

Proof Positive

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prose poems

Kobu Zabione

Even so, some guitar still plays our favorite love song. I dress up in shades of summer wheat and fox-trot through the long hot afternoon tea. Here on the kitchen floor, behind purple shutters, with the dark toast. Each conversation begins with “I guess.” My hands cover my ears. The clock says, “Don’t look at me. I didn’t do it.” The moon whispers, “Trust me to make you look good.” The sea tosses itself to sleep after a storm of molten lead and plastic candy wrappers. The Captain said, “Don’t turn away. What do you think this world is? A fairy tale?” I remember again: Pools of rainwater, oily and rippled by wind. Rags of cloud, flying. The cold, the rubble. We wore gas masks when we worked. But I never said I was unlucky, did I? Did I?

Kobu Zabione is one of many names used by the author who lives with his wife in a small seaside village devoted to a life stranger than paradise.



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To P. P. P.

with love three times beyond forever

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Everything that begins as comedy ends as a cryptographic exercise.

-- Roberto Bolano, from "The Savage Detectives"

NIGHT SWEATS AND DIZZY SPELLS

Don't crowd me, Beauty, I'm running errands for the Beast.

Everyone enjoys being the center of a creation fantasy. It was for this you moved from Davenport to modern dance, to eat a little lead with your bread, get sidelined, waiting for new body parts and feeling pluralized in the game of sensible shoes and suchlike. The jonquils and humidors half as nice for twice the price. It's what takes place between the palazzo and the grand old brownstones we loved so well on the way from prophecies to acts. Tell me I'm not part of the world driving you mad. One day, she said, I shall turn into springtime and shower you with palm trees and shamrocks. For now, farewell, my ugly. He got busy removing himself from her inflections while drinking a toast to her latest recovery. After that he stripped her words of meaning until they howled for real flesh between their teeth. Think three positive principles for using steroids in the time of actual love. Then return to your room and watch the shadows undress and dance around to all the show tunes you can muster. In other developments, another neighborhood is missing and presumed lost. Somewhere in the frontal lobes. Collaterally preempted. Do the math. The world hasn't gone down on its knees before you.

Here we are back in our murky hole of timeless desire. The bugs like to come in at night to play with us on our pajamas. Some are war widows like us, some tap dance

and keep us from sleeping, others are rush-hour sex acrobats, slick with batter. On most afternoons the reeds and rushes bend over backwards as a show of solidarity with the winds that blow the desert sand our way, so we can feed the smiles that hide beneath our skin. Isn't that sweet? But be careful, because along the lakeshore the tchotchkes rally in war paint and sneak into our rooms to burn our ears with torch songs. Then crazy bumps break out in clusters of three. We arise threadbare, and no sooner said than dead. It's clear there's no way out but through the glossy pages of a travel brochure, and soon it's time for bed again.

Because we appear as. Because a fraction of the whole asserts itself as a figment of the imagined. Because of being inescapably thus. Statement as another assertion of. How when my eyes are fixed upon you. I am me beheld in your gaze made whole as other. Ultimately unknowable because. You mislaid your glasses. Yes? And I can't find my hat. So? I become Batman on your broadband. *Bingo!*

Thus every level has a view and every view is prefabricated, which in turn can spin, mesmerizing the inhabitants. At dusk the trees assume ominous shapes twigged with guilt. Cliff dwellers meet in the throes of a backyard barbecue. An attractive blond appears to undulate in a windrow among the flower-beds beside the garden gate. A man in a sharkskin suit prowls the open spaces shared with a chocolate poodle named

Cult. He slowly takes shape in the hazy light, stepping over the bones of a blues clarinet. He strides up and down with his little black book in hand. He's in the rope business and you are tied up in it along with a multitude of others. You've been reading his fan mail and he wants a word with you. He wants you to feel his muscle. He's coming from out of the sunset and knows where the bodies are kept.

Soon a poem stuck its neck out. Heads rolled and the tearful gathered in prayerful silence while we who escaped traipsed from yurt to yurt. Getting our needs met and the like.

Dare I say no holds barred? A long night, a narrow path, a dark room? Preying on some, praying for others? Dare I say that I was a child basket cake, a treat to those things that eat us alive? He made himself a highball. She wore knee-socks and was exuberantly ready to start. Shopping carts rattled on the pavement. It was a taxing terrain. Three cyclists whizzed by on the curve. Dare I say Young Professionals? The cat coughed up a hairball. On the west side of the slope the moon shone on the bones of an old buddha. Dare I say that whatever you get you'll surely lose later on? Dare I say that we cut quite a figure? What does "adumbrate" allude to here? Dare I say that, no matter what, there's no better (place? way?) to be? Like, "How nice to have fresh strawberries again." What about flypaper? Dare I say holding patterns? We toyed with the idea of an empty mind meeting each moment and

thing anew. What does “tastefully flamboyant” mean to you? He had another cup of latte. She read alone at a corner table by the window. Dare I say something is gobbling us up and we’re here for that? Dare I say the high rollers, the bankrollers, the holy rollers? We drove around for hours, days, years. Dare I say she danced around in her skins of many colors, singing, "Iguana, iguana, I wanna hold you tight all night.” Dare I say we faded into virtual reality? That a good friend came under the gaze of the authorities? The river froze. We rambled on knowing that later the telling would be all that was left. The bride got out of the limousine, a pipe-organ played, a thin haze settled over the graveyard as the sun went down. We crossed the bridge. Dare I say that on the other side our loved-ones were waiting with open arms?

Meanwhile every interaction escalates. Somebody rats on our Rottweiler. Somebody else makes doo-doo on a bare floor. Gone are the beach ball and the blond, the mere notion pulled up by the roots which turn out to be mugwort after all. What’re you making such a sour face for? You wouldn’t know what to do if you weren’t exasperated. Cut to a cloud of gnats under merciless lighting, tears flowing down our cheeks as they must. The shadow passes, a little more blue than usual. Owls hoot in the hollows. Cut to a brass band playing a medley of old favorites on a Sunday evening in a park long gone, back when Kilroy was king and folk got all fancied-up coming to terms with ashes and worms,

teeth clenched, hands balled into fists before launching still more trial balloons, while so much else lay concealed, imponderable, riddled with equations, ripped by the wind and drenched in a shower of lucent raindrops. The story behind the story behind the story all the way back. Life as plot-driven drama. Each crash scene a landmark performance. Ricky-tick piano, deadpan faces and muffled guffaws offstage. Dogwood blooming outside a window. A fashion model posing in a peignoir. Cut to a deserted boulevard and on into the white blankness where the sidewalk ends and the last star faintly glimmers.

And so? The way west was strewn on both sides of the road with discarded cups and bottles and metal cans of all sizes, food boxes and wrappers and much else besides. Whenever the convoy halted for a break, the captain would walk into the desert fifty yards or so and commence blasting away at a row of cans and bottles with his sidearm, never hitting a one. This would bring on a temper tantrum and he'd take out his rage on his men by having them police up the area on hands and knees until the ditches were clean on both sides as far as the convoy reached. The landscape resembled the mountains of the moon hostile to human habitation, mercilessly tearing at the hands and knees of the troops as they crawled along dusted gray with cinders.

It was cold outside and the rags offered little or no protection. We bore public scrutiny with feigned indifference. The plan was to trim away the excess. But

something shambled toward us clutching a Big Gulp. Buy two and get one free. Huge savings. Step right up, the storehouse is open for business twenty-four-seven. You want a core center that holds fast but all you get are assumed strategies, conditioned responses, a set of mechanical gestures mistaken as being your very self. "I am" as reconstituted magazine clippings, movies, newspapers, novels, lesson plans, journals, words and more words, a language stew, a brew that grew and grew. At the same time, if it goes, it all goes, the storehouse and the tarnished pennies in your pocket, too. And then, *whambo*, suddenly you find yourself on hands and knees collecting litter from a ditch under the watchful eyes of a madman.

Listen to Igor. But the tip-off is his smile. Like off the map, eyes inverted, the last fusty closet thrown open for inspection. Another and still another day repeating itself in coded messages. Lots drawn up over the spoils. You and you and you again. The paintings turned facing the wall, the ceiling fixtures locked in perpetual slumber. Sunlight faint on the mezzanine. Come back, says Igor. Hold me. So back to basics we went, airily, flew in, flew out, took a course in speed-reading and gave the dials another turn or two. Expostulate, exfoliate, but who can make it stick? Don't be mad. I was only trying to save you from wasting quarters before giving up the ghost in the trauma lane, the perfect wedding gift for the bloodlust of the times. Let's stop this and have a really good cry,

shall me? Leave-taking is such a specialty act. Just don't say it's the same as a heart humbled by mercy.

But when later I went to call on my resources, they were all away for the season somewhere between seduction and betrayal. I broke up my sentences and mailed off different parts to interested sponsors, all of whom dug up the dirt. It's a piece of cake, I was told by one. Desire is the index to the market, another informed me. Some urged carpooling. Eventually word got around: he's in brazil, she's on a diet, he's wearing his old varsity jersey, and so on. The sky looked demystified, almost shopworn, the earth perfumed with sweating roses and swamp water. A vigorous mopping up was called for. Say no more. I got busy, sat down, buttoned up, and subsided into waiting arms.

But suppose you could produce a thought free of money or morals, free of old world influences, free of any merchandising talent, be totally off the grid, and still receive the highest rating in all the government crash tests, would that be a taste of happiness? No. Is sex like the color orange in molten lava, rolling inexorably toward the blissfully unwary? No, it is more like another updated club member diving headlong into whole grain cereals. Then, sadly, the old ringleader slumps back through the roses and trailer trash muttering an A above middle C. And then?

She had a strong industrial accent and usually rode the service elevator to work where, eyes closed, she

polished the bronze sculpture while guided tours were pressed between syllogisms of withering beauty. One waits for the moment when she will finally tire of the scene and throw the flower arrangement into Old Pond. Strange to say, she never seems to get wet, even as she wears away under the harsh sound of the tide pounding on the rocks. Now it is evening once more and the last train east is pulling out past the work site where, since forever, men have been digging and sifting the ashes for a nameless icon.

Moreover, she claimed to be the only person left out there alone on the cutting edge clasped in the arms of the sales force. We traveled upriver past the cake stands and martini glasses toward a common cold. What channel are we tuned in on here? Some specialist in a ruffled shirt is chasing fleeting summer across the tundra with a butterfly net. Something has slipped by unnoticed and will turn up one day in our bed asking to have its papers stamped, something truly hairy-scary. The pictures will be blurred, the misquotes shouted from the rooftops. Words devalued.

So I beseech you, it is all blue all the time everywhere. Though maids make merry in the music room, fading flowers fall. Either way hurts. You bring her fresh water, fluff her pillows, weeping. Her little paper bag of gummy bears. It's your dime. I can only promise more of what we have. Sounds of gunfire echoing in the distance and trucks on the rutted road. We got turkey,

we got hot dogs, we got crackers. Cut to the potted plant, the kitchen window, the doorjamb, the medicine cabinet. We got papaya too. Ten after nine: the guests trickle in. But we expect to be awed. Admit it: we really crave an epiphany that turns life around, burlap transformed into silk before our very eyes.

Tell us: Wasn't there once a cigarette called *Peace*? In the distance the perfect mountain silhouetted against a pale sky? Year of the dragon. Or was it the rat? I stepped ashore. The sun's reflection flared on the windowpanes. Each morning we emerged from the earth in our steel shirts, selling off the last of our heirlooms to hooded strangers. The tanks rolled over our youth. Corrective surgery hardly made a dent. From behind us a plume of smoke lazily worked its way skyward. The bus followed alongside the river, and on rainy days the slate roofs of the neighboring houses seemed to emerge as if from a storybook, a part of some nearly forgotten realm. Or a moment of grand opera, our clothes scattered about where we had tossed them in the heat of a summer tryst, looking oddly sad now, abandoned. Later, dressed and distant once more behind our made-up smiles, unable to resist a backward glance at the room where we had broken out to explore some new and open ground before the ticking of the clock.

Could be a mere vitamin deficiency, I told myself. It was time to take my pills. . . .

More time passed. We found ourselves south of the tracks, in a corner booth, italics on one side, Roman numerals on the other, where our feet had brought us through geological ages and numberless fiestas to ponder yet again the rules of the game, find a working hypothesis, a new strategy to outwit the speed of our crazy glue or else “ye shall stick and stall,” and wearing the same track shoes that will try to outrun next week’s outrage and technocratic scoreboard, only to meet the same individual who looks just like us, asking the same everlasting question: *what song will Bye-bye Blackbird sing to Red-red Robin ?*

This day our rooms had a lovely view of the park. There was a warm breeze blowing, yet not a leaf stirred. Clouds flourishing, but too many wares to choose from. We had stopped with baleful resignation in the phantom city to dine on grilled clams, the sun boring holes into our negligence as we browsed among the ruins. The dinner guests gasped audibly, then threw down their napkins as the chatelaine tore up her albums and scoffed at our old-fashioned ways, saying: “Before Deadwood Dick rides into town again, and it’s bang bang bang in the head.” Though gone forever, that evening’s sunset still shimmers in my mind. Below the galleria, the gardener, smiling painfully, held aloft the squirming form of a baby basket-case, inviting us to toss a few coins its way. It was during the war, but then there is always a war.

Was this the dance card we thought we'd shelled out for? A late afternoon visibly diminished. Closer to the grave than to Little League. A belief that alternative modes of being can be realized, though inexpressible in words. Pine needles cover the shoes outside the door. A pensive silence settles over us. We wait again for nightfall and disperse into a leitmotif, a divertimento, a trial drive in the latest model whatsmobile. Then shuffle home through the fallen leaves piled up under the desolate glow of the sodium lamps.

It took years to realize plans had backfired and we'd missed the point of entry. Well, it's the person, not just the place and times. Everybody felt edgy. The bones of the war dead were warming up for a major scream, a few survivors on blankets faking interest in the execution. Her hand trembled as scenarios were passed out as if they were a memento mori. Now you could be just one more citizen trampling out the vintage in golf shoes or seated at the breakfast table in robe and slippers. I threw open the French doors and stepped out into the silent rain. As if there was a remedy, as if to live meant abusing our past, slipping zones completely into unsuspected subversions. Yes, here we are at sea. The self left behind has merged into the horizon. It was a charming *al fresco* setting. Things are heating up. From here on, better wear your hazard suit inside as well as out.

I seem to remember now. The hostess drank up the wine before the guests arrived. She gripped the cobblestones with her bare toes, saying: "When you enter the court of last resorts, prepare to lose your life." The neighborhood had sunk away replaced by a coal mine. Heaps of wrecked cars littered the stark white beaches. There were strange claw-marks in the hardened mud. From a hundred paces away a cardboard box sounded hollow as a burst of bird-shot drilled its side. The figure of an old bum stumbled away. Though wobbly, his legs could still carry him. Bystanders laughed and cheered him on with their songs:

Grandpa with his hands from Mars

Grandma with her feet from Poland

Dance till the fires grow cold

Calling on the glory of God and gold

We peered in at the room where the bones were kept, the smell of sweet incense twitching our noses. The ex-stripper's makeup ran with sweat, and she turned her face away to hide the tears in her eyes. Asked why, she replied through the polished veneer of her smile: "Because I am a Vegan." Creased with shadows, crowned with gold, our day was almost done. Somebody said on our way out: "Let's meet at the baggage claim at the same time next year." When I looked up from my timetable, it was almost dark and everyone was gone. Then it was autumn again, the

leaves dwindling on the branches outside our office windows. Some progress was reported. Things nicely fitted the modem. All that remained was for us to reprogram some wayward data causing the difficulty, then market a product perfected for self-undoing. It was no longer a simple binary of assertion and denial. Boss said nobody was to leave the premises until the last problem was solved. Soon the first snowflakes began to fall.

“Stop searching my face for signs of disbelief,” he flared up at us. “I can’t help it if the dog’s sad eyes are laughing or my hair is thinning. At any time clouds will gather and thunder roll and the old swimming hole fill up with *Stern Und Drano*.” His gothic tongue. Her legs up to her neck. Come as you are, they say, and we do: out of control, blissed out, buzzed, in cardigans, on bicycles, tense and talkative, wired for sound in case a duet is requested. Meanwhile, back home, Dad’s just returned with an armful of yule logs and Sis in her new pink dress is singing, *That Old Yeller Snake By The Garden Gate*.

Memories switched channels, and all at once a jungle horse romped among the pincushions. From our ratty tenement it looked almost alive, some sort of contemporary creation, makeshift, its eyes like crystal caves. Of course we ourselves had come in a kit easy to assemble, a boon to those who are all thumbs. Another switch, and craving returned from its butterfly hideaway, ready to sink its teeth into a jelly roll. I was

back snarled in traffic again. I tuned in on the local weather report. "Today beautiful sky is making words in your head and your dream is still water." The voice was feminine and it arose from deep within a forbidding city.

The eyes of the dead gazed up at us. Trees were sheared off close to the ground, their splintered stumps like hands clawing at the air. Our sweaty muscles stood out like taut ropes. All around was cold rain, hot ashes, and the smell of singed hair. The mind like a wall dubbed with graffiti. I looked around and you were gone. . .

Clearly, there is no one identity you can call yourself. A figure of some acclaim studies the sky with ice-blue eyes. We know-betters stand back, skirting the topic, whirled around and around inside a revolving door, ignominiously, yet possessed by the drive to prove ourselves. In this frame of mind we arrive at the office, go inside a windowless room and take our places behind the consoles, the same as we do every day of the workweek. Scout dogs are spotted coming down from the hills. The political animal puts the cigar back into his mouth. The big push is on. The smoke gets worse and worse, becoming almost more than anyone can bear. *Almost* being just the right amount. Otherwise, she sleeps peacefully for once and waking at dawn erases all the messages without listening to them, thinks of all those years wasted grooming for a day that would never come. The world as time. As days

marked on the calendar, as pictures hung on the wall, as candles lit and stories told. *Poof*. The curtains billow and the smell of warm rain comes rushing in.

Or take the day a simple back street catches you by surprise. The air tastes like a cinnamon twist. An ancient language is written in the flaking paint. An old man's eyes gaze out from another time and space. Swatches of fluffy cloud dissolve away into the azure above the building tops. Not since the ice-cream social way back when has such a day been seen. Yet terror swept through here as recently as last year when Grandma hiked up her skirts and danced around in her bones. A rock in the middle of the road waits for the right poet to come along and immortalize it. And one tries in vain to conjugate the verb "to save" in the local tongue.

