronic acid from the brand, *Un Chien Andalou le Naturel*, which claims to be deeply hydrating, I push two drops into my cupped hand and spread it all around my skin. More catches on my eyelashes, this time beginning to scald around the whites. Squinting, fumbling, and knocking product off the sinks surface, I eventually grasp my anti-aging, overnight facial cream, which I *pat pat pat* down until it ceases to feel like a spreading slime. I can barely see. The light fixtures above the mirror have halos around them. Nearly impossible to look away. Vision fixed. A world of oil. The world, so cold. A chill drifts in draftways. The bulbs above bear some beheaded thing. Bright blue eyes and cleanly shaven. Beautiful aquiline nose with unflared nostrils. Thin lips grinning.

—I miss you, I say.

But he says nothing. He just keeps on smiling on, until he returns to the light.

Shaking my head and getting ready, I reach for the towel rack and the hair dryer below the sink in unison, splitting my attention. But then—*schllpp!* Tricked by dualism, the bath mat slides beneath me and brings me tumbling down, down, down. *Oh dear.* The dryer's chord wraps all around me like a great black boa constrictor. Dearest goodness. *Auuughhhchhh.* Bruising my forearm. Nearly hit my head. Pry the tangled mess from its grip on my thigh and torso. Ought to clean myself up despite the pain's throbbing red.

Steam billows out the door and disperses into the hallway, being swept along by the current of air conditioning into Edward and I's bedroom. There is a great mass on the queen-sized bed. He is there, still sleeping, seeing as he works hours of the day meant for real human beings—the ensouled. I crawl into bed and press my cold nakedness against his warmth, rousing his half-conscious mumblings and groans. Hands run through the softness of his hair for comfort before noticing and recoiling at an absence. Above his right ear. I can't feel the stitches. No bump from the scar even. Fingering his temple more, Edward, now waking, twitches away from my touch.

—What? He asks. What is it?

—Your scar. From the accident.

—Just let me sleep. Long night.

—Oh well...

I toss and turn around anxiously, clutching sheets so close to my cheeks they pick up a thick layer of moisturizer. Trying to force my eyes shut. It smells like something. Some hint of iron in the hair. Wonder if I'm bleeding, but no, I would surely have noticed before. Wonder if he's bleeding, but no, his stitches must have been removed by the doctors. Or maybe I forgot,

and he was hit on the left side instead. But how could I have forgotten such a thing. At least his warmth is here under the sheets, the only safe place left.

—I love you, I say met only by the whirring ceiling fan and dim dawn light.

The river shimmers as it is often prone to shine. Crossing the great span to Harlem. The stream of the same name, bridge as well. All natural feats of god and scramblings of construction men bear namesakes in fraternity. The edge is on, scalding me. Mind a'run with great speed rocks. Rushing world around me. Water flows at doubled pace. Great iron things flash before me, painted tarblack, winedark, bloodred, skyblue, waspyellow, posiepink, dyingsunorange, ferngreen, creakingcyan, woundmaroon, and so on. As if any of those hues *mean* a thing. Dead end of the deadbeat aesthetic. Reflecting on absolutely nothing, save for impotence. Impish poking at the dying flames of lust. The lowest and most common Aphrodite. Barred from all heavenly. Pounding, poking at, and piercing my weary heart—what throbs and palpitates beneath flesh, bone, or cartilage. Must walk quickly, lest the fear takes me. That great fear which eats at all in its nothingness. Angst or dread or what else.

Passing by the avenue anointed firstly. The street which leaps qualitatively in service of all other avenues of identity. Only when the first is done with, may the fallen repetition of avenues two-through-hundreds bear their fallen meaning. Pacing, swaying on my path, though still hugging the river. Some bright orange wall with a Keith Haring piece emblazoned on it:

CRACK IS WACK

Lots of bodies intertwined and squirming about. A great cross-eyed skeleton handing out a bill marked \$0 to a dying populace. A bowl piece to be smoked. Classic trappings of that sort, labeled *NYC 1986*. Haring died of that faggot flu four years later. Couldn't stop *fucking* I suppose. That's what I've always hated about faggots, either those I'm forced to teach at Columbia, or the peers I was forced to cohabitate with at Williams. No self control. A whole

community dropping like flies around you and nobody thinks to lock the belt. A little chastity never hurt anybody. Just a complete rejection of reality. You would have to be brain-dead retarded to die of AIDS. Only five or six more years and they'd have a medication for it. Inhibition is a virtue. Or maybe there's some beauty in all that death. Maybe it stands as another proof for my theory of the negative-aesthetic quality—perhaps even the negative-ethical—that these judgements extend far below into the void, yet still come out unscathed in character. There is some sublime beauty in the corpse pile. There is some notion of duty in the pogrom. A debt owed to our fellow man to be repaid in any way seen fit. Death, even. There's something poetic about a holocaust. Read properly, one may assume that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz due to the very fact that there is no act more poetic to achieve, save for the absolute annihilation of the subject. The negative-aesthete glosses on the sight of mass graves with glee. The negative-ethicist reviews every last finely-detailed documentation regarding the detainees and employees of Dachau or Belzec or Majdanek, and finds everything to be in order—every man being served what is owed to him in the greater cosmos of karmic duty—and knowing that the ethical sublates the aesthetic, he would find this display worthy of fanfare or symphony. If they'd let me make the mural I'd draw a whole lot of happy cartoon corpses in striped pajamas under my own propagandist pop-art text:

AIDS IS FACT

Ipsa facto, crack is wack-o. Breeze guide me along. Marcus Garvey park. Written in New York Akkurat. Some Jamaican. *Universal Negro Entombment Conglomeration*. First the fags need a piece up, then the negros need a whole park in their honor. That's the name of the game, isn't it?

A whole lot of people shouting, *me me me*, like fucking insects. They think it means something. They think all of their distant identities, symbols in a careless order, have some true inner content. A substance to define. But it's all nothing. Blackskinned or white. Fucking men or women. It's just nothing. No beauty here. Useless people fighting over empty things. Great erection in the center. Rising phallus with a gazebo at the top—spiral staircase downways, like a ribcage around the rusting church bell.

Passing by the Apollo, in search of greater Bacchus. Crowds disperse and sway around me. Women in spandex, men in tracksuits. There's a mob out front the head shop, hollering and yelping. *Batty boy!* Shouted in patois. Spit flung in bursts of consonants. At least we're on the same page with regards to homosexuals. I'll slip past, just looking for something to calm me down.

The inside is lit poorly, the air smelling like fermented dust. There's a few mystery men crowded around the checkout counter, which is covered in bullet-proof plexiglass with a two-tiered slot to take or receive product and a speaker for the cashier to talk into. Heard there was a shooting around here a month back. Mysteriosos, faces obscured by either hooded sweatshirts or black ski masks, aren't even buying anything. They just stand there around an unpowered cooler filled with soft drink cans and pre-workout blends. Not even a word from them, only a brooding loiter. I step past them and ask the cashier for a joint, sliding my credit card into the slot. He takes the card, slides me the merchandise, and I leave without the card.

Struck on the shoulder by one of the men outside, nearly falling as I stumble.

—Outta here bwoy. Jah know ye ah vampaya. Skoom

—Easy nuh, easy nuh, easy nuh.

—Wah?

I scurry in silence. No point in starting anything. The more I run the sooner their patois fade into the crowd of indistinguishable chirping. Auditory equivalent of a gaussian blur. I realize I hadn't asked the shopkeep for a light. Here begins the begging ritual. *Excuse me? Light please? Just a moment, if you would. You smoke?*

Eventually a pretty young white girl stops for me and pulls out a rusty zippo with an engraving of Tweety-bird as a Vietnam War veteran. Setting one end of the jay ablaze and blowing on it intermittently, I squint and notice that the girl is Morticia Fumesborg, a student from one of my seminars on early 20th century existentialism. She wrote a great final paper on Heidegger's *being-towards-death*, which I much agreed with. Her idea was to universalize the very individualized dread theorized by Martin, pushing the term *world-towards-death*. Pointed eschatological implications. I choose not to acknowledge the happenstance, offering quick thanks, but something in her hazel eyes screams recognition. It was then I realized that I had already packed my zippo, and that the entire exchange was pointless. But still, it got me thinking about Columbia...



Busy campus for this time of year. Patterns on the plaza, squares within cubes. Flicking a roach onto the steps of the library. Greek or Roman pillars extend a mile up. Gaggles of students or faculties laughing, smoking, gagging, choking all around. Trees beside the structure scrape the sky with their pom poms.

Feeling smooth. Asking around. How's it going? What's it to ya'? No answers. Must smell it on me. Hah. Mean folks. Purty buildings, though. Green thatching on the tops looking

liverly. Phew. Birdies skippin' round the'r fountain. Lookin' all glazed 'round e'ry spot to see. I start laughing, myself. What'a world. Playground for preps. Fags. Study'n things that don't matter. No truth to any of it. It's all just what gets you off. Maybe the true is just whatever gets y'goin'. Couldn't care either way. I'll show 'em truth. Or maybe I'll ne'er see this place again.

Keep goin' 'till I hit another park on the river. *Hudson Riverside*. Been walking hours. Just spacing out. Life's better when you don't have to think. Think about nothin'. Sun's coming down now. Hitting the golden point again. God's light shining on the surface. Nearly blinding.

Start twisting my legs through the bushes. Skate park here. Rolling screeches against cement pits. Park's almost empty, besides those kids. Oxfords snapping twigs. My foot pushes up and stops against a mass. Oversized caterpillar with a man inside. Sleeping bag. He's reeking with an L.L. Bean backpack zipped up next to him. My being here's not waking him, strangely enough. Like a babe, undisturbed. Helpless. There's something exciting about vulnerability, isn't there. Prohibition immanent to it. That those of strength ought not defile. But I've already left into the pit. Full dark of the valley of death. Time for another leap in quality. New determinations in my character.

Lean down, thumbing degrees of the tool deep in my satchel. Unzipping his belongings: a change of shirt, boxers, empty pill bottle prescribed to a woman's name, prepaid flip-phone, pair of undarned gloves, a ziplock bag containing a glass pipe, a matchbook, and another nested bag of clear-white crystals. Humorous exhale at the thought of patiently lighting and holding a match at the underside of the implement. Desperate. The sunrays hit their perfect point, blasting beam of gold on the greenery around us both, and giving life to his pale, starving face. His lids are twitching in tandem. Making quick work of it, I stick my box cutter deep into the fleshy underside of his chin, drawing a line from one side of his neck to the other. The glossing crimson

spurts and flows as his eyes fly open for a moment and fade from surprise to absolute emptiness. Lightning panic strikes the edge of my skin as I undress him, to know him, to be him. Dawning his dirty clothes with the collar everso damp with tingling mass of corpuscles. Use my discarded sports jacket to clean the blade in preparation of withdrawal.

I leave the scene to the end of the park by the shimmering water, with his backpack lung over my shoulder. Taking respite on a park bench to examine the crystals. Gilded light flies right through their foggy interiors. Familiar. Swooney gave us something similar during a deadline-crunch for our theses. Crushed it up into little pill capsules. Never smoked it though. Explained the half-life to us, as he was often prone to know those things. Eight hours or more. Didn't sleep for days. Can't remember the dosage, not that I care. There's nothing else to care about.

Flame cracks from the steel head of our beloved Mother Mary, convected to blown glass which bears her fury—glowing. Say a prayer now that I've the time, for all that's certain is the coming night's length.

Edward's clanging pots juts my spine from the bed, catching a glimpse of my rats-nest bun in the mirror of my faux-victorian, walnut vanity with the bracket feet and cresting around its ovular glass. *Whywhywhat* does he need to be doing at this hour with those. Like I'm not the one to cook. Undoing tense bobby-pinnings, letting the mass hang down, I'll give my fingers a frantic lap of tongue and try to keep my bangs from frizzing with a glaze of salival slick. Scurry out from the hall to the kitchen seeing Ed hunched on all fours with his head in the cabinet beside the oven.

A guttural *ahem* does little to distract him, as he persists in his digging through clinking cookware, up until the lid of an old dutch oven bounces on the black and white checkered-tile floor, rolling around like a hoop without a stick, avoiding contact with the evening last's laundry which appears to have been pushed halfway underneath our makeshift breakfast nook (consisting of a matching set of black rockabilly-diner-vinyl twin chairs and rounded-edge square table), and careening back around to strike Ed between the asscheeks of his jeans. Startled, he finally retreats to show his sandy-blond mange for a moment.

—What was that? Edward squints.

—Well it wasn't quite German, and it's not exactly Belgian.

He hangs his head below his torso and gazes backwards between his legs.

—*The Dutch*, he groans with ire.

Dawdling over the same crescent path taken by the lid, though diverting to pull one chair out by its back and planting myself behind Ed's ass—flashing to me an impression of an existential episode of Mister Ed, in which the stallion questions whether or not he could actually be a donkey, as opposed to a horse—I open up my own line of questioning.

—What are you doing down there, Ed?

—Just looking. Not sure.

He starts to cram the mess of kitching trappings back in the cabinet, close its door which is still ever-so-slightly-ajar as propped by a panhandle sticking out in the wrong direction, and correct his disheveled floor-crawling posture, grabbing the counter top with one hand and the surface of the commode with the other. Meanwhile, I'm humming along to the swing of the marching band brass blaring in my head, along with some lyrical verse I choose not to articulate:

*A horse is a horse
Of course, of course
and no one can talk
to a horse, of course*

*That is, of course,
unless the horse
is the famous Mister...*

—Shouldn't you be at work by now? Ed asks. Your scrubs are all dirty, and what's that mold smell all over them?

—Dr. Abrams told me to take the day off. But I wouldn't be working these hours anyways. The scrubs...don't ask me about it.

—Day off? Ed's tonally bewildered but physically mute, leaning nonchalant against the countertop. What'd she give you that for?

There's this black burning smell filling the air, accompanied by orchestral crackling and crinkling plastic wrapping in unison with a bread tie, by the will of God—shit—coming undone. I *click clack* clammer next to Ed, with my hand ascending to the cabinets above, and descending with a piece of preparatory clattering china to the counter below.

