

**BEING AND NICENESS**

BY

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## CALIFORNIA

I was going through this phase in which I was making drawings of angels wearing sunglasses. I just kept making these drawings, dozens of them, in all different media: pencil, watercolor, ink, marker, white-out...I really thought I was onto something; I really thought I had hit on a theme with a real conceptual backbone. I was taking these drawings and taping them to the living room wall, behind the television and above the mattress where I slept and dreamed of spiral staircases to the sky, made of clouds and awaiting my ascent into the glittering realm known as An Eternity of Silence. Before long the wall was swarming with angels. Angels extending arms of infinite compassion, angels with arms folded across their chests in some kind of recurring Renaissance motif, angels spreading the good news with index finger pointed heaven-ward as if to say, “eh...eh!” angels whose halos were adorned with such clever and enduring slogans as “Look at Me” and “I ♥ Me.” All wearing sunglasses. I was really into angels at the time. I was completely obsessed with the idea of human narcissism and what I called the “Human Curse of the Mirror,” which referred to our inability to ever stop thinking of ourselves doing things principally in terms of what we look like while we’re doing them. These angels, along with people being murdered and swallowed by whales and mauled by bears, were the cornerstones of the Christian iconography I was raised on and as hard as I tried to shake them, they seemed to be a permanent part of my subconscious. Maybe this was my attempt to exorcise them, but in any event they had a meaning to me. They were Jungian or George Lucas-ian, they reverberated deep, back through the centuries. They were like waves pounding against rocks and then exploding back into the sea, only

without any sound. They were like blades of grass in a windswept field. They were like skyscrapers. They were completely full of themselves but they had a right to be, because they were perfect. Once, in a dream, an angel appeared to me and spoke, and his celestial monologue ran thus: “In case we ever happen into any randomly placed mirrors, we shall be ready. Our own luminescence will never become a hindrance, for we are the ones, the *only* ones, who can overcome our own perfection and, in fact, thrive despite it. We learned that lesson once, and we have grown and are better off for it. Now the time for growth is past, and the period of satisfied self-appreciation is at hand.” Boy was he getting himself worked up, that pretty little angel. His sunglasses almost fell off.

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It was one of those days in which it was raining and the sun was shining at the same time. There were clouds in the sky, there *had* to be, but looking out the window I couldn't spot a single one. The sky was undoubtedly full of water. It was quite a trick, as if the sun and the rain clouds, pregnant and ready to pop, got together the night before and choreographed the entire performance in advance. I've heard that in Japan they believe this kind of weather is the occasion the foxes wait for to have their wedding ceremonies, and everyone is supposed to stay inside for fear of inadvertently disturbing one of these sacred ceremonies and calling forth all the wrath of the foxes, but here no one believes in such superstitious nonsense, they only believe in superstitions regarding fashion, culture, liberal politics, organic foods, and recycling, so it was business as usual.

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I was drinking at least ten cups of tea everyday. I was a caffeine intake machine, the sole function of which being to purge the world of its surplus caffeine depository, primordially brewing thousands of miles below the earth's crust, waiting with a

prehistoric flare for the dramatic for the proper moment in which to break free, forever sending our delicately balanced ecosystem into the highly undesirable state known as Disorder, or Chaos. These are potentially mythological times abrewin,' and it's up to *me* to stop it. This is how I finally quit drinking coffee. I was lured away by the delicate spirals of steam as they rose from the mug, the warm, inviting aroma of a jasmine tea bag freshly dunked into the source of said steam, and my natural affinity for anything Asian.

I got three cups of tea out of every tea bag, despite the straightforward and good-natured advice printed right on the side of the box which specifically tells you to expect no more than two cups per bag, any more than two and you're on your own. But this is what I do with my life: I'm forever trying to squeeze out three cups of tea from a tea bag meant for two. If nothing else I can tell myself I'm conducting a scientific experiment of some sort, one that requires two control subjects and one placebo. I'm a real empiricist. I buy all my tea from the big Asian supermarket down on 82<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. When shopping there I have two criteria for all my purchases: 1) that I buy the cheapest variety of any given product, and 2) that it's packaging looks the most authentically Asian. None of this *Now you lucky Westerners can experience the great joy of this Authentic Japanese dish in the safety of your lovingly romantic robotic western strongholds* for me. If they've got to resort to actually using the word *authentic*, any claims as to a product's actual authenticity are to be taken as being highly suspect. In fact, any appearance whatsoever of our much lauded but rarely understood Greek alphabet should be seen for no less than the imperialist intrusion and desecration that it is. Give me a neat little illustration of a geisha and some pleasantly indecipherable foreign characters and I'm happy, or if I'm forced to settle for little pockets of the English language here and there, like air bubbles on the lightless depths of the ocean floor, let it be badly translated. "Put a bag of Thai

Bao artichoke into or cup of boiling water for about 3-5 minutes. Consumed hot, cold or with milk and sugar if you wanted.” To me that is an undeniably charming sentence.

“Consumed hot, cold or with milk and sugar if you wanted.” Everything is left up to the preparer, all possibilities are offered, nothing is negated, and all within the framework of an irresolute and unshakable devotion to the past tense. I can have my tea with milk and sugar if I wanted. I always take it straight, but it’s nice to know that I’ve been given the choice.

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This particular morning I had my tea with an English muffin. Little crumbs of various bread species dotted the landscape of the kitchen counter at the foot of the toaster. If an English muffin was like unto the State, then these crumbs were fodder for its wars. A sink full of unwashed dishes was an exotic locale for far-off foreign conflicts. Whispers reach us from the front lines, tales of high-tech weaponry such as knives, forks and...a can opener. For some reason there was an eightball in the drying rack. Must be Baxter’s doing, I thought. Baxter was my roommate and, if I’m forced to admit it (by myself), my best friend (for the sake of thoroughness). It had only been two months or so since the two of us had come up here from California to live, mostly, it must be said, because it was not California. I am currently living alone because one week ago he ditched me for a girl. Chased her all the way to Philadelphia. Such is life. (That is, incidentally, the only jumping out of the established tense of the narrative I feel like doing at this point. I hope it never happens again.) This particular morning, however, I remained blissfully ignorant as to the state of the future, I couldn’t see it in all of its myriad colors, their subtle shifts and gradations, it’s unwavering flux and infinite variety of textures, like motor oil in a puddle of rainwater in a grocery store parking lot, jarred of

a sudden back to the harsh realities of life and movement by a minivan, or some other less obvious kind of automobile, driven by a woman determined to approach the next speed bump as if it were some kind of muddy ramp in a monster truck rally, hell-bent on clearing all thirty-six flaming junkyard specimens and earning her rightful place in the MONSTER TRUCK RALLY HALL OF FAME.

On the refrigerator, held in place by multicolored (Greek) alphabet magnets, was a piece of paper with a quote from Hegel. It said: "There is nothing in heaven or on earth which does not contain in itself being and nothingness."

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The bicycle was a rickety jet stream of radioactive particles beneath my body. The circular motion of my feet bracing the pedals was as fluid and steady as that of the hands of a grandfather clock lodged face-deep in a pit of quicksand. Squirrels darted across telephone wires and out of the corner of my eye I could have sworn they were flying. Still, even if they weren't I'm sure, and it's very possible that they know that I know this, they know what it is to fly. As protection against the rain I had on an old mesh baseball cap that said "D.A.R.E. TO KEEP KIDS OFF DRUGS," the acronym "D.A.R.E." looking like it was written in the still-warm blood of some poor kid who dared to take drugs and was caught and then, as an example to all potential druggie-kids the whole nation wide, whose same tainted blood was employed as the very basis of an anti-drug campaign that he never would have willingly consented to be a part of. Calculating, cynical, ironic; these are the adjectives one must employ when speaking of the sinister forces of evil whose all-encompassing conspiracy against fun threatens to shake our American Way of Life to its very foundations. It wasn't the most aerodynamic choice of headgear I could have made, but I felt that the message should not have been suppressed

for such petty utilitarian concerns.

As I hung a left onto 32<sup>nd</sup> Avenue a fellow biker heading in the opposite direction whizzed by and with a friendly, bearded smile called out, “You forgot to signal!” I thought to myself, “No, I didn’t,” but didn’t say anything. I mean, I *didn’t* forget to signal, I just didn’t *care*. There were no cars coming in either direction and it didn’t seem important. Did this guy really think it was that crucial to offer up this friendly reminder to a complete stranger? Was he on some kind of personal crusade to improve the public image of cyclists or what? I can hear him now: “Listen up everyone; I know we’re not quite motorists and we’re not quite pedestrians, but dammit! We deserve a place within the gridded roadway network just like everyone else! We follow your rules and all we ask is that you respect our right to exist...” And so on. That’s the only reason I can think of for why he’d care if I signaled or not.

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I catch a glimpse of a man, a construction worker, lowering a bright orange bucket from a second story window by a rope. He is wearing a worn and dusty pair of coveralls and a gas mask and with his grip on the rope he guides the bucket down to the sidewalk with such care, such precision and such patience that you’d think the bucket was made not of plastic but of brittle autumn leaves, and that it was filled not with concrete mix or copper-plated nails, but with the contents of the previous night’s dreams of his only child, and the sight fills me up like a helium balloon and I think, “How beautiful! How FUCKING BEAUTIFUL!” I can’t believe I’m seeing this and it’s REALLY HAPPENING!” The sunlight is so bright that it looks like California but the rain makes me think I’m in a huge cavern underneath the ocean into which the sea steadily drips. “Caffeine really is a drug,” I think to myself. All of this is just from green

tea, green tea *ad naseum*, admittedly, but green tea solitaire nonetheless. Just one cup of coffee would put me over the edge, like a shot of tequila after a night of beer-binging. I know the feeling. It would be like trying to vomit out the brain through the forehead. I'm quietly trying to feel my way through life with only the five senses. The combination of rain and sun is like a soft-focus lens, and the world is as inexhaustibly fascinating as was Audrey Hepburn to George Peppard in *Breakfast At Tiffany's*, right after they took off the cat and dog masks, right before he took her up to his room for the first time.

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Like a character lodged, if once then forever, in the Eternal Recurrence that is a typical American movie, taking off his mask to reveal the actor meticulously preserved underneath an inch and a thousand miles of artifice in the name of the suppression of *ennui*, I appear from around a corner. I pedal to pack down the loose earth of boredom. I pound, I whack, I flatten, and then I jump up and down on top of the *terra firma*, attempting, with each ridiculous gesture, to achieve something no one's ever done before. I lay it on thick. I'm after density. The horrible feeling underneath the fingernails, the feeling of clawing at the solid earth with your bare hands, both eyelids coiled in flickering anticipation of a dislodged pebble. Blood appears, offering no clear indication as to whether it's coming from the dirt itself or from your cracked, broken skin. The more tightly packed a system becomes, the less options there are for the paths of movement of its various prisoners. I pedal faster. I see before me a huge event, a catastrophic coming together of far-flung points in space, a giant inhalation filling the lungs while emptying the heart, a backwards explosion, a backwards detonation, a contraction. A culling of all that is superfluous beginning with choice itself, mobility, the spawner of Time. I see in a flash the End of Boredom. I hear an aggressive yet cautionary noise—a car horn blaring.

I swerve as a pink Toyota Camry slams on its brakes. I look up and see that I've arrived at my destination—the Public Library. I saw in a flash the end of boredom, in a flash it was gone, and I was left with nothing.

I hit the “Handicapped Access” button at the entrance to my modest little neighborhood branch of the city’s library system and the automatic doors swung open. *Inward*, mind you, so as to avoid the possibility of ever crashing headlong into any semi-comatose old ladies in wheelchairs or one-armed bandits or sightless wonders. Inward, through the parting of the glass double doors to the Temple of Accumulated Knowledge and the Free Distribution Thereof I strolled, like a V.I.P., like a celebrity of underground literary and librarian circles, like the health inspector at the B restaurant, making an unscheduled appearance. In *disguise*, of course, so as to keep the commotion to a minimum. My grand entrance goes unnoticed, the library illuminati’s hearts do not skip a beat, nor should they. I make a cursory inspection. There really is something for everyone here; murder mysteries for the morbid, science fiction and fantasy for the unrealistic, cookbooks for the overweight, romances for the practical-minded, political thrillers for the self-hating, true crime for the repressed, celebrity biographies for the invisible, concise histories for the concise, philosophical meditations for the faint-of-heart, financial planning strategies for the weak and terrified, and books about Michael Jordan, Bill Gates and that series of books that starts with *A Child Called “It”* for everyone else. The place was moderately filled with young mothers and their children, making it a perfect candidate for a senselessly apolitical terrorist strike. I joined the queue to sign up for a computer with internet access and, as I would be in for a bit of a wait, proceed to browse amongst the stacks. As my fingers caressed the spines of my finely-bound lovers in wait, I thought of California, with its skies of blue, women of blonde and hearts of

botox. In California I left behind the most beautiful, the most blissful, the most perfect job a soul could ever hope for; that of a Library Page. Imagine if you will pure, unadulterated freedom, with a minimum of responsibility, in a three-story building devoted solely to books and learning. Imagine caring for little torches first set ablaze centuries ago by the likes of Plato, Cervantes, Confucius and Milton, holding them like precious specks of dust, making sure they don't burn out and that their luminous output is the precise wattage that will allow them to be spotted and identified conclusively even amongst a million other similar points of light. Imagine swimming in the sum total of human folly and wisdom in microcosm, doing the breaststroke through a galaxy, having free reign in a concentration camp. Back then it was just me, the little rectangles, the magic inside, and the Dewey Decimal System...

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I pulled out *The Collected Poems of Czeslaw Milosz* and flipped to a random page. A fly buzzed by my right ear and I told him, "Sorry but you don't understand English." That would hopefully be enough to dishearten the little bugger. I wanted to read aloud to the fly anyway, but was too embarrassed, so in my head I began, "This I wanted and nothing more. So who/ is guilty? Who deprived me/ of my youth and my ripe years, who seasoned/ my best years with horror? Who,/ who ever is to blame, who, O God?" This could be the lament of the fly who wanted to be born human. Sure, why not? We think of the life of a fly as being one of horror; trapped in a grotesque body, eating shit for a week or so, then kicking off in some dark little cavern of garbage in a garbage heap, a short and anonymous life of shitkissing, but for all we know they love it, for all we know the very brevity of a fly's life lends itself to the most violent of ecstasies, for all we know it's one big orgasm.

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Ever since I moved here I had been trying to get a job at the library. With all my experience I thought it would be a cinch, but so far all my efforts had amounted to nothing more than miles upon miles of waiting lists, and call-backs that were never meant to be. In the meantime, before my annunciation, I volunteered here one day a week, putting certain books on the shelves in certain spots, and from certain other spots taking certain other books off the shelves. To the uninitiated my actions while volunteering may have appeared downright nonsensical, but to those other souls, those who knew Dewey, those who had been touched by His wisdom, my movements were revealed for what they truly were: the ceremonial rites of a consciousness in transit.

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The front page of the newspaper said something like “The World Continues to Crumble Beneath Us And Be Patched Up Again.” Crumble, crumble here, a quick patch-job there. Crumble, patch, crumble, patch. Of course I paraphrase, but that was the gist of it.

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A woman who looked to be in her mid-thirties was browsing through the New Arrivals. She was wearing the single most complicated sweater/dress/jacket I had ever seen. It was a crème-colored knit monstrosity covered with more straps, buttons and buckles than I’ve probably got in the whole of my wardrobe combined. I watched her for several seconds as she pulled out a book called *The Ten-Second Relationship Makeover Cookbook*, a ridiculously dopey grin spread across my face all the while, thinking about how every time she managed to get herself into that thing, with all the buckles through the proper loops and buttons through the proper holes, she would probably find herself

trapped inside for days. Or else, once she had tried it on for size a few times and developed a certain familiarity with the procedure, she'd leave it on for days anyway, so as to avoid the inevitable all-morning-and-afternoon unwrapping session for as long as possible. She glanced in my direction and happened to see me smiling at her cordially, so she generously extended me a hearty, "Good morning." I said, "Hi."

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The drive to make things orderly is of course a death drive, a drive toward nothingness. If you've got a whole bunch of things in a state of what you consider to be "chaos," and then you arrange them in such a way that you can feel comfortable with yourself calling it "order," then you've still got the exact same collection of things, just in a different order. Entropy, like life and death, is a natural process, and all libraries erected stand as dams in the river of entropy. Some may see this as being a fatal flaw in the logic of libraries, but I don't. I think they're a convenient place to get books for free and check your email. I looked around, through the invisible, mass-less, volume-less, odorless air of Nothingness that was, despite the lack of even the tiniest shred of empirical evidence, all around me, and saw books in all directions, books I fantasized were even more uniform than they already were, and even more uniformly shelved. I wanted them to be shelved so flush, with not a spine protruding in any direction for miles and miles, that they simply sunk in and disappeared into the shelves, into the walls. I wanted every book to be like a drop of water fallen into the ocean, intact but indistinguishable from the whole. I wanted an invisible empire of words that could never be read, that could never be poured over until the heart was torn asunder and the last traces of humanity were called listlessly back from the abyss of the True Self, like a soul awash in the cold light of death called back by

the hollowest of promises, hurled in eleventh hour desperation from the Valley of the Shadow of the Living. The last defense against death is the lie.

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I heard a familiar buzzing sound and sure enough it was that same fly, this time bugging an attractive young woman wearing a Stooges t-shirt and a fluorescent pink scarf. She swatted at the air once or twice in an effort to rid herself of her unwanted companion, and as I walked by I said to her, “Don’t mind him. He’s the fly that wishes he was human.”

“Oh yeah?” she responded in a polite yet hesitant tone, “And how do you know that?”

“His reading habits, mostly. He likes to read poetry.”

She laughed weakly and added, “Uhh...oh yeah? Is that right? Well I guess that would explain why he’s here...” Even despite her somewhat weak conversational skills, I wanted to hold hands with her in a dark alley.

“Yeah, I guess so. He’s not so bad. He’s an alright fly.” I was starting to feel idiotic.

“Uhh...”

It was at this moment that I glanced at the on-screen queue and saw that my number was up, so I used that as my excuse to jump ship.

“Well, if I don’t log on to my computer in the next nine minutes and twenty-seven seconds I lose it forever, and that would be a fate worse than living life as a fly.” She giggled and I ran for it. I sat down at my computer, placed my hands lightly upon the keyboard, and immediately began to stare intently into the pixilated mystery that was its phosphorescent screen, and the World Wide Web stared back at me like a face in the

clouds. I held the mouse loosely in my right hand, as gentle as if it really were a mouse, as I guided the cursor across the screen to its resting place, which was a link to the only new email in my inbox. As I clicked on it my head shifted ever so slightly and I caught a sharp ray of sunlight right in the eyes from the window above. Momentarily blinded, I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles and then squinted to read the message displayed calmly and coolly before me. It was out of the past. It was from California, that bright golden land of wine vineyards, liquor stores around every corner, basketball hoops above garage doors, sidewalks turned homeless encampments, amusement parks, teenagers making out on swing sets in elementary school playgrounds on warm summer nights. I thought of the Los Angeles Lakers of my childhood, gliding across the polished hardwood in their golden robes. I thought of the miraculous arc of a basketball propelled from behind the three-point line with all the economy and precision of a mathematical equation describing a parabola. I thought of open fields and construction sites with little pink, green and yellow flags plotting out a future life holding hands with angels, the ridiculously overshot mark of suburbia. Track housing as far as the eye can see, like a treasure map on graph paper. I thought of eyes that burned into me with a sadness I knew I'd never be able to penetrate, a sadness not meant for the world outside, not meant for the golden light of curious old California, and sure as hell not meant for me. The text of the email contained only two words. It said, "I'm sorry."

## THE HOLE

There is a giant hole in the middle of downtown, occupying a particularly choice chunk of real estate right in the general vicinity of Broadway and Yamhill. It's actually taking up an entire city block, this hole, it's smooth dirt walls dipping a good four or five stories into the earth; a reverse skyscraper in the making. All four sidewalks surrounding the hole in the heart of the city are partitioned off by way of the cruel and regrettably commonplace invisible walls known as chain-linked fences. Seen and seen through at once, like glass whose only reflection is the diagonally slanting gridded coldness of your soul, and not it's translucent, transparent airiness that walks with you, matching step for step, anticipating everything about you that is unfortunate. The metal signs affixed to the fences inform passers-by that this negative disturbance in the positive logic of their beloved cityscape does, indeed, have a positive purpose after all: when construction is finished, we'll have a lovely new, state-of-the-art underground parking structure to accommodate the swelling of economic activity the city has enjoyed in recent years. But I suppose any pedestrian who reads one of these signs won't be too thrilled. They are walking, after all, not driving cars that need to be parked. To them it's just a hole that they walk by everyday, and if it's going to take a year and a half for the parking structure to be completed, as the signs claim, then they can each expect to walk by a giant hole everyday, weekends and holidays possibly excepted, for the next year and a half of their lives. On one side of the hole is a giant business complex, and oh the busy-ness of it! And the complexity! Sorry. I couldn't stop myself in time. During regular business hours there's a steady stream of people coming and going, those entering the complex closing

their dripping wet umbrellas, and those exiting opening their bone dry ones. I wonder which state the umbrella prefers: dry or wet? A wet umbrella is, of course, living out its purpose in life, performing its only duty; that of protecting it's bearer from the perils of bad hair, pneumonia, and cold, damp clothes. A dry umbrella, on the other hand, is probably not doing much of anything. It's probably closed, leaning in a corner somewhere, or else hanging from a doorknob. It may not be doing what it was born to do, but at least it's resting, and at least it knows that the moment it's called upon to spread its wings and flower into its owner's own personal mobile canopy, a hand-held roof over one's head, it will be ready, without a moment's hesitation, to do so. Most of an umbrella's existence, I dare say, is spent in this state of anticipation and dryness.

