

**LIKE NIHILIST RAIN BURNING HOLES
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY RUSSIAN SNOW**

BY

JAMES BRADLEY

The Swan Princess leaned out of her kitchen window and let her hair dangle down, confident that, though it's fondness for gravity might be pretty strong, her hair's often-renewed love of the body it was attached to would be the force that would win out in the end. She didn't even feel the need to grab hold of it as it flowed along the surface of the windowsill and over the side like a waterfall. She was on the fifth floor, and her view of the downtown office buildings, with their own opened windows revealing computer screens and fax machines, was, if not inspirational, then at least familiar. The Swan Princess blew her bangs away from her eyes and adjusted her glasses. The sharp sizzle of frying eggs was the perfect recipient for her Ignoree of the Day™ award. She was not fond of the sound, like a snake rolling down a steep hill of hot asphalt. She was making her favorite breakfast: a fried-egg sandwich on sourdough bread with cheddar cheeze, a slice of tomato, and A-1 steak Sauce.™ That was the secret ingredient. She used to add avocado, since she thought that avocado couldn't help but improve *any* piece of food, but in this instance that didn't seem to be the case. It was still good, but she couldn't help but feel that it was more of a subtraction than an addition. "There are some things," thought the Swan Princess, "that you can't really know for sure until you try." She spit and counted the seconds before it hit the sidewalk below. One—Two—Three—Four... Three-and-a-half or four seconds...a pretty decent amount of time...

She was trying hard not to think of the night before. She still finds it hard to believe that anyone could have the audacity to be that loud in a library. "I mean, it was *just* an orgasm, and the philosophy section isn't even that well-stocked." Well one thing's for certain: there is *not* going to be a second date, no siree. As she pulled her body out from the window and back into her fifth-floor apartment kitchen, with it's illusion of

solid earth resting stably beneath her feet and toes, she ran the sequence of events through her head: a metal key discovered by chance in the bottom of an old trunk that had once belonged to her grandmother, a library catalogue search yielding rather startling results, an afternoon rifling through old photographs at the Historical Society, and Him. It just didn't add up, but there it was, plain as her reflection on the surface of the toaster. Crystal clear yet with a slight distortion that was only revealed through the accident of motion.

In her sleep, which was restless and sporadic, she dreamed that she had been the one who killed John Lennon. In this particular dream scenario, Mark David Chapman had never been spurred to action that cold day in December, and as a result, John Lennon was alive and well...up until the present day. Last night, to be exact. This time, the Swan Princess had been the one to pull the trigger, which took the form of a mechanism that could cause planes to crash. And that was how she did it: she pressed a button on a box affixed to a wall in a dingey, moderately well-lit basement, knowing that the result would be the sudden falling out of its flight path of one specific commercial airliner, an airliner with a hundred-or-so passengers who would hardly be missed or even considered within the context of the localized guilt atmosphere the dream was generating as if through sheer force of will, and one passenger whose life was worth a hundred planes worth of passengers and then some. He was the target of this strike, and why she felt so compelled she was completely, utterly unable to articulate. She only knew that he needed to die, and that after the deed was done, she would never live down the guilt. She'd be having a conversation with her brother at the beach, convinced that he knew her horrible secret. She'd see knowledge and condemnation in the eyes of every stranger she ever meets. But

it has to be done. “Why?,” she asks herself, to which she replies, “Because.” She covers her eyes with one hand, but cheats by peaking through the cracks between her fingers, while her other hand, index-finger thrust forward, inches toward the shiny, red, plastic button. Fingertip and button collide, and each impresses the other in this meeting. The next day in the papers and all over the TV news the reports seem to fly forward, as if seen through 3-D glasses in an otherwise 2-D universe: “Beloved Rock ‘N’ Roll Icon dies in plane Crash, 89 others perish as authorities scramble for Answers.”