Or the night we sang "What A Swell Party This Is." Then the guests took a bone as a souvenir home with them while the moon passed on to China leaving its hands and feet behind in the host's upstairs bedroom where whispers of passion and betrayal lingered on. Between her sighs and my dizzy spells we missed the moratorium and wintered in the interior with a tribe of Kawasakis while on the other side of the continent the doors of a hanger opened wide and the Goodyear blimp rose into a photogenic sky.

Even so, some guitar still plays our favorite love song. I dress up in shades of summer wheat and fox-trot

through the long hot afternoon tea. Here on the kitchen floor, behind purple shutters, with the dark toast. Each conversation begins with “I guess.” My hands cover my ears. The clock says, “Don’t look at me. I didn’t do it.” The moon whispers, “Trust me to make you look good.” The sea tosses itself to sleep after a storm of molten lead and plastic wrappers. The Captain said, “Don’t turn away. What do you think this world is? A fairy tale?” I remember again. Pools of rainwater, oily and rippled by wind. Rags of cloud, flying. The cold, the rubble. We wore gas masks when we worked. But I never said I was unlucky, did I? Did I?

Excuse me, but my fly is unbuttoned. A renewable resource all the same. *Tertium quid*. Running on instinct is also a beautiful thing. Yet you cannot or are not ready to hear. A lavender mist takes possession of the streets; night tightens its grip. The wine snob swirls his wine vigorously, holding it to the light. We check to see that our passports are still safely tucked away in our breast pockets. A respected colleague turns to leave. His parting words sound something like, *The raincoats are coming!*

There’re a lot more scenes to do before we are through our impersonations, the many roles we play -- man, woman, dog, thief, soul-mate, you name it. Down the dark alley and stony pathway into the unknown before a parting shot of your last day on earth. Weaving stories to wrap up in and call true blue. Habitual tendency and all that. A garbled soundtrack.

Lightning flashes above the palm trees. At night I imagine I hear the death trains chugging along the track, passing the great man's statue in the plaza before cheering crowds. Each morning I read the obituaries to see who else has been taken, then go about the place watering the cracks.

Stop. Don't simply wave a white flag before the first shot is fired. Boss wants bodybuilders and a head-count. It's about who's got the drop on whom, see, held over from the lurid Western. It's there in the jaw, the eyes, a Sphinx affect, glazed. Small missiles from way back find their target right where you stand, like pennies tossed at an actor in a bad play. Study him then as an object of weightlessness, some kind of extraterrestrial, a moon walker, a part of cosmic diversity. And note, the house down the road has again been sold on the idea that taking up arms will cure the common cold. Great fun, so they say, but it is just one of those guns.

One day we broke up into small groups. She took the plow pose while the rest of us took a stroll through the tombs before bolting for lunch. Roaming the castle grounds, eating in splendor in a room of gilded mirrors. The day's horoscope: *Eat less flesh and more fresh vegetables.* We moved on to other topics, the tropics, none more dismayed than I feigning a headache and sudden departure. Not that one complains, far from it, because, as it is written, "the notion of truth is replaced by infinite meanings. . ."

Ask her who fought for the rights of the poor, raised the scuttled fleet, recaptured the taxes. The returns are in. Odds at a hundred to one that she was kissed in all the old familiar places. Blame it on the wine if you can't remember her name. Some nights are saved from dreaming, from an appetite for laughter. We drank in the silence under the yellow light of Japanese lanterns, our legs buried beneath an odd furry thing. Frogs croaked in the moon garden. The cop and the robber switched hats. No, you don't have to crack a smile on demand. But next time we meet, pretend you don't know me. Say it to my face, cousin. It was just another career move.

Notice that eyes that meet one these days look media-saturated, glazed and staring. One's mind, though, stays nestled in the pit of a paper bag. You know the drill: numerous scripts struggling for attention, flirtations with the censor, a focus on long-term strategies, status, payday, vacations, family, etc. Yet the key wouldn't turn the lock no matter how hard you tried. It became a problem just seeing where one was going, falling into labyrinths of honeymoon hotels and maternity wards. Is it simple glare that smites the eyes? Hands waving for taxis at rush hour? Whatever, massive soliloquies peak in the subways, impervious to one's worried sighs from the zoo nicknamed one's secret soul.

I warned you it would be like this, didn't I? And all because we think we are what we think.

A reminder: Keep the mind fit with brainteasers, activating a specific subset of cortical areas, neurons in the left hemisphere lighting up like a blast of fireworks.

By now the storehouse was wide open and contagion spread everywhere. Overnight a green thumb had come to ruin. Sandals clattered down the wooden steps toward a "sweeping farewell." The morning sun shed light on the patchwork quilts, teasing out threads that had survived the night before. We took up our pens and wrote our way into strange truths just waiting to be found. And we agreed that there is more in life's portmanteau than is found in our slush funds. "Rest your weary eyes on me," reprised Muffy, our team leader. "There's a long stretch of lonesome highway to negotiate before the demiurge will manifest." Therefore, confident of progress, we left the pink sands and island breezes to enter the rain forest in our mule boots and swaying cow bells, alert to the serpentine slopes and vaulting trees, a terrain to test one's zest for life. Who could've guessed how far we'd come since the night the blind prophet in her robe, amid the incessant hum of jungle life, dredged the poison from our slurry, viewed by some from afar as unrestrained mud wrestling?

But I knew it was late and I too weak to go the final mile. The smoky village road spoke, "I shared my purple days with you." The clouds puffed up and reminded me, "Something's still left for wonder."

Cabbage is cabbage, clover is clover but, said the river rat, "A thing isn't necessarily the thing you think it is." Sure, we cranked it up more than once, only to let it fall by the wayside and maybe missed the nameless flower's blooming, as they say down by the tracks near where the old swimming hole glittered in the sunlight. Can anything light up brighter than an ocean of blue space? Our laundry is done. The plane's on time. We've livened up the chili. Dawn comes brimming, and a new day inches gamely forward.

I hope you're listening to this. I've opened my heart and sewn it up again. We hunker under the clock, its tick and its tock. Doc says my condition sports red shoes that pitterpat across the leafy floors of September songs. But statistics show there are no exits after Idaho, only imaginary closures, the river raft and the drugstore cowboy traded in for a rolled diploma and a steady grip on the world ganged up on torpid flowers. It cares not a whit about "abouts" or who pushed the wagons through the mountain passes or baby-sat the puppet governments with a smoking gun. Only if sales are up and one size fits all.

Then long dry spells followed weeks of hard rain full of midges. The yeas hardly appeared at all and the nays stayed away altogether. Words come all scrunched up in a ball, a sure sign of narrow outlook, some say, a fear of revealing your life looking like one of the twelve cities sacked by Achilles. There's the war bonnet and the peace pipe and the smoke signals from the hilltop.

Use solar power, donate your old junk heap, and let the cannonballs fall where they may. Remember: You're a dangerous wish come true. "Make do" muddles through, although it could use a fresh coat of paint.

She turned up again after being gone a couple of years in a rain forest somewhere breeding a new strain of orchid and was on medical leave, she said, and shrugged when she showed us her missing finger. She smelled of camphor. When she turned away we saw that she was limping. Was this the same person who'd once smoked cigarillos after making love underneath a poster of Che Guervara? Now, long years later, she sits with friends at an outdoor cafe chatting about safe sex. Dust blows down the street. The sentries, mere children, eye us from a distance. One of them regains his feet and walks slouched over with a banana in his hand. Just then another dependent turns up in the lint as a voice crackles through the static with an urgent message about encroaching peril. The sentry tosses the banana peel into the ditch. His torn T-shirt wears the happy grin of Mickey Mouse.

Put your hand on your heart and swear you mean it. She peers at me through the thick lenses of her glasses. Meaning? You can have your comeuppance now or later. An imperious wave of a jeweled hand. A bomb detonates inside my head. I linger under the trees for an hour basking in the afterglow, the slush and swirl. Here, try a little wheat grass for a change.

Still, one hears the diatribes of freedom shouted in the parking lots just beyond the borderline, a savage ripping of the veil as one steps out into a long dry spell covered with orange peels. I can't sleep, he complains, for the drumming in my head, the hum of bees, the whine of ricocheting bullets, the midnight blues, cascading winds blowing a bygone lover's hair outside a modest stucco house. I dream I am awake, and awake I dream I am on your voicemail. A complete stranger shows me a photo in which the child I was is blowing out the candles on a birthday cake.

Or again, the face of the people's choice stares from the front page. Around it arises a yawn of prodigious boredom. A moment comes bringing a moist promise of delivery from the florescent corridor and the dogwood Sunday afternoon. To walk out of the barbecue smoke and beyond the gate. A spot of fire still burning in the chasm of her voice. Darling, she said, go light a candle, a stick of incense, chant the names of Sinbad the Sailor and Ahab the fundraiser; all those who surf and suffer. Suddenly the imported crystal gave off a dusky sheen, the streets smelled of burning tires. Even the soap dish seemed to sweat guilt.

It's puzzling. Can she fly in the dark to the elsewhere she calls home? Her hand shakes and she misspells her name. She follows the built-in groove in her womb of distressed edges and rich color to a place in the

sky. One look at her and you may feel the urge to plow a cornfield then and there. Then watch her throw up in her chair. But go deep enough and you'll find her spawning ground, the antique fish, the sandy bottom, the crab traps. In other words, kiss me, darling.

Soon after the elephants were all gone we made them into hand-carved icons to be sold in the stores on holy days. Come early, come late, there're a million ways to extract the gold, we were told. And yes, I can take some French verbs to lunch and order a salad drenched in profundity. We shook the hands that shaped the world to see if they floated or not on the charms of the fugitive mind. Space man meets the tax collector light years away from crumbling towers. Galaxy where center is forever yours. Where words break free from true. Ask the good doctor. Just don't make me say you never knew what hit you.

Stuck. But we'll get over the hump and back on track. Till then all deals are off: the evening news, the right diction, soul moods and whole foods, all doctrine as sung by a doctor, a preacher, a housewife, as whispered through thin lips or shouted at the top of the lungs, all arguments and most pronouncements, meanings of what no longer is but could have been, ordinary subject-predicate stuff laid out in straight rows, scratched-out names, your place or mine, under the freeway or over the rainbow, Rome yesterday, China tomorrow, what's gone for, hoped for, done for, what's stripped away, cut down, my name on your lips,

your number in my billfold, the petals fallen, the finish worn off, pledges to our neurosis, assailment in the wee hours by a mortifying sense of failure, booby-traps, freezing, thawing, flowing, sheer necessity in getting out of bed in the morning, the kissed off, pissed off, hissed off the stage, whatever you like or as soon as you can, as in see to it, go for it, in the land of, in the name of, with all due respect, do us a favor and shut the fuck up.

Instead, we know the song, the one we never dreamt we could play or sing, the one that brings us cheering to our feet, creating shock-waves among the burgher kings. But you gotta break through the filigree to get there. Years have gone by since last we glided into a passage as starry as this one, hushed and listening, in case you don't remember. Today while batons twirl in midair, autumn gives way to winter, you can feel its quick pulse under your thimble-finger. A quark is born. A beard grows in Brooklyn. The wonder of it all lays a kiss on your brow and steals away for some last-minute sport with the sunset.

Yes, love is grand, but not grand enough.

Yes, freedom is great but not great enough.

Yes, giving is best but something else is better.

Why can't you be happy? she asked him.

Because happiness is not enough, he replied.

What do you want then? she asked.

Perfect hunger, he said.

Thus the right answer is no help at all. Perforce, learn to tolerate the groundlessness of things. Dance on a bed of funny bones. Rebound. *Write it down*. Get black on white. Your task: inspect the abandoned mine shafts where perfect silence reigns, followed by nights out in an oasis under chill desert stars. But first, dream of a field down the road brimming with wildflowers. Remember: an *idée fixe* can roll over a mountain and flatten a slumber party. Buy polar. It's outwardly crunchy but inwardly incendiary. Centuries of tourists reflected back from the eyes of a stone goddess. The winter guest by the fireplace reads from her book, looks up. Reads. Looks up. When she finally gets around to biting you on the ear, laugh. Then tear the memory in half and crawl out on all fours.

On hot nights you can hear panting in the bushes. Then the rains come and things start to burrow in. The dogs sent to hunt them down fail to return. Next, fur is found floating in the pond. Something's missing here, something oceanic. My shoes wear the look of truth. Blood surges, the years wear on with a thinning bite. *Non contesto*. Sweat breaks out on our foreheads. We squawk and burn the croutons. Remember that wet spring day we danced barefoot in the grass? Sorry, but those tapes don't play here any more. Bring on those crazy black capes. Bless me, I am so unforeseeable! Turn a corner and there waiting just for you is your defining moment, the inner child you thought you'd long ago turned your back on. Podiatrist Moe will go

toe-to-toe with anybody who'll meet him. Aunty Jill will, but only when she is in the mood. He'll cry and she'll fall asleep. Just one more wheat-free day inside the garden walls. Dregs from the dragon, dross from the troll. When the gates are flung open, be ready. No more satisfying sellouts for you, old pal. The subject is taxes and floral wreaths, and a sincere appeal for help is not the same as being tongue-tied in the street or moving ceramic cats under cover of darkness before the curtain falls.

Say that we outlast our dreams. What do you see when the ashes have been blown away? The ten rules for a flat tummy? A night of murdered moonlight and forgiveness? The smoking gun, trace minerals? The one that slips down the dark of time through haunted passageways, multiple personalities escaping for a smoke between acts? Swan Lake revisited, the remake, the outtake? Seriously. We're disappearing even as we watch. All that feckless wandering around. The masks, the costumes, every sort of role, enticements, the hot lips and cold shoulders, the hackneyed comedy of it all. Cut the crap, or at least the adjectives. Melt away. Feel the ground crumbling clod by clod. The Grand Signior has nothing more to say. Gossamer clouds brush the mountaintops, some drizzling, some drooling.

Pop! A camera flashes and some famous clotheshorse is caught out in rags. I'm not here to augur impending doom nor apotheosize a fine model chariot parked

outside the door waiting just in case you want to be persuaded away, gazing through your picture window at a meteorite or at some rare monster commandeered by a word from your sponsor's loudmouth in the land of Wow.

But that was then and we were far away playing hangman with our dada.

This path is long and bent and leads through swaying savannas to a room cramped and nondescript where a jeweled hand writes on and on as if riding a golden gale. Outside the single window beyond the crumbling walls and consumer stampede lies a field of fading words returning to compost and irrelevance like a jacket with box shoulders. *Oh look, my love, she exclaimed one day in the springtime of her life, there are stars on the palms of both my hands!*

In the meantime let's go ahead and flaunt amazing Chinese weight loss and a shower of sartorial gifts to choose from. Place our bets and play our numbers, get while the getting's good, but when getting is gone and giving is good, peace returns to the neighborhood, though it's still always day one of the big meltdown. A moonbeam just keeled over on its side. A swarm of hair nets panicked in the dresser drawer. Yes, we have no bananas but we *do* have a lov-i-ly bunch of cuckoo nuts. Heavens! cried Pill. It's all downhill from here! But it wasn't. There was still a pleasant evening to kill before the hour of the possum rolled away. Time's up.

The doctor will see you now.

Say again? Chief Inspector Javert sits scrutinizing the lineup from the Rocky Horror Picture Show, submitting to the same old allurements while a celebrated doyen obsessively hunts the Internet for knockouts of the original thing. Thousands dig up their lawns looking for heaven. Obsidian fanatics paw and pant. On and on we stroll into the empty hours. Where did the world suddenly go? A million recorded suicides a year and another twenty million attempts do not dissuade a world in thrall to lust and greed. The sour old woman and the grumpy old man next door thought their day would never come, and look! The nudists are gathering for a march on the capitol.

Meanwhile, rain drips from the eaves and puddles on the King's Highway and another dead hero is having a funeral procession down handkerchief drive, the mourners wrapped in flags and ankle-deep in the pools of Saint Elsewhere. Maybe it wasn't your doorstep I trembled on, but there was one, once, someplace trapped in another time warp. Here comes a dash of bitters, said he, for I, poet, preach the gospel of the world, tracking the footsteps of the beast. Take this down: the mud here is unforgiving.

That wasn't a cry of pain, was it? No, more likely just an old man in a black suit insisting, to no one in particular, that he's in the pink. Stand back, give him some air, they shout. Homesteaders mostly, the pecking order

all mixed up with gold braid and bunting. How many beers has Jungle Jim drunk, the better that we don't comment on his décolletage or decor until all the demographics are in, rude as they are wide? Jim with his jewels, Tom with his trumpet, happy camper and weary traveler crossing over to the other shore on their boat of dreams, their ship of fools, one hand waving, one band playing. Mountains here don't loom nor does the sky brood. And morning doesn't sport a toothpaste smile. See there? That's Anonymous making an interesting decorative effect, shoving coins into the parking meter.

Corn oil used as fuel is the only way to God.

Finally the order comes to get the mojo on the road, the laundry trucks first, then the broncobusters with their fly screens and sag hoisters churning up a shit-storm of legibly phallic signification, the H-word: *horny, hump, hemp, and haunch*. But the story doesn't end here, it only gets recycled in a new version like all the ones before it. Inevitably it turns out to be about something else entirely from what it meant to say, leaving its soul pale and wandering like a ghost in the gloaming back there on the lonesome road. Well, pilgrim, gloat or grimace all you will, none shall be spared for long. Neither ship nor shape.

Begin again and then be gone. Whiteout on the near side of nothingness. Darwin online in the uphill struggle to survive, bits of meat stuck between his

teeth, three thousand cookies running wild through merry-Christmas malls, you in your flak-jacket, me in my clown suit turned away from the living god, the gold & silver waltz, caught in a mirage, still convinced a hundred pushups a day can make a difference. Discover your ancestry. Take the old buckboard into Rainbow Flats for pancake day and foot races in the meadow. (Creating the future by a return to small-town values.) Or take a piece of chalk and draw an angel on the sidewalk where the sky lies in blue puddles after a rain shower. It's 212 degrees serious out here fading fast into the chiaroscuro. O Lord, O Milky Way, what do lovers do now that smoking is taboo?

The late afternoon sun throws broken shadows on the garden wall. A tomboy rides a pony through the apple groves. Weeds tear up Old Town. Flights of fancy circle the refreshment stand. A few billions yeast cells go crazy. Another tax dodge for the rich becomes law. And in the name of a world made safe in our national image, blood is spilled on soil far from here. Yet nothing moves an inch. For one ecstatic moment. It can happen by the baggage carousel or in a stretch limousine: words too thin to live for, too fat to die from. Knock on wood and let the jokes come thick and fast. Pervade the atmosphere, it's almost as if it's all in good clean fun.