—Fainted, I say slamming the door above my head. *He* said it was a liability. Terence.

—What'd you faint for?

—*For?* I spaz out from the silverware drawer, nearly throwing a butterknife at the wall as Edward recoils. What does anyone *faint* for? It's involuntary. Like I *chose* to faint. As if anyone goes out to work one day hoping, praying, *ohhhh um I hope I get to faint todayandfallandcrackmyheadopen* the same way you wish for a husband or a baby. Do you think I'm just retarded? Erm...well...I was injecting. Thought too hard about it. You know how it is when you see something violent, like a cut or something. Penetration. If you think too hard about it you feel it on yourself, or your head j-j-just starts spinning. The back of my neck felt all warm like it was about to pop and then I just woke up in a cot.

Ding! Ed grabs the butter knife so previously thrown, makes his way to the fridge, and takes a questionably long time looking for the butter (even though there's a spot right at the top *made for the express purpose of containing butter*).

—I didn't mean to get on your case or anything, Ed spoke nonchalantly as he began to spread his dairy on two blackened slabs.

It was then that I realized something was missing. Being drawn to his hands by the sparkle of this silverware, I saw his ring finger naked—exactly where his wedding band would be. Trading gold for silver. *Where where where*. Why, oh why. That pretty pretty thing with my name so gently prescribed upon the surface in a flowery cursive spelled all *Allisa Antigone*, all

gone and no good no good he could forget the band he gave me lame legged by the waterfall basin in the crispness of spring's bloom out on a trip north to take in the scenic mountains round the Catskills, gone by a day of hiking the Blackhead down to the Kaaterskills, with all the birdies chirping in a wall of noise so deafening it felt like the first time you could hear but you heard *everything*, and when he spoke of *will you's* I returned with a simple how-do-you-do *I do*, or I will I want I must want it after all that's all a woman is is waiting or longing, dreaming of band and baby to be baptized in the last frontier of ethics available (the home in all its comfort), to express the only bond we are afforded in this pitiful life more pithy than pretty though still we thank our Lord, God—fuck—we may give birth the gift of some commitment as we committed then to renting refuge to rest from a fine young couple named Mr. Penia and Mrs. Poros (the wife choosing to keep her maiden, Mrs. Poros being a loose libertine lady informed maybe by the second or third waves of mainline feminism, though most likely the second due to her apparent age), a docked boat with a kingsize bed beneath the deck in the cabin's comfort, which we would return to after a long day in the forest to consummate it all with a fuck and in the morning strip the bed to leave the sheets in a bin designated for post-guestial laundering and whatnot or whatever, then leaving the keys on the table of the breakfast nook in the galley before getting back in our rental for a nigh-three-hour drive south on the I-87, listening through a catalogue from *Please Please Me* to *Rubber Soul* with vocal accompaniment from the both of us as his ringed finger, in chorus with the unadorned, grasped the wheel with such firmness.

—Edward. Edward. Edward.

—Whht ih i'th? He replies with a mouthful of scorched earth.

—Thh'the...mine...our...your...

I rush up to him, slapping the toast to crumble floorward, and make a pincer hold on his ring finger, my face close to his in absolute shock and his in some sort of aloof gloss like the gleaming eye of a cognitive gimp.

—The ring, Ed. Engagement, Ed. *Wherewherewherewhatwhywhy!*

Gripping groping grievingly harder squeezing more intense to catch his wince and slap of my wrist away his stepping backwards. He starts scrambling as he did up the Blackhead, only quicker in the widely known sequence of phone-wallet-keys. I'll catch him catch catch him 'til he's all and caught that scum that dunce that liar I'll slap the top of his head my battery flurry of palms while he struggles arm after arm on a light coat's dawning, slipping to the floor and still with closed fists knocking on the door of his thighs and pelvis striking some surprising tumescence bulging *eeeeuuughhhhhdisgusting* men all the same all the same bet he took it off for a late night with some Loosey Liu in lieu of loving me me me me me me me me me *ueeeghhhhhhhhhhgrrorhesafaggot* cant get his rocks off or on with the safety of a lady who loves him just wants some fling of filth to ease the pain of actually caring or maybe it was the injury all those months ago when he fell on the subway platform, knocked on his side and cracked his head after a hoodlum rushed past with an officer close behind with initiative to crack down once and for all on the fare evasion epidemic, if only they'd all just shoot the blacks right then and there my Ed wouldn't have had his soul leak out his brain my hubby-to-be wouldn't have his hallow shell filled with faggy fancies for *cockcockcock* if it weren't for all those no-good niggers they let run around if it weren't for all the scum and slime all slipping into every crevice and oozing if only all the scum was washed away maybe Eddy would be the same again and maybe then I wouldn't have to bring my puffer coat to the cleaners.

—Off! Ed’s turning the doorknob and pushing me back through a barrage of punches landing on his extended arms. G’te fuck off me!

He slams the door behind and I tip-toe to the peephole to watch his blur smear out of sight. *Hmmgmgggghumming.* Calm sounds. Guttural. *Mmmmmmmmmmm.* Christ—fuckingfuckingfucking—almighty please Christ of shit. Helphelp help heavy breaths heaving chest helpless hopeful cuts to haughty thoughts to herd my mind to calmness please. The breath in breath out breath in breath out breath in breath out breath innnnnnnnnnggggghfuck! Thud thud thud my knuckles tense assaulting denting chipped bronze door and over and over and leaving spurts and cuts of flesh and blood to tear the skintarp cover of metacarpophalangeal joints andhhhuuuughgaaaaahhhhhfuckfuckfuck the pain fashion a kitchen rag hanging over the oven door handle into a bandage wrapped around my fist.

He’s gone now and there’s no point. No point to anything. I run to the second bedroom of the apartment where he keeps his papers, designated *Edward’s Study*. Where he writes his little fantasies. Gazing over the manuscripts, a few completed short stories, an incomplete speculative science fiction novel which started this whole thing with me. The madness. One story called *Panopticopea*, accepted for publication with the independent outlet Hard Press, about the succession of Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, and Arizona circa 2175, all to form one conglomerate hypernation, The C.A.N.O.W. Sovereignty of Planned Communities based on the principle of absolute surveillance, attempting to revive the ostensible miscarriage of the Floridian Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, now injected the new reich into the hearth and rhineland of Walt Disney’s America. There would be no word spoken, no business transaction, no traffic accident, no phone call, no coitus engaged in, no father-son game of catch, no meal eaten—be it breakfast, lunch, or dinner— no exam taken, no bowel movement that

would not be recorded with one-hundred-percent accuracy and broadcast to not only the government, but the general public through a far-reaching intelligence dissemination program. There were thousands of camera clad drones in the skies of every quadrant of their territories, wiretaps on every landline, immediate recordings of all data wrung through a totality of cell phone towers, a camera in every room of every house, sometimes even multiple to prevent blindspots, even drawers and cabinets were equipped with sensors which would take automatic inventory of all contents, doctors being made to report medications prescribed publicly, mailmen being required to open every letter and package, and there was even a special task force assembled, the Proprietors of Essential or Relevant Visions, known as P.E.R.V. colloquially, which was appointed to check the private journals and diaries of every citizen, with special attention given to the recording of dreams. The point of the C.A.N.O.W. Sovereignty was to completely eradicate any and all criminal activity, as well as promoting general civility through an emphasis on transparent public reputation. What surprised the nation's founding fathers, was that the result of their governance was only a negligible decrease in misdemeanors and felonies. Despite the people knowing that every action they took would be immediately recorded and prosecuted, they generally still chose to shoplift, sling drugs, and murder their fellow citizens. The only novel change apparent in this political system was that anyone planning a suicide would be well aware that every man from Seattle to San Diego was going to see it happen in high definition. Being too ashamed to be observed dying an ugly or *God-fucking-forbid* mundane death, those inclined to take their lives began to dream up more and more extravagant methods to do so. Self-immolation was popular for a time, then Knievelesque stunt-autocides, followed by the trend of IEDs being packed to the brim with party store confetti and pounds of technicolored gual, which painted the innocent bystanders of many a bus with fabulous Ganesha pinks and

Krishna blues as their limbs were flung through ports of shattering glass. The story concludes with the most distinguished act of self-sacrifice ever recorded: a widely venerated Imagineer by the name of Cus Palsie Habsburg-Lorraine-Disney-Miller, himself direct descendant of the Mouse Dynasty, as well of a product of the Monarchomedial Reformation of the 2140's which mandated a program of miscegenation among money old or new, high or low. Cus Palsie determined that his Imagineering career would conclude with the most spectacular amusement park ride known to man—a Rube Goldberg on wheels titled simply *The Circle of Life*. The ride would start in complete darkness, before the single car began to move into a blinding light which revealed the black room around the passenger to be a womb leading outward through the walls of a massive vagina, then rolling onward to the oral stage in which genuine human saliva mixed with breast milk would be dumped by the bucket-load on Cus's scalp, then to the anal stage wherein waste baskets of human excrement would be emptied over the car in tandem with automated garden-sprinklers spraying urine about, on to the phallic, entailing a hall of massive rubber cocks stuck on rotary machines on the passenger's right side, which would insert themselves into a queue of facsimile vaginas on the left, exiting just in time to smack Cus across the face with some momentum as he passed, then to the infamous latent period which was nothing more than an anxiously slow crawl up an incline, with scenery changing from an oversized kitchen designed to make the adult rider feel child-sized by comparison, to an adult-sized office which signaled arrival at the genital stage, where the rides track ends and the cart becomes still. At this point, there would be a revolver pointed at Cus's temple on one side. The metal clanging of the cart into place would start the final attraction. At the very top there was a pencil balancing on a thin piece of metal, which having been shaken by the cart, begins to lose balance and fall onto a stack of unfinished homework resting on a platter welded to a loose

wheel, the impact of the pencil on the stack would determine whether it fell one way or the other, with one direction indicating a life of childhood athletics, and the other prodigious academics, which would fall on a line of dominoes that lead to the activation of a complicated series of eye examinations that eventually outputted a requisite prescription for glasses—though in Cus’s ride, the stack fell sportways, causing a baseball to roll down a ramp and lightly tap a football which fell into a varsity letterman jacket up on a metal hanger, all violently collapsing onto one end of a see-saw, letting fly a University of North Carolina college diploma, which would slowly float down into a basin of water resting on one end of a scale that began to lower ever so slightly in response to the paper disintegrating, that extra five-or-so grams being enough for the scales other end to rise and depress a button made to activate a spring below a silver dish holding an extravagant wedding ring that would summersault through the air, landing perfectly on the ring finger of a plastic dummy hand which, having received the proposal, made a downward motion to slap and spin a miniature windmill, the spinning of which not only caused a flurry of pay stubs to flutter all about and fall into a bin below filled with tar, but also started the rolling of a single marble on a spiral railway leading to the big red button that, being pressed, would cause the bottom to fall out of the tar bin just in time for maximum pay stub saturation, being let down into a flaming trash can and instantly being set ablaze, that fire now expanding far enough out to catch a length of rope tied to a rod beside it, on the other end tied to a wooden crate of used needles and syringes containing all sorts of morphine, amphetamines, and the like, with an equally-firm rope tied to the other end so that when one side was severed, the whole box would start a pendulum swing, flinging its contents all around the place, with some of them piercing and sticking into Cus, and one or two lucky needles making their way to a microscopic length of string rigged to the revolver’s trigger. Needless to say, Cus was well aware of the

needle's trajectory and consequently the damage that would be done. Once his brain was blown, the cart would reverse, taking the corpse all the way down the rails for a swift return to the womb.

Another was his novel-in-progress named tentatively, *Ypsilopolis*, about a great metropolis three-thousand-give-or-take years in the future, when mankind has discovered empirical means for spiritual transcendence and direct contact with noumena by means of Kabbalistic mysticism. Just brushing my hand against the page makes me tremble. Knees weak. The piece was a premonition of my psychiatric crisis. At the time Edward began the manuscript I had just fallen into a depression, the graveyard's weight for the first time crushing my throat. The hall of corpses and madmen crashing down on me. But then still, only slightly. I thought it could be simply fixed with Prozac or Zoloft or what have you. That's when I met Dr. Tulip, PsyD. Charming slicked brown headtop. Younger than father but older than Ed. Before any prescription we began regular speech sessions, his trade being influenced by the analytic tradition. I talked him through my whole life story. An upbringing in Lower Manhattan. Two brothers, the younger lame. My being picked on in elementary for my chubby cheeks they chose to pinch like toddler-grandmas. Speaking of what had never been spoken, God—cunt—name of my Father when mother was fast asleep he came in at night to greet me touch me tell me what I ought not say never to speak of never to tell that no good girl would kiss and tell or run to mommy for mommies couldn't understand what daddy and Ally had so secret so special so sweet before I knew crass words cunt or medical clitoral before I bled but would bleed at the touch and squirm and cry so told to give my panties cottonwhite then stained to him to hide for mommy could never see could never know what we must keep so secret just the same I spoke nothing of my favorite teacher in the seventh grade Mister Rastes who told me I was a swell little pupil, told me

stay please stay after class one day or another way down below his desk delightful dirty little nothings little somethings little bitty cream droplets clean up this and quickly go for no more must be said and grow growy grow on up a teenage Ally I now washing my mindless brother's limp body as Father refused sending him away on assisted living for that was in some way disgraceful to him distasteful to him before his straights were dire when mother found a shoebox in the closet with my bloodstained unders he must have hid to keep for pleasure for knowing a trophy a memory to love to keep to hold dear until divorce tore it all away and brother senior began his backpacking trips across Europe to escape it all and I was all alone scrubbing the crotch and anus of the retarded whilst applications for nursing programs were considered and I just sat in a dirtyfilthyhorrible bath of agony pure agony that there was no thing for me no one to save no man in armor and how I missed my big brother and how mother hadn't even told him of the indiscretion as if to defend me or Father's honor as if there was any maybe I did honor him out of loneliness I touched myself at night to the thought of it with every gleaming check of alimony coming through the mailslots of mother's new two-bedroom all until brother came home to celebrate my graduation certification inebriation drunken talking hours on the couch while mother was out smoking finally telling him why it all had to fall deep *down down down* my hand would sneak lower from rib to thigh and crying in his arms I'd try to kiss his thin thistle lips all chapped yet parting wet for tongue one touch one wide-eyed wail or just a gasping sound and then a slide away to the couches other end the end of silence and staring away from one another before he left again for a life of adventure before he went up Everest he wrote to me in a letter his apologies and that was all in all and all Ally got before he froze up there transfigured man to landmark. Dr. Tulip listened intently for exactly eight sessions of those expressions, playing scribe on a legal pad. I would trail off sometimes, taking in spines on his shelf—*Clinical and*

Experimental Hypnosis, Neuro-Linguistic Programming; Volume 1: The Study and Structure of Subjective Experience, Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense, The Function of the Orgasm, Freud and the Hermetic Tradition. It was one day, before our ninth session, that I spent the morning reading Edward's manuscript on his behest. The protagonist was a young street-rat living in the slums of the great metropolis, frequenting a bar by the name of *The Pantheon*, where he would receive spiritual advice from his mentor—a massive, dismembered bovine head kept in a great vat of chemicals equipped with a thought-to-speech transcription device and fed Pall Malls on the end of his cigarette holder with some consistency—on his path to fulfill a destiny foretelling regicide and rise to glory. It was the name of the cow. Exactly the same. Dr. Tulip. He was the guide. The uncanny tear in reality. I hadn't ever told Edward the name. Pure coincidence. Then started the number fits. I would flick the lightswitch on and off that night in great sequences. First three then six then nine then squaring them all over in order at nine then thirty-six then eighty-one and *Lord, fuck, it was like ecstasy it was pure bliss pleasure sweetness fondling the lightclit until I reached that heaven that climax that great orgasm at the root of the tree of life it was then I knew I had to live for nothing more than the power of the trinity.*

Can't stay here all alone. Need something, anything. Some sea of distraction. Some washing of the waves. Some why or rhyme or reason. I need a leave from this life. Strict sabbatical from the intimacy of living. Call again, I'm sure they'll let me. Pick up a shift, who cares. If I only beg Dr. Abrams, I'm sure, surely something must come of it. I just need something.