She wakes up suddenly with the image of her brother’s piercing stare at the beach still fresh in her mind. Then a moment she will feel forever grateful for: the moment in which she realizes that it was just a dream, and her guilt, like a helium-filled balloon from the undilligent fingertips of a small child at a carnival, lifts, and is soon completely unreachable.

The Swan Princess tugged at the bottom of her T-shirt which read, in jarringly bold pink-neon letters, “‘THE WORDS’ by Jean-Paul Sartre,” and in so doing caused the contours of her breasts to become more pronounced, more like an experience and less like a memory. She remembered his hands upon them the night before, and the stack of books by all the notable nineteenth- and twentieth-century russian novelists she could stomach in one all-out, unadulterated nerd session. She pictured, through a haze of apprehension, the tower as it tumbled earthward, each page a note in a symphony of clearly misunderstood but well-meaning rage and desire.

September 28, 2007

She is a person filled with multi-faceted and rainbow-colored self-aprehension, bleak and black as the deepest spaces inbetween stars projecting outward to the deepest

borders of comprehensible space. She is also a lovely creature, she likes to think, comprized of the kind of vague unhappiness that, when seen from the outside, must surely seem deeply poetic. He was a man...a boy, really...making his way through the wicked, wide world by working at the Polygon Emporium,TM the local video arcade, smoking cigarettes, which his hoody wreaked of, and clutching his fake ID like it were a life raft, one that'd take him to far-off exotic shores, or something. The Library was a mediator. She grabbed the spatula that rested complicitely on the countertop and flipped the mass of yellow-white egg over in the frying pan, revealing the golden-brown underbelly. Soon both sides would be underbelly, edible. She carefully placed a slice of cheese on top, so that it would melt ever so slightly, just like she likes it. For lack of anything else to do, she repositioned the A-1TM bottle so that the logo would be prominently displayed in the event of an unexpected visitor coming into the apartment. The slice of tomato already lay sliced on the cutting board, the toasted bread already popped up all the way out of the toaster-top, then landed back inside, like in a cartoon.

His name was Shiro, and he knew nothing of the Dewey Decimal System, which at first the Swan Princess found refreshing and reassuring. Then, as the night wore on, the realization that she was becoming just another sociological runaway grew to be so strong, so overpowering, like old-lady perfume, that she could scarcely concentrate on their urbane conversations; ones revolving around the sound of quarters clanking in a tin tray. Shiro took great pains to explain, at length, the arcade's practice of pumping fake sounds of quarters through the loudspeakers, even though, according to him, this was a practice much more suited to say, casinos on Indian reservations. He said the purpose was to create a similar feeling of adrenaline and high-stakes excitement, to get the kids prepared

at an early age to squander their earnings on a much larger scale in pathetically unrealistic dream machines of chance and painfully democratizing games that required no real skill. The Swan Princess thought that he was an idiot. Still, the wine flowed freely, much of it into her stomach via her mouth, and it's uninhibiting effects were not lost on her bodies circulatory system. She soon became giddy, her cool composure lost in a heavy downpour of Nihilist rain burning holes in Nineteenth century Russian snow. As she assembled her morning sandwich and watched the semitransparent spirals of steam lift themselves over the rim of her tea cup, she ransacked her short-term memory for images of fading self-restraint and lyrical inquiries into the transitory nature of conditions of Selfhood.

She thought about why she always felt the same, why it had to be true that her body was not hers, while her mind, on the other hand, was. Or was it the other way around? Ouch! Her tea was still too hot to sip, and she nearly scalded her lip.