What once seemed remote if not impossible now seems commonplace, capable of ordinary happiness, spelling an end to compromised poses rained on and

shivering. A love poem surfaces from the depths and frolics through the blue of a summer day while tea is served to the deathwatch. Though at first unrecognized, it came to light only after being poked at by sharpened marshmallow sticks. Those who went in over a choppy surf can barely recall now the treacherously loose sands and fender-benders or the icy hand laid on their shoulder. The cat sleeps curled up on the easy chair, and downwind I am me in my own Missouri, tufts of grass beneath my bare toes, peonies before my eyes. Signatories, please step forward and receive your golden chains.

Dusk. Clouds process across the winter sky toward the open sea. The old man's hobbyhorse has slipped the reins again, no telling how far afield it'll stray or what font it'll stick its blinkered muzzle into this time. The hunter-trapper-guide follows its tracks to winter's end. Tarnation! Thundering hoof beats! Certain creatures have only print where their brains should be. Beautiful in their absurdity, magnificent in their folly.

One a.m. Wild horseplay. Host and guest are on the carpet locked in a leg-wrestling contest. The easement leads through a poppy field and must be traversed in order to reach the ferry and cross to the far shore. The air is getting thinner and just ahead the light is hidden in an aphorism. We fight back tears of laughter.

A VERSION

Epigone: a second-rate imitator or follower, especially of an artist or a philosopher.

October was the month the clocks stopped telling time. Gold lost its luster. She wore a knitted cap. I chopped wood. We read in the papers that there was evidence "the ice-age man was murdered." We read that troops were storming enemy strongholds. Again. November found us dodging the hose used to water down the news. The floor felt spongy, the street sagged. Hillsides kept caving in. Miles from home the engine conked out. We drifted to a stop in the winter twilight. The wind moaned through the naked trees.

To those left behind on station platforms and street corners, in rooms of battered gold, who dream the dark mystery of stones and whirlpools, there's something to chill one's teeth on, a rage to slip the chains. Looking over your shoulder late at night when you can't see the footsteps of the beast around your doorstep: it asks at what point is a serene and docile heart awakened to the smell of blood?

A shadow has me by the hand. Who are you? Mayakowsky, it replies; I have things to show you yet. I say to the shadow, The things you show haven't worked out so well, so please go away. I am only a poor lawn mower, the shadow whispers in my ear. Let's work the neighborhood together, you and me, cut and carry, cut and carry, weed-whacker, post-hole digger, burn

pile. It's not too late in the day for a little scene like that between us. What do you say? Shadow, I reply, pointing toward a guarded door where a woman weeps waiting for a loved one locked up inside. Isn't that Anna, our Anna? He, it, ghost, shadow, whatever, looks, shrugs, and says in a scratchy whisper: Every loss leaves a hole until there's nothing left. I just want you to keep our names warm for a little while longer, that's all, and he kisses my hand. But I wipe it off. Off with you, I tell him or it. Off off off. Stop this gossiping in my head. Poets when they starve eat their pretty words, and that's the whole of it!

First inklings. A tug, a twitter, a chocolate moment at the edge of dreams. Worthy of studied intention. It's apple-blossom time at Lost Lingua three thousand miles from a future on bankrupt row. The houses set back behind ironwork gates. Crushed strawberries topping vanilla ice cream. An unspoiled and peaceful rural setting amidst gleaming lakes. In the early morning when the dew is glistening on every petal: pleasures of the moment embraced. There is the fragrance of the fields. Come, says the princess, muss my hair. Maybe she takes the hand of a boy who will soon perish in the bloodshed and mud more or less far away from here. A blowzy wind has already begun spreading rumors, cabin fever, and ill-will. Flock guardians are flying the coop in droves. Gradually head-to-toe measurements become magnified in proportion to the late-breaking news. Virtue becomes

nearly as tiresome as violence as a signature of the times. You will understand that this is a story, like the others, pointing to no end or meaning other than itself. These shadowy figures sketched here will, before long, as things change, eat their livestock, too, bones and all.

It was that hour when bells rang in the town belfry calling the faithful to evening worship. A cannon roared on the edge of town. Only a very few heard the pop that was like a bottle of champagne being uncorked. A riot broke out soon afterwards. I was living in the tower with other shut-ins. Nobody lived on my floor but me. My balcony faced the sea. It overlooked a plaza where boys played soccer at any odd hour day or night. The walls around it were scrawled with obscene graffiti. I heard a knock on my door. I held my breath and waited. The knock became a pounding that could no longer be ignored. I took a perry knife from a drawer in my cubbyhole kitchen, and slipped it into my pocket. Without undoing the chain, I opened the door a crack. There instantly arose a moaning in the air as if from everywhere at once. Prayer-wheels went spinning, staining the clouds with the color of dried blood. The smell of black ink poured down on me, flats and sharps flew wildly about, followed by the last straw, lighter than a feather, as the sky pitched forward with a thousand trilling chimes. Soon all over town, car alarms started blaring everywhere, joined in some unholy cacophony, rending the air as if a maniacal herd of

beasts had suddenly been loosed upon the land. At the same time, dumpsters began to convulse, heaping the streets with debris and garbage. Pandemonium ensued, a street performance extraordinaire, the climate notched up several degrees.

What Grandma said was, “Go to the broom closet and bring me the fly-swatter if you’re gonna keep banging that screen-door all day.” I’d just come to my senses after being buried under a shower of party balloons at a political convention, so I got to work as usual hunting for an antecedent, a precedent, got sidetracked and missed the crucial moment, whatever it was. Grandma always focused her proposition on the numbers involved. For instance, one, two, even three flies a thoughtful person might let have their way out of a sense of mutual sharing in this difficult world. But let the number increase exponentially, a curve into crisis mode, and what comes next without fail is K-I-L-L. Don’t quibble or cavil. Call it natural history, inescapable, at least for the moment.

Picture a room where the shades are drawn and the walls painted a vitreous green as if some omen is taking shape behind them. Not the first time my day had sprung a leak or gotten its tenses mixed up. I said to myself, Forget about the things you came here for, still dreaming of old tribal love songs or skywriting in the windy blue. Here’s a day good for plunging necklines. Let your fingers do the talking, she tells me, as night slowly slips away beyond the curtains. My

back itches for her nails and the finer points of intimacy, but a brigade of lawn mowers attacks just after dawn and drives us from the snugness of our bed. Don't ask what it means. Lost trains of thought, etc. Signs pop up all over the place, but due to a kind of spherical aberration my views get warped around the edges. Whether anything is lost or gained can't be known for reasons that shall never come to light. Over all I am touched by the sight of her discarded pink shower cap. Dazed, but who can blame me? Language itself is desire.

Irma closed her eyes. The grass tickled her bare thighs. The evening was balmy and she sensed a big storm brewing. She felt aroused as the lure of Zack's eyes, their strange dark magic, came back to haunt her. Jeepers creepers, she thought. Nocturnal vapors rose from all sides, leaving her in a swoon. She stood up shakily and counted to seven before throwing herself over the embankment into some strange kind of poultice left from a recent Chinese herb seminar.

See, there in the picture? The rueful one in the dark suit and tie, fifth from the left, that's the Master last seen in the year of the Great Doubt before taking off hellbent toward the twilight trees. Lordy, how fast things can disappear, then come back to haunt you later on, like all those tattoos, taboos, and the mug shots on the wall, those eyes, the way they seem to glare at you, like you be my raven and I'll be your nevermore. Meanwhile Gus, the town barber, who last

year got a bum steer but this year has had stunning success with horses, leads us by the hand over muddled waters to the other side, where his girl friend, Dipsy, glowing with strange blue hair, brings back the child in those of us grown stupid with age.

On, flotsam! On, jetsam! Something was moving toward critical mess. The trail petered out after a few random turns. No doubt it was all designed to achieve some end. Coconut palms rimmed the rice fields filled with quacking ducks. Pebbles crunched underfoot. Foxes frolicked in the summer grasses. The bird-shouter woke us with his cries torn from raw silk. By then we were ensconced in slipcovers. Two wallets went walking. It doesn't bear thinking about. Just the same, we longed for a hillside terraced with parking lots, though empty of cars. Hucksters chased us around the turnstiles until our tram arrived. We scrambled to get on board as flakes of fine ash began to fall. The moon was waiting for us in the mountains. The mist circled in the pines. Before sleep I whispered in her ear, "I forgot to lock the kitchen door."

At dawn, exhausted and preoccupied, we fall in among a sweaty heap of lawyers, sandpapered to a fine sheen. The trees haven't leafed out yet. Mules are still needed for survival, lasers notwithstanding. The insatiable demand for entertainment has watered down the purpose of our mission. What is the purpose of our mission? Menorah mania persists. It's getting harder to find an interesting tchotchke within the standing walls.

The showcased ears look gristly. A gully-washer took out the road ahead. We stay close to the campfire playing a game of double entendre and wait for the trauma to ease up.

March. The cherry trees hang heavy with haiku. The house cat has succeeded in making me its permanent doorman. Close inspection reveals winged things flying in and out of junk yards and thrift shops. We sit buried in layers of silence among the lowered eyes of strangers, thinking, *Run, Spot, Run!* But is this the way to leave a burning house?

Consider yourself a pathetic fallacy like a "lucky star." The I.M. and the U.R. equal the infinitesimal and multidimensional. WE THE PEOPLE is a scary concept for those of us who cherish our privacy. The problem is premature cognitive commitment. Plus all our ancient bric-a-brac. We wait to be called in by the bailiff. Like it or not we are smack in his sights. I'm fearful he'll call my name. His beard is designed to create maximum terror. We're kept waiting for hours, months, years. Goose bumps appear on both my arms. Luckily, the bottle blond behind the reception desk lightens our mood with her bon mots about commodity fetishes and her tattooed cancer scars. I listen for hidden meanings in the drumming of her painted fingernails on the desktop.

Next, the exchange student takes a last peek into a girlie magazine before diving into the swimming pool.

Mucho grande! He leaves a stir of wonder in his wake. Lift must exceed drag. Buy low and sell high. Yes, here we find ourselves suspended on the end of our polite smiles, hand in sweaty hand. Looking in the mirror, I can't tell whether my image is bigger ahead or behind. Call it a day in the life of a bumper car. Specialists search and probe for the missing parts. Just now a swan swam through my headache. The stranger in the elevator going down looks the same as the one going up. This too fails to answer where we are.

Next, it storms for three days. Nobody can get back home. The streets are nearly unrecognizable, people picking up things, then dropping them in stunned disbelief. Only later do you realize you haven't learned the essential lesson yet. Even if a golden buddha spews sewer gas, it's no use hiding your face in your hands.

The dim shapes of trees loom out from a cold fog. For diversion I read another chapter from the best seller, *Goodbye For Now*, whose heroine, Irma, has unshakable faith in the power of romantic love and a good cry. In this chapter her boss has just been held up at gunpoint and stands there with his pockets turned out like white flags. At the same time her lover Zack is hurrying out of her bedroom only to find that his shoes have switched to the metric system and no longer fit.

Daybreak. The sun casts a critical eye. "How's it going?" Hmm. . . a mind choked with bindweed. Doctor Pain has come to call. Says my specimen has them all: jungle fever, foot rot, trench mouth, razor burn around the groin, coffee stains from opened veins. Nor is this heart made from -- Teflon? It's been inspected dissected corrected redirected coded and downloaded. But life for it is too raw today. Why so, the good doctor will not say. The bearer of this unspoken message goes his way, stepping over puddles and potholes. . . this day of dripping gray; and what's become of the White Knight, the hero of the play? Gone, you say, gone, somehow, somewhere, lost in the shuffle of words, I fear, and only a dot at the end of a sentence remains as the remnant of his pedestal.

But wait. Once I spent a year on planet Zafu. It only exists at certain moments and talks in its sleep about a world at one with itself. It chews up the past, throws out the future as useless baggage. The atmosphere there is rarefied, inclined toward sudden turns and twists and hung on bells, incense and candles. I didn't leave. I (he, a persona) am (is) still there, only now I, we, ignore it and live life fully in absentia. Ignorance is the first law of my, his, our life. For that, "I" have been decorated. Twice. "Our" philosophy is to have none by name. I, we, don't, this self doesn't have *A Life*. Don't, doesn't believe in one. *A Life* is just one more idea, an exercise, one moment of inexplicable play followed by

another, between one step and the next, one breath and the next. Narrow, marginal, parenthetical, unlimited, colorful. Or else eclipsing whole worlds. Who can say? In short, in sum, therefore, and so -- every moment is a good moment for stepping wholeheartedly out of one's shoes into a cloud of -- what? Unknowing? Suddenly bereft of weight? of mind? of thought?

Thoughts -- thoughts go back to simpler moments when we, camouflaged men of parts, roistered and rolled across the blacktop outward bound from a leftover world that no longer counted. Curious glances turned on us, searched, it seemed, for traces of somewhere or thing long forgotten yet longed for. The coffee was hot and strong and the food salted with tears and served on a poet's moon by a wan wood-nymph whose boobs, poor things, bounced beneath her starched blue apron as she bustled about filling our cups and passing out donuts.

Such fanciful images, dreamscapes cut from whole cloth by the imagination of the writer. Ah, the writer, the poet. Danger. Textual discourse approaching blind generic disruption. Do you read me? Repeat. Do you read me? You're off course, not on the same page, edging egregiously close to total marginalia. Copy that. Let's stick with WE. Air traffic control, are you reading me? We copy. Insert equation. Show clippings. Hide button bar. Move left. Prepare to cut and paste. I copy. Here is the place. Here the play unfolds all 108-

plus channels, plus seed catalogs. Copy that. Raise topic, expand and italicize *now!* Collapse, turn active links off. Saved! Now do we love we?

Proud, contrived, thus the art of a novel, a poem, plagiarized, no doubt subject to copyright infringement: but still he goes on, this scribbler, not scribbling but tapping the keyboard, tap-tap-tap, this body and mind that goes on shoulder to shoulder between a thriller and a farce, between hope and fear, those cruel twins, through a maze of images, landscapes, cities, houses, interiors, faces, all scrutinized for something, for proof, always for some kind of proof, assurance, as if these lines aren't already written with a forefinger in the dust on a table in some shabby motel deep in the desert night.

A sodden gray autumn day. Rain, fog, mist, a peekaboo sun. Steps are heard at the door. It is Irma, florid and fat as a bumblebee in a throbbing orange and chartreuse throw-on. Her face wears a strange new expression. Zack makes an effort to master himself. She flings one arm around his neck and kisses him insistently. During this ceremony an old man sits alone in back, observing them through half-closed eyelids. Behind the lids a wind picks up and blows out of endlessness itself, stirring embers into a warm red glow, bounded by an inky black plunged in silence.

"Flight attendants, prepare for takeoff."

A sudden hole appears in the center of the plotted

course where every second counts for nothing but itself and there is no ultimate measuring device. None whatsoever. The morning paper says there's scientific *proof* that the universe has left its fingerprints all over us but is moving to a place we can never reach the end of. In other words, the stage is leaving Dodge. No reason not to jump on board even if it means ending up perfumed with a hundred nuances of hair spray on the way to perfect peace.

Let's imagine ourselves alone on an empty country road late at night. Flashes of moonlight, stars glittering. We arrive at our destination, a cabin in the woods, and fumble around putting the key in the lock. There's a purpose here, a reason we've come all this way from town. Inside the cabin we light a lantern and set it down beside a steamer trunk, the kind which people traveled with a hundred years ago. We take a deep breath and with a beating heart we open the trunk. What do we suppose we hope to find inside of it that is so urgently important?

Scrubbed clean by the rain, the stone wall shines against the green. We've come this way before more times than we can count. What is here we look for elsewhere in the dark, plots and plans and polka dots and parties of the first part. And even as we talk, the search engine grinds on -- parlor tricks for sale -- and a swirl of ashes goes scooting with the wind. It's enough to give one the creeps.

I can't recall a time when I wasn't here, says a voice in a room behind the last one. Let's have a show of hands. How many want to learn the way of all fish? Light above, dark below. Each magic moment another call to arms, another empire folding. I don't know how to put it. When the water boils, the kettle whistles. Can you feel those little dents at the corners of your mouth beginning to twitch on the way to either a smile or a sob? Cup your ear and listen closely. That faint hissing sound in the dark may be a slow leak.

"Flight attendants, prepare for feedback."

And may I ask, Do you dress to kill and live to please? Go ahead, bite your knuckles as once again you turn right into all your ancient twisted karma. I don't mind. Words once loved mean nothing to me now. There are no messages left in the trash folder. However, the bed sheets are clean and the moonlight on the waves foams like blue shampoo. Hey there, butterfly. Everybody knows god knows what.

WITHIN THE BOUNDLESS

SWARM OF BUBBLES

1

She wanted to be on high ground when the flood came. She knew it was a kind of underground river deep within her, something like dread. At the office in her cubbyhole she switched on the machines, sitting upright before the screen which jumped with images as she pressed the keys. She slowly sipped a cup a tea before the conference at eleven. Suddenly an iceberg ripped a deep and fatal gash in her side, and she had a sinking feeling. She would have to show the section chief the figures, the sudden downward curve. She smiled even as she felt herself listing hard to starboard. She put her hands on the wires and pulled. The machines howled and went blank. Children were playing again in the streets. The good-humor man was rounding the corner. She laughed aloud then, the water rushing over her, and the meeting got underway rolling in perfect rhythm within the boundless swarm of bubbles.

2

One day the whole city turned up its nose and went on strike, some terrifying last gasp that left our theme-parks shattered. Umbrellas unfurled, we carefully stepped over the dead and wilted flowers that only yesterday glorified the playing field, and put the setting on Squeeze. It hardly did us any good. Why not try push-ups? So we did. That and the obsessive storytelling after dark, the adored one's dramatic monologues like crushed rock, male malevolence arming for an onslaught. Because the water-taps dribbled something suspiciously red, flatlanders drank nothing but a soft drink named *Quo vadis* which gets drier as mortality narrows the gap, whereas we in the tower preferred to sweet-talk our way into oblivion, our generation's version of good manners. Other residents went in for long swims and bowling in order not to lose their edge. The romantics boxed.

3

It was a leisurely five-day hop exploring the first level of material entanglement. One day for using up all our grammar, including the eight parts of speech, namely the five little pigs who went to market plus the three bears; and another two days in the dank cellars sampling the local wines: sipping, undulating, sipping some more, then climbing the stairs into the dusty sunlight. We sported our humanity and traded mutual confessions of self-doubt and an embarrassment of riches, each of us playing host to a vulnerable past. In the photo you can just make out the church steeple in the blue background and the bug goo spattered on the windshield of the rental car. On the final day a view through the window revealed a courtyard where the roundup was going on. Not far off the road a desert scene filled our eyes with wonder. A wildfire blazed up before us. The river went on a rampage. Warships blew up and went down without a bubble. Booty piled up together with the bodies. We wove our way through blossoms and brambles, having just enough squabbles to prove we were a normal couple. Perched atop a utility pole, a great-horned owl assayed our progress without once blinking.