Similarly, I wonder which state the people prefer: being at work or being at home? These two questions, the one about the umbrella and the one about the person, are so similar I'm not even going to get into the details of the latter, for fear of becoming redundant. I'll just go back to talking about the hole. One side of the hole houses the aforementioned business complex, and the opposite side, Explorer Square, another city block-wide entity, along with the business complex and the hole. Explorer Square is sometimes called "the city's living room;" a large, open expanse paved with red bricks, slightly lower than street level, adorned with fountains, vendors' stands selling coffee, burritos, and Thai food, and even a life-sized bronze stature of a businessman holding an opened umbrella and hailing a taxi. When it's not pouring rain, people from all walks of life congregate here. They come to read a book on the steps, or to feed the pigeons, or for an afternoon outing with the kids. Homeless people, young punk-types, and other destitutes use it as a headquarters for panhandling. If you stand in the center of the square at midday for just one minute you should hear at least five cell phones ring, each with a distinct little jingle

of a ring tone. I've never been to Explorer Square too terribly late at night, so I don't know for sure, but maybe it's even a good place to pick up a prostitute. It's possible. If I was going to represent these three places numerically, based on altitude and other more inconspicuous factors, I'd say that the business complex was one, Explorer Square was zero, and the hole was negative one. Additionally, if I was going to assign each of these three places an affinity with a book from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, I'd say that the business complex was *Inferno*, Explorer Square was *Purgatorio*, and the hole was *Paradiso*.

To me the hole represents the city of the future, whereas everything that surrounds the hole represents the city of the past. Even the things that were intruding into the holes sacred emptiness; the cranes and the fork-lifts, the dump trucks and the cement mixers, were merely *in* the hole. They were not *of* the hole. They too are a part of the city of the past, the city of desire and ambition, of movement and of mobility, of hunting and gathering, of looking and of finding, of cursing, of expecting, of opinionating, of dominating a conversation, of articulating, of giving and of receiving. It's true that the hole, which represents the city of the future, will one day be a thing of the past, it will no longer be a negative, it will become an actual thing with an actual positive function, but, and maybe you've anticipated me on this one, that very impermanence will be one of the chief attributes of the city of the future. In fact, the city of the future will be completely *outside* of time, it will be a thing to stand alongside Time, equal to it, and no longer subject to the long boredom of its steady roar from its beginning to its end. The city of the future will delve inward, into the mind of the architect.

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You can make of all that what you will, but just know that on the morning after

Lydia's one-month anniversary of breaking up with her boyfriend, I woke up with a giant hole in my head. Well, in my memory, I guess I should say, no need to get overly dramatic. The dramas intrinsic to the very act of literature at its most basic level should already be plenty for reader and writer alike. Stringing together letters, which if I understand it correctly are meant to represent specific tongue, lip, and teeth positions necessary for the creation of very precise noises that come out of the mouth, to form words which represent specific things out in the perceivable world, external to the speaker, to form sentences which are, if I may be honest, the real darlings of my giddy and enthusiastic young imagination, to form paragraphs, chapters, whole works, clusters of imagery, emotion, condensed little pockets of intense feeling, little singularities of, dare I say it...*love*, love that is only symbolized, only represented, only too much Nothing squeezed into one tiny localization, one specific, unambiguously plotted point in space to be ignored. So because language is already so rich in gifts I couldn't hope to compete with, or match, I will employ a certain economy of expression in my description of what happened next:

I woke up, in my bed (on my mattress, I should say, in the spirit of concise accuracy), in the living room of my apartment on Wednesday at approximately eleven thirty-two in the morning, and I couldn't remember anything that had happened to me the night before. I sat up quickly, grateful, at least, to be in familiar territory. I looked around. The light coming in through the blinds blinded me. I turned quickly to the angel wall. "What day is this?" I thought. "Who am I?" Just kidding, I didn't really think that. All right, conciseness! Baxter was in the kitchen, eating a bagel standing up. He looked at me. He was wearing a cranberry-colored Homeland Outfitters zip-up hooded sweatshirt, style number D497. He spoke: "Hey! Good morning! I'm glad to see you're not *dead*!"

Now hurry up, we've gotta leave in *ten minutes*."

"*Leave?*" I said.

"*Yeah man,*" Baxter said.

"To go where?" I said.

"To work," Baxter said.

"Holy Fuck!," I said with slightly too much expenditure of energy, and my head felt like it had momentarily exploded, but that all the pieces were held together by rubberbands, so they all snapped back into place, leaving me with a head intact but throbbing in pain. *Whoa, whoa, whoa...rubberbands?* Too much imagery! I had a hangover.

"You need to change and *fix your hair,*" said Baxter.

"Yeah...," I said. I grabbed some clothes from the stack of cardboard boxes that served as my dresser and hurried into the bathroom. I took off my shirt and looked at myself in the mirror. There I had thoughts that, when considered objectively, probably aren't interesting enough to record here. I put on a black Homeland Outfitters cotton unisex jersey t-shirt, style number 2001, size small, and over that a forest Homeland Outfitters flex-fleece V-neck sweatshirt, size small, style number QSABB401. I flattened my hair with my palms, so that it was no longer pointing in so many different directions that it seemed to have no point at all. Hey! *Speculation!* I brushed my teeth, I peed. Into the toilet. I pressed down on the knob that sets into motion a series of events culminating in the flushing away of the old, dirtied water in the toilet bowl and it's simultaneous replacement with fresh water, principally familiar to most non-plumbers such as myself as the characteristic counter-clockwise spiral of the water and waste material mixture down into a vortex where we never have to think about it again. Some may argue that

each time we “go to the bathroom,” it’s like having a little dream, since the activity is so cut off, so isolated, from the rest of our lives that it seems to have no consequences whatsoever in what we have come to think of as “Life.” It all happens behind a door, as behind the veil of sleep, and when you emerge from that door you leave behind you no physical record, no evidence, that anything has taken place. It’s as if it happened in another reality...some may argue. Oh, and one last thing: what about married couples, the ones who are so comfortable with each other that the wife will, in fact, sit down on the toilet and pee while the husband is shaving in front of the mirror, mere inches away? That doesn’t seem very dreamlike, now does it! Nor very isolated! So much for your quaint little dream theory! Well to that I say that what is marriage if not *a sharing of dreams*? It’s the *union of two souls*, right? So there! What’s more dreamy than that? I ask you! Oh my god! I’m hopeless! I can barely even make it a page without degenerating into these superfluous baroque “asides.” Okay, I’ll give it one last try. Maybe I’ll even start a new paragraph.

I was reunited with Baxter in the living room, on the waking side of the veil of dreams(?), and Baxter said, “Are you ready to go, man?” to which I responded, “Yes.” I grabbed my bag and we exited the apartment. One of us locked the door behind us, I can’t remember which. In my periphery I thought I caught a glimpse of One-Eyed Willy, the neighbor’s adorably scarred little kitty-cat, but there was no time for pleasantries. We hopped into Baxter’s car and, after letting it warm up for a few minutes, were off. I watched through the window as the cyclops cat receded into the distance. Baxter put on a CD, whatever it was I hated it. One side of my face was flattened against the passenger-side window. Baxter said, “I hope they got all those boxes from that shipment put away yesterday, ‘cuz I don’t wanna deal with that shit today!” Baxter was the Backstock

Manager, if you can believe it. Baxter the Backstock Manager. Backst-er. Baxter. His name was a folded-in version of his title, like those pictures on the back of Mad Magazine. It was like fate. It also made him my immediate supervisor, my boss. Oh by the way, I'm giving up on the conciseness project. Just tell Ernest Hemmingway, if you happen to see him up in Writers' Heaven, that you met this other writer who says he understands why you committed suicide.

"I bet you feel pretty shitty this morning! What a *crazy* night, dude!"

"Tell me about it," I groaned.

"Don't worry, man, they have aspirin at the store, and just drink plenty of water to re-hydrate yourself—"

I interrupted, "No, I mean really...*tell me about it*...what happened? I don't remember anything..."

"Are you serious, dude? Well, lemme *think*. You danced, a lot. You hung out with this one girl all night. And, oh yeah, someone told me you punched her in the face..."

"*What??*"

"Yeah but don't worry about it. It can't possibly be true. It must be some kind of misunderstanding, I mean, you wouldn't do that, no matter how drunk you got, right?"

"Right. *That's right!* I know myself, I know myself well enough that even when I'm not there to keep an eye on myself, I can be sure that there are certain things I'd just simply *never do!*"

"Like punch a girl in the face."

"Yeah! Like punch a girl in the face!"

"Especially a girl you really liked."

"Yeah! Especially a girl I—huh? Really? How could you tell...? Are you

sure...?"

"Uh huh. You danced with her and when you weren't dancing you were hanging on her every word. From what I could tell, at least."

"Hmmm...this bears further investigation...I'm gonna have to be a detective for my own life...leave no stone unturned..." I grew pensive. "Who was she anyway? What was her name?"

"Petroleum or Pesticide or something like that. Something Russian-sounding. Sorry dude, I was kinda drunk, myself..." As he was saying this he parked the car on a side street a block or so off of Coleridge Boulevard, in front of a house with a big banner hanging from a flagpole over the front door that read, "Embrace PEACE. Be like a dove," or something. In front of us the shopping and dining Mecca loomed: Coleridge Boulevard. It was so big, too big to take in all at once, in one breath, in one fell swoop, in one pang of conscience. We got out of the car and made our way around the corner. I swallowed my spit. My eyes darted hither and thither like those of a wounded, hung-over animal. Everywhere I looked I saw the hunters. The hunters of those such as myself, those they, this ominous Orwellian They, because of our perceived lack of self-esteem, our refusal to embrace the absolute rightness of such unquestionable causes as grass-roots politics, body art and free, locally-published periodicals, because of our occasionally (well, most of the time) less-than-chipper, sometimes downright *pessimistic* appraisal of our immediate, socially progressive surroundings, have deemed unfit to inhabit Their perfect future utopia that They get to enjoy today, no waiting. Part of the glue that binds Their utopia is, of course, Their *belief* in the *future* utopia that has yet to be realized, but that will surely come about one day, through the sheer certainty of Their liberal goodness. So high up the ladder of personal enlightenment have They climbed,

that they've nowhere left to go, no more room for improvement, and consequently They're all more-or-less the same. They've all leveled out at the same high-water mark. Their utopia is all around them.

I, Their prey, had once again consented to enter the hunting ground, and Their motto, which is always in effect once They catch wind of one who is not like Them, was this: *kill 'em with kindness*.

The shops up and down both sides of the street have names like *Exotica*, *The Goddess Gallery*, *Live Fast! Records*, *Vintagetopia*, and *Pandora's Bikes*. Already, in the thirty seconds it took to walk to Homeland Outfitters, the friendly faces of strangers assailed me from all sides, their eyes seemingly saying "Good afternoon, friend," but I was on to Their agenda, I could read the subtext. One smile said "Go Vegan!" Another, "Don't blame me, I voted for Kerry," and a third, "My karma ran over your dogma." They walked in two's and three's, always clutching shopping bags, and if They were ever alone, They were talking on Their cell phones or listening to Their iPods, or walking Their dogs. I had yet to decide if Baxter was one of Them or not. He seemed to exhibit characteristics of both hunter *and* prey, but for the time being I felt he could be trusted. We both hated our jobs, that much I knew for certain, and today we both shared the same fate. We hung our heads low as we entered the store. Somewhere up in the sky, above the rooftops I heard birds singing. I think they said, "Without loneliness I should be more lonely, so I keep it."

Homeland Outfitters has a completely glass storefront. A white rectangular sign hangs from above the entrance with the words "Homeland Outfitters" written in plain black type across the bottom third. It's oh-so minimalist, so late-1960's art gallery, so Donald Judd. Behind the glass, on a raised platform stand an array of posed white,

featureless mannequins layered to the point of suffocation in colorful garments. There was an adult male mannequin, an adult female mannequin, a child mannequin of indeterminate sex, and even a little dog mannequin, all decked out in a thermal dog vest, style number 4909. Between these mannequins' outfits were represented the colors fuchsia, sangria, fluorescent pink, teal, lemon, pewter, raspberry, cranberry, blueberry, boysenberry, chocolate, metallic orange, mauve, evergreen, sour apple and sea breeze CRT, which was my favorite color, since a sea breeze *has* no color. It's actually fairly poetic.

We pulled the glass door open and stepped inside the white cube, complete with industrial scaffolding and visible plumbing on the ceiling, and filled to the brim with cotton, nylon and spandex in all the colors of science's rainbow, which by far outnumber those of nature's rainbow. Dance music was playing. Every wall that wasn't covered by racks upon racks of clothes was mirrored. Behind the counter there stood Lydia, looking as bright and cheery as ever. She was an eye-witness to the events of last night, and I'd eventually have to question her if I ever hoped to piece together the whole sordid affair in my head. "Hi, Lydia," I waved. She was folding something navy-colored by the cash register and she didn't appear to hear me.

"Come on dude, let's go clock in," said Baxter.

"Oh hey Baxter!" Lydia looked up and shouted. Maybe she didn't see me...?

In any event we hurried to the back, passing half-a-dozen or so customers, as well as Minka, another one of the sales associates, a Polish girl of eighteen, straight black hair, black turtleneck dress, style number QSAD301, not wanting to miss any valuable seconds of precious pay, since we were there already. One at a time we placed our hands in the electric hand scanner, a device which actually identifies each employee by his or her

unique genetic structure, or something, and punched in our passwords on the keypad. We were each validated by a beep!, our existences acknowledged, our souls signed over to our ominous retail overlords of death, our life energy poorer by a drop. *Was I really here?*, I wondered. *How did I ever even get this job? Golly, I miss the library...* In a tiny office hardly bigger than a closet, off to one side of the backstock area, sat Christy the store manager in her swivel chair, her throne, and seated at the right hand of herself was herself, in reverse, her mirror image in the mirror-wall behind the computer, printer/fax machine combo, scattered manila envelopes, rubber bands, paperclips, lipstick, mineral water, gaudy leather handbag, shiny headband. She was examining her pimples in the mirror, a grown woman pushing thirty with acne the likes of which would make a girl half her age cringe, talking on the phone, legs crossed. A mess of spandex clung to her body like she took a bath in the stuff and forgot to towel herself off, her cleavage jumping out of her lavender V-neck, size extra-small, like toothpaste out of the tube, impossible to ever put back in. “You know it, girl! I know that you know it! It’s like the other day Chelsea, one of my closest friends and one of the coolest people you’ll ever meet, we call her ‘Chelsea Girl,’ she says to me ‘Christy! You are wearing WHITE PERSON MASCARA! That’s worse than white people wearing blackface!’ She said ‘Here! This one is for girls with no eyelashes,’ yes! I guess I’m kinda vain ‘cuz I have this girlfriend with the thickest eyelashes and whenever I hang out with her I like double up on this shit...” She goes on and on and on like this everyday. The positive side of this is that she spends so much time on the phone during her shifts that I hardly ever have to deal with her. “I’m trying to do this *healthy* thing...be on this healthy kick...I’m thinking about starting going to the gym again, but it’s so hard...”

*The Backstock.* Picture those words in big, dramatic horror movie letters, if you

care to. It was a space no bigger than a bedroom, crammed to the ceiling with shelves, bins and boxes of folded garments. Folded as they were in their stacks, organized by style and size, the monotone clothes collectively formed stripes of color the likes of which even Frank Stella could never have envisioned. Every color in the universe. Even colors that haven't been invented yet. In theory the backstock room was supposed to possess a Dewey Decimal-like level of order and accessibility, but if you wanted to compare this mess to a library, it would have to be a library run by crazy people. A library with books falling off of shelves hitting people in the head, pages falling out of books, and the very words themselves falling off of the pages. Up at the top of a twelve-foot ladder stood Dylan with a clipboard in his hand and a pen behind his ear.

“Hey guys,” he said in a defeated tone. “Welcome to Hell.”

“*What? What's the matter?*” Baxter slipped into his diligent managerial persona.

“Well we just got this gigantic fucking shipment in that we weren't expecting. It just came outta nowhere. Sixteen fucking boxes! Sixteen! So we've gotta receive all that fucking crap and fold it and put it all away, and on top of that the factory wants us to pull this stupid goddamned *transfer* and have that all ready to go by five o'clock. Fucking *bitches!*” He grabbed a pencil skirt, wadded it up into a ball, and threw it violently to the ground, like he was mad at it and trying to break it.

Baxter slapped his hands together. “All right, *awesome!* I'm hung over as fuck but we've got the three of us here now and we're gonna *take care of this shit!*” He did this kind of mock-sexy dance and his tongue peaked out from between his teeth. He pointed at Dylan. “Dylan! You keep workin' on that transfer!” He turned and pointed at me. “Dude! You go out on the sales floor and check those boxes against the inventory lists, make sure nothing's missing. I've got some stuff I've gotta check up on in the office.”

“Good luck,” said Dylan. “Christy’s been hogging it all morning. I’m starting to think there’s not even anyone on the other end. When would they get a word in?”

Baxter handed me the lists and I just stood there, staring at them. It wasn’t that I wasn’t thinking anything, it was just that my mind seemed to be stuck on one specific thought, and it was now slowly zooming in on this one thought to the point that it had become so enormous that I no longer had any idea what it was.

“Dude?! You okay, man?” Baxter floated into my field of vision.

“Yeah...yeah! I’m fine. Sorry. The boxes!” And with that I scampered away to receive the mountain of boxes. What this consisted of was going through every box item by item, looking at the barcode number on the tag, and making sure it’s on the list so we know they didn’t send the store too much or too little of anything, thus rendering our inventory counts inaccurate. But the inventory was always way off anyway, and I was in love with the rain. A nice, steady drizzle had started up outside, and I really wanted to stick my tongue out and catch a raindrop, but as it was I couldn’t even stick my body out of the store, let alone my tongue out of my mouth outside. The mountain of boxes was at least twice as tall as me, and as I stared up at it I felt a little bit like Sisyphus, and like Sisyphus I knew that there was nothing to do but get to work. There were no customers in the store at the moment and I could hear a conversation between Minka and Lydia. Minka was telling a story about a vacation to Hawaii her family took when she was younger.

“One time in Hawaii my sister and I were standing at the end of this really long pier and she wanted me to jump off the pier ‘cuz she had her camera and she thought if she could capture me in midair it would be a good picture. So I did it but then once I was in the water the current was so strong that I couldn’t swim back. I wasn’t drowning or anything but I was swimming as hard as I could and getting NOWHERE. I was so far out

that the people on the beach all looked like ants. Usually when you're at the beach you're on the sand looking out at the water, but I got the reverse view, and the image has really burned itself into my mind. I don't think I can ever forget it. I was pretty scared. I finally got rescued by this twelve-year-old surfer boy, which was kind of romantic, 'cuz I was twelve, too."

"Tee hee! Goddamn!" Lydia slapped her thigh. "So did your sister get the picture?"

"No. All you could see was some sky and some wood and a big blur...that was me."

I was sitting with a steadily mounting pile of clothes all around me, attending to the task at hand, and I started thinking about the detective work I still had to attend to. A giant hole in my memory. An entire night, gone. It was the worst kind of theft. Worse than if a burglar broke into your house, tied you up and stole all of your video games, records and art supplies, pistol-whipped you and then spit in your eye. Maybe wrote something degrading on your wall in spray paint, something like "EVERYTHING YOU THINK YOU KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF IS WRONG," or "YOU ARE UGLY." What would we be without our memories? Nothing! That's what! We *are* our memories, and I'd lost a night of myself. I hated it when that happened. Each time feels like a whole new kind of assault on the framework of your being, but in reality it was just one in a long line of alcohol and/or pill-popping related blackouts. Emerging from my pile of clothes, I turned to face Lydia. "Hi Lydia. How are you?"

"Oh...hey. I'm goood...*how do you feel...*?" She could hardly contain the giggles as she asked me this.

"Pretty shitty, little Miss Itty-Bitty."

“I bet! Goddamn, you were so trashed...!”

“Um...I was wondering...if you could...tell me everything that happened...”

Her face became quizzical. “What do you mean, man?”

“I don’t remember anything that happened last night.” I felt slightly vulnerable.

“Wha-at? *Really?*”

“Yeah, really, and I was wondering if you could tell me if I did anything...evil...?”

“Huh? *Evil?* What do you mean?”