After breakfast the Swan Princess went into her bedroom to get dressed. It was a smallish room with out much furnishings, just the bed, which was actually only a mattress on the floor, a night stand, which was actually an orange crate filled with make-up and with an alarm clock on top, a dresser, which was actually a stack of cardboard boxes, and a full-length mirror, which stood upright and rested against the wall opposite the bed. Before deciding what to wear for the day she walked up to the mirror, stood in front of it, and looked herself up and down. All she was wearing was the black and pink Sartre T-shirt and a pair of silver-with-asphalt hot shorts that she shoplifted from American Apparel.™ She studied her body with her mind, via the eyes. She wondered if it would be possible to study the mind with the body, but it seemed like a losing

proposition. She looked down at her toes, wiggled them, made a face and sighed. She grabbed each of her breasts with her hands through the T-shirt and began to move them around; the left one counterclockwise and the right one clockwise, then visa-versa. When she thought she'd reached the peak of ridiculousness she looked directly into her reflection's eyes defiantly and stuck out her tongue. She couldn't help but laugh at herself at that point.

Running back and forth between the “dresser” and the closet, she began grabbing and flinging clothes of all fabrics, cuts, and colors all over the place. Her bedroom looked like the inside of a laundrymat dryer, and from the multicolored tsunami emerged the goal of the enterprise: the perfect outfit for the day. I am not going to describe her outfit at this time because it was *So* good that no matter how good of a writer I am, my description would never in a million years be able to do it justice. I'll just say that she put her hair in pigtails and that she looked really good. She knew that she was ready to face another day of school. She just hoped she didn't run into Shiro. Well, all things considered, she guessed it wasn't THAT bad of a monday morning, as far as monday mornings went. At least all her homework was done, and her hangover was now just a fond, stainless steel memory.

Was she really going to completely avoid Shiro? As she stepped into the elevator the full weight of that decision began to hit her: it meant no more late-night Galaga™ marathons at the video arcade. It meant no more Dance Dance Revolution™ sessions as a means of clandestinely testing the dexterity of potential lovers. It meant no more traveling the world via the international combat circuit of Street Fighter II Turbo.™ As the elevator descended she felt as if it were the weight of these newly-emerging worries

that was pulling it down, and her along with it. No more Polygon Emporium,TM at least not so long as HE worked there. Suddenly she felt like the polka dots on her underwear were showing through in a really conspicuous, embarrassing way, but she was in an elevator all alone, so she didn't know what would spark such a thought. She pulled her backpack around to her front and unzipped it, peered inside, reached her hand in and pulled out a red brick. She was flabbergasted. She couldn't for the life of her explain how it had gotten in there, or where it had come from. She bent down and placed the uninvited guest on the cold metal floor of the elevator just as it's doors were opening to the white, natural light of the ground floor lobby.

She quickly stood up and made her way stiffly into the large, open space that greeted her like an hollowed-out tree trunk greets a chipmunk; indifferently. To the left was a small room behind a counter and a sheet of glass with a rectangular opening for sliding in rent checks and money orders. It was the office of the concierge, and sitting in an adjustable swivel chair behind the glass was the concierge herself, a small, roundish (but not fat), cheery-looking woman of about fifty. She bent down to speak into a microphone:

“Well Good Morning, my dear, dear sweet little Swan Princess! And just how is our royal tenant doing on such a lovely morning?”

The Swan Princess forced a smile. The truth was that she hated the concierge, she thought she was such a phoney. But that never stopped her from showing the proper respect.

“Why hello, Mrs. Concierge! I'm doing...um...well I'm just swell!” She swallowed her spit. “Uh...how are you?”

“Oh dearie,” she inhaled, “you know, you know. I think I may have caught a dose of the Bird Flu whilst I was up on the roof negotiating with the pigeons,” she exhaled, “but it could just as likely be my arthritis flaring up again! With my luck it’ll soon reach all the way up my spine to my brain!”

The Swan Princess clenched her teeth. Social convention suggested she converse on. “Oh Mrs. Concierge! I’m sure it’s nothing of the sort! You just need to stop falling asleep on the couch with the T.V. on. You wake up all sore and miserable!”

“You may be right at that, dearie!”

“Welp, I’ve gotta run, I don’t want to be late for class!” And with that she darted off out the door and into the human world.