Nothing gets you going like an afternoon coffee. June 2nd. A Friday. Big E.O.W. (End of Week) round-table meeting for a portion of the department scheduled. The conference room is half-full with detectives, D.E.A. agents, and their respective mugs of black. At the head of the table is Sgt. Stockhausen, with a mean forward-bent neck posture and one cataract eye. To his left, Chet and I. On the right, detectives Maurice Howitz, Laurence Finkelstein, and Curly Bates. They're all well known faces in the Drug Enforcement Administration, with a great web of contacts in the Jewish Orthodox communities of Brooklyn. The occasion of this meeting is the official go-ahead call concerning Operation Underbelly, which is the working title for a covert operation targeted at distribution networks in clubs from New York to Jersey. The plan's existence was incited by a violent current made apparent by a handful of recent street shootings. Last month it was called Operation Backrub, 'cause of a now-debunked theory involving Chinese and Vietnamese massage parlors, of which some victims were frequent patrons. It was also the case, Stockhausen claimed, that the new title came to him in a brief dream sandwiched in the wake-sleep-wake of the early morning, which involved a homeless man sleeping on his stomach turned around, exposing to the Sergeant an outie of some size.

The deal was to place agents in clubs all around the city, except for Curly, who was too old and washed up to convincingly blend into that sort of atmosphere. The sergeant had a great map behind him with lengths of yarn woven around thumb-tacks marking potential locales. Paragone. The Attic. Someplace. Bad Room. Nichthaus. Nowhere. A few others.

—Now Chet's on Paragone, spoke the Sergeant with his lungs audibly smoked. I want Orson in The Attic. Fink, Someplace. And Howitz, Nowhere. For The Bad room and Nichthaus, we'll operate using a rotation system.

—So what place'm I s'posed to be, exactly? Detective Finkelstein asks nasally.

—And I'll just be taking the time off? Asks Howitz, expectantly.

Sergeant rubs the bridge of his nose in a confused terror.

—*Could use a vacation...*Howitz whispered again.

The office chair slides out from beneath Sergeant and swivels away in a frantic spin-out towards the door. He unsheaths a pencil from behind his ear and begins to trace large, imperfect circles over and over again, spiraling around big block letters written in sharpie. What a fuss. The No. 2 gets tossed right on the meeting table and clatters around like one of those wood-block instruments. The two boys seem to get the message, 'cause the room stays silent while Sergeant pulls his chair back and starts lighting up a Lucky, all the while maintaining some violent eye contact. I've got to ask him where he gets his unfiltered Lucky's. At a cooler moment, maybe.

—Admin says no smokes in here no more Sarg, Finkelstein hushes.

—Now these places, y'know. They're made for scumbags and nighthawks and method-up faggots. That means yer all working late hours on the weekends for a whiles. Overtime included n'all. But we don't want you loitering for too long. It's got to be believable. We're talking a start time of zero hundred hours to three. Authenticity is key here. It's a delicate thing, blending in with these folks. That being, and I know we're all men of the law here, you're going to be drinking at a baseline, and getting drugged when offered. Now I don't care if you've got to pull a hand-trick to brush some powder on the floor or slip a pill down your damn sleeve. Just make it happen. These people, they're like hippies or what have you. The culture welcomes the inebriated and scoffs at squares. None ah'you fellas, from this point forward, will be *anything* resembling square. I want every edge of yers *rounded out*. Round like the sun. Round like Mister Bates here's fat belly. Round like Santa Claus. Loosey-goosey, maybe's more like it. Is this understood and agreed upon?

—Yessir, says a chorus, including myself.

Sergeant, seeing his ash tray has been removed from the conference room by Miranda Coward, the sitting Office Administrator, reaches into his black leather briefcase and slides his own glass tray on the table, which he seemingly had prepared for whatever reason, and snuffs out his luck with a twist you'd start your car with.

—Adjourned, then.

We all start walking out, when Fink and Howitz start making conversation. Drinks after work, maybe? Been a while since we got together. Sports bar opened up a few blocks over, with that flag in the window with the blue stripe, so we know it's fed-friendly. Druggies need not apply. I tell 'em I'd normally love to but oh you know I got this appointment way out in Westchester again, so I've got a train to catch. Chet, listening in, blows raspberries, since no-shows on my end are typical. Howitz asks about the occasion. I tell him dental. Fink asks if it's bad. I say nothing came of my last visit to the dentist's office. Since, though, there's this awful smell. Halitosis, I think they call it. I figured if I was going undercover at some club or another, I wouldn't want my mouth to be a turn off. Supposing when the music's loud, you must have to talk real close to people. If it were just my decision, I'd probably let it rot for another month or so. Sometimes you just let those things slip past, you know? Little things you ignore for months. You brush away the voices that remind you. This is for the force, though.

Dr. Milly's office in Mahopac has a sterile smell to it, but this one in Pelham sure is inviting. There's a little television mounted to the wall with some video playing of water crashing against the Cliffs of Dover. Real relaxing. The receptionist is mildly overweight in a comforting way. White, too. With a Japanese-style sleeve tattoo on one arm. Not that I prefer the receptionist be white, or anything. I just thought it was interesting. Because of the Japanese

tattoo. Maybe she's got a Japanese grandpa or something, but it doesn't show. I don't think I put much stock in the race of my dental receptionist. Dr. Milly is Japanese, however. Again, not that it matters. But I just figured, with the tattoo and everything...anyways.

—Iphig? She hails me to the front desk.

I get up and smile. She has a name tag. *Alice Claire*. Two first names. White names, the both of them. There I go again.

—Just fill these forms out for me and she'll be right with you, Alice recites while sliding a clipboard towards me.

I sit back down and complete them in silence. Always wonder why you need to fill them out every time. Just a formality, I suppose. Wonder if there'll ever be a time I have to check the boxes for having had surgery, or having a history of high blood pressure, or having contracted H.I.V. or anything like that. You never know. Things change. At least I know that in the time it's taking me to slide the clipboard on back to Alice, that none of those boxes will have to be checked.

Milly pops out from the back and leans against the wall, pinching and lowering her medical mask to show me some expression. She winks and nods back at the hallways behind her, which she guides me down before going through the motions of sticking a bunch of metal in my mouth. She puts some cheap plastic sunglasses over my eyes to protect them from the wall-mounted light while she's at it. Says I look great in them, to which I chuckle.

—Alright, Milly says while digging around the back of my gums. It looks like there's a cavity under one of your crowns, where you had that root canal. So what I'm going to do for you is remove the crown, drill out the cavity, and give you a new temporary. It doesn't look like it's too close to the nerves, so you probably won't have to get a root canal again.

—Sounds good to me.

She brings out a metal platter of anesthetics, rubs some numbing agent on my gums with gauze, and picks up the big needle. I wince while she sticks it in. She says sorry. She says now rinse.

—Now we'll just have to wait a few minutes to see if that kicks in right. How is everything, anyway? Your mom still doing alright?

Milly pulls down her mask and pats my shoulder with the back of her knuckles.

—Ma' passed a while back.

—Oh gosh. I'm so sorry. I should have remembered that.

—Don't sweat it, hon'. You're my dentist, not my therapist. It's fine, anyways. Things happen. *Say-lah-vee*.

—Well. Sorry to hear, still.

She covers her face again.

—So how are those gums feeling?

—Fine. Good.

You don't really notice a tooth is fake until it's being torn out. At first, the crown feels like a novel addition to your mouth, and you can't stop feeling it with your tongue to make sure it's there. After a while, though, it's just part of your inner world. But now it's like the charade is up all over again. I'm tongueing at the enamel nub it was covering. Milly starts up her drilling but after a few minutes I start groaning.

—Not numb enough, huh? Let's try this again.

She brings the big needle out for an encore.

—So sorry about this, I know it's never fun.

—Oh no, don't worry. This is my favorite part. I love needles.

—Really? You do?

—No. I was joking.

—*Ohhhahaha!* You are *such* a funny one.

Every day I thank God for moments like these. Brief exchanges that let us prove to ourselves and others that we're still human. For sure, a little informal banter cutting through a sterile medical appointment is at the heart of God's grace. Sticking it in again, it only feels like half as much burning pain as the first time. I can taste some disgusting bitter fluid dripping to the back of my throat, making me gag a little bit. I rinse it out and spit. She gives it a moment and keeps drilling.

There's a window right in front of me with the blinds turned sideways, letting the light in. The suns getting to this perfect angle, like it's God's will that it hits this spot at this moment. The whole office starts glowing around me. The sunglasses have some finger grease smeared on them, and it makes the world look like some gold fluid. It's warm too. Real warm. I could almost fall asleep, if it weren't for the drill shaking my jaw around like a jackhammer.

Milly takes out a plastic tray and fills it with some pink goop to make a mold. She insists I say "ahh" and then sticks it in deep. After letting it sit for a bit, she takes it out and lets me rinse again. Taking a temporary crown in one hand and what looks like a glue gun in the other, she sticks the new false tooth into the back of my mouth.

—Wait a minute, Milly hesitates. I'm so sorry.

—*Hmgnn?*

The anesthetic is starting to make it hard to speak.

—I still see something. Under the crown. I think I need to go back in. I just need to make sure I don't let you leave today with any more problems.

—W'll thast' al'ight.

—*So so* sorry. I just don't want you to have to come back. I know the last thing people want is another trip to the dentist.

—Oh d'n worry, I l've it. M' fav'rit par' ov life i' th'dentis'

Milly cackles, covers her face. Seems to be almost in tears.

—You're a *riot!* You just made my day.

—Oah noh. You'mayd ma'ine.

Past midnight Arthur boards the 1, beginning to stink of sweat and unwashedness. The stolen clothes, with their vessel slain, now as homeless as their previous owner, which he had dawned were of no help to this problem. Those around him recoil, clutching bag or purse. There is no rhyme or reason to his journey, no destination, only endless distance and pure duration. As moments melt to moments, the train empties itself, cultivating a wealth of negative space. By the time the car is made half full from the lateness, Arthur begins to realize the consequences of a habitual use of heroin, a lesson he has only had to bear on the body once before—The Shakes.

Bound to South Ferry, the tremors hit in a great wave. Convulsions of the hands and spasms all around, like pinches to the rib cage that twitch his ragdoll body and toss it limply to and fro. A man about three seats away, with fitted suit and antiquated bowler-cap, scowls and pulls himself up by grip of the stanchions. Paranoid Arthur Abrams shoots darts with his eyes at the dandy, who tries all his best not to return the gesture. Bulbs of sweat wash over his body and leak onto the seat below. Through the summer heat he feels only harsh winter wind, and shivers with chattering teeth. As he begins to ache from head to toe, a deep deathly terror down to his bones, he understands what appears to be an empirical proven moral genealogy to the substance or lack thereof, as the punishment for his sins appear to be built-in on the surface. His debt to his father becomes perfectly apparent to him. A first encounter with morphine. Bring-your-kid to work days soured with clever smuggling. Abrams Sr. left with a nigh-ruined reputation. Those rumors spread ‘round Manhattan dinner tables which cost him the prestige required by a practicing cosmetic surgeon. A network of money old and new taken aback by talk of Narcotics Anonymous. A practice ruined. Tired from flesh to bone, Arthur sings weakly, with baritone growl, a number by G. Welch:

*There was a time
She used to treat me fine
But lately she's been acting
Awful stone
Makes a man weep and moan*

My Mooorphine will be the death of me

*Morphine, Morphine
What made you so mean
You never used to do me
Like you do
Where's that sweet gal I knew*

Words so slurred with mind retarded, not a fellow traveler could make meaning out of what he sang, but as they flew from his lips he began to choke on globs of spit and sob profusely. This was the second time Arthur had cried in his life, the first being a reaction to skinning his knee on the sidewalk as a child. He went through his entire adult life feeling only numbness. Thoughts of marriage, camaraderie, or kinship, failed to rouse his spirit. It was only pain that could remind him that he was human. Pain alone could invoke some debt to God or Father.