“Just tell me what happened. I’ve got a hole in my memory like a hole in the pocket of a pair of old, faded jeans, and the longer I wait before I patch it up, the more loose change goes cascading down my inner thigh...”

“Well okay...you were getting really...how shall I phrase this...*aggressive*... on the dance floor. You kept pulling me towards you. And—oh yeah! You totally punched Petrovna in the face! What the hell was up with that, man?”

“Nothing! Nothing was ‘up with that.’ I didn’t really punch her! It’s some kind of misunderstanding! (So her name’s Petrovna. Sounds kinda familiar...) Why would I punch her?”

“I dunno. You tell me! She says it’s because she didn’t want to dance with you. Touchy, touchy.” Here she waved her index finger at me. “She’s got a fat lip now. I hope you’re *happy*. My beautiful, beautiful Petrovna...” She froze as the music changed. Her face lit up. “I *love* this song!” Whatever the new song was that came out of the speakers seemed to have secret powers to make girls dance, because Lydia began to do just that, and she looked like she couldn’t help herself. Minka looked on with amusement but somehow managed to restrain herself. “C’mon, man! It’ll be just like last night, only

sober!”

“Yeah, right...and right now is just like last night, only it’s *day*.”

“Oh pu-leeaaaase! I don’t need no stinking alcohol. I just need the rhythm pumping through my bones! I just need to NEED!”

I took a step back. “Lydia, uh...*Lydia*! Could you...uh...”

“You wanna know what happened last night?” She seemed to be asking the ceiling. “You professed your undying love to my best friend Petrovna, the stunning young Nazi aristocrat who had clandestinely stowed herself away amongst the coattails of a covert American military operation in the hopes of thwarting their attempt to halt the Nazi war machine through a systematic disruption of its civilian dance halls. The only problem was, and this was a contingency she kicked herself afterwards for failing to foresee, one of the American artillerymen, namely...you!, fell head over heels in love with her, and by virtue of his new hypersensitive insight into the very core of her soul, was able to see through her subterfuge, thus leaving him to decide between his duty and his heart. Being a sensible creature of solid bourgeois upbringing, he of course chose duty, at which point he attempted to incapacitate the breathtaking young Nazi, a princess, I feel obliged to add, by punching her in the face. His attempt, or your attempt, whatever, was only partially successful, for while you were able to, in effect, bring the night’s festivities to an abrupt conclusion, the Nazi infiltrator remains at large. Mayhaps the brazen young American, whom none would deny acted rather rashly, had ample time to ponder the misdirection of his faculty for rationality as he puked his guts out into a goddamned toilet bowl!”

Okay. Maybe she didn’t really say this. I was having a hard time concentrating, so sue me.

The song ended and she stopped dancing, at which point she picked up a baby blue pocket frock and started folding it neatly into a tight little square. I realized that my left leg had fallen asleep so I started to shake it around a little, in an attempt to jar it back to life.

“Oh so *now* you feel like dancing, now that the song’s *over*! I see *how it is*...”

“What? No, Lydia...it’s just...I just want to check some facts, that’s all! Just think of me as a reporter, or a *detective*...I just want some dry, bland, *accurate* information. You see, I value, *cherish* even, the simple joy of knowing what I do from moment to moment and...*are you mad at me?*” I draped myself behind a rack of drape skirts, not knowing how else to defend myself against the unknown. I peeked my head out.

She remained motionless for a moment, then burst into laughter. She had the most peculiar laugh, as if right from the very beginning she was already suffocating from lack of oxygen, but that she didn’t really need oxygen at all except as a kind of pitch regulator for her laughter. “I’m just messin’ around with you! So you had a little too much to drink? So you got a little crazy? *It’s no big deal, dude!* We’ve all been there!” She slapped me on the shoulder. “*Don’t worry about it!*” In the air there hung a feeling. Some kind of sterile hummingbird buzz was underlying everything that happened. It was minute, so minute that it could have just been the barely-perceptible sound a fluorescent light bulb makes just before it goes out, or even the scaled-down equivalent your eyeballs make just before you go blind. This whole ‘detective’ thing was obviously going to be harder than I thought. Facts are vague. Memories, even in all their inconsistency and patchiness, are a thousand times more valuable for the kind of detective work I was delving into. Attached to feelings, to prejudices, to misconceptions, in short, to a

subjectivity, the very notion of memories even existing at all is still much more credible than the notion of the existence of facts. Memories *are the only facts*. Emotions can't be counted among the factual data because while they are happening they simply *are*, and once they pass they, themselves, become memories. Without memories we would never learn to come down from the ecstasy of the moment. We'd wander around, helpless and lost, in the magnitude of the mundane, bumping into each other blindly, falling off of cliffs until the day we died. Wonder can never wear off without a record that this is how it always is, and this is how it always will be, so we'd better get used to it. I guess it's true, as well, that this makes memory the midwife of boredom. Oh well, no mental faculty is perfect. And just as in giving birth, no midwife is so indispensable that the baby can't be born without the luxuriousness of this mediator, so I'm sure it is inevitable that boredom will always find ways out of the womb of the mind, anyway. So memory, I stand by you.

“So...Lydia...about this Petrovna girl...?”

She cocked her head. “Yeeaaaahh...?”

“Is she, like...an angel?”

At this Lydia's eyes and mouth opened wide, as added ventilation for her excitement. She spun around. “I knew it! I knew it! I knew it was more than just the booze talking when you blurted out that you loved her!”

“But Lydia...I really don't even remember what she *looks* like, and her name is only registering faintly, but I guess that's better than nothing. I guess it means that there's *something* there, buried away deeply, darkly, dankly...”

“You love her! You worship her face! Her feet! Her butt! Her neck! Her—”

“Arms?”

“Yeah, man! Hahaha! This is great! You know she’s totally *single*...her only boyfriend is the poetry of the nightlife! And you think she’s an angel! That’s *beautiful!*”

“Well I mean, I can’t see her, can’t picture her, so there’s nothing there to go awry. In my sorry state of immemoriality regarding her, she’s completely incorruptible...*an angel*. It’s like she appeared to me in a dream that, upon waking, I had no idea had even taken place.”

Her expression changed from unshaded light bulb to that of something small, round and mischievous. “You realize, dude, that I’m going to tell her all of this...”

“What? You can’t do that...that’s *cheating*. Oh gawd...well, I guess I’d better shut up now. I’ve, um, got work to do after all. After all is said and done. After all is...uh...filed and shelved...”

Perhaps without memory the drive to be artistic, to be literary, if such things could be possible without it, would consume one of such temperament constantly, without wane, and from all sides at once, for as long as that person held breath. Perhaps without the Dewey Decimal System of the mind, without the experiential filing cabinets that clutter us, deprive us of clarity, slow us down, bind us, blind us, remind us, we would have no choice but to let fly every impulse, every idea, every whimsical desire that ever passed through us, for to fail to do so at once would be to see it die, a death with no funeral. Perhaps without memory we would explode every second of the day until we wore ourselves out so completely we would become too tired to even care about eating. Perhaps memory is a natural defense against starvation.

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Every time a group of people, two or more is all it takes, comes into the store for the first time, they invariably make the same jokes about the lamé products. “Dude, you

should totally *rock* these silver leggings!” “I would *totally rock* this bathing suit if I thought I could pull it off.” Everyone always *would* buy and wear some piece of lamé or another, *but*. They never do. And that’s the joke, and it’s funny to them. Working at Homeland Outfitters I heard these same jokes over and over and over again. To me this is proof that collectively, the human race has no memory.

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I towered above cardboard boxes reaching all the way to the sky, in my opinion of myself. I couldn’t even see the tops of them, they disappeared into blue, into the clouds, and I, above and so far beyond them that vulgar designations like ‘cardboard’ meant next to nothing to me, I whistled as I worked. I sorted. I folded. I counted. I stole. I am an American. Lydia said as much. I think. I pledged my allegiance to the great island nation ‘Me,’ even as I cursed its injustices. I rained on my own parade, in which I was the most elaborate float. I defeated my enemies not through superiority of military might, but rather through pure cultural supremacy. I dominated movie theaters the world over. I won prizes for my abilities and then selflessly gave them all away to orphans. My headache had been suppressed thanks to some aspirin I’d taken, and my hangover had almost completely subsided. My mind felt clear, bright and alert. I think it has something to do with the juxtaposition of a really unclear night with the next day in which you are simply back to normal. All of a sudden normal becomes, or else you’re simply reminded that normal always is, a pretty wondrous state in which to experience the world. You can see things, hear them, touch them, insult them, and then you can sit back and wonder why you did it.

In the backstock I dove into a box of unfolded clothes, like Jim Hawkins in the barrel of apples. I positioned myself so that one ear was the only part of me that was

extruding, and with it I listened to Christy on the store phone.

“Did you know that Americans *eat too fast*...? Yeah...I guess they say it’s true. I was reading it in some magazine and I guess if you don’t eat your food at a certain, like really specific rate your body won’t be able to absorb all the nutrients...I know! All that B-12, all wasted! So I read this and I tried to eat slower and girlfriend, I just couldn’t for the life of me do it! I know, isn’t that *crazy*? Ahh...I eat *SO FAST!!*”

Peering through some micro-mesh I was able to see her, as well, without giving away my position. She had the phone pinched between her face and shoulder as she dipped a carrot into a zip-lock bag filled with some kind of fine powder that looked like sand. She tried on a shiny silver headband with the tag still dangling from it, examined herself in the mirror for a few seconds, then pulled it down around her neck. “Maybe that’s why I’m single...uh huh...uh huh...uh huh...My list is so long! My list is longer than any kid’s Christmas list...girl, you know me so well! Here’s what I say, I say ‘Dudes; here’s the three things you need to know about a lady.’” She pulled the headband back up to her forehead and, as it snagged on the carrot dangling from her mouth, she counted off with her fingers. “One: her favorite flower, two! her favorite color, and three: her favorite food...and watchoo gonna say? You gonna say ‘Well how’m I gonna find out about that stuff?? I ain’t about to *ask her*...Pay attention and she will *tell you*! Guys here is the *perfect gift*: one of those little gold-plated Gangsta Boo necklaces with your girl’s name or her nickname on it. Yeah you know if you call your girl ‘Scrumptious’ or ‘Cutie-Pie’ or ‘Baby Girl’ ...or whatever! I don’t know! Hahaheha!!” Short pause. “And here’s something else; gifts I *hate*: letters! I mean c’mon! This guy doesn’t even *know* me, he doesn’t know anything *about* me, and he’s all like, ‘I love the way you smile! I love the way you chuckle! I love the way your...eyes twinkle...*whatever, dude*! You

*know*...you fucking *know* he's written that shit to girls before! *Nothing* makes you feel less special than a letter!"

Sometimes I marvel at the things Christy says. I mean, on the surface her endless musings and anecdotes and pearls of wisdom seem like the stupidest, most vacuous nonsense a thinking person could imagine, but sometimes she'll say something that seems so idiotic, so unreflective, and so blatantly wrong that I have to stop and give very real consideration to the possibility that she is actually some kind of Zen Buddhist sage. "Nothing makes you feel less special than a letter." Really. How does a person come to that kind of conclusion? What kind of life has to be lived? A penny for your thoughts, O Christy of the fathomless depthless depths of depth and unfathomable depthness!

Meanwhile, from another direction I hear the stirrings of voices, masculine voices.

"Hey I think that box of clothes just moved."

"No man don't worry about it that's where I put it I'll get to it sooner or later."

"No I mean it *moved*, like there's an animal in it or something. *It shook*."

Realizing the jig was up, I decided the best thing for me to do was simply reveal myself before they hit the box repeatedly with a baseball bat. I rose slowly, making my ascent like an ancient tree towering over a forest in elapsed time, or like Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*. Clothes fell from me like I was shedding an old layer of skin, or emerging from chrysalis.

"What the fuck?" Baxter exclaimed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking my fifteen minute break."

"Dude, there's too much work to do! There's no time for breaks today!"

"The hell there isn't. State law promises me two, count 'em, *two* fifteen minute

breaks *AND* an hour lunch! Don't go all fascist on me, Baxter. Are you becoming a *fascist??*"

"Yes. Now c'mon over here with me. I've got a job for you..."

Baxter led me around a corner of sheer dresses to the very back of the backstock. The dead end. The point of no return. The place where I imaging dying one day, torn limb from limb after a long and terrifying pursuit by an angry mob, thirsty for my blood after one of them finds out I didn't vote in the last election. Or worse; that I've *never* voted.

In a hushed tone Baxter begins. "Alright man, here's the thing. Christy says no one is leaving tonight until all this shit gets put away. You want a fascist to demonize? *She's the fascist.*"

"A Napoleon of the Universe...?"

"Whatever, dude. I wish you'd quit saying that." (*Quit saying that?* Was this a clue?) "Besides, Napoleon wasn't a fascist, he was more of an imperialist...or even a republican! But fascism is more of a twentieth-century phenomenon."

"He was a proto-fascist."

"Fine. Whatever you say. Just *listen* to me. The store is closing in an hour and forty-five minutes and we've still got like six boxes to deal with—"

"But that's *impossible!* We'll never get that much done by eight o'clock!"

"Exactly, dude. Just listen. Here're my car keys. I want you to go outside, go around back and wait for me by the dumpster."

He grabbed my wrist and dropped the keys into my palm. They were warm due to the fact that they'd been up close to Baxter's skin, pressed tightly to his 98.6 degree self in his jeans. "Um..." I was about to ask for some sort of explanation, but then thought,

“What’s the use?” and just said, “...okay.”

“Alright, great!” He slapped me on the back. “I’ll be out there in a minute...just trust me on this one...I’m about to *outdo myself*...”

As I was about to make my way out, I turned to Baxter. “Wait a minute...what if someone asks where I’m going?”

“Just say you’re taking a break.”

“But I just *took* my last break.”

Baxter slapped his forehead in exasperation. “I dunno...tell ‘em I sent you to Fred Meyer to buy light bulbs. Something. Anyway, no one’s going to care, or even notice!”

“Oh that’s nice. So you think on one notices me hear? That’s really what a guy wants to hear when the personnel is *seventy-five percent girls in their early twenties!*”

“Just get going! Dude! You’ll be glad in a minute.”

After I decided to stop being annoying I slipped out of the store like a thief in the night and, sure enough, in the confusion of the last “sales rush” of the day, no one even saw me leave. Outside the sun had set, leaving an orange and pink residue on the underbelly of the sky that hovered over the buildings of Coleridge Boulevard, somewhere between heaven and earth, like a mother mountain lion in the process of deciding which of it’s young to devour, and which to spare. There were only a few stragglers out now, window shopping and figuring out which bar they’re going to in an hour or two, who they’re going to meet there, and what they’re going to wear. Maybe the more adventurous among them were even considering the possibility of a last second purchase before all the stores closed. Maybe even a whole new outfit for tonight. In the calm of the evening I cursed myself for my quick judgments. The shops all turn their lights out around the same time everyday, the street is like an organism, and in the lull of the infant night, as the

street prepared to sleep, I felt a little bit sorry for it. How could I possibly feel animosity towards something that was obviously so hollow, so ritualistic, and so vulnerable? All of this, all of this *whatever it was* is just a distraction like anything else. It's just another mask for the faceless, so what do I care?

Around the corner and behind Homeland Outfitters I stood, leaning against the dumpster and waiting for Baxter the Backstock Manager. After a few minutes the back door swung open. I waited, but no one came out. Finally a big, fat black trash bag came flying out, and then another, and then another. "You gonna help me with this shit *or what, man?*" It was Baxter. He peeked his head out and looked around. "There's no one else here, right?"

I laughed. "I don't think so. What the hell is that stuff, anyway?"

"Clothes. Well, velour joggers, mostly...but also spandex leggings, summer shirts, tri-blend V-necks, men's briefs, I think there's maybe a striped hoody or two..."

"Wait, wait, wait...are you telling me you're going to *steal all this stuff?*?" I was holding my breath. I felt like a cliff diver, peering out over the edge of the precipice to the cleansing waters below.

"Fuck yeah I'm stealing it! Christy wanted everything done by closing, or she wouldn't let us leave...well this is the only way that's gonna happen!" He was dragging one of the bags onto the sidewalk. "Gimme a hand...we gotta hurry..."

This was too good to be true. I was monumentally envious of Baxter at this moment, of his reckless abandon, of his heroic refusal to be pushed around, but I still had to play devil's advocate. "You *are* telling me this...you really *are*! You're stealing a small fortune in simple yet well-tailored garments (produced sweatshop-free in the good ol' U.S. of A) because it's *too much of a pain in the ass to put them away!*!"

“You got a *better idea*, dude? You wanna be here all night? You wanna get out of here on time, *don't you?*”

“Heck yes!”

“Alright! And don't worry about us getting caught. The only people who knew what were in those boxes were you, me and Dylan, and Dylan hates his job so much he doesn't give a fuck. And as far as the sheer *volume* of this heist is concerned, well the backstock is such a fucking hopeless mess as it is, even if we *did* put all this shit away it would still look exactly the fuckin' same back there. *No one will be the wiser*. Oh and lastly; I'm the fucking backstock manager, and I'll just change all the numbers in the computer.”

“Oh my god. Baxter, you're beautiful.”

Between the two of us we got the three bulbous bags to Baxter's car, at which point Baxter said: “Alright man, I gotta get back quick. Christy thinks I'm taking the trash out. You load 'em all in the car and I'll see you inside.”

“Roger Dodger.”

A minute or two of effort found the bags safely stowed away in the trunk, on top of a tattered copy of *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, a warped Billie Holliday record, and an unopened but melted Nutrageous bar. I brushed my hands off not because they were dirty but more as an act of solidarity with all the signs and signifiers associated with the idea of “a job well done.” Fucking the system over, even if only in some small way, makes you a lot more willing to accept the fact that you're a part of it.

Back in the backstock Baxter sang to himself, “Do-de-do-do,” while I sang to myself, “Dum-de-dum-dum.” We had really done something monumental, something that would make us feel good about ourselves for the next five minutes, maybe even for the

rest of the day. There were still miscellaneous things to put away here and there, which I suspect Baxter left intentionally to create a veneer of assiduousness, to say, “We’ve worked so hard and now our task is winding down, but that doesn’t mean we’re going to slow down just yet. Yee-*haw!*”

I asked Dylan where the loop terry bathrobes belonged and, snatching the item out of my hand, he smashed it into a ball, wound up like a Cy Young Award winner and threw it up into an air vent just below the ceiling where it was sucked away, completely out of sight.

“That’s where it goes,” he deadpanned.

“Oh. No wonder I couldn’t figure it out...”

Dylan then made deliberate eye contact with me, which is always a little bit scary coming from those eyes, which revealed at once a deadened sense of the world and a sort of wildness. “I almost fell off the ladder today, man.”

“The...ladder? What’s that mean? Is that some kind of metaphor? Are you an alcoholic or something?”

“No, dude, *the ladder!* *That* ladder!” He pointed to the ladder. “I was way the fuck up at the top putting some dumb-ass fucking lamé swimsuits away, but I had positioned the ladder slightly too far away, but not so far away that it wasn’t *possible* that I could reach the spot where they went, you know? So I’m reaching out with this perfectly folded gold swimsuit in my hand, when the ladder starts to *fall backwards!*”

“Oh no! What happened?”

“So for a second I start to completely lose my balance. My body starts to fall in the direction the ladder is falling. There’s this pang of fear in my chest, but mostly there’s no time for shit like that. I did, though, have time to look down at the concrete floor. If

you fall from that high up onto concrete and land on your head, *you're dead.*”

“Yeah, man, it can get pretty dangerous back here. It’s like that very Kierkegaardian scene in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* where Indy has to take the *leap of faith*...But you’re obviously not dead, so what happened?”

“I just *fell into the other wall*. That’s all. In the heat of the moment I didn’t realize that the other wall is only like five feet away, *so there’s no room to fall!* I was clutching the ladder for dear fuckin’ life and we both just stopped. Sometimes I thank god this place is so fuckin’ small.”

“Um, yeah, I guess I never thought of it that way. Can I ask y—”

“And you know what’s the most fucked up part about the whole thing? You know how they say that right before you die *your whole life flashes before your eyes*, well that *really happened*, only everyone, in every single fucking memory from every single fucking period of my life, was *wearing Homeland Outfitters* clothes!”

“Good golly Miss Molly! You’re right! That’s awful! Just the thought of picturing your mother in a Barely-There Bodysuit...”

“*What the fuck?* No! It was nothing like that...you aren’t getting *disrespectful*, are you?”

“No! I’m just joking! Just joking...listen, uh, speaking of *memories*... can I ask you a question?”

“Huh? Oh sure. What’s up?”

“You were at the Roman Aqueduct last night, right? Yeah, thought so. So the thing is...I, ah, don’t really have *any* of them, memories, that is, concerning the, uh, events of the evening, I mean, you know...what transpired...it’s a total *blank*.”

“*Oh yeah?*” Dylan seemed impressed. “Are you talkin’ ‘bout a total

mutherfuckin' *blackout*? Awww..." He reached out and punched me playfully in the arm. "You're a fuckin' *PARTY ANIMAL*, dude!"