September 29, 2007

She walked down the sidewalk, toward the bus stop, in her too-good-for-description outfit, passing all different kinds of people. There was this one guy walking along with a kitty cat on his shoulders, with it’s legs dangling down around the man’s neck, in front of his chest. The Swan Princess thought that was just aces! She wanted to go up to him to say “Hello,” but, aside from the cat, he actually looked kind of scary, with all his tattoos and piercings. She had a theory about tattoos, of which she had not a one upon her flawless, unblemished skin. She thought that people who had tattoos believed in absolute truth, while those without tattoos believed that truth was relative, or subjective. She thought of her own body as an absolute, that is, something that could never be replaced. And in strictly psychological terms, a person’s body could be thought of as containing the entire physical boundaries of the Universe, since we are all so dependent on the bodies’ senses for all we know and experience. Even the sense of sight,

which created the illusion of connecting us to places and images “as far away as the eye can see,” is actually very firmly anchored in immediate physical proximity to the body, since things we see that appear to be so far away are actually just tiny projected images on the insides of our retinas. At least, she believed that this was true, but she wasn't totally sure. But whenever she thought of it the idea made her feel very frightened. It was like being inside of some kind of virtual reality suit, one you could never take off. In any event, she thought all of these issues should be taken into account when deciding whether or not to get a tattoo, and then what to get a tattoo *of*. So whatever you choose to engrave upon your body for the rest of your life—the rest of eternity—better be pretty well thought out. You had better be pretty sure of yourself. Either people with tattoos consider these issues or they don't, so the Swan Princess saw all tattoos as signs of either arrogance or ignorance, and she didn't want to have anything to do with those kinds of character traits, and understandably so.

The city the Swan Princess lived in was called San Francisco,TM and it was located on a bit of land that jutted out into a very large ocean called the Pacific,TM which she thought was a very beautiful name, even if it was a little misleading. The land that San FranciscoTM rested on formed one side of a bay. It was a nice location for a city. There was almost always a very pleasant sea breeze, which was why she almost always wore her hair in pigtails. Sometimes, when she thought of decisions in very straightforward cause-and-effect terms like this, she felt very pleased with herself. This city has been her home all her life. When she tells this to people, they always expect her to tell them how much it's changed over the years. And it has, one might suppose, but to the Swan Princess it all feels pretty much the same. To her San FranciscoTM is a dictionary

definition, set in stone like the Ten Commandments; immutable but irrelevant. But she loved it, not for what it was to so many people or even what it is for itself. She wasn't sure how to gauge her feelings for the city, but they were there, and, at certain privileged moments, they were very strong.

She sat down on the old, splintery, wooden busstop bench and before too long she was on the bus, seated behind a guy with an old boombox. It was like a giant Ipod™, she thought and giggled to herself. The guy was moving in his seat to the funky, funky beat and the song was that old rap song “Jam On It.” She loved that song! It had such a neat bass line. It was like this ominous beating of a heart in perfect synchronicity with a glorious and rhythmic demi-urge of the progress and progresslessness of the static/dynamic, heartless universe. It was the light of a funeral procession in the rain, but where everyone was wearing sunglasses anyway. Resting her face in her palms, she looked out the window and up the skirts of all the tall buildings. They didn't seem to mind, if anything, they probably liked it. They were there to be seen as much, if not more, than to be lived in, worked in, and fussed over. In her reflection on the glass, like a half-finished watercolor upon the very surface of existence, she saw the one thing that she'd rather not see. She saw the future, changing as fast as the scenery the bus sped past, reinventing itself with each blink of the Swan Princesses eye, but there nonetheless. And readable. In it's chaotic scrawl something undeniably legible was also there if you looked carefully enough, if you were willing to strain your eyes and your understanding to the point of permanent damage. The pigeons on the coarse concrete and the seagulls in the silky sky, they moved toward, and also through, this future, this thing that can be touched and laughed at and written about. In a sudden moment of realization, the Swan Princess

yanked the cord to signal to the busdriver to stop. There was a little “ding!” as the red and white “Stop Requested” sign lit up, and just in time, too. There was the college, a conglomeration of buildings, grass lawns, flagpoles, and young bodies. It was as if no one there had done anything since the last time she layed eyes on it on Friday afternoon. It was like it all froze as soon as she looked away, and thawed instantly upon the rebestowal of her warming gaze.