4

I walked along the fringe going nowhere, thinking it was a good afternoon for a piece of peach pie. The sun had burned a hole in the fog and life was becoming a Long March out, so how now brown Mao? My lease had expired, my passport had lapsed, the cats had run away. I still dreamed of candlelight dinners, chicken in wine sauce, her baking-powder biscuits, her cheesecake and coffee. She was Shining Willow and I was Running Deer and we lived sheltered under a cathedral of majestic pine trees. But then the sun entered Ergo, the moon went into Pious, and I became a wandering ghost in a land of crumbling flowers. Every day brought a major energy crisis. But now the winds of possibility were shifting again. I spied a coffee shop nestled behind a hedge of clustered roses. The waitress at the counter was dressed in a cute candy-striped apron. I went inside, head held high. And there before me in the display case was a perfect piece of peach pie.

5

Ships called back and forth in the darkness. A fist pounded on a door. Club Bomb Bay, hardly half a block away, slid open smiling, and out poured smoky permutations of elephants and winged apes and other creatures of delight. Many if not all places in town and country responded with applause and little explosions of excitement that shook the air as clay pigeons burst and scattered in bits and pieces against the sky. Hair curlers were also making a comeback on city buses and in coffee shops around ten a.m. each weekday, about the same time when word came that more body bags were needed. One afternoon from the garden window we heard apples laughing as they fell into the waiting hands of our children. And everywhere else there were plums, plums and their pits to step around on the pathway to the shed.

Days got warmer, snow melted, soon the breakfast table displayed spring flowers. Outside the gates, riots broke out around the hot dog stands, and not a second too soon to suit the Jeremiah crying doomsday on the corner where baby bloomers hung out at lunch time. Down in the rumpus rooms, den mothers were plotting revolution and a summer hay ride ever since July had started smelling just like September in the rain. Troops thumped by in lockstep on their way to the embarkation point. "Excuse me, men," the color sergeant said, "but we're hanging Danny Deever's diapers in the morning." The bank clerks looked demoralized. Their eyes darkened and their chins sagged. A dark cloud with a curious likeness to Peter Tchaikovsky hovered and rained on the Governor's mansion. There'd been creepy and suspicious noises from the fairgrounds the night before, and foul play was feared. The guards stood at parade rest, agonizing over notions of transience and critical mass. "Don't look at me," I told them. "I'm not the answer man in this world of woeful splendor."

7

They have gathered, they have scattered. We have stumbled on their printouts, compared tattoos, been humbled by the house fly. Waiting and longing shared the same look and twin flowering, the pages of the instruction manual open beside the precisely wrapped sandwiches. Dear god, the expressions on their faces, the grimaces, smiles, frowns, tics, wincing. They have jostled us in subways, infiltrated the airways, prickled in our tears, vibrated our spines. They've been electrified, edified, deified, proscribed, and crucified. Many a day they have stood up, sat down, been dragged off and gagged up, first wrapped in silk, then embalmed. In times like these It takes a lot of frogs to get to the prince.

From every mud hole in the principality come the Little People bearing a load of sod in their paws to build the new millennium from the roots up. Plus the hotels are offering free sulfur baths and massage as a surefire way to get beyond the secondary, and for nature lovers there are dowsing workshops in the watershed. At a sidewalk cafe, people drawn out by promises of hilarity and disaster sit under five-o'clock shadow sipping drinks while waiters in white jackets bustle among the tables. Preteen girls are invited to talk to one another without giggles but keep breaking into gales of laughter over the bevy of blond bathing beauties who were fined earlier for alliterating on the beach while trying to glean as much experience as possible from their frozen custards. In other words, the conventions of illusion and the illusion of conventions are never more transparent than when enclosed in small-minded views appearing as just plain fun. Meanwhile, more and more in-laws keep turning up unannounced and expecting to be entertained, and it's beginning to feel like lock-down in Dog Town when suddenly the Little People get rowdy and start sticking their paws into the tourist traps. Others get all tangled up in signs and banners. Still others crowd around the bar, working themselves up over sports and politics. It's only a matter of time now before the mounted police will charge the public square, swinging their billy clubs and trampling the slow of foot.

There's murder in the clubhouse sandwich. And there's poor old Pop stretched out dead in his Goodwill bed where he won't be found until the king asks Hamlet where the body is stashed. Agents in jeans and clumpy shoes already have your name and number, studying the case through periscopes. "It's quirky," a spokesperson remarks during prime time, adding that "angry people *should* live in the most beautiful places." An apple blossom falls. A car door slams. Another blossom falls. And here is where you come in, Blue Eyes, flushed and waiting for the protagonist who, unbeknownst to you, has taken early retirement and run off to study cargo cults in the southernmost archipelagoes of Amnesia. Meanwhile, across town on an apartment rooftop, I was baking my backside stiff with age and squalor, shaming me in your eyes which turn out not to be blue after all.

Out of a whole complex set of relationships, of winds and shifting sands, being predisposed to self-effacement, you one day open a door leading into a courtyard where you choose this table rather than another, sit down with your coffee mug, open your laptop, and just as the sun breaks through the rain clouds and the first flush of inspiration for the day takes hold, you notice from the corner of your eye a solitary figure dressed in mourning black standing just slightly to one side as if waiting the way one waits for a plane to arrive, while from the table just beyond the years a handsome young officer in dress whites (the kind which Navy cadets wore during WW II) rises and, facing the person near your shoulder, says to her (for now it's clear the figure is that of a woman): "Wouldn't you know it, babe. I got shot down on my very first mission!" -- and says the line with such a heartbreaking smile that the whole courtyard seems to gasp, as if to exclaim: "God, what a fantastic actor! He's certain to win the Oscar for this one!"

Outside the window: a sea of neon and Nissans and a flurry of overcoats but not a single cow. One corner of your brain is marked EASY ACCESS. But in another corner the canary has an inferiority complex and refuses to sing. I order an espresso deluxe. Sipping it, I realize two things: one, my figures of speech are mentally challenged; and two, once they appear in print they want to live forever. Fate tugs at my sleeve. A motor scooter backfires as a permanent part of the plot. A yakuza blew in from the north and snuffs all the candles. The murk thickens. I was a knight in old Kyoto, but I wasn't dressed for this. My vocal cords dried up. A recorded message kept playing in my head. It said, Hear the helpless cry of fallen angels. I giggled.

A boy is playing with a hand mirror, making a spot of afternoon sunlight dance on the walls of his room, when he drops it and it breaks to pieces. Seven years of bad luck, dark and rainy, he's sure will follow him now as, stripped to the waist, he begins to sweep up the pieces. Even so, let's stop harboring fugitives behind our shtick but click on applications, open a new program and let the faithful rain on shelter bay. So what if the coyotes return and chew up the neighbor's cats, and three paintings pass away in a row before damage control is called in? Once grown, the kid will sell the movie rights and resettle in the Hollywood hills, where the cherries are wrapped in gold. It's all of a piece, an ontology exquisitely crafted. At some point, after much uphill struggle, he will look out across the auditorium where the audience has jumped to its feet, shouting ecstatically: "Hurrah for Karamozov, the hash slinger!"

13

Deep in the rainy season, buried in the suburbs like a row of asterisks that stand in for the profanity of a lost empire, I move almost invisibly, a safe conduct pass in hand. A lonesome sales girl spends her day-off haunting the Monday morning mall. Her smile looks wrestled from the cave paintings at a sun festival. We hook arms, find a room, take the sky out of the closet and hang it in the window for all to see. With a bucket and broom we get to work cleaning the smudge from the sun, and next dig out a lost civilization from the worn springs of the love seat. But because we've spent the better part of our lives between the covers of a book, we have to learn how to crawl all over again as any worm would.

“Those who merely meet in cafes for caffeine and *mis-en-scene* question aloud life’s transience and parmesan cheese,” observed the sitting duck.

“While slumming even in a rose garden, expect to turn up a body or two,” said the crocodile, tearfully.

“Taste your words before they leave your mouth,” the parrot added, cocking one eye.

“Layer after layer stripped away, but what is revealed?” asked the snake, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“An eon of summer days, another eon of winter nights,” sniffed the gila monster, smug as ever.

15

In midsummer at least half of the camp guardians broke away all at once because an ideal of punctuality had seemingly out of nowhere produced a literary craze wherein deadpan put-downs of former fascists generated almost as much interest as screen stars or what the latest in fashion convinced us created the new prosperity, when in truth the elite had walked out on the town the night before and had fled joy, passion, and the wonder of luxury barge cruises for a run of humor on the slopes of spectacular new vistas without exactly roughing it.

Summer ended on the note *petroglyph*. Call it a password, a featured player in one's space program. He confesses to his love that he lives only in her words. She turns her face away, saying: I'm just an ordinary girl. So then he offers her his coat for warmth instead of his arms. She counters with: Are you trying to entice me with kindness? From a distance this may sound like a faint hum at twilight, but up close it's like an abrasion-resistant fabric being torn to tatters and left flapping in the wind. Whereupon he blew us a kiss and rolled himself away in his wheelchair. For he was edgy and served us a bitter cup of tea. We showed off our small collection of sundry garlands. And then she says: Do you believe in spirits? And she says: I feel like I'm a paper kite. And she adds: Like in a dream I'm floating on waves of warm air above the suburbs of my mind. And she says: On the other end sits a lady whose smile is so tender it could break your heart. And then she herself smiles in just that way, and says: That lovely lady holds the end of the kite string delicately between thumb and forefinger, which at any moment will let go.

Somewhere out there in the night gods in white lab coats are on the lookout for alien fastbacks tracking up our corn fields. Concerns with free enterprise and space walks are mingled somehow with talk of hidden provocateurs, though supposedly all very hush-hush. Closer to home, my old friend Chick's good name is being dragged through multiculturalism. So far there's been no hands-on contact but should one of *them* be brought in, Chick could move around and even sit up in bed again as his drip-rate is recorded by technicians for the purpose officially stated as "understanding extraterrestrials" and whether they enjoy a private sex life, though lately word has slipped out that it's really a covert study of how to perfect a faultless diet plan. I sit with Chick several evenings a week being observed as an object of weightlessness, about which I could easily dream up a whole paranoid scenario about the current Administration. Chick himself concentrates on task-building a new identity, one free of talk-show hosts and canned laughter. He takes it lying down and with great aplomb while still believing in the restorative power of cussing out the staff, especially when off his meds and his eyes look like craters on the moon. At these times I sit focused on my breath, shutting out unwanted images from my mind. Is this cheating? I wonder. Failing this, I am given to taking long breaks, stepping out for a bag of buttered popcorn and a diet soda provided by an up-to-date vending machine.

Tracy was at the bar when the Dragon Lady entered on the arm of Captain Midnight. They'd changed metaphors in the middle of the scheme, presenting themselves this time as a Chinese puzzle box. A paradox, a pox and a vox populi to boot, thought Tracy. But their roots were showing. You can't hide roots. The Joker knew that, Buck knew that, Popeye knew that. They all knew. Fear leaks out like battery acid. Corrosive. Tracy would've smiled if he could have, but he couldn't, so he didn't even try. The bubble broke. The bar was heating up. It was called *The Silver Bullet*. Hi ho, thought Tracy. Ah for the glory days of thundering hoof-beats and the hardy cry of --Captain Midnight and the Dragon Lady squeezed into seats next to him. The Dragon Lady leaned and said, snidely: "Smiling Jack, it's been a while." She was sculpted ice and juicy fruit at the same time. She invented the moon. She invented the typhoon. But her train didn't stop at his station. She roasted him like a Christmas goose. She pushed his tender buttons. Tracy knew irony had never been his strong point. He clenched his jaw and waited.

Lancelot found the coffee house off the main drag. As he opened the door he noticed a quickening of the blood. He was miles from the ocean, with its fishy smell, but just in case he sniffed his shirt and popped a mint into his mouth. He bit his knuckles tenderly. They belonged, after all, to hands that had picked the fairest flowers of the field. Lancelot blinked his eyes. Coming from the bright sunlight into the dim interior of the coffee house, he could barely see anything at first, the things he had come here for, something grand to take part in, the driving experience that can only be described as flayed, generic, wickedly witty, little things that didn't explain how they got there before the onset of beaded bags and a million dollars worth of dog food. There was so much to laugh at, memorable, unique, delightful, rewarding, deserving of an omelet. Slowly the dim interior revealed the usual hockey sticks, rag dolls and torn aprons of famous chefs among the scattering of silent figures seated in booths and tables fingering their coffee cups with a bemused air of imagined sex odysseys. He almost expected to see a movie star. At the far end of the room, Fury was sitting in the adversarial position, tallying up profit and loss in the struggle for the minds of the young. She looked up as Lancelot approached her table. Her smile worked in demolition. It told him that she found the day perfect for wearing chain mail under her cotton print.

We listen to the drip-drip of raindrops on the roof. Not to be taken seriously even though the house is falling apart as we talk. She won't sit still for anyone and I'm too tired to try and have to be coaxed away from the screen in front of me. How history morphs in the telling! What color am I? she asks. Green, I tell her. And you? she asks. Yellow, I tell her. Did you switch colors? she asks. Not since we both did, I tell her. I wonder, she says. Just when you think you got it down, it jumps. Well, I tell her, it's just this way and no other. Whole lifetimes pass like that, she says, and adds: Let's catch the next flight for wherever. We have no unread messages to answer for. Stop this pestering yourself, I tell her. She sighs. Reasons with herself. Thoughts! she says then. The way they can come at you, like a knife from one side and a needle from the other. Between the cuts and the pricks, sleep be damned! She throws back her head and yawns defiantly, loudly. Everything creaks, she says, from top floor to the landing below. It takes my breath away. The crossing guard calls it merciful heavens, I tell her. More tall tales, she says. Why bother?

Everybody on the right and on the left had left. There was nobody left, only recollections from afar now, like distant mountains snowcapped. By the time I got there, there were no standing craters left. Another case of trying to make a sow's ear out of a cow's udder. Predictably, the smart money had moved on. Hauteur stunk up the town. At the bus stop I watch myself turn west into the sea-wind. A door opens and I go in. There before my startled gaze is a huge glossy blowup of a maternity dress stuffed with eagle feathers and bearing a diploma with gold seals, like a graduation certificate. Off to the left, on a slab illuminated by a spotlight, a corpse lies stretched out with ten toes up and tagged. Recognize that face with its familiar features? Of course we do. Also the message stamped upon them: "Demand to be heard, but die to yourself, and you shall bowl 300. Scout's honor."

Don Miquel is headed straight for the windmill, the hood ornament flashing like a sword in the sunlight. Don Miquel, I say, many pardons but this is not the day to slay dragons. A bad end is certain to await the present course of action. I like a man who can carry a tune, says Don Miquel. Prepare yourself, dude. We're going in! He pulls down the visor of his hat to just above his nose and leans into the steering wheel. Don Miquel, I say to him, this kind of bravado has had its day, as everyone knows. Everyone but me, he returns. We're about to make that dragon one big empty room! We? I repeat, *We*? You've been watching too much TV, Don Miquel, I tell him, but my words don't reach the source. I am less thrilled about engaging in heroics than in saving my skin. But a man with a vision, a man with a cause, no matter how harebrained, is hard to stop once he is bent on a course of action. So in we go. They see us coming now and start running about like ants. I close my eyes and brace myself. Don Miquel guns the engine for all she's got. En garde! Zorro has returned.

23

Days of base metals and scullery and the teleological thumb screw. The weird ways of heaven. We were waiting impatiently at the airport for the weather to clear. The crowd was looking ugly. Outside, it was so cold words froze in midair, bubbled for a moment, then burst with a slightly erotic-sounding gasp. It was month nine since Jody had shown up with the pregnant slave girl. Flashback to episode three when Jody realizes after date-raping the slave girl that he's totally consumed by his need for her which he construes as love. He claims it has nothing to do with successful weight loss nor her powerhouse overhand serve.

We had our thumbs out. But no matter how many rides we got, we drew no closer to our destination, population unknown. My buddy Mort had the moves down. His life motto was, "Use subterfuge for throwing off cosmic angst." One town looked like another, the wind blew tumbleweeds across the highway, and our destination was always just up ahead, around the bend, on the other side of the river or mountain. At one dusty cow town we cruised the Powderpuff Rodeo looking for ladies we could take back to the campfire and arm wrestle with. We needed practice in sustainability in a match of arms locked in a contest of brute strength, and some of these broncobusters were sure to make mighty fine competitors. But all they wanted was a hot bath, a rundown and a good night's sleep. One of them had been stomped pretty bad by a Brahma bull. A part of its horn was still stuck in her side. She gave it a hard tug to remove it, tossing it to a pack of curs before sauntering over to the Coke machine and putting some coins in it. I figured here was a candidate for a real match of strength. But as I said, our expectations were never met because the gals were simply too tuckered out after a rough day in the saddle. Said Mort, with a shrug, "The seashells you pick up on the seashore are the same as the ones at the flea market." It was another motto worth pondering.

25

Chief says cases of mistaken identity need refinance before it's too late; that the files are filled with Dead Ringers and more keep slipping away out the gate down alleys of allegories or analogies. Moo, Aiku and Booboo Baba, a trinity of vowel movements toward relief into a vanishing point. Is this similar to crossing the equator with free offers for a tour of lost civilizations? To follow the bread crumbs home? You wake up one dawn after a long sea voyage across hemispheres and notice the sun is rising over your right shoulder instead of your left one. Is this significant? The exotic place where a street vendor will read your fortune across a folding table, and your mind will be illuminated? No.

We read to each other, sprawled out on a blanket, the Lord of the Manor and the Mistress of the Mirror, having a bonding ceremony smothered in hugs and kisses and a general fiddling around to the sound of endlessly falling leaves, coming up for air only to eat our chocolate pudding. Perfect weather for just a light sweater and some woodland lore until the wind turns cold and scraps of newsprint begin piling up alongside the chain-link fence. Darkness comes on faster than expected. Hand in hand we follow a pebbled path lit by paper lanterns. Hardly have we gone a verst before our overshoes fill with snow. We lean on our canes and smile as one, ready to die poor but happy. But first we share weight-loss advice. And there is still the wildflower walk to get through. Then a bell tinkles, whereupon those blinded by a long stretch of mirth and murder hold out their tin cups while a pamphleteer moves among them spreading the word, and our travel couple fly first-class for the final leg of the trip, arriving just in time for their Friday morning breakfast club.