"Whatever. Did you see anything...odd...happen? Like, for instance did I happen to, oh, I dunno, punch a young lady in the face...or anything?" I couldn't get more speculative or hypothetical than that. The objectivity of my investigation surprised even me.

"Ha *HA!* Damn! I knew you were a fuckin' *pimp!* Man! I saw you dancin' all up on all the girlies...shit that music was *hideous*... I don't know how you could dance to it...but I guess a pimp like you's got more *important* things on his mind! And hey, if a woman starts to get ornery on you, sometimes you've just got to *put the smack down!*"

It never ceases to amaze me how white people can so seamlessly slide back and forth between their regular way of talking and their hip-hop talk, which seems to be a sincere form of expression to them, *and* an ironic attempt at mockery at the same time. I had a feeling, or I was making a conscious decision, or they were one in the same, that I may have to leave well enough alone. The career of the Memory Detective might have to come to an end before it truly begins, but what could I do? You can't force these things. Memory is like a river you stand in, and it's a well-known piece of Eastern wisdom that states, "You can never stand in the same river twice." It was pointless for me to keep trudging upstream, against the current, like Minka in Hawaii. It was obvious I was making no headway with the past, so I might as well stick to the future, the other end of the illusion spectrum.

Minka poked her head in, looked around, saw me, and asked, "I've got a customer out here who wants a metallic chocolate pillowcase dress, size medium...could you check for that and bring it out if we've got any? Thanks."

“Sure thing.” I sifted through the pile of pillowcase dresses, which really are just like pillowcases, only with two arm holes and a head hole cut into them, feeling like a frustrated archaeologist. Finally I decided that I couldn’t find what Minka was looking for, so I ran out onto the sales floor to tell her. She was talking to a customer who was obviously far too rotund to ever hope to squeeze into a size medium. She was about fifty with neatly trimmed bangs sculpted out of peppery grey hair. She had enormous gold earrings hovering on the outskirts of humongous fleshy jowls and she looked a little bit like Jabba the Hut. Well, actually she looked *a lot* like Jabba the Hut. I was trying to be nice, but then at the last second remembered that it’s better to be literary.

“Minka! We don’t have any medium metallic chocolates left, but we do have a small and a large, so maybe if we mixed them together...”

“Umm...” Minka pondered, putting her fingers to her chin and biting her tongue, “I don’t think that’s how it works...”

Just then the front door flew open and a single figure stepped inside. She was wearing a blouse with puffy shoulders that laid bare slender, milky white arms, the skin upon which giggled slightly in the moonlight. The blouse was white with little strawberries printed on it. Her hair was all over the place; a huge mess, but, like an aspiring model balancing a stack of books on her head (an image I think about from time to time, and of course the books always end up being my personal favorites, but that’s just because I imagine models as having really good taste), she possessed the poise necessary to keep it all from tumbling to the floor. Stray strands fell forward and came to rest in the narrow strip of open air between her eyeballs and her glasses, a space so narrow, in fact, that the total difference in creative, philosophical, and political sensibilities between Generic Coleridge Hipster A and Generic Coleridge Hipster B

would fit snugly, a perfect fit, even. She carried an extremely large purse with what appeared to be a silk-screened picture of a young Anais Nin printed on it, and out of the top of the purse protruded three or four books of various sizes and bindery. It started faintly, as a vague and undefined feeling in the back of my head, a sort of frustration mixed with the sense of awakening inherent in the image that expands from a single point on the screen of a rear-projection television, brought to full realization in the time it takes the "POWER" button on the remote control to become undepressed underneath your thumb. It started faintly enough, but then I knew, without the benefit of memory, out of a sort of epistemological intuition, that the girl standing in the doorway, silhouetted from one side by the glittery silver moonbeams that traveled so far just to illuminate a girl's backside, and from the other by fluorescent tubes that emitted light that seemed to travel not in rays at all, but rather to instantaneously fill up a room and dance nimbly upon the surface of glasses and of mirrors, was Petrovna. Information: the shining light that comes out of your head. This phrase appeared fully formed: Not just any girl with glasses, *the* girl with glasses.

"Petrovna! Hey girl what's up?" Lydia waved her arms excitedly from behind the register. "I'm almost done counting up my till. It'll be a few minutes..."

In the animal uncertainty of the moment some unseen force rose up from deep within to guide me into the proper course of action. I made a mad dash for the backstock, hoping that she hadn't yet spotted me. I ducked around the corner and bumped into the water cooler, sending it teetering over. Mere seconds away from oblivion, I lunged forward to halt the descent of the huge plastic water bottle with the full force of my upper body, just barely managing to reestablish the upright equilibrium of the sacred shrine: the workplace water cooler. Once disaster was averted I fell to the cold concrete floor and sat

there on my butt, leaning against the wall.

“Dude! What the fuck just happened? Are you drunk again *already?*?” Baxter yelled over a clipboard.

“It’s her! Baxter! It’s the girl! Look!”

“Huh? What the hell are you talking about?”

“Just look! On the sales floor!”

He stood in the doorway and scanned the scene. “Where? What am I supposed to be seeing?”

“Her! Her! *Her!* You dummy! The girl from last night! The one I punched in the face! Like the ghost of a disquietous kitten rising from the pet graveyard, she’s *back!*”

Off to one side I heard Christy’s marathon phone conversation winding down: “Yeaahhh, girl, the store’s closing, I gotta call that fool soon...what?...he got back with *Aleisha?* Homegirl why don’t you *tell me* these things...?”

I shoved Baxter out onto the floor. “Tell me what she’s saying! What she’s thinking! *What she’s reading!?*”

“Man I don’t know what you’re talking about! There’s no one out there! No customers, at least. It’s pretty quiet.”

“Huh?”

Christy, into the receiver: “Uh huh...uh huh...uh huh...”

I peeked my head out and saw Dylan talking with Minka, and Lydia diligently counting away at the cash register. I walked up to her and rested my elbows on the counter, my face on my palms, and my eyes on Lydia’s face. “Sooooo...Lydia, I coulda sworn I saw—”

My sentence was cut off by Petrovna, who stood up from behind the counter and

sliced through the air like a knife. Suddenly she was mere inches from me.

“AHH!” I squeaked.

“Hi there!” she intoned, “I suppose, if one may be so bold as to *suppose* anything, that you are wondering what I was doing down there...?” I could see from this distance that she did, indeed, have a bit of a fat lip, with a tiny dark purplish scab already formed off to one side. I stared intently at this spot on her lower lip. “So,” I thought, “It’s true, at least partially. Someone, most probably *me*, did clock her one, after all. I guess. It *looks* that way, at least...”

“So,” she continued, “You gonna say something?” She smiled, and it dawned on me that I had damaged *the smile*. I tried to remember why that seemed significant, but only vague sensations surfaced, like smoke signals from out of the forest canopy.

“Oh...um...I dunno...are you helping Lydia steal stuff? If so don’t mind me. Just because I work here doesn’t mean I care...”

“NOPE! Wrong again! The young lady Lydia,” here she pulled Lydia toward her and gave her a big one-armed hug, and Lydia didn’t look up from her stacks of one, five, ten and twenty dollar bills, “Is quite capable of pulling off an operation as simply as petty retail thievery by her cutesy-wootesy-ootesy little self.” Lydia smiled but still didn’t look up. “As a matter of fact what I was doing was, in all modesty, a significantly more monumental task...” She leaned forward, waiting for me to take the bait, and...

“Sooooooo...what were you...doing?” I leaned closer as well, and in the process forgot to blink, breathe or swallow my spit.

She bit her lower lip and raised her shoulders like a kid about to reveal her fondest secret. “I was pushing the planet Earth closer to the sun.”

I was about to speak but instead choked on the spittle that had been accumulating

in a pool on the bottom of my mouth and began coughing convulsively. “ACK HACK Cough...Cough...Cough...ug...pardon...AWWGGCK!”

“What? You don’t believe me? Oh ye of little imaginative vocabulary! I’ve actually been planning this for some time now. You see, where we stand right now, in the Northern Hemisphere, on the North American continent, *right here...at this moment...*not only is it nighttime, but it’s also *winter*, which means that the surface of the Earth, or at least our little portion of it, saints be praised, is currently pointing in the exact opposite direction of the side that is facing the sun, which means, of course, that it’s pointing *away from the sun*. So I realized that if I get down on my hands and knees and PUSHED, I mean really *pushed*, pushed with all my might, I’d be able to send the Earth hurtling directly into the center of the sun, thus incinerating everything precious mankind holds dear, and in the process ridding myself of this pesky stinging sensation I’ve got pulsating in my lip. And since that stinging was visited upon me courtesy of *YOU*, I figure you’ve got no choice but to help me in my task.”

“Oh...okay...I guess what’s fair is fair...but, um, why do you have to do this at Homeland Outfitters? Is it like the exact geographic point you plotted for, uh, maximum payload efficiency...or something?”

“Because I’m *here!* Lydia and I are going out to dinner tonight. Now get over here!” She grabbed me by the wrist and swung me around to her side of the counter. Lydia was counting change. Petrovna pulled me down to the floor and once I was on all fours, mimicking her position, she said, “Now *push!*”

I started pushing really hard beside her, but no matter how hard I pushed, we didn’t seem to be making much headway. I told her so: “No matter how hard I try, I only seem to be able to push my *body up*, and not the *Earth down*.”

“That’s just an illusion! Keep going! You’re doing great!”

I looked over at her, but didn’t dare to discontinue my pushing duties. “So I punched you in the face, huh? Um...I’m really sorry I...did that. I was really drunk and to be honest, I don’t even remem—”

Momentarily pushing down while balancing herself with only one hand, she brushed her hair back. “Think nothing of it. I thought it was funny. You smacked me so hard my glasses actually landed in some guy’s drink halfway across the bar, and he was too disgusted to finish it so he let me have it. It even still had the cherry in it.”

“Oh well in that case...” I stopped and thought. “Boy this is hard work. Planet moving. Just out of curiosity...why did I punch you in the face?”

“Because I insulted your God.”

*“Henry Miller??”*

She laughed. Around us I could hear the sound of feet shuffling, voices that were neither mine nor Petrovna’s, and some kind of beeping sound. Then there was a crash that seemed to come from outside, a loud click and the simultaneous dowsing of every light in the store. Then I remembered.

## INTERLUDE

My mind swam.

On the night my sister was born, my brother and I slept in my parents' enormous bed with my father, while my mom stayed overnight in the hospital. Despite everything all the grown-ups kept telling me, I didn't really know what was happening. I didn't know what we were waiting for. An event, a place, an attack, the first glimpse of a sailboat's mast puncturing the distant horizon, a person, *what?* As I lay there in the dark, unable to sleep, I could hear strange sounds, wooden sounds, sounds that made me feel splinters, sounds that made the bed sheets seem coarse, their presence suffocating. I kicked them to my feet and woke my dad to ask him what the noises were.

“What noises?” he mumbled.

“Creaking noises. Coming from the walls...”

“That's just the house settling...” He rolled over and went back to sleep, pulling half of the blankets with him to his side of the bed as his massive, adult body tumbled over. My younger brother stirred slightly, then went back to dreaming about Voltron, or Thundercats, or some other piece of cultural debris floating down from the eruption softly into his curly-haired head. Maybe he was dreaming about all the episodes in which the bad guys won. Those episodes were usually the first of a two-parter.

“That's just the house settling,” I repeated the words in my mind. I pictured, with all the power of my four-year-old imagination, the construction of the house, a construction the final act of which consisted solely of placing on top, with a crane, a roof (autonomous and complete) which would just sit there without any kind of connection to

the walls it rested atop whatsoever.

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The sleek yet boxy, futuristic yet ancient-seeming plastic Nintendo controller rested comfortably in my hands at the same time it caused those hands to develop a callousness no eight year old should be expected to understand, much less possess. I sat on the itchy carpeting in front of the television screen, “too close,” as was the popular parental chastisement of the day, and watched—no wait—watched is too passive a word, I *explained to myself*, through my eyes, ears and hands, to my brain, what it meant to be alive. That’s what I was doing, I was explaining through mental action, without words, everything an eight year old could ever possibly want to know about the secrets of creation.

The image on the screen was that of a flat little world, with skies as blue as on the clearest day imaginable in Southern California, which was somewhere out there, through the front door, over the rooftop, wherever.

“I hope you know, son, that the Laker game is on in fifteen minutes. So be prepared to turn off your little game.”

The voice came from somewhere that was not the television. It was the voice of evil, a.k.a. my dad. As he walked by with a cold can of Coors, the king of beers, he let loose this apocalyptic declaration, this decree of devastation, then sat down on the couch behind me.

“But Dad! I’m only in World Four! I’ve still got six lives left! I haven’t even gotten to my favorite level yet! The one where everything is covered in snow! But Dad,” last ditch effort: “*What about the Princess??*”

“I don’t give a shit about any princesses!” Dad turned the aluminum tab on the

beer can to the side, so as not to get it caught in his mustache. He always turned it to the side. He never just took it off. “There sure as hell ain’t any princesses on the Lakers.”

“Oh yeah, then why does that one guy call himself *Magic*?” I muttered under my breath.

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

My mom was in the kitchen, doing kitchen things. The sound of something frying could be heard. I knew I couldn’t count on her to get Dad to listen to reason. She was just as bad as he was. I was approaching a state of deep Nintendo meditation, I was seeing things on a nearly sub-atomic level, and I was pretty sure the universe was actually, at its most basic, made out of pixels, but now it was as good as ruined. The pixels, the universe, everything would be shattered as soon as I was forced to hit the power switch. The ultra-saturated color orgy illuminated my face as I tried to make the most of my last moments of virtual freedom. I had big dreams, bigger than the clouds, dreams that were inherently impossible for parents to understand, since a parent was, by definition, *one who had forfeited his or dreams for the sake of creating another potential dreamer*.

My palms were getting sweaty, which made the controller slippery. “This is it,” I thought to myself, “I’m losing my grip on my dreams.” Even at eight years old I could see clearly what they were trying to do to me. I felt the seams of the controller’s plastic casing, and the little holes on the bottom that housed tiny metal screws. I knew the controller had a physical being. I knew that it was grey, black and red. I knew that it was made in Japan. But I knew also that it was more like Hermes, that god-guy who was the messenger between Mount Olympus and the puny humans below. It was the mediator between light and shadow. I set it down at my knees with something like these thoughts

in mind.

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The walls all seemed to be *made out of* books, like a Cartesian cage of self-knowledge, or something. Or a cage of other people's knowledge of themselves. In any case, a cage that reinforced the burdensome possibility of dualities, and that was confining enough. The question was this: were there walls, or were there no walls? Because the thing was, if every book was a brick, and these walls of books extended all the way up to the ceiling, all you'd have to do to dismantle them would be to pull the constituent parts out one by one. Language was, in the end, poor mortar. In other words: to topple the walls you would have to *read the books*. There was really no other way around it.

The walls all came together to form what was, in the end, a labyrinth, but a really easy to figure out labyrinth, a labyrinth in which every turn, every corridor, leads to an exit. It was pretty clever, actually. With this setup the very notion of the Goal is called into question and made ambiguous, like a photograph in which you can't tell if the sun is rising or setting.

Every once in a while a person would walk by, dragging the soles of their tennis shoes on the carpet in careless flirtation with static electricity and looking at the books as if they feared they were about to be verbally insulted by them. They'd check the time on their cell phones then reach for one, an extended arm gliding across the narrow space of the aisle like a monochrome rainbow of flesh tone. Then they'd pull out a book; maybe, in this case, a yellow one. Maybe a red one. Under the harsh fluorescent lights all colors became equally hallucinatory and compelling.

In one corner of the labyrinth of books you would also find the southeast corner

of the larger building that housed the network: the public library. This building was made out of actual bricks, not symbolic ones, and it withstood the elements to such an extent that the inner lives of books within were able to carry forth with at least the confidence that they wouldn't be blown about haphazardly or rained on in an overblown display of pity. At least they could count on *that*.

Another thing they could count on was the Dewey Decimal System. For the most part, they knew who their neighbors were going to be day in and day out, to the left and right, and also, to a lesser degree of certainty, above and below. They were like atoms dispersed across the universe, held together by impossibly precise laws and an invisible overlapping of sensibilities. Theirs was a nebulous world full of concrete things, floating around and bumping into one another like during the formation of solar systems; catastrophic yet beautiful.

There would frequently be flies buzzing about in the corner. They were aimless as the carefree library patrons of bygone days. They buzzed in figure-eight's, or spelled-out words, whole sentences, even, in indecipherable languages you could only learn if you spent half your life hovering around waste. Maybe they were in the process of translating. Since they were in the sociology section maybe they were translating books on the sex lives of teenagers, or books with titles like "The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?" Really it was impossible to speculate.

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Sometimes, in the middle of the night, sleeping all alone, in the dark, under inhaling ceilings and above exhaling floors, when the line between dreaming and deeply-sunken mattress introspection becomes sufficiently blurred, the sound of a lone airplane flying thousands of feet in the sky above my blankets and pillow will be enough to set in

motion the chain of thoughts that lead down the tighter and tighter, spiral-twisting corridor of the dead, to the word *death*, to feelings that cannot be contained within that triply-steepled and conveniently sharpened little syllable.

Death.

The word *death*.

I have never for a second really believed that I, or anyone else, is ever going to die. Wait a minute. Maybe what I meant to say is that I've known all along that we're all doomed.

Are these feelings a true awareness of death? Knowledge of an impending something, a black and useless inky form at the end of a road lined with flowers, beneath a blank expanse overflowing with stars and space stations? The sound of an airplane being hurtled across the sky leads immediately to the thought of an airplane crashing through my roof and into my bed. I think, "Oh geez," my head hazy and my emotions emoting unchecked, "What if *this is it*?" I try to think of pleasant things: of fluffy clouds in the sky over a lush Tibetan plateau, of undergrad fashion girls dancing drunkenly to Cyndi Lauper songs, of snow angels.

Instead of trying to clear my mind, I try to prettify it. Sometimes it works, but sometimes the clouds melt, the plateau splits open in a great roar of fire and melodrama, the undergrads become demonic and won't give me their phone numbers, and the snow angels have their wings clipped before my very eyes.

I feel panic. I clutch the blankets as if they were the very substance of Life itself. This is my current state of helplessness before something as commonplace and boring as the sound of an airplane and the astronomically miniscule odds that it is somehow barreling down upon *me*.

This kind of fear has nothing to do with logic. It's a tiny little thing, it happens all the time, to everyone, and when I wake up the next morning it's not even all that likely that I'll remember it at all. But somehow it's still there. It's always there.

Even the living present is nothing more than memories getting ahead of themselves.

## THE ROMAN AQUEDUCT

Baxter and I spent the first part of the day in question shoplifting from thrift stores. I made out pretty well; a few sweaters, a Nintendo game and a pair of pink-framed plastic sunglasses with a Carl's Jr. logo on the side. The sky was white; the color of indecision. By the middle of the afternoon we were back at the apartment.

"Dirt is *not* dirty, man," I said without looking up from my drawing pad, placing a comic-hipster emphasis on the word *man*.

"What do you mean dirt's not dirty? Of course it's dirty! It's dirt!"

"You're right, you're right. Dirt is literally dirty, meaning of a dirt-like nature or possessed of the qualities and/or characteristics of dirt, but what I'm saying is it's not unsanitary."

"Not UNSANITARY?" He was up-in-arms. He dropped the stack of burned CD's he'd been looking through in order to give our conversation the full attention it deserved.

I was sitting on the asbestos tile floor clutching a black ballpoint pen, drawing an angel wearing the exact pair of Carl's Jr. sunglasses I'd pilfered only about an hour previous. I, myself, was wearing the sunglasses as I sat there, indoors, on an overcast day. The implication was obvious. My relationship with the angels was like that of the funhouse mirror's in the traveling carnival with the prettiest girl in town.

"That's right. It's the most natural thing in the world. In fact it *is* the world. The world's *made out of dirt*."

"I don't care what the fuck you say," he exclaimed while jumping up from the couch, "I'm gonna go wash my hands."