As she stepped off the bus she caught sight of a ladybug exiting along with her. It flew in a pattern past her pigtails that looked like handwriting in the air, all loopy and grade school-esque. She wondered what business a ladybug could possibly have using public transportation, but she supposed that she’d never be privy to that particular piece of information. She watched as the ladybug sailed off into the sky, then she focused her attention back onto the ground upon which her black converse All-Stars™ treaded.

The thought of Monday morning was like being told that all of your life’s memories actually belonged to someone else, and you were only five minutes old.

September 30, 2007

All at once she felt like running into the bathroom with her hands covering her face, and she did just that. Luckily, it was empty and she bolted into one of the stalls and immediately began to weep. It came upon her suddenly and once she started, it just wouldn’t stop. She thought about writing a perfect novel. She thought about writing at all, about the very act of putting words on paper as a kind of negation of lived experience, but the only thing that made her feel truly alive. She wondered if the creation of good writing was solely the occupation of good writers, who needed only commit themselves to the act and the process. Could a fundamentally bad writer, through hard work, love of

the craft, and patience, create good writing? Or were they excluded from competition for the real prize before the game even begins? More than anything the Swan Princess wanted to be a Good Writer. Being here at school served only to remind her of that. She knew that everyone in the English Department would only think she was being silly, self-indulgent, and overly-dramatic if they could see her now. They were all so pragmatic, hard-working, well-dressed and serious. Half of them wanted to use their degrees for becoming teachers, a quarter wanted to be writers, and the remainder, well, she wasn't sure that they even *had* plans. They seemed to exist solely within the conceptual confines of the starch of their shirtsleeves.

Her tears played upon the surface of the toilet water like satin woodpeckers upon a gingerbread tree trunk. She thought of recent failures, both literary and otherwise. The scene from "The Goonies" passed through her mind in which The Mouth (that was his name, right?), at the bottom of the wishing well is soliloquizing, "*See this coin here? Well this one is My Dream, my wish, and it didn't come true! So I'm taking it back! I'm taking them all back!*" She wiped her watery face with the back of her hand and spotted some graffiti on the stall wall. It said, YOUR LIFE IS THE GLOW OF SUNLIGHT REFLECTED OFF OF SNOW. She was caught unprepared to read such a statement at that moment, and she felt like a rubberband, snapped of a sudden back into shape. She stood up, took a deep breath, and prepared herself for class, which would be starting in only a few minutes.

She stepped into class a few minutes later and looked around. All the kids were busy chatting or listening to their Ipods™ or doing some last-minute homework revisions. All but one girl, who sat at the very front of the class, right in front of the teacher's desk

and the chalkboard, with a large sketchpad plopped awkwardly atop her desk and a small avalanche of colored pencils scattered all about. This was Caroline, the Swan Princess' very, very best friend in the whole world. They had been best friends since the third grade, when Caroline would show the Swan Princess the secrets of the underground cave network beneath the elementary school, which they would access through a trap door next to one of the drinking fountains. The Swan Princess took a seat beside Caroline.

“Hi Caroline, whatcha up to?”

“Oh, hi Swan Princess. I forgot to do my homework last night, and then this morning I was going to buy an apple for Professor Polkadot, to kinda smooth things over, you know? But then I forgot to do that, too, so now I'm down to one final, desperate solution...” At this point Caroline finally looked up and smiled at the Swan Princess. Then she grabbed ahold of the sketchpad and held it up so she could see it. On the top sheet of paper was a drawing, in full-color, of the most beautiful, shiniest, tastiest looking red apple you could possibly imagine. It looked good enough to eat. “So what do you think? Do you think Professor Polkadot will like it?”