Hours passed and the passengership dwindled from half to a quarter as he splayed out over three to four seats. Groaning and nauseous, he turned over, falling and pressing his face against the black rubber flooring. He raised and sauntered almost drunkenly to the doors of the

car and, feeling the call of nature, made a downward pinch, unzipping and exposing. The great snake reared its ugly head and spewed urea, splashing and pooling at Arthurs feet. A lady traveler felt raindrops and began to gag, hand over mouth, and fled to protect her now-tarnished white sports jacket. To him the smell was a comfort, as all scents of the self would be. In a world so numb and meaningless, his body alone could provide some minutia of sense certainty.

Late into the night or maybe early in the morning, his limpness saw a coquette reading something. A black hardback which blended with her black hair, black blouse, and black pencil skirt with the slutty slit over orphan thigh. He always made note of the rare souls who still read on public transportation, and squinted to ascertain the content. Too far to determine, he closed the distance. Uncomfortably close. She tightened up and lowered her head in his presence. Cowering at the towering over. He read the spine's golden text. *Being and Time*. Gritting his teeth like an ape, he blew salivation through the gaps in a violence outburst, sputtering all over her pale face as she whimpered.

—Go be-somewhere-else! Arthur shouted.

Being-without-permission now on the clock for a shift, Allisa made way to the ICU, rushing through halls of the lame. Before, at the clock, she entered her employee ID three times, felt tense enough to pull out a clump of hair, three more to make six—that being a sequence of in-out-in-out-in-out—leaving her off the clock and forcing her to enter it up to the ninth attempt, which put her at some insignificant ease. Humphrey catches sight of her and attempts to match her strides, however fat and bumbling his steps seem to be. Nearly out of breath he calls out and slows her down with the imperative. She responds with the interrogative fragment, “what?” Met with the ready-known information that she was not supposed to be-where-she-was, she countered, making clear that she was-where-she-was-supposed-to-be, and in fact it was a

pressing matter that she be there, supposed to or not. There was a groundless ethics to her need-to-be. Importance read from the tea leaves. A principle of superstition which bound her to family, lovers, or professional life. If one were to collapse, the rest would fall in on one another in their great moral web.

Terrence pressed his temple at news of her arrival as Nurse Hoon apologized apropos of nothing she had done herself. The day was almost worse than the last. Hordes and hordes of these strange people, speaking in tongues on the same strains. Wailing about love, truth, the powers that be and being proper, essence, noumena, qualia, logos, light, death, Jesus Christ, Adolf Hitler, all things universal and particular, the world spirit, angels, wings too, heaven, darkness, some great awakening, false prophets, the eternal, the temporary, finitude and responsibility, the inside, the outside, that which is mediated, abstract, or concrete. None of it made a lick of sense to him, but the similarity of their thought was haunting. On top of that, he had to deal with Little Miss Drowned Ophelia. Try as he might to convince her to accept a leave of absence, the business of the unit began to take precedence over debate. Exhausted of option, he directed her and Hoon to retrieve a patient called for moments ago over walkie-talkie static.

The two nurses were obliged to follow his direction.

—You're a pain, you know that? Sophie Hoon whispers. A mess too. Did you even wash your hair last night? It looks like a rat's nest.

—I did, Allisa gasps, I did I did.

—Those stains on your scrubs, Ally. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. You think I can't tell what those are from?

—Itwasitwasitwas. The m-moth. Moth man. The man on the subway. Awful terrible horrible.

Nurse Hoon diverts her attention from the argument and just mutters exhausted exclamations to herself, like *every day with this* and *every fucking day*, or variations on the general motif. They pass by Clee, whose yellow face is splotted with purple stain of bruise, and turns from a warm smile at Hoon to an absolute shock on recognition of Allisa's being-there.

There being Orson, for a late and densely packed night in The Attic. Bodies pressed all around as the room is filled with rhythm. Sounds he hasn't heard before. Low synthetic rumbles and shooting high-ends pierced his weak eardrums. He wore a hair piece to conceal his place on the Norwood scale, not on account of shame, but to blend in. There was nothing wrong with balding. He knew this well. He cycled between the bar and the dance floor, observing youthful faces and bodies gyrating. There was something so sweet and simple about it, he thought. It expressed a fundamental humanity. Getting lost in the energy, the constant rhythm melted away. It all became white noise. He would forget why he was there, why he was different from them.

Throughout the night, he tailed a few people, but nothing interesting presented itself. Just the witnessing of a few snortings of blow and fumbling tipsy girls. It felt ultimately fruitless, and he wondered why Stockhausen had initially thought this would be a good idea. He began to question the utility of dream revelation with regards to police work.

At one point he spotted Fink at the bar, wearing a black mesh top and sipping a fifteen-dollar cocktail out of a stainless steel cup.

—All this drinking, Orson shouted over the music into his ear. Makes me feel like my ma'.

—Have I seen the macaw? Finks aloof and setting down his drink. They got birds down here?

Orson slides the cup selfways and shoots some down his throat while Fink's head is turned towards a buxom leather lady. Vodka Redbull.

—Weren't you assigned to some other club tonight?

—Sgt. told me "someplace", thought I had'a choice!

—Ridgewood, Fink. Someplace. That was the name of it.

—Sun Space? I'll have to look up the address.

Sun shined naught on that space so designated as "Central Park" that early in the morning, where Arthur left his train car to visit, after its departure and return to and from South Ferry. Wandering through the sweeping paths and tunnels, he felt he was looking for some action but knew not the sort he sought. There was an inkling, however, in the back of his mind that here he would find his next victim, or proof of the negative aesthetic. There was an eternal suffering he had the task of making finite in this world. To bring heaven down to earth. Or hell, rather. Still sore and sick from the withdrawals, he periodically vomited in his mouth and swallowed it, building up the taste of pure filth over the top of his tongue. Whilst hurling over puking, this time in actuality (released; external), he spotted a woman in a low cut top. Naturally, having not seen or lain with Sarah for weeks, he began to follow her out of excitement, keeping to the trees and bushes. She eventually came upon a park bench and sat there, tossing an empty bottle of brew unknown to shatter on the pavement beside her. Arthur, keeping his distance, dropped his trousers to his ankles and began to stimulate his member. Staring at the glossy hair on the backside of her head, he thought of, and recalled to himself pictorially in the eye of his mind, what must have been thousands of hours of pornography consumed over the totality of his life thus far. Arthur was twenty-seven. From age sixteen onward, he had watched roughly one-to-two hours of pornography five-out-of-seven days of the week, totaling around five-to-ten hours every

week, which meant that over his life he had to have watched two thousand eight hundred and sixty hours of porn at least, or five thousand seven hundred and twenty hours at the high end of the estimation. All sorts of filth filled his mind: eighteen-year-old blondes giving blowjobs to childless men in their forties, girls in garish technicolor makeup which gradually smeared away with spit and sweat, urine pouring over the faces of debutants or misfits with faded razor scars on the thighs, latin women in their forties fucking thin white boys, close-up shots of bleachwhite anuses winking somehow knowingly, young chicks with cocks and fake bolt-ons, lengths of great rubber or silicone sliding in their entirety down gagless fleshy throats, gauche outfits of fishnets, bikini tops, thin-rag jean shorts, and high heels of six or more inches, hussies whored in halloween costumes resembling nurses, maids, angels, devils, pizza delivery drivers, slasher movie villains, and other looks referencial to then-popular media, black women dressed in confederate regalia of dixie fashion taking rail of white, skinny white broads fucked by hordes of hulking black men taking load-after-load of semen in their mouths before gargling and swallowing, skinny white men fucked by hordes of eager chubby women, obese cattle people jiggling heaving mounds of fat over a yellow stained mattress, sluts spread eagle and pissing themselves through their pantyhose, phalli ranging ten-to-twelve inches slapping women directly in their faces, Japanese schoolgirls politely bowing to preface the insertion of their tongues into the anuses of suited salary men, crackwhores being fucked in their mouths until their own vomit spewed all down over their breasts, boots overtop the skulls of green-haired ladies weeping red in the face like sad tomatoes, girls with alopecia areata being ordered to stand straight while struck with jockey whips, females waiting eagerly to fellate members which popped facelessly out of holes in the wall, rubber cocks attached to mechanical fucking machines making rounds on the in-and-out-in-and-out of every orifice, bondage-machines of latex and leather, metal

clasps bound with elastic which tugged from above on girl's nostrils to give them the appearance of pigs, men taking milk enemas into their assholes before sitting above women's faces and releasing the slop below, etc. He spiraled around these thoughts until he came, wiping the semen partially on a bush beside him and partially on his pants as he pulled them back up around his hips.

There was a rustling in some bushes far behind him, followed by moans and panting. Turning to investigate, he saw a pair of homosexuals copulating a few yards out. This put Arthur in a state of blind rage, being irritated not only by his ongoing opiate withdrawals, but the very existence of faggots as well. He snuck up behind them with boxcutter in hand, cutting the neck of the erastes mid-thrust. Blood poured all down his chest and onto the eromenos's backside, followed by the sounds of gurgling, choking, and sputtering. Cock still inside him, the erastes turned his head and squealed in disbelief. Arthur pushed the larger man overtop the recipient, and trapped him there on the ground with the dead weight as he squirmed and struggled. It only took six stomps to the head to end all movement, topped off with a satisfying crack and squelching noise from the top of the eromenos' skull. Noticing a brown leather wallet in the back of the erastes' chinos, Arthur makes haste to inspect it, letting fly a waterfall of smoke shop loyalty cards, state mandated identification, business cards, and so on. One department bears an eight ball of cocaine, along with three loose pills he assumes to be benzodiazepines. There's tickets there too, for entrance to a nightclub by the name of *Nowhere*.

Somewhere a crazed voice is cooing, crooning hall to hall. Where, in particular, Allisa is at the moment making haste towards. The path to her is filled with corpses. Not in the sense that they are physically dead, but rather that their souls have fled their respective vessels. The practicing Voodoo shamans of a nondescript, unnamed due to acute western chauvinism or

perhaps more likely sloth of the intellect (though surely the two go hand-in-hand), African village would designate their being as *Zombi*. These are the dead which walk or crawl or lay atop this earth. She thought that maybe it was not only them that were dead, but her as well. Even further, it may be the whole of the planet—a rotting carcass being flung by orbital motion, prograde or retrograde, throughout the similarly lifeless universe that hosts it. Hoon, she thinks, must never share her view. In fact, she presumes her fellow nurse to be devoid of any thought whatsoever. A zombi like the rest.

—Alright sir if you would just please come with us, Hoon lulls, the doctor is waiting to see you.

Allisa's pushing one end of the cot-on-wheels towards him and prepares to help him up onto it.

—Wa's thi's little white biech gonna do to hell'me?

—She's not the doctor, sir. That's nurse Antigone. She's a sweetheart and she's gonna help you get yourself on over to Dr. Abrams.

—You's believe in heavahn, white lady? The mad man spurts through twitches of inquisition.

Allisa perks up for a moment, single strand of hair curling on the top of her head like a question mark. She believes in heaven. She prays for heaven every day. Heaven, to her, is not some sort of painted paradise where flocks of blonde-haired angels rest on smears of white cloud glimmering. It certainly isn't a place where one would reunite with family lost. There are no gates of gold, and she knows without a doubt she will not meet Christ or Abraham there, let alone be held in the comfort of their bosoms. Heaven is where family ends—where all the bonds which tie her to this earth are finally dissolved, and all that is left is a being pure, incorporeal,

ineffable, an absolute manifestation of utopic atopia. No more awkward phone calls to mother, veering around the *nom du pere* and all the breathless tension that would bring. No more bouquets to be purchased for those annual visitations to a brother's grave. No more dinners ready and warm for her Edward's arrival home, on each and every night she's off from work. No more clockings in or out. No bonds, no duty, no ethics. Just a final denial of motion, regressing back into the sweltering warmth of Eden.

—I do sir, Hoon clutches a cross necklace and points to the sky. Every Sunday.

—Heavahn ain't up there! The mad man begins to yelp with a blood curdling coarseness.

He juts from the waiting room chair, flailing and nearly grazing the disheveled woman nursing a babe beside him. Hoon is shoved to the floor before she can even let go of her messianic jewelry.

—HEAVAHN IS RIGH HERE! ON EAR'T!

And then *POW!* Fist strikes face, and Allisa takes a fall in the first round, ending the bout before it could even get off the ground. Tumbling. Limpness takes hold. Collapsing. The crowd is roaring. The whole stadium is in a state. *BRINGBRINGBRING!!!* Ref calls it on the spot. Technical Knockout. Must have misspoke, seeing as it was a clean K.O. Surely the announcer, silkvoiced dandy that he is, will suavely correct the record as the gloves are raised. Vocal chords of milk and cigarettes begin to boister: *Folks, this is history in the making! The quickest, cleanest match in the history of the New York Presbyterian Medical Group. Before the it could even get in thick, Marcus Darkly wins by knockout and takes the title of the NEW! WELTER! WEIGHT! CHAMPION! FOREVER! AND EVER! WORLD WITHOUT END! AYYYYYYYYYYYYMEN!*

—Amen to that brother, chortles the bouncer in response to Orson’s quip ambiguous (likely a banality along the lines of “long night, huh?” or maybe “those legs must be tired, standing here all night. Ought’a invest in a chair.”).

Ready to head home in the most virginal hours of the morning, Orson paces a few blocks to get the clubhouse beats out of his system, before happening upon a young blonde. She’s in this real tight mini-mini-miniskirt and a corset pressing her organs in and her breasts out, walking around in circles at the avenue corner. Mumbling things to herself. Strange things. Incoherent. He stands there for a bit in disbelief, just observing. Bird watching. Noticing him, she stops short of a crescent and holds a lengthy eye-to-eye. Dilated. Pools of black saucer. Those dinner-plate eyes that let you know she’s *on* one. As if all that speaking in tongues business wasn’t enough to tip you off. Slurring words all over the place. She plays doe and stares into Orson’s headlights.

—*Mmmmmmm...Mmmmmmmmm...Mmmmmmm...Ahhuaaaaumm.*

Her glossy lips gape ever so slightly as vibrato leaves her chords. Vocals fried and whimpering.

—Excuse me, ma’am, says Orson. Something I can do for you?