A fresh layer of dust kept everything in the apartment warm, tenants included, covering us in a soft blanket of forgetfulness. I think Baxter forgot that aside from being made out of water, human beings are also made of dirt. And we certainly aren't made out of soap, that's for sure. I'll use this opportunity to say that Baxter is a compulsive hand washer. The guy must wash his hands at least ten times a day, which may not seem like a lot, but I know that I sometimes, fairly frequently in fact, go whole days at a time without washing my hands once, and as far as I'm concerned it's a hell of an annoying albatross he's got around his neck. At least it would be to me. He's a highly intelligent individual for the most part. He's got a degree in Creative Nonfiction, an impressively esoteric field of study, to be sure. Just call this his obligatory personal idiosyncrasy for the sake of interesting characterization. A lot of these things people do consciously, I believe. They feel this burning desire way down in their gut to "flesh themselves out," so they go and they buy a pet iguana, or else they develop an endearing disorder. And of course, the dramatic success of these various character quirks depends largely on the innovation and creativity of the individual. A race of bad performance artists, that's what we are. Shakespeare said actors, or players, or whatever, Milan Kundera said poets, I say performance artists. *Que sera, sera.*

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Through the window and over the rooftops I saw trees swaying slowly in the wind. Their rhythmic back-and-forth motion was like that of two lovers embraced in a slow dance in a bedroom, the door closed, the light dim and the lovers' eyes full of tears. It was the last dance of the tall trees in the dying light of day, and for a brief instant I was hypnotized, and in that instant I was only what I saw. A barrel, a tunnel leading back and forth, with neither way definitively pegged as backward and neither as forward, a

compressed, instantaneous history of the universe. The history of the universe is written in the stars, and the history of a human's life is written in the unrecordable blank space between the seer and the seen. I thought of a billboard I'd seen months ago; "*She looked eighteen*" is no excuse. Statutory rape is a crime to all but Nature herself, who invented it. I heard the sound of running water from across the apartment, accompanied by scrubbing and splashing. I realized that I hadn't checked the mailbox yet that day, so I went outside to do so. I lifted the rust-colored lid (or was that actual rust?), stuck my hand in, brushed off any passing notions of spiders lying in wait, evil mail spiders, and grabbed the two or three items lovingly stuffed inside. All junk, naturally. One of them was one of those *Have You Seen Us?* Fliers that, if you stop to think about it for even a fraction of a second, if you allow yourself an ounce of sympathy for the black-and-white and purgatorious, is really one of the most heartbreaking documents of our times, if nothing else than for the fact that nobody cares. These little cries for help will end up on the bottoms of kitchen trash bins in homes all across America, right on top of used coffee filters and half-eaten Pop Tarts, equal in vulgarity to dog-eared copies of last week's *People* magazine and the people who fawn over them. I took in the tiny snapshot of a sixteen-year-old Mexican girl who had been missing for two years now, when suddenly I felt the faintest flicker of a presence at my ankles. I looked down and saw that it was a pudgy little kitty-cat, all dusty-colored and with a fluffy coat made of affection it was apparently planning on rubbing off all over the bottom of my pant legs.

I said, "Awww...look at you! Where'd you come from?"

He said, "Purrrr..." and smashed his face into the sides of my tennis shoes as if he were trying to rub out sleepy sand. I set the mail down on the sidewalk and knelt down beside my new friend. The walkway was coarse against the palms of my hands, a dry,

barely-maintained hedge tickled my backside. A patchy No Man's Land of a grass lawn stretched out before us between apartment doors that stared each other down as had the two assassinated towers of the World Trade Center, and I couldn't help but envision a similar fate awaiting us here, only it'd take a lot less than two commercial jetliners to do the job. More like a pair of fat kids with ADHD and pogo sticks, or something. I shuddered at the thought. The cat's whole body shuddered with the mechanical intensity of its own purring. I've always thought that feline purring and human laughter were neck-and-neck in the race for Greatest Animal Expressions of Joy on Earth. A dog wagging its tail? Light years behind. I gave the cat a few solid strokes along his spine and felt a healthy creature, a happy creature, but just as I reached for his forehead to give him a nice, satisfying scratching with the tips of my fingernails I caught a glimpse of a sight that caused my hand to instinctively recoil in horror and disgust. This poor cat was missing an eye. The right eye was perfectly fine and for all I knew the left one was fine, as well, but I'd never be able to confirm or deny this, since it seemed to have fallen out of its carrying case and gotten lost. And that's all there was to it. A hole. A void. An abyss, and the cat didn't even seem to notice, or else he'd lived without it for so long he no longer paid it any mind. The blackness of that hollowed-out eye socket was so stark, so pure, so intense and so complete, and the cat seemed so content, that my initial reaction of pity quickly gave way to waves upon waves of affection. If the loss of an eye can have such a negligible impact on a creature's vitality and well-being, then the real loss was suffered by this cat only in the spit-shined and superclean realm of vanity, and if he chose to continue on with his life soliciting rubdowns from strangers, chasing birds into the far, far, far away stratosphere, and stretching out upon the sun-heated sidewalks of a world in which the refusal to understand and acknowledge the feline philosophy of hedonism and

smug solipsism is taken as a matter of course and even *pride*, then let this cat wear his deformity as a badge of honor. In a world of cosmetics and chronic depression, let his happiness shine out, let it drip forth from the very same gaping wound that wise and well-seen eye was plucked from only five minutes prior, for all I knew. Maybe the period of adjustment was that short. Maybe his eye was obliterated the instant I laid eyes on him, the wheels of his symbolic martyrdom set in motion by a glance, a brush of color and light, a single note in an opera of sight, then darkness. He was ugly, but he was happy. If the price for happiness is one eyeball, then just let me know where to get in line, and I'll be there with a bottle of painkillers and a spoon. I'll wear the dislodged eyeball on my sleeve. It'll be my favorite new accessory. Stereoscopic vision, I can frolic through fields without you for a thousand years and never once lament the loss of depth perception, for I'll know that with that loss has come the re-bestowal of innocence. Lodged in a perpetual wink (and what is a wink but a gesture of knowing?) this cat and I will be singin' in the rain while everyone else is scrambling for their umbrellas, and then once they have them they'll only use them to impale each other. Two eyes, two eyes, to witness the miracle of your senseless demise! Hell, while I'm at it maybe I'll lop off an ear too. Maybe van Gogh wasn't just an obnoxious simpleton, after all. Maybe he was on to something. I'll rid myself of every superfluous organ and appendage, I'll streamline my entire being, I'll...ahem, sorry. I'm getting carried away.

So this cat and I are spending some quality time together on the walkway in front of the apartment, and by this time I've christened him One-Eyed Willy. I'm a product of my generation, what can I say?

"You're a real punk rocker, aren't you?" I asked One-Eyed Willy with a slight note of cutesy condescension I knew he'd understand was only out of genuine affection,

as all the while I'm scratching him behind the ears and contemplating the philosophical implications of our nascent partnership.

One-Eyed Willy said, "Purrrr..." and rolled around on the concrete like he was a roll of toilet paper and he was unrolling himself and rolling himself up again over and over. A flock of birds flew by in the sky overhead and I admired One-Eyed Willy as he admired the flock.

"One day, One-Eyed Willy," I signed, "One day."

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Back when I had a car, long, long ago, I was constantly assailed by the acute urge to run over pedestrians just because I *could*, just because it was possible. It was a youthfully oblivious little fantasy, one brought on by too much Camus and, if not an actual desire for some kind of higher form of freedom, then at least a *desire* for this desire. It's really cute, actually, all of us little existentialists running around with heads full of moral dilemmas and nowhere to go. There were dozens of us. We would meet up in the coffee shops—we really did that—as if there were some innate connection between coffee and ideas, and then, once we were old enough, the bars, which made slightly more sense, since while we were composing our little Venn diagrams of Arthur Rimbaud and Richard Hell and the Voidoids, we could at least be getting fucked up in the process, safe in the knowledge that we were steadily moving toward the hour in which our courage was built up enough to feel each others' bodies underneath our t-shirts. I thought about this for a minute, then I thought about swans, then I sprung up from the concrete and jettisoned my body back into the apartment. "See ya Willy!"

"Meow."

"Hey Baxter! I want to smash a storefront with a rock!" The words exploded out

of my mouth like a smoky mass of bats out of a cave.

Baxter turned towards me and smiled. “Are you serious? I was just thinking the *exact same thing!*”

“Really?”

“Yeah, man.”

“For reals?”

“Uh huh.”

“Cross your heart and hope to die?”

“YES!”

“Stick a million-billion needles in your eye?”

“Yes! God, man! I’m dead serious. I was just sitting here thinking about all the glass shop fronts on Coleridge Boulevard, and how *clean* they all are, and it just makes me want to stick my fist straight through one of them.” His conviction was surprisingly convincing.

I was practically jumping up and down. “Could such a thing be possible?”

“Sure. But I mean, I wouldn’t *really* punch one. Do you know how *painful* that would be? Probably break every bone in my hand. But if we got ahold of a nice, heavy rock...”

“No,” I shook my head and closed my eyes tightly, “I mean, is it really possible that both of us were thinking such similar thoughts at the same time? I mean, *what are the odds?* I was out there petting this neighbor cat and—”

“Really?” Baxter interjected. “Was he cute?”

“Adorable. He only has one eye. Anyway, I was out there petting this neighbor’s cat and you were in here washing your hands or whatever and—*wait a minute*—why do

you want to punch a store front just because it's *clean*?"

"Well," he went into thoughtful mode, "I'm not entirely sure." He repositioned his glasses and scratched his stomach. "I see these big walls of glass but they're so completely spotless that it's almost like I *don't* see them, you know what I mean? I can hardly even see my own reflection, all I can see is these stupid fucking mannequins looking ridiculously sexy and self-confident on the other side. Of course they're confident! They're inanimate! And they seem to be saying, 'We are the representations of what you supposedly strive towards,' but fuck that shit! Sometimes I run my fingertips down along the surface of the glass, just to smudge it up a little bit, just so I know it's really there, because I'm *glad* it's there. I'm glad this division exists between me and the stupid fucking bullshit being sold inside, but I think the glass would exist even more, it'd have a more concrete existence in my head, if it were shattered, if I could witness it exploding into life and then cascading down and assembling itself on the ground in new and spontaneous patterns. Then I'd really be able to *see* it."

I ran my fingers along the curve of my chin and neck, and in so doing tilted my head back and looked up at the ceiling. There was nothing to see up there in the whiteness. "Sometimes I feel like there's nothing truer in the whole world than the memory of seeing yourself reflected in a storefront window in a city you no longer live in."

"So this cat really only had one eye?"

"Yup."

"What did he have where the other eye was supposed to be?"

"A hole."

"Gross. So why do *you* want to smash a shop front?"

“I think it’d be fun.”

At this point there was a break in the conversation and both of us fell silent, as if ashamed of something we had said, or ashamed at the very possibility of thinking the same thoughts at the same time, however different they undoubtedly had been in reality. Words had made them the same, and the intimacy of this incorporeal intersection had proved itself to be too tiring an obstacle to mount. As if on cue the telephone rang. I stepped over the mattress and crossed the room to where the telephone rested on the floor, all coiled up in its cord like a sleeping snake. I lifted the receiver and positioned the smooth plastic aside my face.

“Hello.”

“Hi. It’s Lydia. What’s goin’ on, dude?”

“Hey Lydia. Um, oh nothing much. I’m just spending some quality time with my evil double from the Mirror Universe.”

“Huh?”

“Baxter.”

“Hahaha! Goddamn! Listen, dude, what are you doing tonight?”

“Umm...nothing that I know of. Got no plans. Free as a bird. Why...what’s the story, morning glory?”

“Well...as you well know, today is the one month anniversary of me being single, so I want to get all my closest friends together and celebrate.”

“Oh yeah. One month of Devin-free living. How do you feel?”

“I feel great ‘cuz tonight I’m gonna get *fucked up* with my friends and I’m gonna dance like an idiot, and *you’re* gonna be there!”

“Oh...um...”

“What time do you work tomorrow?”

“Noon.”

“Perfect! Me too! So you can totally go out tonight!”

“Yeahhh...”

“You will come, right? It’ll mean a lot to me. This last month has been really hard...and I need moral support!”

“Well when you put it like that how can I possibly say no?”

“AWESOME! Meet me at my house around ten-ish. We’ll hang out there for a while, drink rum, then we’re all gonna go to the Roman Aqueduct!”

“To dance? On a Tuesday night? I thought that place was just a bar...”

“*Hell yeah, man!* Tuesday night is ‘Irrigation of Funk’ night. They’ve got a DJ and it’s a big dance party.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“So I’ll see you tonight, right? *Don’t flake out on me, alright.* Oh and invite your evil double, too.”

“Huh?”

“Baxter.”

“Oh yeah.”

“See you tonight.”

“Later skater.”

I put the phone down then swung around to face Baxter. “Did you catch all that? You wanna go to the Aqueduct tonight?”

Baxter made a face, showed his teeth and sucked in his spit as if to say, “I don’t know, man.” Then he said, “I don’t know, man...”

“Why not? We can ride our bikes to Lydia’s then get a ride downtown... We’ll get plenty of free booze...it’ll be *something to do*...”

“Yeah, I don’t know. I work at twelve tomorrow...”

“So do I,” I interrupted, “So does Lydia. It’ll be a huge collective Homeland Outfitters hangover. Our heads will throb in unison. We’ll take turns puking in the bathroom.”

“Well first of all, my bike is broken. Second, Madeline and I are supposed to talk on the phone tonight...”

“She’s in *Philadelphia*. She’s gone. She flew away. Are you guys still dating or what? Let’s just walk to Lydia’s house. It’s not raining and it’s not that far. The world is calling and we’re only young once, so we’d better waste it while we can!”

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The world was floating away, flying to meet the universe, trying to dissipate into the empty spaces between constellations, dying to leave it’s mark upon the unintelligibly vast cosmos and then retire to a life of leisure and scholarly contemplation, crying out with a pain that needs to be heard in order to be realized, sighing in anticipation of the day when it is suddenly clear that the end *has* in fact been reached, and that the now-withered dreams and aspirations of a lifetime lay scattered and brittle, dry, dying, windswept, flying.

The earth is indeed flat, and it’s but one step in a great stairway, the step below being a lesser earth, the step above, a greater one. Baxter and I walked through the neighborhoods after dark, what we may call the Neighborhoods of Night, a step at a time, each previous step a lesser destination reached, each coming step a greater accumulation of the ongoing narrative struggle that is Life plus Consciousness. Our conversation was

illuminated faintly by porch lights and canopied by trees that grew from the sidewalks and met high above the center of the street. The houses here made me think of after school specials, of childhood as portrayed by an era and a generation that was already on the wane by the time my childhood began. We were each sipping a can of BZZZZ!!, which is a combination of malt liquor plus energy drink, lots of caffeine. If I was going to dance tonight, I was going to need it. Inside the houses an occasional human-like movement could be seen behind the shutters and curtains, and in almost every house the soft glow of a television. “I wonder how many of them are watching the same show,” inquired Baxter solemnly. The air was pleasantly brisk.

When we got to the general area where Lydia’s house was supposed to be, I had to stop and think for a second. Baxter grew impatient. “What’s the matter? You *have* been to her house before, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, once or twice.”

“Was that when you guys had your little dates?”

“They weren’t dates, and she lives...right there!” I pointed authoritatively to a tall, skinny two storied house wedged between similar houses on either side, with a long concrete stairway leading up to the front door. We climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell. *Dinnnnng-donnnng!* Soon the sound of movement could be heard from inside. “We’re about to meet a lot of new and potentially annoying people...are you ready?”

Baxter straightened up his posture and his face assumed a hardened expression of mock-seriousness, in contrast to his messy blonde hair. “*I’m ready.*”

Just then there was the sound of a deadbolt being turned, a little fat brassy sound, and the door swung open. “Hey guys! I’m so glad you came! C’mon, everyone’s upstairs!” It was Lydia, all four-feet, eleven-inches of her, a little asian bumblebee all

decked out in a teeny-tiny black tube dress and shiny mauve-colored leggings, all Homeland Outfitters official merchandise. “Take your shoes off, then follow me upstairs.” With that she darted up the carpeted stairway without, I think, touching a single step. We knelt down to unlace our shoes and once they were off we set them down amongst the dozen-or-so other pairs dotting the hardwood floor of the entryway. I took one last, long gulp of my can of BZZZZ!!, finishing it off. I held onto the can, though, for the effect. I was about to make a lot of first impressions, after all. Baxter went up first and, shiny aluminum piece of pop expressionism in tow, I followed close behind. As we got closer to the top of the stairs the sounds of laughter, garbled human speech, and other miscellaneous noises that could only be coming from a television set became audible. Through a short, dark hallway we traversed, following the noise and the light, until we found ourselves in a spacious, clean and orderly but not overly pompous living room full of young, mostly white, mostly fashionable, mostly attractive twenty-somethings. Numerous conversations found life and exploited it for all it was worth, or rather, from the mouths of these children of the post-industrial, pre-apocalyptic hemisphere of the individual, words shot forth in all directions, and sometimes these streams of words would intersect with the streams of words coming from other directions and collide in midair, thereby altering the trajectory and composition of both. We stood there, in the doorway, for several seconds, waiting for an opening, or a natural disaster, anything that would allow us to seamlessly integrate ourselves into the larger scene.

Just then, and without warning Lydia grabbed each of us by the hand, yanked us into the room, and, like a gracious hostess, with her phasers on stun, made all the necessary introductions for us. “Hi everyone,” I managed with a feeble wave of my hand. There was nothing left but to get down to mingling. Well, there were two things.

“Where’s the alcohol, Lydia, my little lunar princess?”

Lydia was dancing around with a gigantic toy microphone in front of the TV, into which she sang, “It’s on the counter next to the sink, *next to the sink*...help yourseeeeeeelf!” On the television there was some kind of stand-up comedian I wanted to strangle.

The kitchen was connected to the living room, but you knew you were in the kitchen once the carpet stopped and the linoleum started. I caught a glimpse of the tops of some bottles like they were the far-off towers and spires of a magnificent and highly advanced alien city at the far end of a harsh and unforgiving extraterrestrial terrain. (I guess the words “terrestrial” and “terrain” derive from the same source, the Latin *terra*. If so “extraterrestrial terrain” is kind of self-contradictory...) Obscuring my view of these bottles were two girls, one who looked like Bettie Page and one who looked like a page torn out of *The West Coast Lesbian Fashion Directory*. They each had what I presumed to be mixed drinks in their hands, one pink, the other cranberry-ish. I moved in to secure my prize.

“Hi there...so who knows where they hid the tequila in here?”

Bettie Page smiled seducto-condescendingly and with her free hand on her hip said, “There’s no tequila here, shorty.”

“Good. Tequila makes me sick. What are you guys drinking?”

“Vodka and cranberry.”

“Vodka and pink Kool-Aid.”

“Wow, really? Pink Kool-Aid?”

“Yeah, man,” said the lesbian archetype. “It’s all out on the counter. Go for it.”

I figured I had a lot of catching up to do, so first I found a shot glass and downed

three shots in quick succession: vodka, vodka, rum, then I mixed myself a vodka and pink Kool-Aid I could cultivate while I waited for the shots to meet up with the BZZZZ!! in my stomach. Once there they could all convene and do what they needed to do to expedite the speedy distribution of the alcohol into the far-flung reaches of my bloodstream. I looked around and saw a few familiar faces, but mostly strangers. The few that I knew all worked at Homeland Outfitters along with Baxter, Lydia and myself, and this was the first time I'd seen most of them outside of the drudgery of retail clothing purgatorio. We had now entered the drudgery of youthful social interaction purgatorio. Baxter was having a conversation with Dylan, one of our co-workers, about the appalling conditions of the backstock room, and Lydia was still singing and dancing with the microphone with a bunch of people gathered around her, the life of the party, as they say. "Whoops! My boob just popped out! No one look!" My two fallback friends being occupied, I saw no other recourse than to take my drink and sit down on an empty spot on the couch. I sipped the sickly-sweet concoction and as I felt the first waves of intoxication gently wash over me like I was lying on the beach and the tide was coming in, I became aware of a girl sitting to my right. I acted like I didn't notice her, but I stole a glance at my first opportunity. She was slightly nerdy; skinny with glasses and a mass of brown hair plopped atop her head like a piping-hot plate of spaghetti. The room was becoming a parasite for my energy. Everywhere I looked I saw something that seemed to zap it right out of me, even as I became more and more intoxicated. A poster of James Dean on the wall, zap! *100 Poems by E.E. Cummings*, zap! Double-breasted jackets and scarves, zap! A pink table lamp, a flat-screened TV, zap, zap! Just as I was about to get up to make myself another drink, the girl with glasses turned to me and spoke:

"Lydia told me about you."

“Um...what?”

“That’s right, so don’t think you’ve got any secrets around here, mister! The jig is up before it even begins! The world is a cold and unmercifully knowable and surprisingly readable open book! Let’s open it to a random page, shall we?” She cleared her throat. “Chapter seventy-seven. On the genealogy of unicorns within the context of the gridded two-dimensional picture plane, a not-so-modest mistake of the twentieth century...”

“I think I’ve read this book...”

The girl downed her drink in one gulp and threw the glass over her shoulder. It landed with a clink on the carpet behind the couch and miraculously did not break. She had laughter behind her face, behind her smile, and the dam was going to burst at any moment.

“Hey,” she looked around to make sure no one was spying on us, I guess, “Do you want to have some *fun*?”

I stared directly into the sun, thunderstruck, as her glasses reflected all the light in the room, all the laughter, all the veiled despair, all the tomfoolery, but soon was able to regain my composure. “*Fun*? Gee, I don’t know. I’m not really too into fun, I don’t know about you...”

“*What*? Not into fun??”

Lydia appeared beside us. “What do you mean you don’t like fun?”

“I think it’s kind of boring, if you must know. There’s not much to be gotten out of it. Fun just isn’t very fun...”

They had me surrounded now, pinned to the wall. Lydia’s body wanted to dance. “What do you *mean* fun’s not fun? *FUN IS THE FUNNEST THING THERE IS!!* Wait a minute—do you think she’s asking you if you want to have *sex* with her?” The girl with

glasses blushed slightly but otherwise didn't miss a beat. A creature of wealth and power she remained, her façade forever shaking but never breaking, maintaining a delicate balance, an equilibrium. She stretched her arm straight out and rested her palm flat on the wall over my shoulder, and there she hovered over me like a storm cloud.