“Caroline, you are something else!” She smiled, sniffed and rubbed her nose just as a very distinguished looking woman entered the room carrying a stack of papers. It was, of course, Professor Polkadot.

The professor placed the stack of papers neatly on the desk and said, “Good Morning, class. And how are all of you on this bright, sunshiney Monday morning?”

No one said anything. Then Caroline blurted out, “I made you a drawing, Professor Polkadot!” She held up her exquisitely-rendered apple and held her breath.

“Very nice, Caroline. Very well-done, indeed,” the Professor expounded,

seemingly genuinely impressed. “I take it you forgot to do your homework again?”

There was a few scattered chuckles from the kids in the class. Caroline hunched over in her seat. “And need I *remind* you, this class is called Modern Russian Literature, and not,” the Professor paused, “Apple Drawing 101!”

Caroline was taken slightly aback. She expected a more witty fictitious class name than that. She turned to the Swan Princess and whispered, “Nice outfit! You look really aces today!” Then, to Professor Polkadot: “I’m real sorry Ma’am. Honest I am! I just, well, I just misplaced my copy of The Brothers Karamazov, and as I was looking around for it I started thinking about what you were saying that one brother, Smerdyakovv...right? What he said, about how if God doesn’t exist then everything is permitted,TM right? So I thought, what the heck? I just won’t do my homework tonight to show Professor Polkadot how well I understand the book.”

The Swan Princess just loved this kind of blatant exhibitionism that Caroline displayed so recklessly. She was a performance artist, after all, and highly capable of such displays. The Swan Princess, on the other hand, was much too shy for that kind of thing.

“Very well said, Caroline,” the teacher began to clap, slowly. “But you’ll forgive me if I use God’s absence as permission to give you a zero for the day!”

October 1, 2007

One morning the Swan Princess found herself up before the sun. She woke up and just couldn’t get back to sleep. It was a shame, because she had been having the dream in which the moon was where people lived, and the Earth was this luminous blue and white globe in the sky that waxed and waned in monthly cycles and was fawned over by poets

and young couples strolling through lamplit parks on first dates. It was one of her more pleasant recurring dreams. But now she was awake and trapped on the Earth. She sat up in bed, scratched the back of her head ferociously to get her hair all messy, and got up to make jasmine tea. She was wearing an oversized white dress shirt and red and black plaid panties. She called this her “Holden Caulfield pajamas.” After the water boiled and was poured, she brought her mug back into her bedroom and sat down on the bed. She looked out the window, which faced east. It was still dark out, but the sky was exhibiting the first traces of the hues of the sunrise; gentle lavenders and pinks, along with the faintest trace of what would become a brilliant neon-orange. All of the buildings were still acting like it was nighttime, with lights on even though no one was home, or working. She felt like these buildings, she felt bound to somekind of blueprint that pre-dated her life, and even the life of her parents, and who knows how far back?

She pulled out a well-worn looking notebook and placed it in her lap. She should use this insomniatic opportunity to write. Yeah, that’s the ticket. But the first blank page taunted her, the very first one, and she felt helpless in the headlights of it’s condemnatory oncoming traffic. The sky began it’s steady transition from eggplant to radish to mango. Still the Swan Princess’ pen remained motionless. As the sun rose it was hidden from site behind a highrise apartment, causing a sort of ultra-saturated, extremely intense halo of orange to burn around the building. And still the Swan Princess’ heart remained mute. The streets below began to be speckled with the day’s first early-risers. The halo around the building seemed to be reaching it’s apex, and with it the Swan Princess’ sense of frustration. She put the notebook down just as the sun finally peaked it’s face out from behind the apartment complex, and she grabbed a hand mirror from the top of the