Forthwith she lifted her head and drained her gin, left a lipstick smudge on the rim of her mother-in-law's chalice. I liked her for it, for a spirit that never quit. She smiled at me and said: "They closed the polls before my vote was in. The world is made by fools for fools." She drew a long puff through her cigarette holder, and went on: "Boom is black and Bang is white, except of course when their bombs go off. Then the powder turns Boom white and Bang black, and leaves them indistinguishable. They lived, they died, they're back, and they're angry. Boo on both their houses. I don't understand their accents anyhow." She put down her cup. She continued: "I believe they escaped from some French laundry one moonless night and swam the moat by bribing the crocodiles with hunks of meat left over from the latest children's crusade. One can never tell," she added, "when a man with a blue scar will step from a doorway and flash something nasty in one's face. Today's fine weather checked out at noon, I fear, given over to a just cause for reprisals." Three wines and four courses and all that talk about a winning horse and eponymous clothing lines. "Oh dear, now wander west to the demitasse palaver, but don't embarrass me with outré stories in front of otters." She flashed me her smile again with its playful glitter of expensive dental work. What a fun hostess. Crab salad, sudden death, and the crickets rasping their love songs in the moist heat outside the bungalows.

These Ozimandian figures, these great brute follies that round our heads and look out to sea, have no origin and remain a mystery for all times, impenetrable, for their isotopes have lazy bones and will not yield to the pressure of any mind. How they got here or what they are no one knows, but their stony silence unlocks a quiver that runs from head to toe. It's not so much what it is they fail to disclose as it is our own ignorance and our need to know, or else they are mute testimony to some supreme power's arch indifference to our hungry will. Yet we circle them in awe and drink and pee and paw one another in their monstrous shadow. Bonaparte no less once led a retreat here under their blank stare. The day was picture perfect, bright and clear, with the mountains, the sea air, the bubbly fountains, and she with a flower behind her ear. Down by the shore the tribal drummers and dancers were frenziedly performing. We walked with the sun on our faces and the wind in our hair. Then galleons appeared on the horizon and fired a salute or two. I was handed a hard-bitten spoon by a monk with a scratchy beard. "Beware, my son," said he, "of too much irony, a way that's steep and keeps you from yourself. Why trivialize experience with a frown and shilly-shally when all you need do is take a class or two from me, a seer, with a Ph.D., and learn to write with a true heart's intensity." The monoliths stared down at me and I awoke and caught the first plane out of there.

As pictured in the popular mind, the sun and rain beat down on the little lean-to beside a steamy lagoon somewhere lost in time. It could have been a watershed year, or a waterbed one, depending on the mood of the moment. The two Bills were there, Budd and Bailey, as were their wives and kids, smitten with jungle lore; that much is certain. The search planes were gone. The intrigue wore on. The scrapbook was left open on the sand, hoping to be found one day and answer the mystery. Fingers point to the clerks on deck and the jocks in toe-shoes down below who had no business being on board in the first place. But one should not make light of the holy terrors of our fathers, those among us who play loose with hooky or hockey, who fish and forage through the cerebellum South for clues as to our own whereabouts. Merciful heavens, no. We have been if not there then in a place just like it and have returned wetter than ever before, in case we need a reminder, which I doubt, here in our dry and cozy Koffee Korner within easy reach of our peers and the morning papers.

Phil has just returned dazed and starved from a week of wandering around inside the Internet, trying to chase down the intricacies of postmodern thinking, hours untangling dated and shapeless metaphors, cross-referencing papaya with *upaya* and dichotomizing “authority and power” in the light of *feng shui*. He finds himself caught in a loop of infinite regression, a *reductio ad absurdum* of fixed views from a position of *ex cathedra*. Though romping in his domain of expertise, he suspects he may be captured in some poet’s misguided *vers Libra*. He wonders whether he is hallucinating. I need grounding, he tells himself. I need to get back into my body. He gives himself a shake and gets dizzily to his feet. For the first moment or two, Phil doesn’t know for sure where he has sprung from, but he suspects it has something to do with a.) a monster wave in a sci-fi horror flick, b.) the revenge of an X chromosome against a snooty Y chromosome, or vice-versa, or c.) the classifieds. He feels he is wallowing in a huge vat of spaghetti sauce. Worse still, he is stumped by what the name is for the substitution of a title or epithet for a proper name, as for a sovereign “Your Majesty” or a traitor as a “Benedict Arnold.” A stifled sob catches in his chest. Now a vacuum cleaner appears, doomed or at least irrelevant, and begins to gobble up the last of the crumbs from under the table, though its bag is already stuffed with the strange leavings of bachelorhood.

Mandy bit her tongue, then withdrew on tiptoe behind a wall of money, her life based on True Story and credit cards. She said, Take my drum and beat it. She said, Take a powder and blow. She said, Take a pill and poop. This breakfast food really works. The aspen leaves shimmied and shuddered. The earth squirmed, riddled with worms. A timely message arrived: *Destroy the blog*. Mandy misread blog for dog, with unfortunate results for old Spotty. She took herself to the clinic, checked in, checked out, went home and threw open every door and window, threw out all her romance novels and French lessons. "Dear Mommy," a letter found in the desk drawer read, "I'm writing to tell you I can't make it home for the holidays because the gang's planning to pull a heist and picked me to drive the getaway car." Her pale, trembling hands pieced a puzzle together, somehow. Sickened, sad, and sunburned, she said coyly: Care for some sherry, my dear? Chocolate truffles? Foi gras? The hour turned late and adventure called. The northwest passage was open once more and the traffic was moving along at a stiff clip. A certain receptionist I once knew had a front tooth pulled, yet dared to smile! Nearly beloved, how I almost miss you on this summer night.

I closed my eyes and awoke to find myself seated on a bench under a tree by a lake on fire, my forefingers in my ears. A mental note from somebody else had taken wing and now came floating down like an autumn leaf and settled on my kneecap. It appeared to be a corner thought concerned with a recipe for mock turtle soup. When next I looked up, she who'd lost her name somewhere approached and stood in front of me with eyes large and moist searching my face critically. She knelt on one knee and I knew instantly it was my muse taken bodily form and come to sniff the fragrance of my *ars poetica*. Her robe was tattered and patched, her hair knotted like leather strings and sporting a feathery plume. She was drugged on woodbine smoke, her one diaphanous veil dragging balls of skunk spore about her person as she twitched and turned. Struck with wonder, I reached out to stroke her cheek, upon which she abruptly jerked herself back. *Beware*, said hissed, italicizing each word as it came from her lips, *or my small fist shall be fitted to your nose soundly, for though I seem a mere spurge, I have the might of a measles and may cash you in for a megaphone, that noblest org of antiquity. Mold, molder, muskmelon! You are to my left-sided boob what a sonnet is to a sestina; that is to say, beyond compare!* All at once I found myself dropping as if into a mail-slot wherein a dark figure with a shaggy dog was twirling in midair as in a hurricane. *I am annexed!* was the thought that

swept me as I swooned, reciting a quatrain as I plummeted into the abyss:

Even though frost-killed now

I long for the moon maiden to dance

For me one more time

Here on Shady Lane.

When next my eyes were opened, I saw that I was here again at my desk, biting on the end of my ball-point pen, and the air was purple with the familiar shades of prosody.

Whenever Karl spoke roughly, the cat clawed him in the groin. During his wanderings, Germany was discovered moving eastward. Karl made a grab to hug her but stubbed his toe instead. The crucial moment came and went without his noticing. He was nonetheless decorated with oak and hazel wreaths by a trio of Rhine maidens playing on their lyres the works of Gounod. After that, Karl disappeared into a library. At home we too were taught reverence for the natural world. We too took extensive travel notes and attended botany lectures. The Dean had us for tea in his private chambers where we sat on low stools shaped like mushrooms and told one another bold-faced lies. No kidding, for kidding was *verboten*. His wife turned out to be a Druid cult enthusiast which explains why her swirling robe smelled of mistletoe. It was she who gave us the album for our coffee table. On the tray her cutlery and crystal gleamed and sparkled. "Any hosting I do," the Dean whispered to us when his frau excused herself for *a little smoke* in private "is a sacred space to golf in. I hope you brought your clubs." Gounod, by the way, achieved considerable success in the theater but was thought of by Rimbaud as having a tin ear, which may be one reason why he moved to England, Gounod, that is, not Rimbaud, who took a drunken boat to Africa soon after, like so many artists who leave a massage parlor in a shambles.

Dusty arose one morning all at once superbly free of key-chains and locks of any kind. This was the very same fellow who knew only too well how to string a fence around his property to keep the varmints out. His land was posted and trespassers warned. Now exuberant and wide-eyed, he stepped into the seamless symmetry of the day and broke into a spontaneous dance which carried him across a field of fleas and under a bubblegum tree, waving both arms and singing at the top of his lungs, which sent Bessie the cow crashing through a hedge of moot points. "The joke's on me, the joke's on me!" shouted Dusty, beside the baseball diamond where he collapsed at last, gasping for air, in a salty heap of peanut shells.

Her day gets started early tangled up in marigolds and demigods, facing a hundred mountains belching sulfurous fumes, though soon to melt, soon to spread their myths into timely proverbs, while she, Jane, queen of the jungle, a thin linen handkerchief pressed to her nose, pushes her shopping cart down the back streets of paradox and oblivion. Tarzan is still asleep under the palm trees in the park, if indeed there is a Tarzan, this Tarzan who takes his notion of what social engineering means very seriously, which is to say he has no intention of painting a house or hauling a baby grand piano over to somebody's aunty's place today or any other day. Or else it is a question of boundary issues. Or of low blood sugar. Or could it not be a case of being trapped in the brain of an absurdist playwright? Any of these would do. He's no one's chump, or chimp, either. No, siree. Jungle Jane pulls up her coat collar tight around her jaw. It's May but the wind is acting as if it's still winter. Stupid wind, can't it read the signs of the buds bursting on the trees? And it smells bad, too, exhausted and hung-over and leaves a metallic taste on the tongue. A time was when it could smile like the happy face of a retiree in a life-insurance ad. Of course, it plays with the dust and bangs doors, as usual, but listlessly, without its old spirit. I don't care, I'm happy even if it's not, Jane muses, driven by travelogues and tautology around the turnstiles of a great metropolis. Bowling balls are

shooting heavenward out of the hollows behind her eyes. Once upon a time her life had looked thin and faded as if it had gone through the wash too many times. Now the ragged morning clouds appear to her like pink dumplings good enough to eat and the broth they simmer in is nothing other than the hard light of day and everywhere she looks is a world of jellybeans just waiting to be recognized as proof that, all evidence to the contrary, life is sweet.

See that picture on yonder wall? Once it was my mattress back when artists drank beer that made the Pharaohs jealous. We were the first of what later would be known as *The Motel Six*. That is, until some of us took up a life of crime writing art criticism, got a swollen head or a fat lip, and returned to stripping rawhide in Durango, a piece of live unrehearsed performance art not seen since the days of the Old West. My dealer and I made eyes over petite fours at exactly five in the afternoon after walking Lorca, her Chihuahua, in the city park. We dropped our articles and prepositions as the conversation heated up into a richly textured, buttery still-life. But our breath began to smell of the old hunter and his dog, after which we separated and my work went the way of adding machines.

Having donned his robes, the old monk sits speechless before the assembly. Finally he recites a poem: "I am the voice of the fountain at midnight, the colors of the hills at sunset." But I pictured an old man alone between a twitch and a tremble, hands thrust deep in his pockets, waiting in the shadows for the bus to come. It was late in the game. Jesus, the husband said, dragging his plastic bag behind him, it stinks in here! But Jesus was at the door. Let me in, he cried, it's war and more war. I can't take it any more! The woman turned the key in the lock and gave him a challenging look. The dishwasher whined, the dryer rattled. The cat scratched on the back door to be let in, the baby cried for its mother's breast. With fluid finger-work her hands kept busy unwrapping the crystal, the china, the silverware. There will be blood, she said as if to herself. The trees bowed down in the storm, the sky unleashed torrents. And the apple tree burst into bloom. Said the old monk, "Use me as a vehicle to reach the source," as if one surely exists. Not this, not that. *Neti neti*. We are left on a previous page and soon forgotten. Behold the world, the stucco dumps, the wounded romantics, the plastic wastes. Jaws forever chewing. Bombs going off. You cannot reason with rage, self-deception, or bedtime stories. About now you realize you are not the one you think you are. Yet we know, don't we, that we love ourselves even more when others feel the same as we do.

What a cool place for our little closet drama. If you like riots and tear gas. They're snapping pictures, taking names. It's an historical romance with a political subplot. "The Return of El Marco." The blood and tears look surreal. Actually they're just chocolate and glycerin. The body parts are made from Styrofoam. The bad guys are just actors. The rioting mob are extras hanging around while the lights are being adjusted. In this movie the bad guys win. They get away with stealing. And murder. It's just a piece of film noir. Or the Mardi gras. The theme again? The same as the last hundred and eleven movies made about toppling a regime. Namely? *High performance guaranteed each time you step on de gas.*

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Why should one want a peaceful mind, a contented heart? Up the street was a shop that sold chocolates. Big wet flakes of snow kept falling straight down where the hero walked. He walked and walked counting his steps, passing three men and two trucks, as reported in his notes. The need for carnal fulfillment troubled his mind, so he collected safety pins and kept them in a locked jar beside his bed. When a certain cashier's dark eyes flashed at him, he took her to his room where he helped her with her taxes. Then he crawled into bed alone and pulled the covers up to his chin. He was a very good boy. He claimed he dreamed in logarithms.

I think it might be the machine probing the leftover soup that makes those worrisome night sounds. I was warned it had “peculiar tendencies” before I brought it home. The thing hasn’t been trained for the job I want it for, and it snarled at me the first time I plugged it in, though it appeared contented otherwise being in the kitchen. Maybe it’s just scared. It seems *happy* enough. It makes those little purring and clicking sounds that can be so adorable sometimes, but it’s not supposed to turn on and start scratching around in the dead of night when it’s programmed to stay at rest. I swear it tried to open the bedroom door the other night. Maybe it’s all in my head, but the truth is I’ve hardly gotten a wink of sleep since. I can return it to the dealer, or course, and maybe I should trade it in for a quieter model. But I confess that although it causes me anxiety it also excites something wild in myself, something almost illicit which, however weird, I like too much to give it up easily. Something far from the certified fur farms we once raised cane around.

On a summer afternoon the world started sneezing. It had a hollow, helpless sound. In a noisy public square, handkerchieves fluttered like United Nations flags. Something banged on the walls that words had built. More ink darkened the pages. Tangled threads, spidery lines started showing up all over town. People got down on their knees. The rent was past due. The messenger sped to and fro on a monorail. Talking robots worked both ends of the line. The beach queen's body turned milk-white. That left aerobics to consider. Stranded, we lay there in the olive-drab thickets, in the stinking heat, listening to cries for coffee royale. All that dithering around when you could've been practicing your throws and punches. The old snake-charmer read our fate in a dustpan. I have an interview with silence. Don't know where it's taking me. Peepholes appear. The swelling spreads. The starch runs out. Orders are: fall back and regroup around the dry cleaners. Close up the ranks. Stitch up the holes. Come back, Shane! The herd of palominos gallop on until they can no longer be seen.

The guy says he's been mostly lying low. When he breathes close to you, you can feel the breeze skimmed from the oil fields. I turned away before there was another thing to look at, a single shot fired. Were you there? Latin Mass for Miss February, silver cup and candle in your sweating hands. Didn't she die in the fighting, or was it in her rocking chair, the ball of yarn falling from her lap and rolling across the floor? Don't stay back. Just be warned. They'll nab you as soon as you step off the plane and check out your blub in the mirror. Bartender, what's your take on this? What, they don't work here any more? Awake, caught in midair, dresses and neckties fluttering up over their heads as they stepped out between the canyon walls? Says he didn't mean for it to turn out this way? Don't tell me where we are. Let me guess.

That spring day something truly alarming turned up in Homer's jeans, like a condor nestled on a bean pole. The air hummed with hymns to acidophilus. The ground was cleared of churls. All around him the color code was loosening up, slipping from the grip of hula hoops. It felt as if some virus like a mutinous mutation was chortling in the hard-drive. He thought: This can't be happening to me, *The One True Goodness and Rich Favor*. But it is easy to get lost in a dense metaphor and mistake *reshaping the world* for *escaping the world*. Why? Because Time's not a swift arrow. It's a steak sandwich.

It's your normal Spring day wrapped in cotton clouds with a light dusting of apple blossoms. After such a tough row to hoe, they'd found the perfect dream house in a safe neighborhood with decent schools for the kids and space to walk the dog, the church was near to perfect as well, dignified and liberal, and lord knows how grateful they were now that the older of the two girls could begin therapy and get her head back on straight, which only goes to prove that it's never too late to find a vacant bench on which to sit yourself down and close your eyes and wait for a sudden truth to arise from those leaky places in the interior where the names of state capitols are likely to hide, is the opener of the bestseller, "Six Ways of Slicing a Watermelon." The salary man was waiting to be counted in, jingling the loose change in his pocket and looking at his wristwatch every few seconds. Thoughts bumped into one another like billiard balls, thoughts fully loaded and primed for either the bluebird of heaven or another rude awakening. But don't get him started, he's a barrel of mush at the moment and carsick, too, and hasn't had a bite to eat since dawn and the car is waiting to take him to the airport. The bell has rung and the jury is hung and the in-crowd has taken off for a beach in Bermuda. . . . Get the picture? All stories get started in a barbershop, rolling around a set number of themes: sleep fat and walk thin; pull up your socks and let down your hair; be square and play

fair; the fun or terror has just begun; remember when; and, I'll get my own back at you. That's it. What's wrong at home that would bring you out on a cold and stormy night anyhow? Well blog me, if it isn't the old articles of faith! Zipped up and maintained as assets. Dense espousals beamed with advertising smiles. Making meaningful eyes at ceiling zero.

Out on the road with the rain coming down, you're broke and soaked and need a smoke and you're far from your hometown, and you wonder if nobody sees you standing there in your rags and bags and wet zigzags and tangled string for hair. Then out of nowhere a van pulls up and the window rolls down and the sweetest face with the warmest smile this side of salvation says, "Hi, I'm going all the way to Nibanna in case you're headed that way." I introduce myself and my partner: "I'm Sam and this is Sara and Nibanna is where we're trying to get to." We climb up into the wide front seat of the van which is painted in glorious rainbow colors and our driver guns the engine and off we go on the road to Nibanna. "You ever been there before?" she asks us. "Not that we can recall," says Sara. "What's it like?" "Depends," says the lady at the wheel. "Pretty much like anywhere else. If you see it in the right light at the right time, then it's like one big juicy miracle, or else, if you don't, it can kinda be like finding yourself in one of those hilarious, scary fun-house mirrors at the fair -- not that opening your eyes at the wrong time can't be a revealing experience, too." Her voice sounds like the chirruping of the first robin in springtime. I get to feeling warm and dry, my eyelids grow heavy, and my head droops. The van seems to be moving faster and faster under us, as if reaching an incalculable speed, until it even feels as if we've left planet earth and are free of the pull of

gravity. All at once I'm drinking a soft-drink handed to me, feeling totally relaxed and happy, stretching out my legs. At the same time I can't believe how bad I suddenly have to pee before God and everybody; but there's no stopping now, and I can feel we're gaining altitude fast, flying free and easy through boundless space.