—*Mmmmmmmmm...Ahhouuummm...Man. Standing man. Daddy.*

—I think you should come with me, hon’.

The trains are empty besides the two of them, and dashing bullet lights flash by in the dark of those tubular tunnels, muddied by dusty windows. She’s rocking back and forth, swinging her head down to knee-level and then back up until her chin perks up. Orson now and then tries to gently push her knees together with the back of his hand to preserve her dignity, knowing her see-through panties were on full display when her legs would splay. He did this despite the fact that there was no one there, maybe under the unconscious assumption that a

higher power would be watching back over it all, frame-by-frame. She didn't even notice the brushing of his hairy-backed knuckles, just kept moaning.

Orson huffs and strains his eyes heavenways, averting gaze from the labial.

—What're you doing out here all alone, hon'?

—*Cha-cha-cha-cha. Jast cha-cha-chaysin'*

—Chasing what?

—*Chasin' the dragon.*

Back at the precinct, the lights are dim and the office is nearly empty, save for some rattling around in the kitchenette, which could very likely be an all-too-repressed rodent problem. Orson plants the girl in an office chair and she starts using her heels to spin and centrifuge, twirling 'round in a daze. She's still hummin' shit like *mmmmmmmma* or *aaauuughhmmm* while he grabs some stale, lukewarm coffee from his desk, as if testing the extent to which her throat could mangle air. Orson pulls up an immotile metal chair and just looks with his posture arched towards her. Her spaghetti string purse, which up to this point has been dangling from her exposed shoulders, flies off of her during a particularly turbulent revolution of the office chair, it's Hallmark Heart shape of imposter 'gator skin fumbling to the floor and puking up a wallet, keys, lipstick, and gloss from its gaping zipper jaws. Picking it all up for her and starting to fill the purse back up, he thumbs a keychain trinket in the shape of a cartoon rabbit, and proceeds to explore the contents of a lightweight wallet, which is revealed to contain an ID with a Virginia address and the name Stormy George, along with zero-dollars and a couple of miniature squares of paper all picturing the same hare character on her keys, with blue ovals laid vertical for its eyes, and pink horizontals on the cheeks to indicate spots of blush. He tosses the tabs in a trash bin and puts the rest of the wallet back in the belly of the 'gator,

reminiscing on a Mardi Gras pilgrimage to New Orleans, where years ago he had sampled the meat of the animal, coming to the conclusion that it was a damn fine beast to be had if it could be.

—Where you from?

—*Loveyyyloveloveee. Luvvvvvv. Luverssszz. Fourr for for! Luv luv luv!!! Auuuughhhmmmmmm. Farrrr out man, far out! Heeheehee. Did'n they use't say that? In in...umumumum...um...back then?*

—Like in the sixties?

—*Ermmm. Wheneve's they had Charly Manson. N' that preggy lady. Ohhhhhhhmyygod. Sadsadsad. Weyland told me all 'bou'it. 'N how mmmm...mmmmmany times they sticked 'er. Ewwwwwww! Yuckyyyy.*

—Weyland?

The kitchenette rustling turns into steppings muted by carpet, coming closer to the party of two. Chet makes himself known, with a mug of hot black, emblazoned with a blue-striped American flag and the sans-serif, capitalized helvetica screeed, “LOYALTY”, printed beneath it, held up just below his breast and head-level with Orson. The force of Chet’s stopping-short beside the seated Orson flings a warm droplet on his cheek, burning a molecule his unflinching face, though bringing his attentive eyes to the mug’s textual element, dropping the “TY” at a cursory glance and inserting phantom “A” for a briefly buzzing remembrance of the St. Ignatius, brushed away by his fly-swatter consciousness.

—She’s *far out*, mocks an aviator-clad Chet DeFuria.

—*Fuh-arrrrrrr out*, she echolaliates.

—*Guh-roovy!*

The girl giggles so profusely that she tumbles out of her seat and rubs a rug burn on her knees and calves.

—What brings you here, Cheddar?

—Same as you, right? Tight pieces like this. Mine just washed up in the sink and left. Should have *seen* the crowd at Para-whatever. They had all these red light fixtures flying around like there was a big emergency at the factory. And the *gash*, man. Never thought you could party down like that in a bathroom stall. You fuck'er yet?

Orson mutely helps the girl up back into the chair.

—So yer sayin' you brought her here just for me?, Chet grins. You shouldn' have!

They stay in their stillness, and frankly awkward silence, while she continues to spin and hum some Hanna-Barbera in a dull, closed mouth *mmmm*, going ♪ B- ♪ E, ♪ E-C- ♪ B- ♪ E, ♪ B- ♪ A-G-G- ♪ A- ♪ B- ♪ E-F-G.

—Well, I'll leave you two love birds to it. If you need to tag me in I'll be sleeping in my office.

Sleepless sniffing nostrils pull with breath a powder from the surface of Arthur's fingertips—the fuel to pull himself back on the train in aimless wander. He feels an anal twitch which informs him of the substance's cutting agent, that being laxatives, as opposed to the fashionable Purdue Special famous only to the friends and families of the down, out, and dead. Black placards fly by in his peripheral screaming 34th Street, which he takes as a sign from God to exit stage left.

The streets are lined with weary salesmen, draped in stinking rags. He doesn't notice the smells anymore, noseblind to all from prolonged exposure to his own accumulated scent. The salesmen all have tarps on the ground, with stolen Poland Spring bottles, Huggies baby wipes,

rolls of Charmin Ultra Soft Toilet Paper, candy bars brought to you by the good folks at the Nestlé Corporation, drinks ranging the entire spectrum of the Coca-Cola Company and the lot of their subsidiaries, four-count boxes of Kleenex tissue paper wrapped in plastic, loose lipsticks of MAC and Maybelline, family-sized bags of Utz or Lays, bottles of supplements from vitamins A to Z, bulk packages of HP Printer Paper sized eight-point-five by eleven inches, circular packs of Ice Breakers Mints with two flap openings (the larger opening at the top labeled “many”, and the smaller at the bottom, “one”, as if to express in the sting of one candy’s cool mint flavor, the great weight of that sacred phrase, *e pluribus unum*), cheap earrings of false silver and gold what turn lobes green with jealousy, and sometimes even hulking tall-boys of Coors or Budweiser all laid out on top of them. All of these goods were stolen from the subterranean refuge of the Penn Station Walgreens, and sold to tourists at a profit rate of one hundred percent.

Arthur ignored the vendors and approached a huddle of vagrants, joining them naturally as if he were already there in the first place. One of them is smoking a Marlboro down the butt, most likely recovered from the ground after having been snuffed and tossed, and Arthur asks for a drag—a request which is promptly obliged. Nicotine cools down the rush of amphetamine, but only briefly before what is practically pure filter is handed back to its rightful appropriator.

—How do you all feel about this?, Arthur inquires. Life, like this.

—Wus’er to feel, one of them replies. Jus’ shit.

—Is’all shit man, another chimes.

The filter drops only for another three-quarters-smoked to be produced and promptly lit by matchbook, the smoke making a circle around the group of five. Arthur thought to himself that these would be the perfect subjects for his working theory on belief or faith, rather. A circle

of automatons ready to be rewired. He wanted to preach lies to and with them. His chosen affect was decidedly pre-Kantian.

—Don't you think there's something higher than all of this?

—W'll wussat then? Like stanin' up?, spoke the vagrant with is ass on the floor.

—Well for instance, that cigarette. It seems pretty used up and filthy, probably. But out there, somewhere, there's a perfect cigarette. Completely unsmoken, and clean to boot.

—'N why'sat matter?

—There's an idea of a cigarette. A perfect idea in your mind. But it's not the one you've got, right? There's a perfect one out there, though. A cig' up in heaven.

—S'pose so, said the vagrant with one eye.

Arthur reached into his satchel and took out the eight ball.

—Match?

The one-eyed man plucks a match from its book and makes the exchange, cutting against his confusion. Arthur dips the match into the bag and starts offering the group bumps of the stuff, which each of them giddily snorts in waves.

—So imagine that cigarette is like a life. A person's whole life. And all of us, well we must look a lot like that there cig'. Begging for food. Dressing in rags. Smelling like shit. Feeling like shit, too. Whatever it is. But up there?, Arthur gesticulates to the sky. Up there, there's a perfect life. A happy life. Up that latter, you're fed. You all dress in three-piece or more suits. You all smell like fuckin' daisies and lavender. You're all happy. Know what the Greeks called that?

—Who's?, asks one with a sickly, chain-smoked voice.

—Greece. They called it *eudaimonia*. It's just what they called happiness. But it also means you're flourishing, like a flower. Like a daisy. It's what you have when you're the best you that you can be. It's what you're supposed to be. It's like being the perfect cigarette.

—Wazzat got'sa do w'it anything?, asks the cement-bound man, now nearly prone.

—Well the thing is, there's people in the business of *making* these perfect cig's, yah dig? Marlboro, Newports, Luckies, Spirits. It's not like you've never seen one before. You've got the idea, but it came from somewhere.

—Sure.

—S'pose so.

—So suppose there are people in the business of making the perfect man. Say that's the state, you know? America. We have schools and cities and places to get jobs. Shouldn' they be like the tobacco men? They ought'a do their best to make a life worth living. If the Marlboro man can bring heaven to earth, why can't the government?

—H'yup!, says the smoker.

—Y'er ontah somethin'.

Arthur dishes out another round of blow, barely trying to hold back his trembling hands which drop snowflakes down to the sidewalk.

—What I'm saying is that you boys are owed exactly that. It's a debt to you all. It's our debt to God that we bring the heavens down to earth, and we live with dignity. Wouldn' you say?

—Fo' sho'

—Yessir!

—Now how do you folks say we bring heaven down here? I'd say it's a lot like how God does it. Through love, right? What do you boys think love is?

—When you wanna *fuck*, says the groundbound.

—When you ask a pretty lady out on a date, says the growl voices smokefreak.

—Those girlies in them mag'zines, on the covers. Perf'ct faces n' all. I geh' down there in the station 'n just have't. You feel? I get's th'excitements.

—Now that's a common misconception, says Arthur as he rubs the bridge of his nose. There's two sorts of love, clearly. One's when you want to stick something. But that could be anything, right? Could be a goat, for Christ's sake. Doesn't matter, it's just your cock thinking, 'n not your soul. The other is that kind, when you want it deep down in your spirit. To make someone happy. To make someone safe. You feel?

—Amen.

—Suresuresure

—Now why are we all out here on the street?, Arthur asked? It must be 'cause those men up there in their towers? They don't love at all. All they feel is the first kind'a love. And they want to keep it all to themselves. That's why we all have to sit out here on the street. 'Cause there ain't enough of the first kind of love to go around. But the second kind? That's the kind they have in heaven. And in heaven, that kind of love never runs out. So you know what I say? I say we all act a little more like the Marlboro men, and we try to make something perfect.

Arthur and his interlocutors went on like that for some time, debating Platonic formalism, Calvinist theology, exegesis and eisegesis alike, political theory, the metaphysics of morals, the empirical reality of the ethical realm, the purpose of the state, consequentialism, utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, temperance, duty, the importance of evangelism, and so on, all the while suits and leather clad ladies passed them by at breakneck speed. At least Arthur discussed

it all. The rest just seemed to sit there and listen, taken aback by it all. Hypnotized. By the end of it, one line stuck with all of them. A sort of poetic fragment he uttered on the spot:

Spread these thoughts

For they are wingéd

Love never blooms

In the hearts of the wicked

And they kept on doing the blow too, between the five of them, until it had all run dry. Dry as the powder what substantiated its form. Dry as each and every one of their chapped lips, longing for sip of water or whiskey—whatever came first. Arthur left them eventually to persist in his wandering, with each of them promising always to remember what they had heard, and to spread the good word to all who would listen.

There was a large-bellied woman with her back to a lamp post at one street corner which Arthur happened upon, deciding to sit next to her. She was holding a dirty piece of cardboard, what rested against her pregnancy, and grime-soiled newspapers underneath her unwashed jeans to keep her from rubbing up more filth from the pavement. The sign read:

PREGNANT

&

HUNGRY

She spoke naught, yet revolved her head in his direction, catching him in the corner of her eye. They sat there for a short while as taxi cabs blurred past in fits of yellow checker smear. The back of her skull rested on the post, squishing her tight-wound ponytail between rock and place hard as her chubby chipmunk cheeks jiggled in their fatness. Her under eyes bore weariness in their sagging purple, puffing out to change her silhouette. Plucking a dirty half-smoked cig' off the ground, she asked Arthur if he had a light, which he obliged, striking his orphan match on his pant legs and cupping a hand around her smoke as the flame caught her breath, bending towards her as if called by a higher power.

—My name's Terry, he said, what's yours?

—Anne-Polly, she whispered as if that was the extent of breath she was able to muster.

Anne-Polly Pollop.

—That's a good one. Dactyl and dibrach.

—Wha'sat supposed to mean?

—Poetry. Doesn't matter, there's no poetry out here. Or maybe it's everywhere.

—Doesn't look like it to me, said Anne-Polly.

—So...you. What's the story? Why's there a lady expecting on the street?

—You don't want to know.

—Wouldn't have asked, were that the case.

—You don't want to know. You just want something. Everybody out here just wants something. Here on the street. It's just dog-eat-dog. You can't trust nobody. We're all just waiting for a chance to stick it to each other or take take take. You can't turn your back. You must be new to this or something if you think I don't know that. I mean, you don't even have a beard yet. 'Less you just shaved it to pull one on me. I used to have a dog, you know. A little puppy named

Knuckles. He was a little terrier. Cutest little thing. One of these guys pulled him right off the leash a while back and just ran with it. Broke his little neck. I think he wanted to eat it.

—Why'd you name him Knuckles?

—My husband, well. There was this song. It was from a rock group he used to love when he was a teenager out upstate in Albany. He would drive me around and play their stuff all the time while we smoked pot on some back roads. He nearly crashed his Corolla a few times, 'cause he would get so high. It was fun though, blastin' that rock music. Song was called *Knuckles the Dog Who Helps People*. 'Bout a greyhound though. I didn't think I could raise a greyhound in the city 'cause we'd be living in a closet, so I settled for a little terrier.