“No. I thought we were talking about Fun in the abstract. Fun itself as a noun, a concept, a Platonic form, a Hegelian sitcom, with a capital *F*, correct me if I'm wrong...”

“*YOU'RE WRONG!*” The girl with glasses poked me in the chest.

“Ouch!”

“Lydia told me that you like...”

I braced myself, clenched my teeth, attempted to protect my vital organs from the incoming onslaught.

“...*to draw!*”

“Huh?” I opened one eye cautiously just to make sure the house wasn't a pile of rubble at our feet, then I opened the other, then gradually I allowed my body to relax, piece by piece; one shoulder, then another, fists, kneecaps, lungs, tailbone...

“Yeah dude!” Lydia was drunk. “I told her you're a totally rad artist!”

“Really? Gee thanks, Lydia.” Then I turned to the girl with glasses. “She flatters me, really. I mean sure, I *enjoy* drawing, I use it to while away the slow, lonely hours of my pitiful existence, to give meaning to my solitude, to validate my suffering...and yes, I *do* have a degree in the fine arts from an accredited four-year university, but ‘totally rad’? I'd hardly say...”

“Don't be modest! I *know* you! I know all about you! I know your strengths, which are multitude, and your weaknesses, which are like unto a mustard seed; scant.” She was beaming. Somehow, without my even being aware of it, we had both moved into

the kitchen and were pouring ourselves reverse-ratio drinks, that is, three-quarters hard liquor and one-quarter mixer, just for a splash of color. I'm not sure what I put in mine, but it was green. Hers appeared to be glowing, but then again, so was everything else in the room. She went on: "I thought maybe we could draw together..." She stopped short. I couldn't believe it. It was almost like a flicker of coyness out of the volcano, but like a blip on a radar screen, it only appeared for a second, and was gone. She looked down towards the ground, but then pointed her eyes up until they met mine. They were green like a serpent, green like an 8-bit video game floating castle in the sky, green like a mangled wire coat hanger. Maybe they were kind of brownish, too. I bit my lip in anticipation of her next move. She opened her mouth as if to say something, but all she did was inhale deeply, filling up her chest, and scamper away. I stood there with my drink not knowing what, or if, to think.

Baxter was still talking to Dylan and also a gigantic Mexican football player who had recently joined the congregation. I moved in their direction, but just as I was preparing something witty to say by way of introduction, Lydia's voice boomed out, seemingly from everywhere at once. I looked all around, then saw her over by the stereo. She had plugged her microphone into it and was now addressing the room like a high school principal, omnipresently and with a tinge of abuse of authority in her tone. "Hey everyone, listen up! We're going to the Aqueduct in like five minutes...who's driving and who needs a ride?? We are going to have FUN, that's right...*FUN!* Even you, Mister Partypooper." She pointed right at me and several people snickered, the girl with glasses included.

"Hey! What did *I* do? I was just *playing with language!* It's an *art*, not a *science*, you know!" I felt like I had to say something.

“Goddamn!! Alright, alright! You know we love you, man! Now c’mon everyone, let’s get downstairs and get *outta here!*!”

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When I was in kindergarten I went to a private Catholic school. It had all the grades all lumped together in the same institution, under the same God-concept, pre-school through high school, and there were nuns walking around all over the place. I don’t remember much from those days. I remember learning about time, about how it supposedly moves forward at a constant rate, and that two clocks, even if they’re in different rooms (assuming they’re both functioning properly), will always tell you that the same amount of time has passed. The clocks don’t get to interpret the quantity of time that goes by. If one clock says, “There! Did you see that? Feel it? That was fifteen minutes,” then another clock can’t possibly say, “I beg to differ, my friend, but to me that felt more like twenty-five minutes!” One of the clocks has to be wrong. They can’t both be right. I also remember learning that if you mix red and white together, you get pink. I learned this fact, the ground zero for my life as an artist, on Valentine’s Day. It had rained all day so we didn’t get to go outside, not even for recess, but that didn’t bother us much since we had the Valentine Card exchange and other interesting activities to occupy us. One of the things we did was make strawberry ice cream floats. We’d take the strawberries, which were red, and vanilla ice cream and milk, which was white, and mix it all together, and presto! a treat the color of which was fitting for the particular holiday that happened to fall on that specific day. All the kids were so excited because they loved the way the stuff tasted, naturally, but what interested me most was this completely new color that you ended up with. Where’d the red go? Where’d the white go? At first I couldn’t fathom the transformation I’d witnessed with my very own eyes, but then it

struck me. *They're both still there.* Neither one went anywhere I felt a surge of emotion in my little five-year-old chest. Even then I knew I had grasped something fundamental, something essential. Later that afternoon, when school was out, as I was on my way to meet up with my parents in the parking lot, walking through the rain with a bellyful of pink goo, hopping over puddles, I saw these two older kids, high schoolers, a boy and girl. The boy was swinging his backpack around with his arms outstretched, spinning around in an obvious attempt to impress the girl. I felt slightly intimidated by the teenage whirlwind in my path, but I trudged on, and as I passed the boy his backpack struck me and I went down headfirst into a puddle, and my box of Valentine's Day cards flew open and all the cards spilled out into the puddle to share my sorry fate. The girl gasped, cursed the boy and hit him on the shoulder, and hurried down to my side to help me up and to collect the soiled mess. "You jerk! You've ruined this poor boy's Valentine's Day!" She chastised him, but I could tell she wasn't really mad at the boy. If anything, she was amused by the spectacle. I was sniffing but I knew I wouldn't cry. I *couldn't* cry. As the cards continued to soak up the rainwater, their colors began to run, flowing down into the puddle, swirling all around me, a hundred different colors mixing together, accepting each other without question, making no judgments.

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I ended up in a car with Dylan behind the wheel, the Mexican football player riding shotgun, and Baxter and I in the backseat. I looked out the window as we went over the Coleridge Bridge. The water below us was black as black velvet, the blackest substance on the planet, and atop this perfect and sleek blackness the lights from the skyscrapers just ahead were painted in a such a way that the brushstrokes never stopped moving, never dried, and never grew sick of mixing with each other to make newer,

newer, and newer still colors. It was a restless existence in the dark, no wonder they built bridges over it, since you're not supposed to touch a painting before it's dry. The surface of the bridge thumped rhythmically by, like the sound of giant termites screwing underneath the wheels of the car.

Beside me Baxter was moving about restlessly as well. He was putting on his own little water pageant, repositioning himself and redistributing his weight every few seconds. Finally he took off his seatbelt, which couldn't hope to contain him, anyway, and said, "I really need to wash my hands." I didn't reply or turn from the window so he went on. "I think I spilled some rum and Coke on them...they're all sticky...it's disgusting! Hey...who was that *girl* you were talking to?"

"Baxter," I addressed him without taking my eyes from the water, "I think I met a crazy girl."

"She had old lady arms."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Her arms were really skinny, but at the same time they had this excess skin that sort of hung down and jiggled when she moved around. They're pretty gross."

"Really?" I was slightly taken aback, not wanting to believe that any stranger who'd show an interest in me could possibly be anything less than stunning. "I didn't notice...I thought she had...*immaculate* arms."

"She has old lady arms."

In the front of the car they were having a conversation about *The Goonies*. "You know, man, you fucking *know*, if they made a sequel to that shit, every fucking person from our generation would be standing in line on opening day to see it."

"Even if it sucked?"

“Fuck yeah! That wouldn’t make any difference whatsoever. Just look at the new *Star Wars* movies...”

“Hey!” I butted in. I loved the new *Star Wars Trilogy*. I thought it was a beautiful inquiry into the existence of free will and predestination, their consequences, and so on.

“So,” Baxter continued, “Do you wanna screw this girl?”

“*I don’t know*. I just met her. I...I...” I had to stop and collect my thoughts with a butterfly net, because they were floating all over the place up above my head. “Look at the way the light from the skyscrapers is reflected on the surface of the river...it’s very...um...very...”

“Are you drunk, dude?”

“Yes. Yes, I think I am.”

“*Christ.*”

As we wound our way through the city streets the Mexican football player continued: “Yeah, Chester Copperpot is dead, but he’s got a son, or a grandson, I can’t remember which, and he’s got this *other* map...”

“A map leading to *what*?”

“To another fucking pirate treasure! And meanwhile all the Goonies have all grown up and moved out of Astoria, all but the little asthmatic kid with the inhaler...he’s the holdout...he’s got a successful law firm in Astoria...”

Dylan turned the steering wheel and acted as narrator: “All right, we’re here.” He parallel parked like a pro and we hopped out of the car. I stumbled a little bit but it was okay, because so did the entire city.

At the front of this place the words “The Roman Aqueduct” were painted on the window in pink, brown, and orange parallel strips of color that twisted all around to form

letters, and beside that was painted a Roman centurion with a spear in one hand, a beautiful contemporary-type woman in a tight dress in the other, and a deadly stoic grimace upon his face that seemed to say, “I’d never, not in a million years of being stuck on a desert island with this girl, ever let her get to me enough that I’d ever lose my imperial *cool*.” On either side of the entrance were large ionic pillars I suspected did nothing to contribute to the structural integrity of the building, but I let it go. I wasn’t here to critique facades...*or was I?*

As I attempted to make my way inside I smashed face-first into the chest of a big, square-chinned brute of a bouncer whom, I bet, harbored his fair share of bloody midnight fantasies involving the plundering of impoverished villages, the sexual exploitation of women and children, and yes, the torture and execution of Christ. “HALT! ID PLEASE!!”

“Oh! I’m so sorry! I didn’t see you there...I just walked right into you, didn’t I? I really do *apologize*, I can be so absent minded at times...so how’s your night going? Mine? Swell, just swell...My ID? Of course! Just let me dig it out...here it is...it’s a California ID but I’m sure you deal with these all the time...’crazy Californians’ I bet you say to yourself...Isn’t the picture just *awful*...thanks, I’ll just stow this baby safely away in my wallet, wouldn’t want to lose my driver’s license...after all, I *am* the designated driver tonight...oooOOOFFF...!” Just then, as if to counteract the force of crashing into the bouncer, whom I was now engaging in delightfully one-sided conversation, I felt a second blow, this one from behind, and I found myself flung inside by a pair of hands attached to a sturdy frame and a best-friend-like concern for my well-being.

“Jesus, man! What the hell are you doing? Let’s get inside already before they

kick you out,” Baxter exclaimed as he led me to a table and plopped me onto a chair opposite him.

“*What? What’d I do?*”

“He’s gonna know you’re wasted. Just show the man your ID, march in single file, and order yourself a drink. No trouble, dude.”

“Well I at least agree with that last part...I need a drink...”

“Yeah I *bet* you do. Just take it easy, okay? So’re you having fun?”

“I don’t know.”

The lights were dim. It was the kind of insipid and sickening bar lighting that made everyone look younger and more attractive, thereby giving everyone a better chance of going home with someone at the end of the night, thereby giving them more reason to come back and throw more money into the place, and thus the cycle of sex and money is forever renewed, like the contract the planets have signed with the sun. I looked all around, trying with a renewed sense of vitality to make some sense of it. To the right of the entrance was a long bar with two or three bartenders behind it, working diligently to keep up with the sizable demands of the clientele, flipping glasses in the air and catching them, pouring behind their backs, real pros. By the bar was a DJ table with turntables, giant speakers, and a guy with headphones stretched over a giant afro. From his fingertips flowed a steady stream of repetitive, beat-driven dance and hip-hop music. To the left was a row of tables, not an empty seat to be seen, each one being occupied by the tight-jeaned asses of human beings hopelessly entangled in the myth of perpetual youth and mirth, in the world of idolatry and surface charm, in the image of themselves as social beings, existing in a world of social forces and farces as real to them as the monsoons that ravage the East, as real as the hurricanes and tornadoes of our willful yet

indifferent symbolic mother and father the Earth and the Sky, that touch down and connect the two in horrific union, every bit as powerful, as unquestionable, and as unstoppable. Everyone was either talking, sipping, or exploding into laughter, that spasmodic bubbling over of the soul of joy that, under the wrong conditions, in the wrong lighting, can so easily seem to be transformed into the wail of the despairing insane. But at the moment I made no such judgment. I mean it. I was more or less one of them. I approached the bar and scrolled down the bulletin board marked “Specials.”

“What can I get you?”

“Ummm...what’s the ‘Supersonic Semiotic Soulsucking Centurion’?”

“Shot of tequila and Sriracha Hot Chili Sauce.”

“I’ll have one Supersonic Semiotic Soulsucking Centurion, please.”

“Three dollars.”

I handed the guy the money and grabbed the drink. It was red and thick, like a South African sunset. I dropped the glass onto the table between Baxter and myself, and it swiveled around before coming to rest. “What the hell is that?” said Baxter, his breath already smelling like gin and tonic.

“Tequila and Sriracha sauce.”

“*Holy Mary mother of Christ!*”

“I’m a little scared...”

“Why the fuck did you order that? Why the fuck does that *even exist?*”

“How could I not?”

From where I sat I had an unobstructed view of the dance floor, which was simply the open space between the bar and DJ on one side, and the tables on the other. Talk about economy of space. At this point there were a dozen or so people dancing with

various degrees of abandon, from barely-nodding-their-heads, to arms, head and body flailing about like a chew toy in the mouth of a small puppy. Two of the more animated of the fray were none other than Lydia and the girl with glasses. Lydia was jumping up and down and swinging her arms from side to side, taking up a considerable chunk of the floor for one so small, and in front of her was the girl with glasses, doing some sort of primitive firestarter pantomime, to the beat, and like a caveman witnessing the invention of fire itself, I was helpless to turn away from the spectacle before me. Then the fire saw me looking at it. “*Hey!*” she yelled at me as she waved, her arm like a tongue of flames. “*Come dance with us!*” But before I had a chance to give a reply she moved away from Lydia and suddenly appeared at our table. “Hi there... you gonna dance or what?”

“Hi. Well we only just *got* here. What’s your *name* anyway? Give me a chance to have my *first drink*.”

“First drink, *hell*,” Baxter butted in.

“First drink *at the bar*, thank you very much,” I retorted.

”Petrovna.” Her hair was all tousled and her glasses were on crooked, but her smile was as symmetrical as ever. Somehow she was now seated beside me, though I could have sworn there were no free chairs a second ago.

“Excuse me? Did you just sneeze or something...?”

“Petrovna. That’s my name. Have you ever thought of dancing as being like making three-dimensional drawings in space, with invisible ink? Using your body as the drawing implement? Isn’t that the most beautiful kind of art you can imagine—the kind that leaves no trace?”

“That all depends...hiccup!...excuse me...on your conception of...um, permanency. All art, really everything we ever make, or do, will eventually leave

no...no...no..."

"Trace?," she ventured.

"That's right. Not a trace. Not a sound. Not a whisper...God this music is *LOUD!*"

"I agree. Now let's dance!"

"Okay!" I reached for my Supersonic Semiotic Soulsucking Centurion and threw it back with all my might, swallowing it like medicine. I'm lucky I didn't swallow the glass whole while I was at it. Baxter looked on in anticipation and astonishment.

"Shit, man! How was it?"

I attempted to speak but no words came out of my mouth. When I was a kid I had one of those plastic green Ant Farms, but one day I left it in my bedroom window in the summertime and all the ants were flash-fried, leaving a Pompeii-like record of a dead civilization. That was how my throat and stomach felt at that moment. Like my fried ants inhabiting an eerily silent sandscape. Quickly I lunged for Baxter's gin and tonic, snatched it right out of his hand, and used its ice-cold liquidity to soothe the fire in my gut.

"What's the big idea?" roared an indignant Baxter.

"SSSSorry...HISSS...I'll get you another one...SSSCZZZZHHH..."

"Yeah, well...okay...but just keep your hands to yourself from now on, or wherever else they may end up...*but away from my drinks!*"

"Sure thing, Baxtie-Waxtie." I smiled and waved as the girl with glasses, a.k.a. Petrovna, yanked me by the hand onto the dance floor, and burrowing up through the stratification of all the different types of alcohol I'd ingested thus far I could feel the faintest flicker of hesitation surface within me. The truth was it had been several months

since I had danced at all, and I was nervous. I had never been the best dancer, or even a *good* dancer, or even a competent one, but the liquor a person takes on in a night can make him do strange things, for sure. I had a girl dancing in front of me, a strange and hyperactualized world throbbing all around, and a head that had been unburdened of all the excess tonnage that usually made it impossible for me to ever be “light on my feet,” so I just dove in. The music was awful, but all of a sudden my body and mind felt free. I was so drunk by this point that the barriers, the boundaries, between my mind, body, and the rest of the world seemed to be evaporating away, and everything was becoming like one big ball of gas. Light became a gas. Sound became a gas. All sensation, every thought or memory, all awareness seemed to be dispersing in all directions, from a center which used to be called “me.” In other words I was completely blacking out, but my body just kept on going, a ship with no captain, an automaton with no brain. I danced and danced and danced until finally...

“I have to pee.”

“Well you’d better go take care of that, kiddo,” Petrovna suggested, full of wisdom.

“Yeah...um, yeah...” On the way to the restroom I ordered the cheapest beer they had, to keep me company while I stood in line. As I stood I swayed like I was a good fifteen feet taller than I was and there was a gentle breeze sweeping through the bar, coming in from the entrance and heading straight to the back, like it had to pee, too. But no matter how soothing it was, I wasn’t going to let it take cuts. I looked back at the giant dust cloud with arms and legs poking out in all directions. It looked like it was a mile away. I saw people I thought I knew, and who I thought recognized me, but I couldn’t be sure. I thought I saw the girl who had been the Swan Princess in my dream the night

before, but then I realized it couldn't have been her, because she was a human girl, and not a swan.

I made my way to the front of the line, took care of my business, and then headed back to the bar for another beer. I needed to sit down. I didn't even bother to look for my table, I just fell backwards into the first empty chair I spotted, no longer discriminating between one member of the species and the next. They were all just ridiculous monkeys wearing clothes who, like Prometheus with the fire stick, somehow had managed to acquire, by sticking a tongue into God's thought reservoir, the completely irrelevant gift of language. Who needs it anyway? Trying to represent thoughts with words is no less absurd than trying to explain what music looks like to a deaf, dumb and blind kid. I sank deeper into my chair. A vision began to manifest itself in front of me, that of Baxter dancing with someone, not just anyone, a ravishing beauty of a young woman. As if through a prism I could see the two of them moving as one, as two, as one, as two, her arms wrapped around his waist and her hands clutching tightly to his buttocks. I shook my head and the vision vanished. The lightness of my being threatened to crush me once and for all. Suddenly I was back on the dance floor, only this time I was just standing there, with no one to dance with, while couples all around me were locked into the motions of the sacred seriousness of the pantomime of their sexuality. They believed themselves to be free, but to be free of sensuality is a possibility they'd never allow themselves to entertain. Now I was sitting on the floor on the far side of the room, behind some scattered chairs, leaning against the wall. Petrovna was sitting beside me.

“You look like you hiccupped one too many times and the force of a really big one landed you outside of yourself and now you're sitting here waiting for yourself to show up again so you can jump back down your throat, thus re-attaining the

completeness you had heretofore smugly taken as a matter of course.”

“You’re not too far off, darlin.” I felt like it had been at least seventeen hours since I last spoke. My throat was dry, which reminded me of the half-full can of beer resting in my right hand. I took a gulp. Petrovna laughed. She found my pathetic, waverin-between-dimensions state amusing.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I don’t think I’m thinking *about* anything. I’m just thinking. I am the verb to think. I am thought. Also I think I might puke.”

She looked me up and down. “You’re all pale. You look like some of the guys I used to know in New York. They had dark hair, and were all skinny and white as sheets, only they looked that way *all the time*. I used to work at this bar, *Spanky’s*, it was called, and these assholes would come up to me all the time, offering me as many different kinds of drugs as Anthony Burgess has adjectives, if only I’d come up to their apartment come closing time. I’d always take the drugs of course, but I’d never give them what they wanted, namely, *me*, well...maybe sometimes...but that would always be completely independent of the fact that they were giving me the gift of an eightball, or whatever. I’d sleep with ‘em if I thought they were cute, or if I was bored or fucked up enough, but never *because* they gave me drugs. What did they think I was? Some kind of barter prostitute? The thing is, that’s *exactly* what they thought, the pigs! Look into this ashtray and tell me what you see.”

I leaned forward, dizzy from the sheer speed with which she propelled herself through the quagmire of that which she had to say. “Ashes, cigarette butts...a lemon wedge...”