A warm autumn day with sails billowing on the blue horizon. A middle-aged couple-- call him Bruno, her Dorothy -- sit across a table from each other in an outdoor cafe soaking up the California sun and wine. Mums the word, or so it seems, until Dorothy empties her glass and breaks the silence: "Try this," she begins with a smile, gazing with big soft moo-cow eyes across the table, "let hugs return to those whose arms are waiting, whose legs are steady under the unruly game of love." Bruno, face hidden in a bushy black beard, smiles back at her, but what a different smile! In a voice taken let's say from a screwball comedy of the 'thirties, he spools out his words like a silken ribbon: "In the first place, Emily Dickinson, who asked you, and in the second place I didn't, and in the third place stop bugging me, I'm content, I get on fine, I don't make waves, others are always trying to change me, improve me, so what if I spend my days with feet up watching sit-coms and crummy old movies, so live and let live, I don't need no stinking badges!"

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Dear --

Tonight is hung in beauty like a thorn. Here beams the moon of many smiles upon Ghost Town. All day, winds blow through the dusty streets. Come now so I can cool your hot head, open places you think are dead. Real smog, real flies, dragon kites in stormy skies. Shakespeare is here, wants to say hello. Message is start from scratch. Or maybe not. Too much static now maybe. Overhead power lines, buzzing. The palaces, the parks, the subway swarm, the stunning ruins. I've gone native. Can you see in the picture I'm sending that no baby Buddha is to be born in this time and place? Yet something extraordinary sits and waits under the window, sits with straight back and eyes half-open, skin prickly with traces of radiation mixed with signals from galaxies a million light years away.

A poem calls for simple words of praise written in the language of a heart overexposed and underdeveloped and willing to chew its fingernails. It is words that make the world go round. A poem can find its own way home. We are what we think, or think we are, and a simple word can turn the sweet cream sour. I tear out my mind, leaving it no place to hide. Meanwhile we're thrilled to present the falling frangipani leaves. Ask yourself, Have I hugged my skin today? You may as well brave the mess. Now try living. Now without the prescription. Call for help without saying a word. Get more miles per gallon. Love yoga. The only way you'll learn is by hacking into it. Next time start at the scalp. Or try osculation. Fit for all contact sports. Comes in three delicious flavors. Targets pain messages. May cause delirium.

Madam Bovary sits sticking pins into her voodoo doll that's dressed like a country doctor. She awaits the Countess Natasha Rostova, a recent arrival in the trailer park, along with the rogue Anatol whom she, Natasha, finally ran off with after all. They've set aside Tuesday evenings for rewriting the lives of Tolstoy and Flaubert from the perspective of the Grand Marshal of Mexican Independence Day. Who doesn't need a little salsa along with their Kruetzer Sonata? The diatribe in chapter four, however, has been given over exclusively to Anatol's literary bent, a style Natasha has sent out six times to be checked for traces of lipstick, and the poor man is still not satisfied. Back at the bivouac, the night before the great battle that will settle the fate of five nations, Nicholas and Boris sit at the campfire talking rapturously about Sonya's knitting. In truth they love it more than bugs and spiders, more than all their druthers put together.

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Once more the front drops away and we rush headlong into the broiling surf. Truth in its many shades of gray drenches the beachhead. Endlessly we drive the pagan highways feasting and fasting. I ask you, what gives us the right to sit all day by the roadside taking potshots at our world of wonder? Death by a thousand cuts does not a single poem make. One after the other the guests and hosts skip town. Where blood turns cold is where the work is found. Don't think a sneer will help you get around life on mosquito lake. Another moment comes along talking to itself in iambics and when you look up it's already tomorrow. Make us laugh at that.

At this very same moment, in the sticks, Wile E. Coyote climbs deeper into the inferno where, from a crook between the branches of a painted tree, he hooks up the contraption, the iron forge, the dynamite, the trip wire, waiting for Roadrunner, that impudent prick, to come zipping along on his way to somewhere else. Already puffs of dust can be seen approaching. Just about now Big Daddy's been found in a border town wearing Mommy's dressing gown; slaughter as ever makes common cause with cannon-fodder; and *pow!* Rifleman pops the unicorn in the sculpture garden. Snow melts on the mountaintops, our footprints with it. Now comes the wind stirring up the muddy water. But don't lay it on too thick. A shard is just a shard, no more, no less. A huge hug goes around town like a tidal wave, upsetting the status quo, and is put to bed without its supper. Deepening blue descends. And night falls on the little noodle shop.

52

Scenes now start flying by the window faster than trial and tribulation can be dropped off at the station. Can you hear the tempo of the Rain Dance Brothers? It says snow in the deep interior. It says closed for the holidays. There's cloud soup for lunch today. Thunder in the deep. A sky streaked orange, hands waving farewell. The angels of light float down the long green pathways to the sea. When you last poked your head inside my door, I was on the phone talking to myself. Out in the garden the crumbling stone poet sits green with envy.

53

Says our Big Man On Campus, “Here’s a telescope. Now go study things for awhile.” He can freeze you with a smile. A few short yelps in the adjoining room where they’re twisting knobs, mixing voices, moving illuminated screens around an eating disorder. Your genes are showing. On close examination they seem to be laughing and crying with equal fervor. The light is right. Let’s get nautical here, head for open water, and steady as she goes.

Right. It wasn't yet the time or the place. So he fondled his Teddy bear and drew his cape closer around his shoulders. A calculated response, and why not? There's only so much laughter in a barrel of monkeys. The evening was lapsing away sighing over sour grapes. By this time, one knew every pot and pan by heart. We mapped out our humble kingdoms and washed the dishes and put them away. The guardians of peace and harmony fell out over how to use the pumpkins, and a select committee became bewitched by a detergent substitute. That ended it. He gave up his Teddy bear and the rest of us counted to ten, then burst forth with *Hail Hail The Gang's All Here*.

Mend your fences if the cat is not to stray. Avoid the color gray on bleak winter days. She sat in the back of a gondola bound for Idaho and spouted slogan after slogan. The morning sky, drenched in orange juice, mocked her mood and jargon. Languorously her hand dangled in the canal searching for the lost blue of the midnight moon after she'd dropped the chip on her shoulder overboard along with her ax to grind. A lone drake was preening on a sand spit in the shallows while citing from a long list of grievances. A white crane was demonstrating the fandango to a bored frog. A man on the bank raised a hand to wave and yodeled good morning to her. The world had turned to sugar, one drop of honey for every note of birdsong that quavered in the air. She could no longer tell the Internet from Indra's net. The gondolier sang on while bits and pieces of human flesh floated by.

ODD LOTS AND SHORT PIECES

It is written: Only great thoughts are conceived from continual sleeplessness. Our pens poised over our notebooks, truth is simple. It is all that very beautiful autumn scenery I have in mind. Field and figure with the major arcana in the filtering light of late afternoon. Note in particular the absurd background helter-skelter beyond the dew-dripping fronds. Fueled by desire, tongue in place, N for nurturing, O for openness, and many more to come. "And there is pansies, that's for thoughts." With a little sepia and india ink I can give you The Hanged Man, The Fool, his beard yet to grow. The Grateful Dead posters. The Kabuki Papers. Sushi along with utsukushi sunsets. "There's fennel for you and columbines." With regard to this one, I hammered it off in a single day. "We know what we are but know not what we may be," whether tortillas or toast. Seek zeros! God bless everybody! Now go brush your teeth.

There are nights when sleep won't come because something powerful is at the door pushing it from the other side. As evening wears on the droning in the next room slows to a peaceful hum. In deep pockets some penny candy and loose change are having a difficult conversation. Old now, the unknown poet doesn't ask to be understood. He's been in the jungle living on seeds and faith. The muscles in his arms and

legs are still strong but his wind isn't and he wheezes a lot. Trade winds blow in and mess up the carefully arranged papers we depend on. The idea of there being ghosts is disquieting and intriguing at the same time. The flowers, the rusty pitchfork, the wheelbarrow are just as they appear to be. Hats keep changing. The rest is fake. A sudden blast of frigid air bursts through the front door and Dickens strides in dressed as the ghost of Christmas past.

We sit around the kitchen table airing our views till our knuckles turn white. The table brims with food and glowing wax candles. We sit across from one another in deep leather chairs, a brandy snifter in hand. What do you do besides ruin teeth and cause tummy aches? Oh yeah? We feed people. Our kind were here long before anybody was stupid enough to dream you up. The unknown poet sits at a garden table with his glass of wine and evening paper, a place where he can age in leisure and feel restored. Who can say how heaven works its ways? Waterloo, he tells me, was the date fate had him created for. Don't scoff too soon. The child most adored points to something unseen and exclaims, "Look, mommy, there goes an angel!" You smile and humor her. Two days later the police show up at your door with some very bad news. Something or someone is always moving into the neighborhood.

Of course the unknown poet can produce no papers. He has no face, no name, he is simply like space, but warm and fragrant of fresh bean curd. Because I've read books and appreciate an interesting life, I knock and introduce myself at his door, from which his beard sticks out. Over in one corner of an English-style garden a crew is setting up for a fashion shot. Candy is soft compared to coins. Coins have presidents, buffalos, Indian heads, dates and other features that appeal to collectors. The eyes of the unknown poet follow the young with a sad smile. When the phone rings he doesn't answer. Laundry piles up. One day the circus comes to town and the trapeze artist misses and falls to his death. It's rumored he'd lost his good-luck charm that very same morning. The model poses, the photographer says, "Hold it just like that." He urges me to peek inside for a look, I do, and two turtle doves fly out.

All too soon their summer idyl will go up in smoke, then clouds will gather and a hurricane roar in smashing whatever is left of it. The seasons pass, each day like a night at the opera. He doesn't care. One thinks murder, the other thinks compassion. She lugs his grocery sacks up three flights of stairs every day but Sunday. A lost talisman is found unexpectedly by the traveling salesman the night before the plane he misses crashes into the sea. Dozens of shots of poses follow, and then it's over. But the smile on the

beautiful model's lips stays behind, hovering just out of range. In no time the room fills up with warmth, smelling of Christmas trees and roasted goose. Guests return from the dead, everyone chattering at once. Times change hats. At a certain point you will fritter away the days and end up at a recycling center. The unknown poet asks himself, Am I the reason I'm alone? But none of that part rings true any more.

Aunt Harriet drops by and as usual bores everyone with her tales about the Hickenhooper sisters. We too once made the scene but then fell back in step with convention. Someone will follow clueless in your footsteps, a concept up for grabs. Finally out of sheer boredom I speak up. Everywhere he looks he sees himself in a bad light. It proves his basic dictum, he tells me: meticulous planning, then watch the first shot blow it all to hell. Without this kind of thing who among us would bother to bow our heads or throw salt over our left shoulder? Her smile sails on, resembling a butterfly with crimson wings. We hug and kiss one another under the mistletoe. People brake for people. Make that "break." The moon pops up suddenly like a toy balloon. I'm perfectly content being just who I am all balled up in myself. A wolf spider shows up in our dreams. Thugs laugh at us in the street.

There's dancing and drumming and the smell of hothouse roses. Polite applause drifts out into the

sultry night air. The unknown poet has the demeanor at times of an old Prussian officer, down to the smallest facial tic. The dark settles in, a shiver runs over your body. Slowly it glides out across the shadowy hilltops, down the far slopes, where it comes to rest on the tip of a willow. Scenes of carnage circle our dreams. The cognac tastes like old rusty sabers. Some soul-searching and back-stabbing surface but are soon put to rest. Cake is served. Moonlight floods the terrace. Nobody can see it, but the smile is there warming the atmosphere, inviting whatever kindness is around to show itself. There is a place beside the lake where the young people like to meet. Attack, always attack, says the unknown poet. For our children and our children's children. But it's clear he is making fun of something, and he laughs. We clink glasses.

The sun hangs like a silver coin in the dome of the winter sky. Where day puts on a charming face and comes out to play, Space Commander makes ready to launch from the sand box. Chairs are shuffled around. A slideshow is about to be shown about the causes of, and treatments for, food allergies. We need something to help us say goodbye when that time comes. I'll thank you to cover your face when you sneeze. It's all talk, more or less, right? The game goes on but the second you doze off the narrative unwinds into yuletide carols and an elephant gets up to dance, though the guests pretend not to notice it. We missed

our chance. Those unwanted pregnancies and broken hearts are but dried tears between the pages of your unfinished novel. Flies land on my neck, chiggers bite my ankles. A quick run to the store for more ice. The roaming hands of the groom's drunken father throw cold water on the party. The moment passes.

I don't know what I'm doing telling you this. Infirmity, all is infirmity. *Adagio*. Summer evenings with its fireflies and lakeside walks. The unknown poet can hardly bear to look at them. It takes at least five minutes for me to get my breath back after our hike. You can never tell which turn life will take. Right this moment her smile is smiling on us. And of course feathery snowflakes begin drifting down outside the steamed-up windows. Once home he runs up the stairs three at a time into the waiting arms of his lady fair. In the back of his mind a dance-hall ditty is driving him crazy: *Old man old man / withered old crow / with cigarette stains and widows weeds / and little crosses all in a row*. Soon they'll be coming with garlic and herbs in their hands. War stories told over the dinner table are orphans of the truth. We shall dissolve into pure abstraction, and the unknown poet will make a song out of the ruins of the day.

Words alone can't tell us where we've been or are. Perhaps there really is singing in a choir loft beyond our reach. The unknown poet concentrates on writing

his death poem. We wait for our call to come through. Long green days under the oaks, lunch and laughter down by the lake shore. The breeze turns the pages of a book. I love you; the goodness of your heart goes undisputed. Waves lap against the rocks babbling in a foreign tongue. We're in the home stretch now breaking for the tape. He smiles, deals, rubs his chin before discarding. Is this a test for us to work our way through to something rewarding? His body lies in the dust, coconut milk spurting from the bullet holes. I can't live, she tells us, where everything is a metaphor. Fear crouches behind her words, ready to pounce. It already has my name on its list. Tomorrow a talking head will be shown on national TV. Eat shit. Jolly good. Make mine a double.

They are contentious about the relative merits of their place in the world. His nerves are in rags. Without another moment's delay, he pulls the trigger. One more page torn from the wolf's diary. She slips in and out by stealth. The room stinks of sickness, old age and death. I'm thrilled to be here with you today. Roasting chestnuts like in the holidays back when we were securely wrapped in innocence. Then night bends its elbow and blows out the candle. It's still a surprise how many twists and turns there are and how steep it can sometimes be. As children and simpletons do, I also have imaginary playmates. The sea draws nearer, dark and haunting. Let's hear it for the old fart

on campus. His face even at rest looks like that of a lost child. Call me when you find something good to read. It's gone numb again. Well, eat what you can and what you can't we'll can.

She took me to the cleaners and hung me out to dry. I can't thank her enough. His very words. Half-digested cake and canapés splattered like grapeshot across the carpet. This detail doesn't deter the heavy drinkers. Cheers! We can go on from here, light a fire in the wood stove, get cozy with the cat. On our dying day we will still be up to our elbows in soap suds. The yuletide wouldn't feel the same without candy and cookies. I step into the yard under a somber sky. The trees look darker than usual as if waiting and listening for something huge headed our way. The days are lived sectioned off into cubes and squares. Dawn pokes its fingers through the bedroom window. Don't, definitely do not leave your hat on the bed! Banging the door behind her. The numbers don't agree. The way he put it to himself, a poet is made out of raw meat eaten daily by cannibals. When the horror closes in, light a candle, watch it flicker in the motionless air.

She sits alone at the dining room table twisting her fingers in knots, her face etched in granite. The old garden rake rests on its laurels, and the old dog rests his head on his master's knee. Fifty crayon drawings

flash in the windows of a yellow school bus passing by. The old man sits upright tinkering with an electronic heart. He's been leaving a little at a time for a long time, cell by cell, but now the door has closed for good on that small, spotless room he has made for hope to live in. Why, if all my ships have come in, why do I still feel so much at sea? The hot seat is everywhere. No one escapes sitting in it. It bespeaks the ransacked garbage cans of history, the sprawling metropolis, where every other word is fuck. The facilitator asks for volunteers. Hands shoot up, then take wing and swirl like autumn leaves. Don't turn poetic on me now. She sobs and sobs: *Goddamn cranky cantankerous curmudgeon coot!*

The holidays wouldn't be the same without tinsel and hot-buttered rum. We smoke our pipes, staring into the fireplace. The darling with the hole in her stocking has turned sulky and won't eat a piece of the wedding cake. We really get around, says the loose change, passed from hand to hand, freshly minted. My age spots itch. The unknown poet smiles, showing his ruined teeth. Only silence and flower fumes remain in the deserted bedroom upstairs. Over the years her smile turns up in schools, in offices, on the wards. Take from these hands what you will, and fly away to fields of sweet clover. Lovers now parting try to talk but somehow the words don't fit together. All their appeals back and forth seem to fall on deaf ears. More

clapping when the house lights come back up. Is that cat pee I smell? Half digested cake and canapés vomited on the rug shatter the hostess' hope for any social future, and she feels disgraced, though it's all organic.

A beaming Dickens thrusts a gift-wrapped present into my hands, humming a bar of *White Christmas*. See, triumphs a gumdrop to a dollar bill, you've lost value and I've gained it. Don't get all puffed up, replies the dollar bill, depressed, you're cheap through and through and have no taste. In other news, myths and proverbs are having a field day; brooms sweep up leaves futilely in the midst of a windstorm; some local flooding swells our vocabulary even more, and the unknown poet, climbs into his clunker and drives off into the December dusk, never more to be heard from. The moon -- but forget the moon, she's fed up being used by us for our own needs, real and imaginary. The hostess has a face-lift. Office workers pour into the streets, their expressions like blank sheets of paper. It's drizzling, your date is late, and the umbrella leaks. Evening comes. The door swings open, you enter, and just being alive is enough.