—How'd the song go?

Anne-Polly, in her voice of sand and exhaustion, sang a few bars of it the way a child would, droning and barely holding a proper pitch and wavering to (successfully) hold back teardrops:

I am a blind and palsied boy

Condemned to life in this wheelchair

Other kids will not play with me

But Knuckles the dog you were always there

Knuckles goes to the nursing home

to visit the elderly

Abandoned by their own children

Knuckles lifts them from their misery

Then she sounded out a guitar riff—*doo-duhduh-doo-duhduh-doo-doo*. Two dactyls and a spondee.

—That’s a funny song.

—It was a funny band. But sort of, I don’t know. Earnest.

Arthur pressed against his shoulder and groaned, stiff from days without bed, rolling his neck to stretch it.

—Your Husband, Arthur asked, what was his name?

—Eurion, Anne-Polly responded.

—So where’s Eurion now, if you don’t mind my asking?

—Well, you see, we were up in Albany a long time ago. He had always wanted to work in business or something. Investing, you know? He played the stocks a lot when we lived up there. And he got his degree from the University of Albany, his bachelors. I never went to school really past nine-through-twelve. I tried out a nursing program, but didn't really like it. And, you know, he would promise me all sorts of things. ‘Cause he wanted to make a lot of money. My ma’ always called him a ‘no-brains retard’, or a ‘future-deadbeat’. She didn’t really believe in him much, probably ‘cause he always toked around in the back yard with me, and she freakin’ *hated* the smell of it. But he really thought he could make it. Got into NYU for his MBA, and I followed him here. Worked as a coffee girl to help him through it all, ‘cause back then he said he couldn’t work. Had to focus on school. Said it was do-or-die or whatever. ‘N after all, he ended up graduating and doing pretty good, believe it or not. Got some job at a big firm up there on Wall Street. Boy, I was so proud of him. But trouble was, his boss was some mean kinda faggot. Said he was a real fruity guy, but bitter. Guess it was a hazing kind of thing, but he always mocked him for not wearing the right suit or tie or something. He spent all of his fuckin’

paychecks on new clothes just to impress this guy. And once they had their business mixers after work, it was hell for him when I would show up. ‘Cause I’m no Manhattan girlie. You can take a girl downstate but you can’t take the upstate out, *heh*. ‘N the guy wouldn’t lay off about my weight. I get it and all, I’m no catch. I mean, look at me. But it really drove him crazy. He’d start rambling to me about Atkins or this Ray Peat guy, ‘n what I should be eating. You know what they called him at the office? Ahab. Christ. He never really seemed happy once he started working there, ‘specially after he had to quit the pot to focus more. But one day he really snapped. I think he came into work, and his boss was there tellin’ him that he can’t wear a warm-color tie with a cool-colored suit the way he did. Eurie just lost it. Fuckin...wrecked the whole apartment. All the clothes were torn up. Some of it was burnt. I came back to the window wide open, and we lived like ten stories up.

—So he left you with the baby?

—Gee I wish, Anne-Polly said, rubbing her stomach. This lil’ friend’s from the street. I wasn’t trying to have him. Didn’t even wanna screw nobody.

They shared a speechless company, smoking more ground pickings and listening to the cars stop and start.

—Listen, said Anne-Polly with a quiver, thanks for hearing me out. You should have these. Can’t take ‘em no more ‘cause of the kid. Don’t need him any more fucked up.

She handed Arthur a little brown envelope, which he opened to find four tiny squares of paper—all depicting different micro-segments of Van Gogh’s *Starry Night*.

Night-night time was finally ending for Miss Antigone, who was roused in the arms of a carnival mirror. Nurse Clee, with his face bruised up, was staring right down at her, imploring that she look in the reflective segment of Nurse Hoon’s blush palette. Both of her peepers were

She slapped his hand away and flew backwards, rolling over one of the desks in the office and spilling a seemingly endless stack of papers and pencil over the floor like a great avalanche of bureaucracy, before landing back on her bare feet with fumbling feline reflex.

—You're a *pig?! How'd I end up in the piggie den? Cuhhhh-rightst!!!!*

She spit on the carpet where Orson's feet rested and ran off in a hurry, retrieving and dangling her heels, which had fallen off at some point, with the dangling grip of her fingernails.

Fingernails fingernails fingernails took all the four all the four gifts delightful gifts from gracious God almighty start to take hold on one more train ride must be out in the Bee Kay now Bruhbrrruhbbbbbbrooklynbound seeing magnificent swathes though few of whawhhwhatmust be the stragglers of a nightlife those lords of absolute aesthetic they must feel the world sssuhsussuhhsososofullso much fuller than I they must know some pure harmony that I cannot all taken up with hate and shit and filth that I that me *cogitocogitocogitoblurringgggggg* not knowing what I say out loud what I speak it all blends from nous to qualia all bending bending bending bending bend my spine my rocking thing that body that flesh that machine that keeps me wanting wanting wanting and I feel so...sick so sick like something aching out me something trying to scrape on'm stomach but it's justjustjust must must be shamanic uptake like the brownmen out in South America out some mountain place out somewhere *REAL* spiritual *REAL* heavenly where you go on some retreat to imbibe the vital essence waking every send making ever mends making everything bloom the colors heard before the eyes widen take in more light when it happens looks like gloss looks like glossy glossy pangloss world the *BEST BEST BEST* haven't done this since bachelors since the buhhhhbuhhhh Berkshires out there with Swooney Gully Gee the rest Hully Gully called him 'cause of Wilson Brian playing all those things with the boys on the beach early era of their fame early morning surf earlyearlyearly on and on and on

listening *Be My Baby* on loop listening demos in the loop with Gull him doped just piano voice
keys singinnggggggggggknowyou'regonnalovePhilSpectorhauntyhauntingEuropacalling it all
came flashing to me so quick like lightning that heroic dose that thunder that clap of Zeus split
me in two or rather is splitting me splitty splitty sploch black night cold cold traincar spot a man
of the orient all dressed in black beanie sweats and sunglasses *THIS* early in the morning a
straggler a vagrant a wanderer a man of the night walking alone alone alone and who am I but to
read the tea leaves on to where the Gods have sent me grinding fingernails fingernails fingernails
against tense sense chrome poles the coolness calms and bursts my heartbeat rates raising
phasing grazing clanging repetition to think he could be wrong Søren got it all *BACKWARDS*
that once repeated it would not become nothing but instead become a something a nothing an
everything it must be everything for it never ends the snake the coiling Christheadslithering
slithhhhhhering Confucian man must be off his stop but I won't I won't let intent pop or fail or
falter I *mustmustmust* make haste make it out make something stumbling up go towards across
the aisle of others other lovers thinkers writers dancers singers prancers poets suits and dandies
wriggling pale little world black leather sun black leather moon glistening as *ONE* won unity
singularity duality forever dialectic stew of heavens bleak and blue but pale in the creaking light
the crackling starting morning warning yet another repetition here to come to stay to happen on
and always forever if only it would *endendend* if I werent struck with fear and trembling how I'd
love to end it all myself so quick but that even that in-itself is too brave an act no tact I no
nothing *no no no* numbers splitting head and vision of the great mindsnake all 'n all coming back
to fall into me into out of Eden sealed for good with sword ablaze with twin young eunuchs
angel blonde pristine *white* might be much debate to be had on the region being Arab maybe
brown floating childrennnnnneeeuughhhhhhhno it's too much too much too much too much too

much white pink brown shimmer shine blue shine yellow shininggggggggggggoldgoldgold the dawn the hissing stop take hold and follow great Orient great man journey to unknown land charting course of spirit spilling blood like blood like the sweetness like the bitter licorice bitter bitter bitter saccharine something sick something slick the everything breaks black nothing black light black love black leather sun black leather moon weeping black leather heart black leather heart calling bleak weary world bleak wooly head bobbing black winter world black weather world calling block by block brick by brick or pavement rather slow the saunter haunting him him man of drink of gin or no or no or what they drink there the Asians intthhhhhthhhhhelittle cups miniatures sock-ay warm or cool besides he plays 'round with keys jingling jangling spurs of tangled wire tangled iron into the falt his home I slip in I slip and still so still wander up the staircase and hope he doesn't notice tthhhhithouhhthough he *DOES* he does he spots me but the key to his portion of the living not yet retrieved and fumbling dropping drops t'words me down these steps it's all *mineminemine* this coil of flesh this coil of locks answered bounces slides down past me me me make way otherwise *UPUPUP* ayyyy-scend scent with me scent of fear his stillness beats and struggles but I shout I scream I have the grasp on my weapon I draw blade first and into his belly his chest his neck his face over and over and over and on and on and on and on and in and in and in and in and with and with and with and with and for and for so for him on and on again 'till he collapses drops a pistol gurgling bloodburst gasping air and gasping now forever nothing as spirit fades it's all so easy such a rush allallalllllllohhhhhhggggggfhhhh please please please I'll run down take his keys pull him in make myself at home make myself comfortable.

Arthur slides the clubgoer's corpse into a minimally furnished studio apartment. There's a wooden table in the middle of everything with a couple of shrink wrapped bricks of all sorts

along with a scale between them. He starts beating himself with excitement, going up his body with blows from his thighs to his head with reckless punches, falls to the linoleum to roll around and moan, and somersaults back up to his feet, fishing the pound-heavy drugbundles into his bag with childlike giddy glee and giggling convulsive—Aristophanic hiccuping that seems to be without end. He searches the fanny pack still on the body of the dead man, seeing it was filled with technicolor dime bags full of whatever he was cutting out of the bricks. So joyful he could burst at the fleshy seams, he slams his oxfords into the body for quite literally twenty straight minutes, breaking any bone still in accordance with its concept into a purely irrational conglomeration of body. The night or morning was still young for the dastardly Arthur Abrams, who now, more than ever in the midst of his acidtrance, had scored.

Score score score silly brother slitting presents sensing treasure shouting sweet exclamations, said them many times before the whispers and the touchings hungry sausage fingers groaning father breathy breathings pushing warmth through cracking lips to ears that tingle twinkle golden details off the model airplane brother got that Christmas—shit—the *zzzzzrrrrmmmmmm zoom zooming* play pretend trajectory whistling figure eights then straight until he hit his face and body on the wall where wailing weeping crying withered at the comfort rub of mothers hands all *theretherethere* in a way she never seemed to comfort me as if she harbored jealousy or maybe saw the way he looked at me that Father—cunt—the windows shone in rays that morn' but turn to gusts of winter wind to temper him his hands all grasping shifting scene that went from den to living room to my bedside with the lampstand hosting doily spotted by crazed monster ladybugs gnawing gnashing at the warmth of blanket making mountain goosebumps shoot around my skin so pale so cold cold cold can he tell could he know can't he glean I am not sleeping am still watching some impression of a blackness over curtain eyelids

sometimes raising every so slightly sweeping underneath to see a man of shadow though I surely know him from the smell so well but then a swell of filth and fluid soaks the sheets and he retreats replaced by mother flicking switch of light and telling me *this isn't happening*.

It wasn't, after all. The clock says noon and I must have been asleep for hours and hours or more. I hate hate hate those dreams. She's always there telling me what is real and what isn't at the end. Girls like me were raised not to question the iron lung of the matriarch. And *oh oh oh* wait oh why I cry at memories such as these without the comfort of a man in bed next to me. Where is he? He doesn't work these hours. He isn't in the kitchen. His head is not at work in his study. His body isn't being cleansed in the washroom. He can't be seen from the peephole in the hallway. His skin isn't stuck to the ceiling. He isn't passed out on the floor. He can't even be found underneath the bed, hiding. Though, there's this smell. This horrible smell that keeps wafting—blown around by the ceiling fan, but only in the bedroom. Worst of all there's a monster in the washroom mirror. This walking dead magenta spectrum weeping at me with its steel wool clumping sticking to its disgusting plum head, bursting sticky liquid at the seams as if it's about to pop and let a slew spill out. I'm all alone, and there is nothing. I've put my faith in family, past or future, and all I have to show for it is absolutely nothing. The rooms are all empty. The world is all death to me. It's all *nothing nothing nothing*.

There's a shoebox I hid away in the closet under clothes I had meant to return long ago, and there's nothing in there either. Just Father's shitting handkerchief, mother's wedding ring I retrieved sifting through the garbage bin, a heart shaped locket with my brother's high school graduation photo, a picture of all the three of us in front of the springtime bloom of cherry blossoms at the botanical garden, and a letter from my english teacher, Mister Tripart, had wrote and slipped to me one day after class that read:

Dear Little Miss Antigone,

It pains me so to know your graduation date is nearing. That my classroom will forever lose the grace of your untimely presence. The poems you have penned under my tutelage will never cease to rack my mind and heart until I die, and perhaps even after that.

Your face is young, but I know beneath it there are centuries locked away—the mind of a knowing woman. A woman who knows too much, and says too little aloud. It was a pleasure to read your thoughts in silence, as they could never be spoken.

You will surely do great things in life, find a wonderful man, and be married. There will be no man with a fortune so auspicious on the face of this winding earth. I can only pray you keep the words we have shared as they have always been—forever true by virtue of their silence.

Sincerely and with love,

Your happy teacher,

Mr. Dooly Tripart

I scan it again and press down on my stomach. Wishing for the life that was once there and will never be again. Pressing, searching, wishing for that something which is always nothing. My barren corpse. Crotch bleeding cuts of coat hanger wire and cooing pain. To catch the sound of anguish. To cut the silent air. To never bear the crescent scar. To follow mother's firm commandment, that there be nothing there again.

Nowhere beats are trembling speakers, leading mass to throb and swing. The crowd congregates around the tabernacle, hosting the headphoned man and his twin discs. Orson's somewhere in the middle of the whole thing, this time actually attempting to partake. For a bit he actually feels some sense of unity—in the sense that he is an alien part of this picture, he constitutes its wholeness. His rocks and turns mirror synchronicities with his fellow men and women. The flickering of spotlights turns all into stop-motion; an early motion picture; choppy sequence of a horse's gallop. Orson feels every muscle of the beast inside himself. Off in the corner, another soul stands still. His name is Edward. He knows not why he's there.