“nightstand.” As she lifted it up to her face, it caught a ray of sunlight for a brief instant and blinded her. She pulled it away and as it turned she spotted the ghost of light it reflected moving across the floor and up a wall. There was a class she wanted to take next semester; it was called “Intro. To the Modern Heart.” There were more people walking the streets below, scurrying to get to work on time. She had an idea. She walked over to the east-facing window, mirror in hand, and held it up to the sun. Like magic a small but bright spot of light appeared on the side of the building across the street. With a minute twist of her wrist the light crossed all the way to the other side of the façade, disappeared momentarily, then reappeared on the next building over. She was highly amused by this simple yet altogether new discovery. She delighted in forming circles, stars, and then spelling out whole words. She tried shining her light on buildings farther down the street. Since she was on the fifth floor she was in a pretty good position to do so. She found that the light would only show up on concrete surfaces up to about two blocks away, but on more reflective surfaces such as traffic signs, mail boxes and car windshields, the glittery influence of her hand mirror could be observed for several blocks, as far as she could see before the street dead-ended. When she moved it back and forth across a row of parked cars, the red and white reflector lights appeared to twinkle like the night sky (or an idealized version thereof). After a few minutes of this she moved on to the next logical step. She picked out a pedestrian from among the thrawl and shined her light several paces in front of them, then when the person got to the point where they were about to step on it, she jerked it away, again directly in their path. Each time the person got close to stepping on it, though, she’d move it forward. The first person she tried this trick on didn’t seem to notice at all. The second person, on the other hand, stopped dead in his

tracks, looked at the shaky little ball of light in front of his feet, then looked all around, in all directions, and finally up towards the higher stories of the surrounding buildings. At this the Swan Princess ducked behind a curtain for fear of being spotted, but she still held the mirror out with one hand and did circles around the perplexed man. He began to walk very fast, and the Swan Princess began to laugh very hard. She turned the mirror around to look at her face, then she kissed it and looked around for her glasses. She found them sitting atop her paperback copy of Plato's Symposium. She put them on and then continued to study her face. She thought about the story in The Symposium that tells how we are just half of what we were in our original state, and how the search for love is really the quest to find our other half. In her face she saw exactly half of nothing. In her face she saw a wilderness completely tamed, and therefore completely drained of its very reason for being. In her face she saw a coral reef, visibly protruding from a sea of uncertainty. She set the mirror face-down back on her "nightstand."

October 2, 2007

"One time," Caroline said while unwrapping her twinkie, "I got one of those satellite radar speeding tickets in the mail, and I didn't even own a car. And I hadn't driven *at all* in months."

"That's pretty weird," the Swan Princess commented, and then added: "and Metaphysical."

"Yeah! The ticket had this photograph, a black and white photograph, of a license plate with a number that was supposedly registered to me. It's like some kind of evil, corrupted version of Plato's Forms, like they pulled this license plate number literally from the sky! And it was supposed to correspond to things that exist in the world! What a

joke!”

“Hmmm...,” The Swan Princess sat thoughtfully for a moment before proceeding. She was juggling two activities at once: the conversation and also making little sculptures on her plate out of strawberries and whipped cream. “One time,” she went on, “Or rather, over a period of time, I was receiving this series of visits at my house by Jehovah’s Witnesses. We talked about things like the wicked state of the world today™ and sometimes they’d make these sweeping gestures with their arms across the clear, blue sky and say things like, ‘this is God’s perfect Paradise world that he crafted for us out of His infinite love and generosity. It’s so perfect and wonderful and one day it will be obliterated!’” She cupped her hands together and drew them apart quickly; an exploding gesture. “KA-BOOM! And one time when they were talking about Satan they referred to him as a Renegade Angel. For weeks after that I couldn’t stop thinking about that phrase. I think it’s really loaded, and really beautiful.”