Look closely and you can see the trees turning green before their time, the shivering leaves of silver, the tail-end of a falling star just vanishing above the

housetops. A pleasant view of the sea, a clear channel to the breakwater, the weeds grown high around the old gateposts by the mailbox. Polarities switch places. Now who's getting the sour looks? She got my goat, the cat got her tongue. We trade tit for tat, grow fat. Concessionaires put out suggestive T-shirts, *Get Your Licks Here*. We move in the dark of our moods. Get on the off-ramp. Come unglued like a paper shirt. The big deal turns out to be tiny little. Yet has abundant body, has flavor. Has all-day parking. Has alien landing site. Urgency propels the plot. We slog, elbowing our way in, posing, posturing. The elaborate dropping of names. The *whump-whump-whump* of the chopper circling the riot-police. Stolen kisses become all the rage. Then overnight it's dated, gone, forgotten. Nobody cries in the dark for licks any more.

The tomb of the unknown poet is whatever room you happen to be writing in at the time. A hank of hair, a broken fingernail, clothes flung over the back of the chair don't care what club you belong to, whether you speak in full sentences or stutter; a storybook version, nothing more, wind sighing along empty corridors, rage spent on trifles, hunger when all you eat the most is toast. Look me in the eye: have I made a fool of us again? They're waiting in the car, midnight madness closing in, the way forgotten, the streets deserted. The ghost train speeds on through the night. The king of spades beats the queen of hearts, the iron maiden

is wed to a scarecrow, we follow the tribal imprint to the end of the line where the clock-tower splits open, flooding the sky with pigeons, and the heart thumps, whimpers, stops you in mid-sentence. Diminuendo! The exterminating angel plays *Stars and Stripes Forever*.

Spring fashions have returned but black blots out the horizon. At the edge of the walkway, empty boots lie scattered with their tongues hanging out. A time comes when the hair shirt that winters in the pump house counts off the years longing for another way to dress, communicating with towels, the smarty-pants next door undone. The wrecked flesh in the flesh appalls. Kids hurl snow cones across our bows. The weatherman is fined for fraud. Then one day he too is gone forever. And a face without a name glowers in the twilight shadows. The mattress holds the shape of our dreams, the entire corpus of our love, our birth and death. No loitering on the doorstep, please. Things don't mesh emotionally now. Time to aspirate or howl and wallow. "Take at bedtime and after meals." The loss of meaning doesn't go unheeded. Be site specific. I want to live. I want to die. Like any sports nut.

Sinister, what's left of right. Quick-change artistry, charades every hour day and night. Subjectivity as

agency through which is expressed universal love and paranoia. Clumpy shoes, spider lines, grit and determination. Scratch paper poems. Flow, manifest, infiltrate. We live on what we owe. Old man, what the hell are you mumbling about? The missing piece. Dreamy light on the profile of an et cetera. The wolf's den, the cat's cradle, the war that left the night before the great battle. Hard to bring forth a meaningful whole when treading water in shark-infested office pools. Controlled inaccuracy guaranteed. The poetics of nonintentionality. "If" and the subjunctive mode as syphoning on empty. This cell is held for dancing on your toes, for singing in the pain. Feats of daring-do in vaporous mirrors. She scrunches up her face. It's shocking what may turn up in your stocking. Bow out now. Time to go. Okay. Let 'er rip!

TROLLING THE SEA OF SIGHS

*Whose woods are those nobody knows,
the garbage dump just grows and grows,
it will not mind your stopping here to pick your nose,*

when what was meant was no offense
but mostly mumblety-peg,
after which we can move on to the next thing
in the American way of life
crammed with broken toys.
The tyranny of discourse has not been scaled down.
The sermon has been pronounced dead on arrival.
All arrows point in the same direction
to where the fair-haired prince sings
a final bel canto solo
with yawning insouciance.
Small wonder a leading character shuts
herself up inside a summer day and won't come out
to play.
He sings of murder when what she feels is tender.
There's something about a woman and a garden.

Even before we peep under the curtain we know
by the sound of footsteps that the stage is crawling
with turtles. It's party time, time for a new kind of
rhythm, a direct route to where the big people live.
We jostle the doorman for details of keys and
late mail before letting the old cat die.
Nothing can stop the faucet from leaking family
secrets; yet how refreshing it is in a time of common
graves to stir and watch a tribe of dancing feathers
tickle pink the pasty faces of party-poopers.
My name is Ralph and I live on a shelf.
Being human doesn't work for me any more.
Whoever took the board game from the play room
please return it. The war room needs it.

The day is born in pieces and the sea is blow tonight.

Framed? And then?

But folks hardly know great plumbing when they see it. As if elbow joints have ever been a mere enactment of ordinary playtime.

All this shuffle between rewind and fast-forward, this ceaseless display of finely calibrated meanings.

A petty mind is exhausting, not to say dangerous. Meantime the bulldozers go rucking about the debris as you sit working on a piece of handicraft for later selling door-to-door, all the while the dream merchants entering the six gates and spreading out their wares in the malls and town squares. I'm being careful when I open my mouth that it's just to breathe.

Research shows that forcible gagging doesn't work.

It may come late in the game or not at all:
a well-rounded profile. Your summer in italics.
A perfect Kodak moment. Uncle Bill and Aunt Dill,
Mort from the motor court.
The beauty of a mind surrendered.
But how will it look tomorrow or the day after when
some April fool comes along and sticks flowers in
all the wrong holes easily construed as something
teasingly sweet, when in fact it merely seems
so because we feed on what we fuel?
Things Daddy never got around
to telling us suddenly turn up
to make another day good with hammers
but lousy with nails.

*Not to worry. We'll surely find someone to blame
when the going gets rough.*

Awake again, haunted by regret!
She took the car and left me the cat.
What do you think of that?

Yes, the weather has turned colder.

Show me where it hurts.
Here, between humor and irony?
Here, between gain and loss?
Or is something out of joint
between dinner dates and flowers?

*We could read the lees
in the bottom of your tea cup.
Wait. Tea doesn't have lees.
It has leaves.
Duh.*

I was born under the sign of the Wasp
in the year of the Ghat.
This is the year of the Slug
whose only motive for being is to
remind us to watch our step.
I am my own rejection slip
mailed to myself bimonthly.
I collect them. Paste the inside of my skull
with them. They're a part of me now.
Everywhere I look I see me.
I love me. I'm adorable. It's horrible.
He likes the taste of his foot in his mouth.

My pathetic fallacy is sad tonight.
Its nose is wet. I ignore it unless I torture it
as I am wont to do. Poetry is ruthless that way.
That's why I love it so.
Speaking of noses, mine won't hunt.
But when it breaks open, my head rolls out
and explodes into print vile and free.
Vile and free. How I love the sound of it.
It bores me ad nauseam.

The winter sparrow pecks at the frozen ground.

The image of The Poet. One who has no new messages.

I was not like this once.
Before being standardized
and sanitized. I coursed in silent film.
I wore the world to school.
I flunked life. I was happy.
His mind is out to lunch.
Wait. . . There's someone at the door.
It's not the raven, that's for sure.
Death in drag? No,
it's the Welcome Lady
selling me the day before.
I already know what she will say:
"Your dog ate my day!"

Ears blistered by a meter-maid

It furthers one to take up fly-fishing.

Here the path smashes into itself.
The demolition derby of our idealism.
I sink back in my chair.
Failure to find peace on the playing fields of
experience.
I wait for a message from the King of Mockingbird Hill.
My footsteps sound German on the hardwood floor.
I snow all over myself.
I'm the last survivor from the day before.
Stretching, retching, reaching for my coffee cup
I step from one dream into another.
Now I'm driving past myself out of town
through the gossip and the blather.
The more said the more pollution spreads.
*An incipient poem just took
a tentative step there,
then tore itself in two. Boo-hoo.*

The door bursts open. In rushes the world
more omnivorous than ever.
The same as last week at this time
The war against the war is losing.
World copulation has doubled.
No cutbacks expected.
Bombs away!
*Meanwhile smile. Be cool. Fuck off. Just kidding.
I hate you. Congratulations!*

Poetry woke me up one day
and sat me on her wounded knee.
Big boy, said she, you don't know what you're asking
for. She had me on all fours crawling for metonymy.
My poems still stiffen at the thought of her.
They look better in black and white than in living color.
Not the very image of "good taste."

Here sits the ventriloquist's dummy.
Signs in the windows
proclaim square meals and fair deals.
Yes, experience *is* prized over theory.
This works out as fuck first, then fight,
then talk, then sit still.
Calling all cars. Be on the lookout for.
The amusement park has bottomed up for good.
This poem is clumsy and needs work.
Yes. No. I don't care. (Pick one.)
*I'll have two bees and one cheese if you please.
Other than that, who gives a rat's ass?*

Excuse me for airing out my mind
but nothing will stay down.
You were standing in the moonlight
translated from the Russo-Japanese .
Together we chopped down the family tree,
snapped the locks,
smashed the clocks.
A dab of color here and there
on the way to the Big Game.
*Is it a monster movie? A twenty-four hour mating service?
How they made their minions came later.*

The mind is out there in the stars somewhere
waiting for my hand to take dictation.
God knows I've dropped taboos behind me
like cigarette butts. God doesn't mind.
She's in bed eating bonbons
with the hired help. One moment
she's a particle, the next a wave.
I spend whole minutes staring at my hands.
Give us something to touch and feel, they say,
Solid proof that we exist.
There's so much love in them they can hardly bear it
because they know the killer lives in them as well.
*Just throw open the door and step out
well combed, dressed for any occasion,
the wedding party, the liquid plumber,
the hip and the hop to the butcher shop.*

Will the accused please rise?

Studies show your mind's turned purple.

That's no surprise.

You found your life in a poem somewhere, we hear.

Personal meaning, not group singing.

There's no way back from there, is there?

No special glasses to see by.

Just one more lap around the track

and then another. Thus and such and in the main.

Om on the range, homage to a namesake

And the heartsick. How high the moon

How deep the well, white party dress

Black tie and homespun grin

And gun.

That's how it's done: Asses to asses, bust to bust.

The road out smells like burnt potluck,

follows longitude all day, latitude all night,

twists and turns through a breezy tale or two.

Maybe its Jack's skill but it's Jill's hill under

her espadrilles. Look, here I am again sorting mail in

my head. Like the dean of dead letters. Don't mind me

if sometimes I am Grover and sometimes drop the "g"

and become your Rover on hands and knees

waiting for a bone and for a stick to fetch for you.

One thing, however, I know now for sure

is that my war is over. When you say "bow," I go "wow."

*Some people go gaga over a lamasery saga,
as they have every right to do.
How about a story about a girl named Hacky Saks
who wears her jeans low on her hips
and comes from the other side of the tracks?
She meets a boy named Bud, the son of a billionaire.
One's bucolic, the other alcoholic.
They go off to collage together and suffer.
Take it from there.*

A path lies down under the soles of our shoes
So we won't stumble around in the bramble bushes.
Nobody thinks about it, being what people are.
The path is amused by this quirk of ours
And to teach us a lesson it one day leads us
To the city dump instead of to Vista Point.
A dog-eared book with a broken spine
Opens itself and out pours Hamlet
And E equals MC squared.
A loose cannon shoots off its mouth.
Billfolds miraculously open,
Revealing their warm, soft thighs.
Mock me, silly me, for visions of cookie jars
And teapots blowing their tops en masse.
Meanwhile on the other side of town
The massive muscle gang is lifting weights
After another fashion model got waxed and dyed.
We don't stint on double-entendre here.

Afterwards, the wind whipped the willow trees.
People got down on their hands and knees.
The landlord banged on the front door.
The hummingbird discoursed with the breeze.
Free samples were passed around.
But the wasp that stung could not be found.
And down the street came seventy-eight thromboses.
*On a sunnier note, it's the first day of autumn
and the President has left town for
some sport in the countryside.*

The opposition rallies.
A colony of microbes swarms.
We linger over the unmentionable.
Taxis and doormen ignore us now.
Lap dogs snarl and snap at our heels.
Waiters snub us, then snatch away our plates
before we've finished.
Strangers have started calling us "kiddo."
We've been downsized.
Coach, you're turning white!
Your mutton-chops are trembling.
You're being recycled, cut from the scene.
Coach, you're fading.
Coach, don't look at me like that!
Question: Can innovative technology combat ID theft?

The map of the ancient island
Lies spread out on the wooden table.
See, there's the capital.
But I've lost its name somewhere.
My fingers poke around.
I seem to know this room
With its whitewashed walls.
The island is shaped like a hungry ghost,
Thin neck, huge belly. I must be gone
Before dawn. I must follow the high road to where
It meets the sea. And I must hurry.
The night is draining out. And the torn map
has begun to bleed.

What, me worry?

The wolf's sniffing around nearby.
Bloodthirsty red's all the rage again.
Men dressed in black stand with dead eyes in
check-out lines.
Hard cash speaks when the chips are down.
What was once in greener pastures intended
has now ended.

*We change channels, our wardrobes, our diet
and our passports, and it still comes to this.*

Where in heaven's name am I?
Upstairs? Downstairs? Dining room? Shower?
Outside? Where? I've looked everyplace
high and low, left and right. Gone. Nowhere to be
found.
I've up and disappeared.
Trees roar, doors bang, waves crash on shore.
But I'm gone, really gone, not a trace.
You're there, and *you*. But not me, I'm not.
Where d'you suppose I've gone to or might be?
My appearance is here, I can see it in a mirror,
a sensorium of sorts with various parts.
Turn away from it and I have vanished in toto.
Functionality, yes, I guess so, but nothing more,
neither here nor there at 98.6 in the shade, the shade,
at 98.6 in the shade.
*The theme party started out okay,
then Buck slipped something into the punch, and*

Captain Crunch is back. Claims to be my alter ego.
Says he's going to take me into the tub with him
to see if I can float. His eyes glow in the dark,
not the clamorous dark of evening full of cabs
and cats and family squabbles.
This dark holds its breath, it watches and waits.
Crazy legs dance and everything feeds on everything.
I'm walking down the street past shops and store
windows. Shadows gesture from darkened doorways.
I pass by muttering under my breath, Coca-Cola Coca-
Cola, just seconds away from being blown out of this
world. Sir," says a voice, "we have your window table
with a complimentary glass of chilled jackhammers."
*Well, you won't play golf and refuse to get Rolfed.
What do you expect?*

Uselessly
Ask, knowing you cannot hear.
Maintain a porcelain smile.
Portrait executed in egg tempera
and laughing
Gas. Bravura high note sung basso profundo.
The shutter clicks and clicks,
Recalls the year you first turned old.
*Late in the day over cocoa and crackers
for a little slice of life and talk
about the pitiful comedy of hammer toes
plus the complete works
Of Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche.*

Drenched in glacial sweat:

Glacial sweat: a fluid that can expand indefinitely.

We kick off our shoes, seek body heat
and upon reaching our target immediately
liquify.

This is called midnight moonlight on still waters.

It was ages ago that we were borne

aloft in an April sky, or maybe it was October.

There was a frog by a river had a lump instead of a
liver. Not a river. A marsh in a meadow. And no frog
but a snake with a stripe down its back.

We brought it home, I recall,

and made it our pet

peeve until the day it slithered down a hole
in the floor where the toilet used to be.

And this is called bringing the cow back home.

How thick does one's skin will have to be?
When the train pulled out of the station,
did I not wave goodbye to all that was good in me?
Didn't my sighs fill heaven and earth?
Didn't I skin my shins again for you,
break out in song,
in hives, in a cold sweat?

Watch it. You almost cracked a smile there.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'm sorry to say
That Herr Holderlin won't be here today.
He's in bed with a chill and in restraints.
He's convinced his name is Buster Keaton.
Claims he's in a movie hanging from a ledge
miles high above the world.
Has so much chatter in his head
he can't hear a thing we say.
He laughs, raves. We need not weep for him yet do.
In the gated world permission is needed to enter.
The shuttlecock flies back and forth.
The data banks are swamped again.
The room fills up with unseen gifts.

*I sit slumped in a chair beside the window,
dreaming my life is made in China.*

Dear Theo,
Everybody has heard about my ear.
I squeezed it out of an empty tube of paint.
It looks like a dried sunflower.
I'm glad.
The good doctor is gone for good.
One less survivor of the day before.
The hunt for the perfect pain goes on.
I'm an incurable masochist.
I'm glad.
The sainted nurse here nurses me.
You should see her smile.
She holds my hand.
She feeds me mac and cheese.
You should see her eyes.
Like Saturday Night Live.
When she shakes and shimmies
Fireworks burst in my head.
She's bad.
Theo, I am booby-trapped.
One wrong move and I'll blow up.
I lay my head on my knee and cry.
Up in the attic all hell breaks loose.
Elephants and dancing girls!
Gangsters, gladiators and conquistadors!
Victory at sea! Torch-light parades!
I'm sad.
Today I saw death drive up on a motorcycle.

It was Marlon Brando in black leather
with a message from the undertaker
Inviting me to dinner.
I'm scared shitless.

*Now a major motion picture,
just in case you missed seeing the paintings.*

Dear Ophelia
I sense finality in the air.
There's a sudden drop in cabin pressure.
I wear a severe frown to bed.
I sleep in deep water in my underwear.
Fight pain with pain
And drown in current affairs.
I wish you were here, Ophelia
To see the beauty you are
With Saturn's rings shining
Around your hair.
I am your drum, Ophelia, ta dum ta dum.
We beat the drum as one, dear one.
We shake the empty air and outrun the sun.
*A burning bush, a morning star.
A torch singer off the charts.
A Miss as good as her smile.*

End of the line. Everybody out.
Take your belongings with you.
What? You wanna go back?
You say there's a blizzard in your head?
Sorry. You'll have to apply to
The Bureau of Drawers or else the China Cabinet
Which we the people threw out of office last May.
We only accept next season's tickets here.
You can freeze or starve but either way
There's no return on your bottles.
Pay at the door on your way out.
The screen went blank, the bank went broke.
It's no one's fault that your car won't start.
Everything is terminal.

*Not so.
Come sit beside the gene pool
and let's swap chromosomes for free.
Negative have all my tests come back.
I juggle my chemistry easily.
I have wings on both collars.
Rings on all ten fingers.
A tin dragon between my thighs.
A cardboard castle behind my eyes.
I am everything you want.
Which is nothing. Nada. Zero.
I am not now nor have I ever been.
I was gone before I got here.
I work miracles.
My sight is sound.
I make light of everything.
I haiku in the hills.
I waka in the woods.
I howl the howl of howls.
I beat the meat of meats.
I wipe up the spill of spills.
I am a festive wind.
A gale of merriment.
A shopping frenzy.
Come, O my thou.
Levitate.
Eat my words.*

SOMEWHERE ALONG THE CUSP

How many bodies do we have to step over
on the way to somewhere else?
Now we're coasting on the very edge
disarmed and dangerous only to ourselves.
The joke was in our dreaming,
salt on our lips, sleep in our eyes,
our maps abandoned, our words like rubber swords
waving as if they were wands to heal the wounded
light.