She took a deep breath, wound up the catapult, and began anew the barrage of

words: “No! Wrong!! Don’t be so unimaginative! What’s here, what I see, is a fundamental truth about human beings! See these things, these burnt out little nubs? Do you know what they used to be? What they used to *look like*? They were long, cylindrical, *pristine* little entities that served no purpose whatsoever, but at least they were *unsoiled*. At least they were new, pure, *virgin*. And why do people smoke them? *Ruin* them?? To inhale smoke into their lungs? *Why*? To make themselves look *cool*? To be in control, to have literally at their fingertips a tiny point of light, a miniscule ball of fire they can ignite simply by drawing breath? Do they think that simply because the stars look tiny in the night sky that they aren’t really enormous, a million miles in diameter? Bigger even! And that they’re just out of arm’s length, and not *light years* away? Do people who smoke cigarettes really think that? Are people so caught up in their own subjectivities, their own egos, their own puny little galaxies, that they really think that every cigarette they smoke is one more star born and extinguished in their own personal puny little *galaxy*? *Napoleons of the universe*, that’s what we are! Intergalactic *Hitlers*! *In our own minds*! They can’t even acknowledge the charred wastelands they leave in their wake, the gigantic piles of cigarette butts, drained and discarded! I’m going to destroy the world one day, but I’m going to do it honestly, with *literature*! And just the world, mind you, I’m not nearly delusional enough to hope for more than that! I know how far away the stars are...”

She said these things. Out loud. To a drunken idiot she’d only just met. And she spoke quickly, with a sense of urgency, as if she had to get them out before they died in her head, like goldfish flopping around on the floor. All she needed was a fishbowl, an attentive ear, someone such as myself, practically too drunk to speak back to drop them into. *Like writing with invisible ink*...for all she knew I’d remember none of this. She had

a monomaniacal twinkle in her eye, but suddenly I realized that she was not crazy. She knew the power of abstractions, of symbols, of words. She'd not let the abstractions our society has invented, maintained and honed over thousands of years control her destiny, no, she has seen beyond them, seen the strings that tug at us, the strings that enslave us. In the very emptiness and meaninglessness of words lies their true potential, their true power, for if a thing cannot be grasped, how can it be stopped? The futility of language, fully realized, is its salvation, is *our* salvation. The system of Life points only back toward itself. If, in this blackest night called Life life itself has invented a system that is equally complete, completely equal to itself, equally contained and self-referential, what can we possibly hope for that is greater than that?

“Finish your beer. I bet you've got it in you to dance some more.”

“N-no...I don't think so...” I stammered as I looked at her bare arms, trying to decide whether or not they really were old lady arms, but I was unable to focus well enough to make a clear decision.

“Come on! They're playing The Smiths!”

Egads! She was right, the first good music of the night, but at the moment I just couldn't think about using my body for anything more than a pedestal for my head. “I'm just gonna sit...”

“Come ON! Don't turn into a William Blake on me now!” she pleaded as she attempted to lift me up off of the floor with both arms, old lady or otherwise. I held on for dear life to my can of beer and mid-hoist I decided to try to take a swig. “Hey! Hold still, you!” As I tried desperately to raise the can to my lips her grip on my torso began to falter, and I began to slide back down to the ground. “Errrr...!” she huffed. Then suddenly the can slipped out of my hand, spraying us both with a moderate sprinkling of

warm beer, and at the same instant my left arm swung around and backhanded her right smack in the face. “UUOOoofff!!” Her glasses went flying halfway across the Aqueduct as my body fell back to the floor and landed in a puddle of foamy beer. Petrovna yelled, “My glasses!” and darted off in the direction in which they sailed in the hopes of retrieving them before they were trampled. From the speakers I could hear Morrissey melodizing, “*I would go out tonight, but I haven’t got a stitch to weeeaaaAAR... YOW!*”

“*What in the bloody fuck is going on here?*”

I looked up, afraid, wet and confused, and saw Lydia standing above me with her fists on her hips, in a rage. “Did you just *punch Petrovna in the face??* I can’t believe you would—whoa...did you *piss* yourself?”

As I gazed up at her I decided that I really was guilty of all crimes of which I stood accused. I could not fight, therefore I’d just take them all on and accept my fate. “Well...aren’t you gonna say something??” Lydia huffed and puffed, as a small crowd began to form around us. “All right, we’re leaving!”

“*We know so much about these things...we knooow so muuch about theeeese thiiiiinnngs...*”

I closed my eyes on the gently mounting animosity and when I opened them again I was in the backseat of a moving vehicle. As my eyes slowly regained their focus I could see that it was Lydia’s car, with Lydia driving, and, lo and behold, Petrovna sitting beside me. I was curled up like a cat. “Uuuhhhhhh...”

“Oh I see you’re awake. I don’t know exactly what the fuck’s going on, but Petrovna insisted I take you along with us. We’re going *home*, you hear that? *Home.*”

I looked up at Petrovna with kitty-cat eyes of awe and incomprehension. We were traveling over the bridge again, I knew without looking by the rhythmic bumpiness of the

ride. I was nestled at her side. She just looked at me with that beaming grin of hers, the one that seemed to convey her unbridled amusement in everything. In all things. Unable to contain myself I grabbed her arm and squeezed it against the side of my face and, beaming, myself, shouted out, “I love you!”

They both looked at each other and burst out laughing. “What? What’s so funny?” I asked, offended by their mockery of my earnest expression of inebriated truth, “I love you! I love you! I love you!”

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Darkness. Then Lydia’s house again. It was well past three o’clock in the morning, and once again Lydia’s living room was teeming with life, but now only about half of the people who were there before were left standing. I was not one of them. I was laid out on my back on the floor, with my hands over my eyes. Periodically I’d hear the rustle of someone stepping over me. I must have been no more of a factor in their thinking than a pile of dirty laundry would have been.

“Hey, man.” Someone was talking to me. I tried to ignore them. “Dude! Get up!” I pretended to hear nothing. “Dude, we’re getting out of here, now!” Now a pair of hands was shaking me by the shoulders. “C’mon man, let’s go. Up and at ‘em...” I removed my hands from my eyes, and this little game of peek-a-boo with the world revealed Baxter standing over me. He helped me to my feet and we made an unceremonious departure.

“What the hell happened at the Aqueduct tonight? When I got back to Lydia’s place she and a couple other people pulled me aside and in all earnestness, and with a sense of real urgency, said to me that I HAD to get you home, that you were dancing like a maniac, knocking people over and throwing beer cans, that you *pissed your fucking pants*, and that you punched a girl in the *face*! You are out of control, man! Look at you!

You're a mess! You can barely walk!"

All the while, as we made our way home through the city that slept, and rightfully so, in the comfort of their personal fantasy spaces, I had my hands covering my face, with my elbows sticking outward, and I was shaking my head back and forth.

"So is it true? Did you punch a girl in the face?"

"I don't know. I don't know. *I don't know...*"

"All right! Just calm down. How much did you *drink*, anyway?"

"*All of it...*" I whined.

"*All of it?* That doesn't even make any sense. You are so far gone. Sorry I wasn't around to keep an eye on you. I met this totally hot chick who was flirting with me all night. Oh man...the way we were dancing. She had the nicest tits...I even grabbed 'em at one point. That was nice. But then I thought 'Holy shit! What am I doing? What if Madeline found out?' She has *eyes everywhere* you know! She *finds out* about stuff. It makes no sense that she should know some of the things she knows...she's like a fucking sorcerer...or worse, a *demi-urge*...she's a goddamned *demi-urge*, I'm telling you...three-thousand miles is nothing to her. *Nothing!* So did you punch that girl with *old lady arms* in the face, or what?"

"I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know..."

"Short-term memory loss...this is bad...we've got to get you home and into bed as soon as possible. Hey, man, *look up at the stars...*"

Like a splash of cold water in the face, this suggestion somehow calmed me down a little. I removed my hands from my face and looked heavenward. The tone in Baxter's voice rang true, the stars were, in fact, beautiful tonight. Through the black silhouettes of trees they sparkled, like the tips of ignited cigarettes, and as I gazed up at them I could

have sworn I saw one go out before my very eyes, a discarded world now of no more value than a spent and twisted cigarette butt.

“*Napoleons of the universe...*” I whispered as my eyes shone with the light of a thousand stars.

## SPIDERS

I hate spiders. In fact, I believe I have a mild phobia regarding them and all things associated with them. If, in the universe of my iconographic fancy, the forces of good are represented by swans, kittens, and in a somewhat more ambiguous way, angels, then one of the principle representatives of the forces of evil would have to be spiders. You can say that it's obvious if you want but I call it *archetypal*, so there. Sometimes I have dreams in which everything around me is covered in spiders and spider webs. They're all more-or-less still, but every few seconds one of them will take a few gangly steps in one direction or another and I'm stuck there, a tender young morsel in their midst, and I, too, remain motionless, not exactly paralyzed with fright, but more accurately filled with the unquestionable dream knowledge that if I move it will alert them to my presence, and I'll be finished. So I just stand there and wait for the dream to change scenes. Then if I'm lucky I'm making out with the Swan Princess in the next scene and I forget all about the spiders, but I don't think they ever forget about me. Every time, in real life, I reach for a banana and pull my hand back at the last second at the sight of a little brown arachnid I think, "There's *one of them*. He sees me and doesn't care at all if I kill him, because the justification for his entire existence is that he was seen by me *at this moment*. That's why they sent you, isn't it? Well guess what, little spider? I'm not going to kill you. You, too, are a living creature, a very alien type of life form, but living nonetheless. Consider your Being spared as a result of my Niceness." Then I watch it as it makes its way across the kitchen wall, afraid to let it out of my sight for even an instant.

Every time I see a spider, no matter where or what kind, I get the feeling that I'm

witnessing a manifestation of the same phenomenon. I don't even know what it is, and consequently I have no real idea why I hate spiders. It's a potentially crucial piece of self-knowledge I lack. Spiders are the only part of the world that makes me feel there's some kind of underlying design, an *intelligence*, behind the universe, and I don't like it.

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Sometimes when a conversation is going sour, losing its momentum sooner than I'd like, I pull out my sure-fire conversation revitalizing question. It always fits in perfectly because the awkward pause is its natural precursor. The question is this: "When was the last time you walked through a spider web?"

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One day I went to work just like any other day in which I went to work, but there are always, you know, subtle variations to the themes that run through any person's life, so no day is *really* just like any other day, even if you're the most boring person on the planet. That's why people write novels, I guess. For the sake of the variations. On this day I woke up, drank only nine cups of tea (can you believe it? A mere nine cups?), and sat and read while I drank my tea. The tea was chrysanthemum tea and the book was *Madame Bovary* by Gustav Flaubert. The tea was extracted from the delicate and creamy pedal of the chrysanthemum flower as it fell from the tree, in mid-descent. That's how they get the flavor. Any pedal that, through the unthinkable yet occasional neglect of a master Japanese tea brewer or, more likely, an apprentice, is allowed to touch the ground, even for an instant, is immediately discarded and the ground purified through ritualistic metaphysical scrubbing. The book was an extraction as well; the result of a chrysanthemum pedal extracting tea from *itself*, so to speak. You know what I mean. Flaubert said, at one point in his puny little life, that he *was* Madame Bovary, and that

morning as I sat there reading his masterpiece, Madame Bovary was longing, with all her heart, for something more solid to lean upon than love, and I was wondering what that could possibly be. A Jell-O mold, maybe?

Just as I was about to set the book down, down the last of the lukewarm tea, and reach for my D.A.R.E. hat that lay capsized down on the cold asbestos floor, Baxter lurched into the living room. (When we first moved in here he was awarded the bedroom and I was stuck with the living room as the result of a very high stakes game of Rock-Paper-Scissors in which I choked at the last second, changing my mind in a disastrous instant of doubt from paper to scissors. My subsequent chants of “Best two out of three! Best two out of three!” fell on deaf ears.)

“Waaaaaaaaa...I drank too much last night,” he bemoaned.

“Why is there an eightball in the drying rack in the kitchen?” I inquired as I sat in a bubble of detached curiosity. Yawn.

“Huh? Oh *that*. A few nights ago I was over at the Rodney Street Pub playing pool with Rodney himself, the guy they named the street after, and I don’t know what happened, but the eightball got stuck up inside the table and we couldn’t get it out. I reached up into the little hole to try to see if I could reach it and dislodge it, but it was fucking *disgusting* up there! So I gave up pretty quick. I bet no one *ever* cleans the insides of pool tables! What an oversight! But anyway man neither me nor Rodney could get it out so we ran across the street to Smarties and grabbed *their* eightball and brought it back to the pub, but then while we were playing the *first* eightball came loose and we were stuck with two! We were both too drunk and embarrassed to go back to Smarties to return their eightball so I just took it home with me. It was all grimy so I washed it in the sink with good old soap and hot water then set it in the drying rack to dry...and *that*, my

friend, is the story of the eightball, how it came to be, and all of that David Copperfield crap.”

“I see.”

Silence enveloped the apartment like a giant spider from above, descended from a single thread of web that hung from the clouds. Light from the concealed sun shot through small openings in bright, solid white rays and bathed the spider, a shiny, black thing, like a stealth bomber, in a very religious-looking mist of frothy incandescence.

“Welp I’ve gotta go to work...the Homeland beckons...” I slurped my tea.

“Yeah dude that sucks.”

“What are you gonna do with your day off?” I inquired. Yawn.

“I don’t know dude...I can never decide...probably talk to Madeline...something...at least I don’t have to be at *that fucking place*...well dude have a nice day at work.”

“Maybe the Apocalypse will happen today...”

On the bike ride to Homeland Outfitters I passed a large, rectangular metal entity that looked like one of the things big-rig trucks haul behind them on the highways and byways. It was parked on the side of the street in front of a house and in big green letters had written across its side “P.O.D.S.,” which stood for “Portable On-Demand Storage.” The Pod-People were becoming brazen, overconfident. Now they were *advertising*, which probably meant that their conquest was nearly complete. At least in California they were rude and isolated *on the outside*. A rude and isolated world—the perfect backdrop upon which to perform beautiful acts of recklessness and magic. If the world was going to be rude and isolated *that’s* how I wanted it to be, but at the moment it didn’t feel all that magical. It felt *none too magical*, in fact. The pavement beneath my tires felt

practical, material, real, present, solid, dense, compact, and gravelly, in need of maintenance. There are people out there who *maintain* the city, who keep it like it is. By having a job at all I was a kind of maintenance man as well. We all do it for the city. They tell us that we do it for ourselves, having a “career” and whatnot as a confirmation of the self, but we all have jobs for the maintenance of the city, and for the network of cities, and for the network of nations that kill each other and love each other, and that is the structure of the world, a great big slobbery lollipop suspended in space, licked by the winds of fate, which is the force from outside that creates the need for maintenance.

I huffed and puffed my way up a steep hill. I stood up on the pedals to increase the force of my cycling, then, once I reached the top of the hill, relaxed as I allowed myself to cruise to the bottom. As I turned onto Coleridge Boulevard I made sure I remembered to forget to signal. A homeless guy sat on the sidewalk corner holding a cardboard sign that said “BUSH IS A WAR CRIMINAL. Could you please spare some change?” It was an interesting tactic, I guess, the exploitation of your political views for the sake of panhandling, and in this town it would probably work. Sure enough, a couple with inner arms intertwined and outer arms swinging shopping bags walked by and dropped a dollar bill each into the guy’s lap, then gazed longingly into each other’s eyes and went about their merry way. Ah young socialist love! I chained my bicycle to a bike rack and headed inside Homeland Outfitters. It was still a couple of minutes before the store opened and all was relatively quiet. All but Christy, who stood behind the counter gabbering away into the telephone. “Blah blah blah *blah blah blah blah*, you *must* be a Sagittarius, blah blah blah *blah...*” I walked toward the back with the colors all around me, but even those felt quiet. There was a stillness in the air, not a single garment swung on its metal hanger. All the lights were off in the backstock room. I placed my

hand in the hand scanner, felt a chill run from it and along my arm and up my spine, and entered my password. Beep! Then I went around the corner of sheer dresses to where the light switches were, and fumbled clumsily for them in the dark until I was able to find one and flip it to the “On” position. The lights went on and the place became visible, and I was startled by an unexpected sight. It was Minka, the sales girl, sitting at the very back of the backstock room on a cardboard box full of clothes, with her face in her hands, and she was crying.

“Minka,” I attempted, “What’s wrong?”

She looked up at me, her face red and streaming with tears. She attempted to wipe some of them away with her hand, then with the other hand made a gesture in the air that seemed to be meant to push my question back into my mouth, or to weakly brush it aside. I felt bad and didn’t know what to say. I was trying to come up with something when she stood up and swooshed past me and into the bathroom, closing the door behind her. Most likely she was in the middle of some kind of unresolved romantic crisis, a little apocalypse: a teenage girl with a broken heart. What could a person do in the face of that kind of sadness? It was impossible sadness, impossible because no one wants it but we can’t live without it. Without it nothing would ever happen. It was probably the catalyst for the first caveman *cogito ergo sum*, the first spark of consciousness that set into motion the entire mess that was now culminating in the salty tears of a girl whose entire field of vision has become flooded with the collective memory of the sadness of the entire history of the race. The saddest Hebrew slave, a brick in the pyramid, the saddest homerun champion, isolated by his ability, the saddest movie star, trapped in a role never auditioned for, the saddest shrine maiden, suffocating in her kimono, and to this list let the saddest retail clothing sales girl be added, gentle in an aggressive world. From the

spot on the ceiling directly above where Minka sat a moment before, a spider dangled from a single strand of web, each of its legs following a different train of thought through to its logical conclusion, each leg an island, each leg a city.

## NICENESS

I feel like I'm losing the sense of my "I." It's becoming weaker, duller, less of a necessity throughout the course of this first-person narrative text, as the uncoiling of the scroll continues to reveal, or at least hint at, the astonishing truth that the more the scroll is unrolled, leaving a twisted and weaving paper trail behind it, here bunched up and doubled over in an uncommonly dense heap, there stretched so tight and thin that the tension is causing the first tiny tears and buckling of the brittle, fragile material, the more the scroll is unrolled, the less of an actual material core it possesses, and once the end is reached there will be nothing *but* the paper trail, crumpled, trodden upon, already heading off into the abyss of unintelligibility, and the core, which was supposedly the natural destination of the narrative all along, will be revealed to be nothing but a fiction. That is where this book is heading, into nothingness, and it's almost there, but in the process I'm trying to be nice about it.

It doesn't even matter what I write about. It doesn't matter if there is no resolution whatsoever. It doesn't matter if there are characters, plot, arms, legs, limbs in general. It doesn't matter if there are stars, it doesn't matter if there are comets, it doesn't matter if there are beings for whom being is an issue, it doesn't matter if my fingers hurt.

I would rather be writing a book in the third-person omniscient. Then I wouldn't have to be held accountable for anything I wrote, I could just say, "Yeah I know it sounds incredible, but I was there. I saw it all from a three-quarters perspective high up in the clouds, I saw it all down to the tiniest detail and trust me...that's exactly how it happened." But no, a first-person narrator carries in his back pocket no such badge of

authority, instills in his audience no such unwavering confidence. In fact, if anyone ever reads this book I'm convinced, I'm absolutely sure, that they will not for a second doubt the inescapable fact that everything they're reading is a lie. It's been so obnoxious, writing a book. At times I just wanted to slap the pen right out of my own hand. Stop it! That's enough! But I never did it because once I decided I was going to start this thing, I mean really decided, well, then that was it. That meant that I had to finish it. So the whole reason that most of this exists is that I started it, and starting something means finishing it. You could argue that if I wanted to I could simply *abandon* it, as opposed to *finishing* it, and then I'd be free of my obligation and I could stop complaining. But it's just a text, just a string of words and punctuation on paper. It's an inanimate object, and therefore cannot ever hope to experience the gift of feelings, and for that matter it cannot ever hope to *hope*. It loses out, and thus cannot be stricken with anything resembling a sense of abandonment, and I put forth that without a sense of abandonment the idea of abandoning a thing loses all meaning and becomes absurd. I can't abandon it because that is an *impossible notion*. Therefore I have to finish it. There you have it; the greatest *reductio ad absurdum* in the history of modern thought. But...Ah! Now you're really on to something, you think. Ah ha! But what if the sense of abandonment lies solely within you, the writer, and is actually the feeling of abandoning yourself, in the displaced form of your precious labor of love, that is nagging you? In that case there would be a real, *tangible*, you feel compelled to add, feeling of abandonment within yourself. Then you could give up your project cold turkey without any more of your silly rational proofs to hide behind and explain away what are obviously your own conscious decisions and insecurities. What? I counter, you want me to experience this so-called sense of abandonment myself? That is your advice to the fledgling novice, that he should

knowingly take himself down a course of action that would make him *feel bad*? And you expect me to bow down and accept that! Well, in that case where do I sign up? While you're at it, gentle philanthropist reader, why not hand me down any sure-fire recipes you happen to have at your disposal that might cripple me with unrelenting guilt! Or maybe unrequited love! That's a good one. It might be nice, too. See? And you wonder why I get tired lugging around the burden of my "I." It's because an "I," or a self, is a target. Haven't you ever heard the term "bull's eye"? All right! You plead in a last-ditch effort, if you don't want to write, well then just STOP! Desist! Cease! Simply put: *don't do it anymore.*

Be patient. I'm getting there.