Lately, Edward hasn't felt himself. He doesn't remember things the way he used to. He doesn't feel in the same way, on the emotive level. Though sandy blonde hair has grown over the top, there is a gnarly bolt of scar tissue on the backside of his head, which was birthed by a stumble on the subway tracks. A writer friend told him once about the club as they exchanged creative advice. Changing scenery often leads to new bouts of inspiration, perhaps. The funny thing is that Edward cannot for the life of him remember the friend's name, and he certainly hasn't called him any time since the accident. All of the names and numbers in his phone had become meaningless scribbles. There are no faces left to match them. He only remembers one

spirit, and he knows for sure that she is dearly important. More than that, she is calling to him. She is always calling to him, even when he feels as if he is already dead.

Orson, dry to the bone, breaks from the crowd to patronize one of the complimentary water coolers—which really ought to be complementary considering the price of a vodka-cran—and in doing so locks eyes with Edward, who happened to be leaning on the same wall the cooler sat by. Their mutual noticing seems to hold a vague significance to Orson, who in his act of hydration cannot seem to shake the faint hazel shade of iris from his consciousness. Maybe it was the coolness of his gaze, which somehow indicated that behind its veil was both detached emptiness and a profound or knowing fullness all at once. Maybe it was his outfit, being a well-kept two piece suit, which felt uncharacteristic of garb usual to this dancehall clientele. Either way, it stuck with him, and he refused to keep his eyes off the man for the entire night, albeit from afar.

But Edward eventually gave in to what was calling him—the compulsive cry of a muse or oracle. He made way to leave the club without his presence. Orson followed, but only up to the door, seeing as his assignment was to stay there until at least two in the morning. Before Edward disappeared, Orson took a snapshot of the back of his head on his phone. In examining it closely, zooming in with Zapruder-precision, he noticed strange topographical features in the texture of Edward's hair. Peaks and valleys in bronze fur brushes. Consciously, he passed it off as a birth defect. Unconsciously, there was something brewing in the lapsus.

That night, or morning rather, Orson slept restlessly and dreamed of a road trip northward bound to the Canadian border, which he was prone to penetrate in a worn down '95 Ford Explorer at least once yearly over adolescent summer months as accessory to his mother's familial visitations. He was in the passenger's seat, staring out the window at the curves and

clearing of a vertical wooded landscape. The one-lane mountain roads swung up and down like roller coaster tracks, at their peaks exposing lines of sight which caught glimmering lakes and rivers painted at their edges with twirling pines. Every now and then he saw a paddle boat out in the middle of the water, and without question knew that it was his father far out there, teaching his childself how to fish for the first time. The radio was on, playing golden oldies, in particular a track by *The Zombies* which thrilled him in his youth and rang out:

Well, let me tell you 'bout the way she looked

The way she'd act and the color of her hair

Her voice was soft and cool

Her eyes were clear and bright

But she's not there

For some reason the station wouldn't stop playing it. Each time it ended, a cool headed jockey would extrodue and introduce the song with a golden tongue. *And that was The Zombies, with their breakthrough single, 'She's Not There'. Now this next track comes from across the Atlantic from Mister Rod Argent, nineteensixtyfour...* It felt like it had been playing for hours without end, punctuated only by the high points of the twirling road. Orson, though usually discouraged from editorialization with regards to radio selection, finally asked if they could change the station. But nobody answered him. He actually asked again a few more times before he turned his head. There was nobody in the driver's seat. It was all seat and wheel. He braced himself for impact as the Ford began to roll down another great dip, fearing death was near. A crash never came,

however. The car just kept on rolling perfectly through its single lane, and Orson just kept sitting there, gripping the upholstery on the car's door as his stomach fell out.

Out and trying out and training back to railway back to Penn to rekindle flames of my newfound disciples followers friends in knowing wearing off the trip of tabs of magic paper tongue dissolved diluted destroyed now in me now wearing down the lightbulb glows unbearable start to lose their luster muster fumbling through my bag my package new material new bounty new substance to be subject or is already life is murmur mewling meaning splitting through the drugs rotunda swirling lazy Susan spinning 'round the brick of purple crystal wondering what may be of it may be out of range my range of expertise my knowing though a knowing must always be upset by truth a fracture pit of death perhaps I've seen it once before those days when Swooney took me out at night he crushed it in his drink dissolved and sipped away but yet the rocks were not colorful the same so bright so lively I must must must partake to know how my dear friend had felt those years ago I'll cut it open with my tool of choice my only companion on this journey down and out my fall it's all covered in rust and ruby fluids though does it job just the same my old reliable slit and slip the rocks on traincar seat and crush it up with the butt of its grip with shards of glass flying all over floor and body mine my nostrils hover and inhale the pure pain of glass the sharpest pain I've felt yet of the sinus a shooting sting of cut but still I feel some nothing and make effort all the same to dose again to serve and crush and snort until my nose is bleeding all down my face and neck and shirt and chest but I wipe it all away while few souls around simply keep to themselves afraidfraydyfearful what I could do to them oh no oh-ho-ho but why do I feel nothing maybe misjudged uptake mistook judgements synthetic for analytic though perhaps reversed perhaps the uptake is contained in the subject of the substance or perhaps not since my use is surely an external predicate but then after all the subject is substance andd anddd

his agony, trapped in an inwardness impossible to externalize in any fashion save for catatonic fits.

After half an hour the effects begin to taper off, but still he rolls and rocks. Speaking aloud, he attempts to start the same sentence almost a hundred times, each dictation cutting off at some point midway through and coming back to the start.

—Suh-suh-suh-such works such works such works are are are such works are are works are such are such are works such works are mmuhmuhmmuhsuhsuh-such mirror works are mirrors are muhmuhsuhsuhsuh-such works are mmmmmmmmmmmuh mmmmmmirrors such works are mmmm...

He was making an attempt at a quotation of an epigraph, attributed to Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, a kraut scientist of the eighteenth century who had invented a visual model of electric discharge, which headed *Stages on Life's Way*. He must have been stuttering for an hour before he came to finally speak those words.

—Such works are mirrors...when an ape looks in, no apostle can look out.

—Look out! Cried an onlooker, ladyvoiced and scared as Arthur tumbled out onto the 34th Street platform.

Finally recovering to some extent, he took to the streets again in search of patrons. It was his plan now to sell off quantities of his newfound supply, in order to purchase some clothes suitable for the attendance of the *Nowhere* club he had been made aware of, hoping he could score some sex or perhaps just a new vista for his next victimization. Selling the stuff proved to be no easy task, as the visibly homeless he solicited clearly had no dough, and the differently-homed of his targets were in no mood to talk to any vagrant such as he. Unfortunately, his persistence actually happened to brew up some trouble. A crowd of wandering

leatherfolks started to follow him where he trekked, watching him attempt a fruitless route of salesmanship. Followed for a few blocks, Arthur was finally made aware of this out of the corner of his eyes, which seemed to defy all logic considering the aura of sheer paranoia he had been exuding since Friday. He tried to run, but the molly had fucked his senses nearly to death. Tripping and falling on some dollar-pizza stoop, the gang caught up and started beating the ever-loving crap out of him, armed with bare fists and rubber soles. It all ended with a great *CRACK!*, as Arthur's soft intellectual bounced off the pavement like a bruised tomato.

Waking again later, he found his satchel devoid of substance. The man who owned the dollar pizza shop, *DiMaggio's*, was poking at him and trying to help him up.

—You okay, bud'?

Halfway up, Arthur vomited all over himself a stew which was mostly bile and fluids miscellaneous, considering he had eaten nothing for what was coming on three days now. The pizza man, disgusted, dropped him where he was and went back into his shop, where he washed his hands thoroughly while complaining to the rest of the staff.

—Fuckin' bums out there oughta be wiped off the street, he said.

Limping back to where he had won his disciples and interlocutors, he wanted to make an attempt to reconnect. They were all right there by the same burning trash can, still smoking used cigarettes and shooting the shit. Bruised as he was, none of them were able to recognize that he was yesterday's orator.

—You's look sick man. Wanna smoke?

—Did you tell them? Did you spread the good word?

Arthur was coughing out each word like any of them could have been his last.

—Wut, you know’s ‘bout that dude came ‘round yest’rday? Talk’d some’s folks ‘bout it all fo’ sho’. How else you would’a heard?

Hoping for a warm greeting and maybe even some sort of ceremonial worship for his rhetorical efforts, Arthur became briefly enraged, spitting on the ground beneath them and kicking over the fiery trash can. They all just watched him limp away as if nothing had happened, the group being too underfed to muster up the excitement required for a proper response. He knew what had to come next. Though still in rags, he was determined to get into that club. Something in the air spoke to him, let him know it was vital. There were whispers of an oracle flown in from the North Wind. He picked up on the vibrations. A single end was in store for this Bacchanalia, and by intuition he had deduced its teleology.

Nowhere throbs from its excess through every window pane, with bright bulbs flashing and a dulled trancing rhythm that could be felt in the ground from across the street, where Arthur happened to be standing. With a fervor, he stalked the girls coming and going with fetish eyes that received in turn looks of both fear and disgust. One lady walking past with her six-inch stilettos actually had to heel over and puke just at a second of inhaling his putrid fume. He crossed the street to the entrance, where a stately bald fellow guarded the door. Arthur, for whatever reason thinking that he had donned the ring of Gyges, perhaps mistaken by the conventional New York practice of never dare laying eyes on the homeless (this was a purely technical means to the end of diminishing and possibility of heckling or assault), attempted to slip by the bouncer as if he simply were not there. The plan was thwarted with the vaudeville hook of an arm’s crook, Arthur being quickly slammed to the ground and being told to, and I quote, *‘get the fuck out of here.’* Days worth of overdose and head trauma left him breathless and confused, taking refuge with his back against a parked car. It was at this time that a certain suited

man came drifting out of the club, exiting stage left in slow motion. There was something strange about him to Arthur, but he couldn't put his finger on it instantaneously. That man was half a block away before Arthur put it all together. His height, slim figure, sandyblonde hair, and jaunty face. He looked strikingly like himself. It was as if he had caught a glimpse of a mirror, only in this case a mirror much cleaner than himself. Arthur knew, after some cursory consideration, that this was the reason he was called to the club. This was what the lovers in the park were trying to tell him: that his journey perhaps had a path clearer than he had initially intended, as all paths must eventually be, albeit in accordance with the principle of retroactivity.

Stalking, ever stalking with persistence my conviction sees what's fit to find to follow the Mirror Man along his path wherever it may take me. This horrid bender, this sordid fall into those senses best left resting for the unattuned aesthete. But I have seen it now, the depths of filth which make me whole—those lies and crop rotations that constitute the sum total of abstract being—and my sickness will come to bear upon this final destination, that bobbing skull before me. Wonder where he's going to at all, down and up all these street corners. With certainty, a man of sound mind would not walk this distance without a purpose, certainly not at this hour, when scoundrels such as I reveal themselves to haunt the avenues. Though, it is no I at all, this body has only become a vessel for a greater energy. This being, but the force of boredom set in motion. Boredom, which itself is the motion. Movement which relates to itself as motivation. Struck by the fullness of the interesting, I am become pure freedom inasmuch as there is no me to be found in this melted ego—no ties to kith or kin, but sheer fluid. A melting vomit slipping through the social web. Surely when I meet the mirror man at his destination, I will be the first subject in the history of subjectification to have grasped the noumenon by its flimsythin neck.

Walking so long my feet sting of blister, though he must feel it too. He must feel exactly the same way I feel, as he is a part of this world which is only me and me alone. Him and I are but fragments of this spirit we occupy and share. Each patch of pavement or strip of street is part of my soul. So no matter how far, I will walk with him to fulfill whatever piece of myself he contains. The piece of me that beckons. I only want to show him what heaven feels like. He must feel the flash of lifend in place of me, and only then may I become him. My whole life I've only been a spirit waiting for its host. Surely I am nearing my destination. Surely it's near. Nearing nearing and it all seems too familiar. It all reminds me of this and that. An exchange and smoke. Under the bridge that helly hell hell that deep pit below the arc to everything. Every thingy thing

thing still brings me joy what fun the trip that never ends though I am beaten dry and buried all my past I long for more. The park. That park.

He stops in stead for why unknown by some benches overlooking the river, that river. Feeling the tension of the teleological, I approach and hark.

—You there, I shout.

No answer, the mirror man may only gaze to shore as I continue to close the distance to make myself known.

—*You! Look! Look!*

But still there's nothing. Nothing but the back of his pristine black three-piece. Nothing but his flimsy hair blowing in the breeze. I see myself looking. I want to take hold of myself. I want to become myself. I want to become him. To take his place would be the final actualization. The lastmost trick in my magic act. The final solution.

So near so nearing so quick so close. I empty the contents of my satchel all in the grass to prepare myself. Grabbing his shoulder. Pull and twist. Make him see me. Make him know me. Watch his eyes twitch. Excitement, expected. But, rather, there's just this deadness. He doesn't look aghast. He doesn't tremble. This *stupid* man this *scum* of the earth this *cretin* makes a mess of my art my miracle my painting of the acts. I *fell* for you days ago I fell and left it all to meet you and yet you think *nothing* of it. Absolute *imbecile*. Subhuman. Filth. Bastard. Ingrate. Invalid. Ignoramus. Idiot. I'll scream, I will, at the top of my lungs I'll shout and tell him exactly who he is.

—*YOU ARE ME!*

Slip the bag over his head and pull him to the ground, thumbing the extension switch of the cutter and sinking it deep into the neck area with a tearing pull of all the strength the arm of my

unfed weary body has left to output. Maneuver his head and neck to be sure the spray misses his suit. Pooling and splashing on the park's path. Once it's all done, I'll do it. Make the trade. Dawn him on myself. Undress and redress, to be and become. To drape, to undrape, to cut. Searching through his things with agony. That he didn't even recognize me. That he couldn't even see the point of it all. The point of his being there. The point of mine. They will never understand. No matter how hard I try to make them. They won't understand because it's all nothing. It's all just death and shit and agony. But at least I can make them feel it. Feel it just the same as I do. I'll make myself a mirror.