Where is the common denominator
in all this flux and flutter
between the carport and the airport
deluged with friendly fire?
The same place where the cat's meow
is the chinchilla's nightmare and style is power?
One could die for the human character
groping through such static as this
toward the Other while the timeless carriage rides
the canyons of the sky,
 or whatever traverses the boundless
like some Ubermensch thrilling to the soul,
if there is a soul, perhaps a pellucid membrane in
Mother
Russia where snow covers its traces, for all I know,
and the mad monk Dogass The Ugly fingers his beads

and mutters his prayers in a cave lit by a single taper.
Transparency or Transylvania, say, to no one's surprise
comes at owner's expense and jumps the fence.
Strike a pose, say cheese, and presto, it's done,
a little something else to remember us by.
Kiss me and all will be revealed, the whole
enchilada. Those celebrated boathouse days
with a full head of hair poets still write about,
celestial navigation all the rage, and
a slaphappy smile that lifts the weight
from those things laid out in the open,
tradition, ritual, saintliness, golf clubs,
the breeze shot through with the scent of money,
otherwise known as the carbon king,
the writing on the wall, the book of books,
sunsets to blow your mind.
Fe fi fo fum. Get it?
Appearances shifting faster than the phases of the
moon,
the voice of experience brooking no argument:

Said A to B, I went down into hell for you.

Said B to A, Who asked you to?

Said A to B, I was taught not to wait to be asked.

*Said B to A, I search your face for the smile I
remember.*

*Said A to B, It came straight from eating dirt, tasting
blood and swallowing back a whole sea of
tears.*

Said the guru to his disciple as he whisked away a fly,
Can there be anything too small or insignificant
not to warrant our concern?

*Wrote the captain in his log, We have landed and been
handsomely received by the inhabitants of this golden
isle.*

*The sponsor put it this way, Make it an exclusive online
offer.*

*The dictionary states it thus, "Superordinate: A higher
degree in condition or rank."*

The poet awoke and spoke:

O for a hamburger and a Coke!

Time + fear = name & number:

- 1. is Nationalism. Opens to rave reviews. Closes in
ashes.*
- 2. rolls thunder from the right, sounds trumpets from
the left.*
- 3. watches helplessly, grimacing, collated and
deconstructed.*
- 4. means kissing cousins, backstairs affairs, and
bedroom lore.*
- 5. tries to tidy up the mess but loses its head instead.*
- 6. is actual flesh bruised on the corners of real tables
and chairs, a palpable surface, thighs, elbows, knees,
old gloves with fingers missing, hair-snags in a rattail
comb.*
- 7. goes by the name of Whiz, takes the temperature of
the times, shags flies and foul balls, writes synopses,*

reviews, critiques and obits.

8. is Florentine fountains, frescos. running colors and diamond sparkle.

9. believes nonstop. Goes cuckoo, cuckoo, sequel after sequel.

10. is the old Dream Boat lost in a sea of semantics tinged with sadness.

11. is a slow dissolve removing stains from the Big Picture.

12. is mimeses and the magisterial: leers, plots, pants, writes GLORY on the mirror but forgets the L.

Thus images shift

in search of a place where they can make a perfect fit,
can be top drawer and fully padded for extra comfort,
multifaceted and adjustable,
a colorful combination depending on what season
we're shopping for, trying to shore up the sky,
seeking certainty, reading whispers in the wind.
Or trying to nail down the earth
as it fades into show tunes from times long since
ended.

“Tell me,” the stranger on the path asks
one day in April, June or September, “is there a
shortcut through yonder hills between
Fruit of The Loom and Victoria’s Secret?”
And buy and buy we find ourselves in the hungry
embrace of boredom or panhandling for bliss while
unknowingly transforming into a drowsy deathwatch.

Yet who knows?

Sooner or later we may actually crack the code,
finally solve the mystery, find out for sure
whether Lois Lane, with her tan, her freckles, her lusty
flesh tones, actually is Wonder Woman after all.
One could almost believe we live outside
the words in which we appear as real.

A heroic figure undismayed before
the pockmarked wall, smiling into the barrel of a gun.
Feigns indifference. Takes things at face value.
Holds still. Starts doing everything at once.
Eating on the go, keeping strict business hours.

See there:

She knits, counting stitches,
her face like a shield.
And I believe that is me flying a
paper kite on a hillside near a stream
as a sudden ray of sunlight bursts
through the clouds like a Jesus beam.

GRAVITY AND GRAVY

Nothing happened today. Nothing happened yesterday. Nothing happened the day before that. There's a portrait on the altar of a man in rimmed glasses. Just the hint of a smile. What does it mean, "Poor is the one who steals his own gold"? Crows cry out from the nearby trees. Curtains billow gently in the noonday breeze. The mourners get to their feet, then drift away in twos and threes, one scene merging with another. A child's doll lies face-up on the office floor, its glass eyes staring into yours. The sunlight glares on the surface of the pond. A lone dog sniffs around the grounds, then lifts its leg to pee.

Today let's just be who we think we are. I live where the fog blurs the landscape. I rob my predecessors of their words and their absurdity. Here is the place where fictional characters live who've been dropped from the works of their authors. See, I'm dreaming now of my flying days and the comfort of old familiar songs. In any case, hope no longer waits for truth to knock as another day spends its last dime and is heading out to sea.

Poetically speaking, I am winter's child.
My shoes soak up the dew as I walk, each footprint
leaving a hole where a name used to be.
I am the sentinel of a plastic saint, a voice-over
commentary of a fleeting rainbow. I roll over in bed and
pull the covers over my head.
In other words in other words.
What does it take for the world to bring you to your
knees? God, those sad eyes!
Sorry for your loss. Sorry I used you like a broom
to sweep myself away.
Final days! Everything must go!
All that good old stuff once too green to burn
now turned from cash to ashes.
Say something tender, wise and true.
A postcard from a sunny place. A tourist trolley that
stops at historic sites. Where George slept, where
Custer fell. Where angels fear.
The park bench. The shadows on the wall.

History drowns out the private legends
of the heart, its fables and its fortunes.
I think I cried, and so on.
We called in from time to time
but there was no one at home to pick up the phone;
they were all at the scene of the crime.
We drowned out the tumult with our lies.
We tossed sand in one another's eyes.

Masked as the stranger, each a Lone Ranger
for reasons left unspoken.
Back there my voice broke on the rocks when we said
goodbye.
I danced with the bride. Her friends were glad she wed.
Or so they said.
We floated like butterflies and fishes, never more
alive.
The band was playing "Let's Fall In Love."
I heard only the angel of death in our laughter.
Beloved, someone crooned, you are the reason
the glee-club still sings in my heart,
why I am still here in this room.

We gather here today in the gusty wind
where the steps end and the water begins.
Poetically speaking, we go in with a fine-tooth comb
for an identity unknown. It's pure fiction,
a new kind of diction, where the seen was just that
scene and the heard was just that bird, and we sat in
the hall where a cold wind blew and a hot one too,
and some went off to Rome
and some to roam
the convolutions of the mind, hunting down a clue.

We are the barbarians at the gate as well as those
inside screaming. The land of our birth is mad.
The embankments are even now slipping silently away.
It's a rare coin that won't tarnish or wear.

The very air feels sculpted. Who is that stranger in the mirror?

Here's a garden spot at the edge of the sea,
the patio table set with candles and silver.
Music floats out through open French doors.
From this far away the city at night looks like another
firmament ablaze.
We made it here somehow, down from the hills,
amazed,
or dazed, at all that is commonplace and still.

Nothing has ever happened.
A sneeze explodes suddenly, once, twice, three
times.
There's mold everywhere in the air.
There's altogether enough gravy and gravity to go
around.
A quiet heart comes with the fading of the light.
The shimmering haze at sundown.
Another autumn day performing its vanishing act.
Some things are worth remembering,
Everything is out in plain sight.
Nothing's hidden. I'm glad we met.
But let's not linger here any longer over yesterday.
What we know now could not have saved us then.

THE GARDEN DESOLATE THROUGH WHICH THEY CAME

"We construct a comfortable life and expect it to hold."

And you wonder, Am I just plain dumb or being clever?
For certainly pork is not to blame nor coffee either.
Nor dust devils swirling around your member.
Try as I will I can't come up with the answer.

One day, without warning, a huge storm blew up. It rained and rained until everything was drenched, soaked through, saturated, bloated, earth and streams and ponds, vegetation, animals and birds, especially birds, which had gotten themselves so stupefyingly fat on the sudden abundance of earthworms available that they could hardly fly but mostly waddled or waded about awkwardly all day in the downpour or stayed in their nests peeping and pooping the way birds do looking at withering white in a cul-de-sac.

Here's that swamp which people fear yet feel drawn toward as if it were a crystal cave instead. He: *Think of the two of us as a fine bit of antithesis!* She: *Between dogs perhaps? I'm here to soak up as much as I can.* One strong but slender hand pillowing her cheek. Then as an aside, or nearly: *Or should I dress like a nun?* Ah, the dreamlike strangeness of an unbridled life. Tumbled about among the incongruities and left to

land wherever. He at the window with his broad back and narrow waist, saying: *A mirage, nothing more; no smudges yet on the snow queen.* She listens for something slightly off. *Now the two-year-old has turned over his bowl of oatmeal,* she thinks, *and I say, "guess that's pay-back."* Or again: *Here I am in the same room with the same furniture talking to myself. My head a deserted ballroom full of soap bubbles, smut-glut and troop-poop. Housebound, mulling over a collection of familial traits. On the whole, it is a curious thing to feel that I am missing from myself.*

The smell of wet pavement after a rain shower as something vaguely poignant. Stepping out into the too-bright afternoon sunshine feeling rubbed raw by the street in all its harsh detail. Who is this "she"? Anonymous, maybe, but a different bright that neither gleams nor glitters nor glows. A sprig of lilacs drawing a sigh from the maternal breast. A silk scarf picked out beforehand blossoming around a bride's wish book. A pair of brilliantly white French cuffs flashing in the darkened corner of a hotel bedroom as she slowly disrobes before the gaze fixed upon her every move.

. . . for what we call attractions of this world are in reality a cookbook for which we, out of feverish desire, furnish our lives as the ingredients. Thus to even think that one should join forces with the world, clumping about the back streets in the name of some higher

poetic order, suddenly reveals narcissism as the truer face plotting ignorantly behind the pen, trading on wisecracks . . .

Then, gween gween the gwasses gwo on the faux side of the silly.

Fate observed the two of them from a distance. The heat did not abate. The times were not amenable to their wishes. Socially ambitious people newly come to wealth were struggling to speak and act a certain way. To judge by their accents. She, it seemed, judging by the sounds *she* made, experienced multiple orgasms as blows rained down on his head.

In fact, they, in theory the masters of language, are merely borrowing. Sometimes they see their own shadows and misinterpret the meanings as other. Words are used to filter out the fear. She was bored. She put down the book. The nights here were the blackest she'd ever experienced, full of tremolo, perhaps from the distant coal trains or tanks on their way toward the border. She turned out the light but remained wide awake, her large eyes shining in the dark.

He, a has-been, the former lover, sits on the edge of a park bench like a child who wants to do well but has trouble sitting still. *I am suh-duced, she suh-duced*

me. I'm toast, toast! Try not to slump is the lesson to work on now. Nothing left an afterglow like seduction, he recalls her saying, shoulders scripted with tooth marks. Which proved -- nothing.

“The new guy” leaves a message: *I need to see your room, sweets. Your signature style, as 'twere.* The crisis unfolds from another perspective. Democracy requires dissent. Which the cart, which the horse? She defers an answer. The uninflected prose is relieved only near the end as it comes from the mouth of the speakerphone. *What husband would straddle his wife like a donkey?* Ah (her practiced smile to hide behind, lest she scream), so much demanded from a bid for freedom! Looked at another way, the flip side, not an exception but an anachronism. He signs off with a curt, *Let me know. Soon.*

Then there are the chaotic jottings, miscellaneous messages. A dead man's last words. Jokes, half-truths, legends. Where does one learn to stand firm? *She began to plant a garden,* yet another sentence that sounds in her head. A season for healing, her tall figure among the golden rod, drenched in a healthy sweat. He returns from a business trip, pale and haggard, with barely concealed rage. He's her Crackerjack, isn't he, after all, but where's his prize? His face pink; hers cool and smooth as travertine.

Ah, yes, the furniture's been moved around. The desperate overkill of detail. Hold on. Let's flood the room with sunlight as she replies to the question, 'Can't you see beyond the dandelions?' No, she's beyond his reach, up from novice to enthusiast to a graduate, even an escapee, and narrows her eyes as dramatic proof. The future belongs to those who break the rules.

He shows her his sunspots, burning holes into her, hoping she will melt. She stands there dazed and begins to smolder instead. She shows him the door. He likes it, admires its solid workmanship, marks out a spot, places himself between her and it. She shivers all over, moans, miming a winter storm. Next takes him down a peg. His mouth, her ear. Her ear, his mouth. Back and forth, on and on; shrill, and rising. Sooner confessed, sooner forgiven. Only now does she realize she's burning hot, febrile from head to toe, a hell.

"I'm sorry, I know this hurts you."

"Understood, but . . ."

"Let's just say I rediscovered my creative potential."

". . .behind all bargains there's a debt, right?"

"What some people call . . . what? love? truth?"

". . .before the restless start tearing down the door."

". . . haven't you heard a word I've said?"

"What, that you don't really care?"

"I care."

Hungry, (she thinks) everything all the time everywhere.

"Then prove it," his tone insistent.

Ah, there it is. Proof! Proof that you love me. Proof that I'm adored, that I'm needed. Proof that I exist as somebody. As something worthy. Solid proof. Hovering like a shield over the whole world, protection against uncertainty. Proof positive! Show me, show me!

A door is heard being flung open and slammed shut, followed in short order by the sound of tires screeching out of the driveway. . . Beyond the balconies, beyond the windows lie stretches of asphalt and gray facades. Behind each equivocation, the buzz of scooters, the whirr of cars. The faces in the street like ghosts to her. The sudden chill foreignness of things, the old ways crumbling, splitting apart, dragged off to city dumps out of sight somewhere. The dawning suspicion that tiptoeing through life has been mistaken for a way of feeling safe. Consider the panic welling up behind the vacant expression in her eyes.

Here it becomes illuminating to exchange one voice for another. Speaking in generalities, employing idiosyncratic ready-mades as if to say, "Communication is impossible, but one still has to make an attempt:"

*Madness feeds on madness.
Those who did as they were told were the first to die.
Adoration is excess; now expect only loss.
Everywhere the edge is shrinking faster and faster.
The absurd notion that art needs to offer hope as we
die off one by one, as life-forms fall by the wayside like
animated origami gone soggy.*

Whoosh! She flees her own gaze.

Still we will understand, at least in this version purified against "reality," that her hour is sure to come when her eyes will open, awakened.

MARGINALIA EXCENTRICORUM

1. *Then It starts all over again filled with ticking clocks and holes in socks.*

2. *"Winds follow one upon another."*

3. Wonderful how these things work.

4. Pertinently, Deign reminds us of Shinbone practice.

Ringling of banta bell 108 Dalmatians.

John Doneness reads Zing medication instructions.

Midnight bonfires stop watch and stretch.

Ancestor Dogged Zing implies practice of chimera

digs deep pathways into brain cells:

oh, ah, oo, ee

au, au, oh, ah. aye, eel, mmm

uh, au, oh, ah, eye, aye, ee

uh, uh, oh, ah, eh, eel, eel

5. Summer salts end with a big bow.

6. *Then the new teacher steps out of the late Tang Dynasty and has a shake and some fries, and the luncheon speaker admits there's more to poetry than a parameter.*

7. By the way, what sign are you? A sign of the times? A stop sign?

8. Last call for train leaving on track eight.

9. *Then the monks take their leave in the dwindling light.*

10. You cannot reason with age.

Whatever's been swept under the carpet, say,
or who or what is coming out from behind our war chest
with hands up or venom in its eye.

11. *Then the poete maudit with the potty mouth stretches
himself to his full height.*

12. *Rimbaud:* Dude, you're the champ. And I really dig the
gun.

Rambo: Yeah, you like it? I can get a lot more where dez
come from, kid, in case yuz innerested.

Rimbaud: Dude, I'm a poet, a genius, nineteen years old
and you're cutting me in on the arms racket? Maybe later
when the muse kisses off.

Rambo: H'm, I dunno. Yuz look like a punk to me. Talk like
one too. Maybe I outta take care of your ass right now and
save yuz from a season in hell, "dude."

Rimbaud: God, I love it when you talk like that! Gives me
goose bumps all over. No wonder you're a movie star.
Thanks for the autograph.

Rambo: Forget it. Yuz ain't such a punk after all, just need
a little practice blowin' someone away. Here, would yuz like
to get off a few rounds from my Rashkolnikov for starters?

Rimbaud: Wow, thanks, dude. How d'you work this.
Whoops! Oh fuck! Sor-ry! You didn't tell me the friggin
prop was loaded!

13. *Then the old [illegible] squats and pees a great yellow hole in the snow.*

14. Yet no matter how many clues are uncovered, conventional hermeneutic marketing strategies meet metageneric binarisms and confirm the paradigm.

15. "Expect a dialogical encounter to turn savage between your lover's legs."

16. *Then pink slips flutter down and cover the private lives of fleas.*

17. See "THE MORNING STAR," now defunct, whose masthead once bespoke enlightened reportage. First a flood, then a fire, next a vegetarian restaurant, now a condo. Easy money, morals, and Brussels sprouts. Beans by the ton. But wait. Isn't that *[illegible]* with medals on his *[sic]* chest come to face down the corporate giant ORG?

18. Proof-positive: the eating of the pudding.
Rice over piping hot shotgun shells ala Hemingway.

19. *Then a smile like a fist deals a blow to the gut*
Is that blood or what on the page?

20. Hush. Yes, the *[illegible]* is coming like the dawn, mounted on a milk-white steed, arms full of flowers, pockets stuffed with party favors, the townsfolk crowding up with splayed fingers reaching out hungrily, hailing the conqueror.

21. Hail also to the musty murk, the misty eyes, the broken smile along the way. Hail to nightcaps, pillows, beds and easy chairs. Hail to coffee cups, slippers, brooms, and wash rags. To eyeglasses for sure. To toenail clippers definitely. To lucky stars always, the moon usually, the wind sometimes.

22. May laughing eyes gaze upon you.

[And upon you, my sick friend.]

23. Now back in the box. The band's packed up and departed. The mousetrap doesn't like its theme. Furious, the book snaps shut on itself. Smells like goodbye. The Speed Queen checks for spelling errors and uncovers 446 questionable words and still the clothes come out spotted and in knots.

24. *Then the batteries run down and the cellphones go dead.*