Um...the truth of the matter is that I don't really feel like putting up much of a fight. This is just a short novel, not a *Discourse on Method* or a *Phenomenology of Cuteness* or anything like that. I can pull out of a dispute whenever I feel like it and, despite all available evidence to the contrary, declare myself the winner every time. Yeah, that's right. Myself. The "I" that I pinned to the lapel of my jacket and has now become so hopelessly entangled in the weaving that they're stuck together, unless I want to destroy both. To clarify: the "I" is the pin, or the "I" is the self, the point of light in the darkness of existence, the prize in the Crackerjack box, and the jacket is this book, and I'm not taking it off just yet and, when all is said and done, we should all just concede the fact that the two were made for each other, and that it's a good look for me, but in order to soften the blow of the "I," as the narrative winds down, I have conceived of a little scene that is the perfect dampener of individuality, and that puts all who set sneaker inside on an equal footing in the collective arena of human public life. That setting is the inside of a city bus, heading downtown due west on Rodney Street, at around ten o'clock

in the morning on a weekday.

On the bus everyone admits to having a need that can't be met through their own personal ingenuity and ever groped-over American autonomy; the need to get somewhere. A bus ride, no matter how short, and contrary to such Simon and Garfunkel-esque notions of going off "to look for America," is a decidedly un-American experience, it's a subjugation of the American Spirit, it's an admission of humanity, and Americanism sure as hell isn't humanism. I think this might be why so many people, while riding the bus, try so hard to assert their individuality in such obviously loud, discourteous, and obnoxious displays. What they're doing is overcompensating for the temporary loss of autonomy. Once they get off the bus and to their job, then, THEN, and only then are they truly whole again. Then they're working for a living, making something of themselves, providing for their families, making the world a better place! Only then do they exist again. On the bus they feel the ephemerality of their positions, they feel themselves slipping away, floating between worlds, in the nether regions of their fists, the back alleys of their parental authority, the No Man's Land of their personal enterprise.

I was sitting somewhere in the middle, in a window seat. I looked out beyond the greasy spot on the window where someone had rested their over-gelled head, past my reflection that looked back over and beyond me, far off into the distance, at the grey sky. I heaved a deep sigh as I tried to contemplate the events of the past few months; moving up here from California on a whim, running away from someone, something, somewhere, right into the arms of more someones, somethings, and somewheres. My mind was a jumble of images: skyscrapers, angels with glasses, libraries, bridges, rainbows, slim volumes of poetry, people who were better looking than me, water flowing rapidly along

gutters and down drainpipes, even the sewers down below that I'd never seen. I'll let it all flow down into sewers unseen, that seems like the practical thing to do. I'll give it all up for the moment and concentrate instead on the voices around me. There were plenty of them, to be sure, so I looked around and tried to zero in on a single conversation.

“Hey! Hey Bessie! It's me! You do remember me *don't you?* It's me—*Bubble Armor!* Yeah, yeah, yeah...you remember me! I used to shop at the Value Village! You still work there? No? Oh man that's a shame! Lotta good deals there! HAHAUAHAHA! I need to get me some *paint thinner* so I'm thinkin' about headin' over there pretty soon...so anyway woman how're *you doin'?*”

“Oh...good...good.”

“That's *great!* That's really great! I'm really, really glad to hear that. That's really *great.* It really is. Me? Oh you know me...HARHAAUHA! I fell down some stairs backwards about a week ago...me? No! No! I know, you know me...that's why they call me Bubble Armor. Ain't nothin' gonna get through this skin...it's hard as a rock! Here, feel! No? Okay, suit yerself. HARHARHAAU! Yeah, a whole flight a' stairs. I was on a contracted job and...huh?...oh...my cousin's a *lawyer*, and he's gonna try an' see if he can't get me something outta the whole fiasco...negligence or something...”

I don't look behind me. I figure it's better if I don't know what they look like.

To my right, past the empty seat upon which I'd stowed my book bag and on the opposite side of the aisle, sat a young man and woman covered from head to toe in “vintage” clothing, right down to the shoelaces, I'd guess. The young man appeared to be consoling the young woman, who seemed to be experiencing a considerable amount of distress. He repeatedly patted her on the shoulder while she sat hunched over, seemingly on the verge of tears and/or hysterics.

“There, there honey...I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it...”

“Didn’t *mean* anything by it?? Of course he *meant* something by it! Of course he meant it! He thinks I’m a degenerate! A savage!

“No! Of course he doesn’t! He was just messin’ with you! He doesn’t really care...” In the young man’s eyes was a look of utter helplessness.

“*Yes he does!* Yes he *does*... he’s just like everyone else...the bastard! So I eat meat? *So what?* What is he in *kindergarten*? Why doesn’t he just leave me alone? Why does he have to be so mean...sob...sob...”

“There, there...”

Her head shot up in sudden triumph. “Doesn’t he know I’ve got a *condition*?? I’ve tried to be vegan, I’ve really *tried*...but my *condition* just won’t allow it! I *need* meat. Is that so horrible? Without a steady stream of the red fleshy stuff passing through my system I start to shrivel up like a raisin in the sun! I *need* it! Why is he so...so mean...”

“Aw honey.” He stroked his facial hair. “I’m sure he’ll come around. After all, he *is* your father...”

The bus went clankety-clank-clank over the bridge and I thought that the waters below might make a neat little sanctuary for a lot of these people from the persecutions of their daily turmoils. I began to admire the back of an old lady’s head who sat in the seat in front of mine. It was covered in a blanket of white hairs so fine that you could see right through to the scalp, and the hair appeared to float above it. Her skin was pale and pock-marked, with subtle gradations in tone and texture that would put the most skilled photo-realist painter to shame. It was like the surface of a planet, a dying world long since devoid of life and vegetation but still clinging to the last fading traces of its atmosphere. Suddenly, without warning, like a major seismographic upheaval the head turned around

and I found myself face to face with the old lady. The skin covering her face was definitely cut from the same ream as the back of her head, but it was stretched much less tightly, and in certain areas, such as below her eyes, on her cheeks, and on the tip of her nose, the obvious negligence of the craftsman responsible was impossible to overlook. Her eyes looked tired and desperation hovered all about her like an overpowering perfume. The dry, brittle lips parted.

“Excuse me, sonny. I was wondering if you wouldn’t be willing to do an old lady a little bit of a favor?”

“A favor?” I yelped. “Um, okay...uh...maybe...what kind of favor?”

“Well you see, m’boy, I’m an old lady without a soul to turn to. Ninety-Six years I’ll be come the Equinox. My children, they thought their old mother belonged in a home, they did...but I outlived ‘em all! My dear ol’ husband, God rest his soul...killed by terrorists on September 11, 2001. Those were mighty powerful images aspewin’ from the television that morning. *Mighty* powerful. ‘Fraid his poor, dear heart just couldn’t take the strain. The doctors said it was cholesterol but I knew! Heaven help me *I knew!* Poor, sweet me! Sixty-five years of marriage ended in Jihad! Oh, the world!”

“Uh huh.” My eyes were two globes of awe tinged with dread. My jaw hung agape.

“Alone I’ve been since that dark day...alone in a big, drafty, rickety house, alone, were it not for one courageous, loyal and fuzzy little companion, who stood by me with such loyalty th’ likes o’ which you’ve never seen! Thick and thin she’s been by my side! *Thick and thin!* Oh Mittens! Best darn cat I ever saw!” She cast a suspicious glance my way. “You like cats, m’boy?”

I slowly and silently nodded my head.

“Good. Good boy. I like a person likes cats. Shows character.”

“Uh huh. I agree ma’am.”

“Mittens, Mittens who was supposed to be there for me until *the end*, Mittens my sweet little gal that stayed with me after all my peoplefolk done up and gone off to a better place, Mittens who’d sit on my lap while I watched my shows, Mittens who reared a litter of kittens, then bravely stood by as one by one they were given away to children from the neighborhood! Yesterday Mittens met with...an unfortunate tragedy...I...I...I can’t speak of it! Let’s just say it involved a lawnmower...and a despicable dose of human *carelessness*! Oh me! *Poor Mittens!*”

The old lady broke down into fits of sobs right there in front of me on the bus. As I sat there in the seat behind her I didn’t know whether to offer my condolences or get off at the next stop. Suddenly she regained her composure and went on.

“Sorry—sorry my young lad...it’s just...I’ve become so weak without my Mittens to brighten up my life...and that’s why I need your help. I plan, through the almighty power of our radiant lord and savior Jesus Christ, to bring poor Mittens *back to life*. I’m traveling into town now, a rare trek for these old bones, to pick up the necessary provisions, but in the meantime I need you to *pray*! Pray for the soul of my prematurely departed little darling! Pray that she comes back to me...back into my everlovin’ arms! It’s integral! It’s essential!” She raised a claw into the air in a show of mad ambition.

“Will you do this one little thing for me boy?”

She panted and panted as she awaited my reply. The palms of my hands began to sweat. The bus sped through a red light and almost ran over a cyclist. Everything was tumbling into entropy and there was only one way I could stop it:

“Um...I’ll do my best, ma’am.”

The old lady clasped her hands together in triumph. “That aboy! I knew I could count on you, I did! I could feel it in my bones! Oh you’ve made an old lady very happy, *very happy indeed!*”

She began to rock back and forth in her seat, wringing her hands and muttering over and over again, “Yes...very happy...very happy...” and periodically, “Oh Mittens!” After a minute or two of this she stood up and, in a much more powerful voice than I had experienced previously, spoke up in an address to the whole bus: “Everyone! Can I get your attention long enough to see if you wouldn’t be willing to do an old lady a little bit of a favor...?”

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I hopped off the bus at Explorer Square, between it and the block-wide hole where they were building the parking structure. I stood on my tippy-toes as I walked down the sidewalk swerving through waves of pedestrians, trying to see as far down into the hole as I possibly could. From my position across the street I couldn’t see the bottom. A giant crane rose from the hole’s center and, like a dinosaur fossil from the future, loomed over everything in sight as its neck slowly rotated to one side. From the mouth of the behemoth dangled a bundle of steel beams. Whenever the motion of the neck would halt for a few seconds the beams would sway back and forth as if to a waltz in what felt like slow-motion, but that was only because they were so big and so high up, like an airplane traversing the length of the sky.

Occasionally I would brush up against a passing stranger as I walked and we would both carry on as if we didn’t know the other was human. I didn’t envy them their neediness, nor should they mine. Everyone walking up and down the busy sidewalks was doing it for some reason. Why, oh why are we so tied down by the feigned

irresponsibility of our devotion to *reason*? “I did it because I had every reason to,” we say. “It was the only reasonable course of action.” *So what?* That a course of action is reasonable is no reason for *having* to do it. Conversely, if, in a desperate attempt to escape from this retarded loop, you do something simply because it is *unreasonable*, then your reason for doing it is to subvert reason, and you’re back at square one. I continued to sift through the loose change of my thoughts like a prospector looking to strike it rich at the bottom of a wishing well. The cacophony of city sounds; the rhythmic randomness of the traffic, the pounding yet spread-all-over texture of construction work like butter oozing into the nooks and crannies of an English muffin, the infantile helplessness of the gabber of adults who think that they understand and control the world as they pitter-patter to and fro, usually layer upon each other nicely and serve as a smooth sounding board to bounce my thoughts off of and have them returned to me clear as crystal. Today, though, I was preoccupied. By what I wasn’t sure, like I was preparing for an event I knew would never take place. My thoughts began to drift back to my second encounter with One-Eyed Willy, which occurred a couple days after the first.

I had stepped outside of my apartment kind of arbitrarily, to have a look at the weather, maybe, and who should I see stretched out in front of the entryway like a bulbous inflatable welcome mat but One-Eyed Willy? He was lying on his side with both sets of legs outstretched and when he saw me he quickly did a sideways about-face, spun around in the air, and landed on his feet. He then proceeded to rub his plump little torso against my ankles.

“Hey little guy! I’m so glad to see you again!” I reached down to scratch behind his ears, already making plans to avoid the gaping eyehole as skillfully as possible as I bent down, but before I could get there he darted off in the direction of a plum tree

growing out of the little mini-lawn between the sidewalk and the street. I watched as he made it about halfway, turned to look back at me, rolled around in the grass for a few seconds, and then sprung back onto all fours.

“Meow.”

I thought he wanted me to follow him, and even if he didn't, even if he was just a dumb cat with a capacity for planning and communicating nowhere near as powerful as I was giving him credit for, I figured I might as well play along. Proceed *as if* what I wanted to be true were actually true. I moved in his direction as his tail swung back and forth in the opposite direction as his butt. As he approached the base of the tree he shot me one more half-glance, then faced the tree again, crouched down low to the ground, stuck his backside high up into the air, and lunged up the trunk, digging his claws into the dried-chocolate-like bark, and did his best to pull his chubby body up to the lowest branch. After a minor struggle which involved hind legs dangling and kicking for dear life, he managed to position himself upon the branch with a modest degree of stability.

I ran over to his side and stood expectantly beside the branch, which was about a foot and a half above my head. I'm no expert, but at the time I thought it was a plum tree because the leaves, the ones that hadn't fallen off in the cyclical disintegration of life that is winter, were all purple. At this time of year there were only a few left dangling precariously from the tips of the branches, being pulled by the wind, awaiting their turn. Fair's fair, after all.

“Meow meow.”

Now that One-Eyed Willy was safely propped atop this branch he proceeded to hop up to another branch, and then another. He was now several feet above me, and I had to squint my eyes to look up in the direction of the white afternoon sky that glowed like

the inside of a refrigerator. The branch he was on looked to be barely robust enough to support his weight. I clenched my teeth as he began to inch further and further out toward the end of the branch, and it began to bend underneath his sagging stomach. Once I was sure he could go no further he began to reach his paw out as far as he could and swat at something. What he saw in his superflat field of vision I couldn't yet say, but he appeared to have a definite agenda. He swiped and he swatted at nothingness, at air, at the wind. The only thing I could see from my vantage point was a single purple leaf bobbing around in the breeze like a wind chime, accidentally composing beautiful melodies in silence, hanging on stubbornly to a sub-branch, refusing to give up the ghost. Was that what he was after? More than once he appeared to lose his balance completely, but at the last second, thanks to his feline coordination, he was always able to stave off tragedy. This single leaf, if this was indeed his prize, seemed to be mere millimeters out of his reach. Finally the tip of a claw managed to just barely graze the leaf's surface and that was enough to jar it loose from its lifelong home, and it detached and fell, swooping pendulum-like back and forth to the sidewalk below. Once this was accomplished One-Eyed Willy effortlessly bounded and bounced from one branch to the next and back down to the ground while the leaf was still some moments away from getting there.

One-Eyed Willy sat beside me and I got down on my knees and cupped my hands like I was awaiting first communion, and from this kneeling position I received the leaf. It landed softly in my palms and lie there restlessly, twitching nervously with each tug and pull of the wind. I clasped it between thumb and forefinger by the stem and examined this odd offering from the treetops. It was a cloudy, splotchy kind of purple, like cheap wine held up to the light, and its veins radiated out from the central stem axis in parallel V's. A leaf; that's what it was. I looked down at my fuzzy companion and scratched my

head, but aside from a soft self-satisfied purring, he offered up no sound. The only thing odd or in any way striking about the leaf in my hands was a small, nickel-sized hole off to one side that had probably been eaten into it by insects. I held the leaf up to my face, shut one eye tightly, and looked at One-Eyed Willy through the hole like it was a view-finder, or an empty slide mount, and suddenly it struck me. I held the leaf out and turned it upside-down, so that it was now pinched between my fingers by the tip and not the stem, and examined it one more time. It looked like a cat's face. *A cat who was missing an eye.*

“What is this, Willy?” I ventured to myself a few guesses. Was it possible that he somehow created the hole in this leaf himself as a kind of self-portrait? Or else did he come across it this way and immediately recognize the similarity, and consequently was drawn to it and adopted it as his own? Or was he just a cat, and therefore incapable of such drives as self-expression. But what about the cats who paint? That is a documented fact. *What about the cats who paint?* Just because cats don't wear clothes doesn't mean they can't be creative, and they *do* have a language of sorts. It's the most basic kind of language: a *binary* one composed of the two rudimentary elements known as the *meow* and the *purr*. If they only possessed one or the other I'd be hesitant to call it language, but what the hell?

I thanked One-Eyed Willy profusely for the gift and ran inside and stuck it on the refrigerator with a magnet, like it was an art project my child brought home from elementary school. I noticed that in my excitement I had forgotten to close the front door, and there stood Willy, his round face peaking inside curiously.

“Meow, meow, purr, meow...” he said.

“Yeahhh...”

Struck by sudden inspiration, I began to compose a sentence out of the multi-colored (Greek) alphabet magnets that adorned the refrigerator door. My hands moved swiftly, sliding orange t's around purple d's, circumnavigating yellow, blue and green migrating flocks of consonants around clusters of disused letters and punctuation marks. When I had finished I took a step back and surveyed my composition:

“A BLiNd UNIVERse  
anD the future Certainty THEREOF.”

It was, indeed, the most terrifying thought of all: a future with no sentient beings, no eyeballs hooked up to brains to perform the simple yet necessary act of *looking*. Without this affirmation, the universe, in all its infinite variety of form and motion, was pointless. The next day as I opened up the freezer to grab a box of Bagel Bites I noticed that the leaf was gone. I asked Baxter about my prized possession's untimely disappearance.

“Dude! It was a *leaf*! What the fuck do you expect? You track some random piece of nature/trash into the place and then you display it like a blue ribbon? Yeah I threw it away...what's the big deal? By the way I liked your little poem with the magnet letters...what does it mean?”

The walls seemed to contract and swell. Sometimes I feel like life is like a maze of dogs. I mean, all the walls of the maze are made of unfriendly neighbor's dogs who bark at you bloodthirstily every time you step outside, and for every insecurity you secretly harbor, for every self-effacing joke you've ever told straight-faced to your reflection in the mirror, for every time you've ever spit on your own shoes in disgust, for every time you've laughed hysterically at your deepest, most personal longings, there is the ravenous, snarling face of a canine in wait, hundreds, *thousands* of them. They keep

you on your path. They justify your decisions. They keep you from extending an inquisitive arm too far in any random direction at any random time. They keep you honest, which is to say, they keep you locked down, forever winding your way through the labyrinth of what you believe to be your own free will, but what is, in actuality, just the path of least resistance.

“It was something a cat told me.”

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A green popsicle lie prostrate on the sidewalk, bleeding to death. I spotted it several paces in front of me thanks to its unnaturally vibrant, acidic hue. People walked over it or side-stepped it as they read newspapers or fiddled with portable electronic devices, no one willing to admit complicity by picking it up and throwing it in the trash or even looking at it. As if it were a dotted line pointing directly at it, a trail of ants emerged from a crack in the gutter or from underneath a bus bench, or wherever it is ants stash *their* civilizations in the midst of *ours*, and made its way up to the shores of the puddle of melted syrup that encircled the popsicle. Then the ants just kind of walked around it, like couples taking long walks on the beach. It was a double popsicle; the kind that had two sticks. Whatever kid dropped that treasure must have been pretty unhappy.

(“Dammit, son! Look what you’ve done!”

“But Daddy it’s still good! I’ll just brush the dirt off and...”

“And nothing! Don’t be ridiculous, son! Now c’mon, we’re gonna be late!”

Parents are weird.)

I, too, stepped over the popsicle and tightened my grip on the shoulder strap of my book bag. I, too, had a destination. I had decided to forego my usual trip to the local library branch and indulge in an afternoon of book-perusing at the massive, three-storied,

Neo-Classically-architected downtown library. I could think of no better way to distract myself from the non-specific anxieties, the ephemeral uncertainties, and all other forms of general nervousness I'd been experiencing lately. I climbed the concrete steps that led to the row of polished oak, glass and bronze doors at the front of the building. On the face of each step was carved the name of an accomplished and famous author, so making your way up these steps was like treading on the backs of giants. It felt almost disrespectful: left foot; Walt Whitman, right foot; James Joyce, left foot; Nikolai Gogol, right foot; Jane Austen, and so on...

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I was in love with an abstraction I enigmatically called *Petrovna*. As I sat on a rigid, plastic chair in the A/V room of the library, staring at a looping DVD menu screen, as silent and still as I'll be five minutes after I'm dead, mentally composing the opening paragraphs to novels I don't ever really want to write, or see written, or read, or know about, I realized it was true. I knew I shouldn't be, but I couldn't help it. I knew she was just an abstraction, a construct, a lie, and cheat, a completely *impractical* joke, a vision of an absent mistress in your mashed potatoes and green bean casserole while you're sitting down to dinner with the wife, or like an uncle claiming he's stolen your nose, or a window floating in space with no wall, a facade for your disappointment, an idealized projection of your failed past relationships, a cop-out, an escape hatch, a backdoor, but one leading to sheer and utter emptiness, the ashen remains of a burnt-out barn, the conflagration of which the night before being Life itself, the solid earth that, when you tripped on a pebble in the road and fell, was supposed to be there to break your fall, but inexplicably wasn't, leaving you to just fall forward continually, faster and faster, faster and faster...

Would that such inertia have no end, and would that the angels form pinwheels  
for the perpetuation of the word, unuttered by their shining lips, unspeakable by ours.