Choking sputtering blood coughs against the ground face-down. I caress the back of his head for some brief comfort, and feel a great tissue scar against my calloused fingertips. Maybe we aren't as similar as I had thought. But rummaging through his pockets at least I know we share an eye color, I and this Edward Crane. Now too his living place is known to me, by way of legal address, as designated by state-issued identification. His ghost there, I shall follow. I'll be the vessel for his spirit forever more. Wrapping my prized killing weapon in the rags I had worn before to absorb the red mess, I make my way to his former living accommodations in a neighborhood of Queens named Utopia.

Heaven bound, I use his keys to enter what seems to be an entirely empty apartment, though entering the washroom there are surely signs of feminine cohabitation. Undressing, I feel my first warm shower in four days, and a thick filth wears away. The mirror cabinet contains his shaving kit, so I'll make myself at home and tame my stubble to more imitate his likeness. Wonder what to do with these bloody rags and the cutter. Garbage is no place for them, as they contain the memory of my feast—by a principle of hauntology I will part naught with them. In the bedroom, just lifting the mattress I'll store it for when a healthy recollection is required.

The suits in the laundry bin now, and the bed is all made and inviting. Now that I've proven my point once and for all, my only remaining feeling is exhaustion. Need a drink before bed. Entering what seems to be his study, I make use of the mini bar beside his desk, preparing whiskey neat and sipping at it with little focus. The bookshelf here is packed full of all sort of back, hard or paper. *Either/Or*, parts I & II, Princeton University Press. Hardcover with the white and snotgreen design.

Maybe we really are the same. Not so different, I and him. Beyond looks. In spirit. Maybe I'll fall asleep tonight in the same spot he normally occupies. Perhaps stirring with the same frequency and rhythm. I could wake to find the same woman beside me, and pick off where he had left. Maybe I'll even dream the same dreams. But surely my long dream is over.

Home again home again home again if this is anything able to be called by that name. This dungeon dirty dingy den of dower death, I hate hate hate it all that I wake to this world if only I could sleep and dream for good. Oh fuck oh Christ oh fill the fear of filth with fewer charge for I for thee for me for mother. I'll never forget not ever not once you telling me that no thing took place with Mister Dooly, or even *Fatherfuck*. My brains a broken book a flowing brook of lie and thoughts bubonic. If only if only if only Edward were home he cold hold me tight and tell what's wrong from right for me, for nothing feels correct or true. This life is blind compulsion. All stabbing at the dark. The dark of this apartment, which still I've refused to make lit. The switches are all used syringes, waiting to stick me. Knowing once I turn one, a plague of needs will swell in me, a well of on-and-off. I'll slick them all three times, then six, then nine. But my skin is burning and it will never be enough. I'll square them all at nine at thirty six at eighty one until it's enough to soothe me. *Flickflickflick*...the quick of my heart beats ever fast, ever on to breathy panic. Gallop 'round with shoes still on my feet, my bunions burn in agony against the tightness. Right right right. Burning everywhere. The fire starts from nothing. *Flickflickflick*...if only I knew where he's been all the time I'd give him such a stern talking-to, I'd smack him right across the head for he to leave me here so long, to left me so unheld, unheard, how could he leave me heaving, breathing heavy breaths of strobe light nothing. *Flickflickflick*...knowing now if I were to stop the floor boards would give out or the tiles would slip away or if there were his child in me and I weren't to have known it would surely end in miscarriage and blood across the toilet seat but oh how I wish I had his child in me to hear those little feet making fleshy chatter on the floors for me, for he and I. *Flickflickflick*...but how would a daughter manage with a man so absent, so far away to help me. If her were here he'd be holding my hands back from the switches in the foyer and the bathroom, and catch me as I ran between them, grinding my teeth.

He would hold me down even when I thrashed and bashed at his head, like when I first read his manuscript and broke for months, forever. *Ickickick*...disgusting everything no splendid evening no meal to cook no mouths to feed no love to feel no soul to peel away to know to touch to love him graciously. There's only mechanics, the law of nature and chemical imbalance. The syringes on the wall that drain or inject me as I feel them over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. *Chckchckchck*...chugging on I'll hum all the songs he ever sang to me like *You Are My Sunshine* or *Be My Baby* or *God Only Knows* or *Pretty Ballerina* or *And Your Bird Can Sing* or *On Top of Old Smokey* or *Ain't Got No Home* or *Tonight You Belong To Me* or *One-Sided Love Affair* or or or or or or or or or...*Chckchckchck*...*Blue Suede Shoes* or *Egyptian Shumba* or *Devil In His Heart* or *Fun, Fun, Fun* or *My Prayer* or *A Teenager In Love* or *Waterloo Sunset* or *Seasons In The Sun* or *All My Loving* or...*Chckchckchck*...it's all the same it's all over and over an absence. He hasn't stopped to love me or notice me in days or weeks or months. But now he's all but disappeared. Even with him gone, it feels exactly the same as it's felt since the injury. He's there, but he's just gone gone gone. *Chckchckchck*...nearly done with the burning in the kitchen in the bathroom on to the study where the flickering makes his papers glow in stop motion, flashing at me a thousand moments. A thousand words and pictures. All his fables I've read and remembered, though he never will again. He never will recall the stories he's told me. *Chckchckchck*...and on and on and on. *Chckchckchck*...to the bedroom, keep up the task. Nearing sacred numbers. Coming close to rest. But something breaks it all, the burning compulsory. It's the smell again, and it's only worse now. That smell of iron and rotting something. I start sniffing all around for it on my hands and knees like an animal. Smelling around the seams of the bed, I tear off all the fabric and pillows. Still nothing, but some speckles and smears of red on the underside of the fitted sheet. Pushing

the mattress to the side, I see it there. Some bundle of old clothing that smells like a sewer. Fetching disposable gloves from the bathroom, I dawn them and unravel the bunch. Something heavy falls to the floor in the unwrapping, tumbles one bounce and *eeeeouuuuuoch!!!!* *Fuckfuckfuck* my foot's cut open. *Bathroombathroombathroom. Lord cuntinng dammit all.* First aid and gauze wrapping around it all. Limp back to the scene of the crime. Why a box cutter? Loose in there with the blade revealed. But the blood...can't all be mine...for some of it is dark nearly black red and must be dried...and the stains on the clothes...and the sheets...gosh it all smells *awful*...it's all so fearful...but only makes me wonder...who I've been with all this time...

Got a call early this morning from Chet, telling me that I've got to check something out. He told me to skip checking in at the precinct, and to get myself to Queens pronto. Said it was extremely related to our case. I was darning my socks at the time with my phone cinched between my shoulder and my ear. Asked if it could wait 'til after church, and he told me no, absolutely not. Time's around eight o'clock and the service is at eleven, so if I get there quick I'm sure I won't miss communion. It's always a real disappointing thing, missing that. Hopefully Chet doesn't mind me showing up in my Sunday best. That's the only occasion that could get me in a sports jacket. All ready at eight-thirty, give or take.

Took the W to Astoria Boulevard. Cars are awful empty this morning. There's one lady there with her kid. He must be ten or eleven. Her hands on his thigh, rubbing it. I don't think she's trying to console her, though. He doesn't look upset. But it wouldn't matter either way. That's just the kind of thing you do when you're a mother. My ma' did it to me when she was driving when I was old enough to sit in the passenger's seat. Sometimes she would just grip me real tight, like she'd lose me the second she let up. She came to me one night real late, when I was in bed, and did the same thing on my shoulders. I was only half asleep but it sure woke me. She told me that if she ever lost me, that she would have nothing. That she could never lose me. No matter what. When you love somebody like that, it's a real scary thing. Once you have something, that's when you know someday you might have to let it go. And when I joined the force, that was a whole other thing. Made the drinking worse, for sure.

Out the station it's up to Ditmars and a left nine more blocks. There's a real modest Catholic parish there on the corner. Not the gothic kind you usually think of. It still towers, though. Straight up into the sky, brick by brick. On the corner of it, there's an indentation in the brick to leave space for a statue of the Mother Mary. Better stop for a second to pay my respects.

Know I'm about to see something terrible, whatever it is. Bow my head. A little lower. Miss Mary, I know it's usually a Catholic deal to pray to you and all, and seeing as I'm not a Catholic, I'll hope you'll forgive my not talking to you for a while. Now I know, if there's anyone out there who gets what it's like to lose a son, it's gotta be you. So I'm asking you now, if you could guide the soul of whatever poor son's gotten mixed up with this mess, it would mean the world. S'pose I don't know if it's a son for sure, but I've got a feeling. But if you could do that for me, I would be forever grateful. Thanks ma'. Amen.

On the north lawn, I take a path that winds around in a circle towards the Hell Gate bridge. Chet told me on the phone that it was near there by some benches. Sure enough, there's a crowd of people around a taped off area. Squad cars planted on the grass. Breaking through the pedestrians, I see Chet standing there, only this is the first time I've seen him without his aviators on since I met him. Funny. I can see his eyes from here. They're piercing blue. But I could just be fixated on them for now, 'cause I don't want to look at what's below him, which sure enough is the body of some mother's son. He's laying down on the pavement, with a halo of dried blood. Naked. That's a strange one. You usually don't expect to find them in the nude. Walking closer to Chet, he looks down at it with me, and just lets out this big sigh as his overcoat dangles down to his ankles. As you do when you see something like that, he pulls a loose cigarette out of his coat's breast pocket and lights it up, squinting at the flame to make sure it's still there, and exhaling a puff of relief once he knows he's done it's job.

—Somebody sure fucked him, huh? Chet asks me, rhetorically of course.

—It's always fucking with you. What's the deal anyway? And give me a drag.

He offers with a passing hand, and I take.

—Everything’s about fuckin’, Chet responds. It’s a cut across the neck, anyway. We don’t know much else. Searched all around. No weapon in the vicinity. It’s connected to the whole thing though, for sure. The slit throat’s consistent with another body we found. Some chinks apartment. Difference there is he had the golden ticket. Those little baggies we found on B.B. stuffed in a fanny pack. No way this is an isolated incident.

—Why’d nobody tell me about that? The other stabbing.

—You know how this whole op’s been, Orson. Late nights. You haven’t been to the office in the same way. Some can handle it, some can’t.

Guess I can’t. I’ve just been collapsing into bed every night. Could barely get myself up this morning with how long the night before was. Never stayed up that late this often. I grit my teeth and look closer at the body, trying not to touch it. Notice something. Strange. The back of his head. It’s weird. There’s a bump under his hair in the shape of a lightning bolt. Seems strange. Seems familiar. It’s...it’s...

—Chet.

—Yeah?

—I know this guy.

—You know him? Like, personally?

—No, not like that. I saw him. At the club. Nowhere. I saw him hanging around and leave. Just last night. I mean. This morning. In the A.M.

Take out my phone to show him the picture. Holding it above the body, I zoom in, and we gaze deep into the mess of pixels that form some jagged pattern, before pulling the phone away to the sight of the real thing right before us. It’s him. I know it’s him. It’s gotta be.

—Christ, Orson. Was he suspicious?

—I mean, he was acting strange. That's why I took the picture.

—And you didn't follow him?

—He was leaving. That's beyond the assignment, right? We were supposed to stick to these clubs.

Christ. Chet's pinching the bridge of his nose and walking in circles.

—You could have saved a fucking life that night, Chet shouts while tossing his cigarette to the ground nearly contaminating the scene. We could've gotten to the bottom of this. This whole thing. You know how long me and Stockhausen have been planning this shit? And you just go and let the guy off. Whoever it was...he is. Jesus-fucking-Christ.

—I don't know. I'm sorry. Really. I need to walk it off.

Hanging my head, I pace towards the opposite end of the crowd.

—Where're you fucking going now?

—I just need to walk.

Weaving through people, giving any who look me in the eyes a nod. Keep down this path, past the benches. Things slip by you. Sometimes it can feel like life just slips by, and you're not there. You wish you could reach out and grab it. You feel that way for a long time. Some day you just accept that it's never enough. Give that up to God, I guess. Tell yourself things. It's okay to be wrong. It's okay to miss a cue. It's okay to be weak. Or maybe it's not okay. Maybe it just is what it is. The water's thick with white caps on the East River. The river just keeps moving. Doesn't matter what's in it. Keep on rolling. Keep on walking. Under the Hell Gate. There's all this graffiti on the base of it, saying things. They're talking to me. *Fuck Pigs*, they say. *Take Action*, they say. Big blocky letters. One's just a big circle with the letter 'A' in it. Just keep on walking. Circling 'round the lawn. Someday my circle will close. Someday I'll die. I'll die and

this is all I've had to show for it. Sand slipping through my hands. But that's okay. I'm not afraid to die. Could tell myself, "I did what I could", but that doesn't matter. It's not up to me. There's only moving forward. There's just moving upwards. It's just all life, and God, and me. It's all just happening, and it's happening all the time.

Coming back around to Chet, I slide through the people again.

—Let's get it wrapped up, I say. Get forensics and clear the scene. It's Sunday. I've got a service to attend.

The ride to church is long and silent. The service, too. All white noise. Like my ears are ringing. I eat the body. I drink the blood. Everything's washed away. The world is new again. We sing songs. We pray together. Maybe he went to church too. That guy face-down in the park. Maybe he took communion. Maybe he sang songs. Maybe he prayed. But it all came crashing down. All things have to end.

You have to ask yourself whether there's anything to do about it at all. The pushers, the shovers. Girls in the red light. Late night stabbings. Endless drinking. The constant flow of drugs and all that brings with it. All the cheating, lying, stealing, and fist fights. All the scars and the wounds left unlicked. The streams of blood that flow and dry up on the streets, the sidewalks, and the beaches. You wonder if there's anything one man can do, or even a whole force of them, and you wonder on and on maybe for your whole life. When you think all of it will end, and then maybe we could all get some rest. There's gotta be one thing, one single act you could have done to put a stop to the whole mess. But that's just wishful thinking. You have to realize someday that maybe there is no end. That it won't and can't. You have to wonder whether what you did meant anything at all, or if it did any good. You must wonder if it's all just a big nothing. Maybe there's nothing to be done. No one thing at all. Or maybe something.