“A renegade angel...how could an angel go bad? It seems so improbable. Did any of those self-satisfied hucksters ever stop to think that maybe Lucifer was right? I mean, I don’t have all the facts, I wasn’t there, but maybe things had gotten so out of hand in Heaven, what with all the hierarchies and dogma and stuff, that Lucifer had no choice but to rebel if he ever wanted to have any chance of living with a clear conscience. I dunno, I mean...it’s possible!”

A leaf dislodged itself from the tree above them and made its way down to the top of the picnic table where they sat. Students walked to and fro, all-or-most of them connect to the same Ipod™ Hive Mind. The Swan Princess swirled a strawberry around in whipped cream and lifted it up to her mouth to take a bite. A little glob of whipped cream

stuck to her nose, but she didn't seem to notice. "I don't think Professor Polkadot likes me very much..."

"What kind of crazy talk is that?," Caroline exclaimed. "You get A's on all your assignments!"

"Yeah," the Swan Princess said, "But she never lets me clap out the chalkboard erasers after class is over."

"Yeah," said Caroline, "but she let you lead the discussion on Nihilism™ back when we were reading Fathers and Sons."

"I know...it's just...I don't know!" She struggled with her words as the glob of whipped cream melted slowly down the tip of her nose. "It just seems like so much fun... all that chalk dust floating up into the air like the laughter of children."

"Speaking of fun," Caroline grew mischievous, "how'd your date with that guy go last night? I almost completely forgot to ask!"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh come on...don't be such a touchy little baby! How bad could it have been? What? Was he really annoying? Or boring?"

"Worse...he was really annoying, *and* boring, *and* I slept with him!" The Swan Princess turned red as a strawberry.

Caroline scrunched up her nose. "Really? Didn't you just meet him yesterday at the Historical Society?" She jumped up on the table. "Since when did you become such a slut?" As she did this three or four twinkies fell out of her backpack. She scrambled to collect them all.

"Shut up! I am not a slut! I'm a princess! I am one of the elect who know how to

act in any situation! Under any conditions! I am a precious gem! A glimmering beacon of —Oh! Who am I kidding? I don't know anything about anything! I *am* a total slut! I could just die!”

Caroline leaned forward and gave each of the Swan Princess' pigtails a firm tug. “Aw, come on...where's that classic existential detachment we all know and love? Where's the girl who could punch a rock and leave the rock crying? The one who said Anne Frank didn't have it so bad?”

“What? I never said anything of the sort...” The Swan Princess felt, at that moment, like what lies on the other side of the television screen; essential in her own mind, yet completely underappreciated.

Somewhere, on the other side of town, in Daly City, actually, city of pastel-colored cubes that are all the same size, a cat digs through a pile of garbage in an alleyway and hits paydirt: one of those cartoon fish skeletons with the head still attached, and stink lines radiating out of it. The cats eyes shimmer in the daytime-running headlights of a Toyota Corolla. The cat grabs its prize in it's mouth and heads for the rarely-used parking lot behind the lawyer's office, where the disenfranchised alleycats hold all the meetings for their secret Apocalypse preparation committee. They hold these meetings because they know, or at least believe, that after all the humans kill themselves, it will finally be their turn to run the show.

October 3, 2007

Winter is the time of year to count your blessings. It keeps us warm, as has been suggested, and it gives us the opportunity to snuggle up in a snow blanket of forgetfulness and wear scarves, and swear at our family members because we've been

spending too much time with them indoors. Winter brings with it a widening of the wisdom that comes with whiteness, wind and worry. This novel does not necessarily take place in the winter, but it very well could. It's not essential, but it could. Each season is a condition, a refusal to acknowledge the preceding truth of the one just passed, as well as the reality of the one approaching. Seasons are the Earth's attempt to play house with the rotation of the solar system.

The Swan Princess sat on a bench with her body, in her head. Or was that an inaccurate appraisal of her situation? Was she sitting with Caroline because they were both sitting, or was she sitting while Caroline was also sitting, in a completely unrelated composition? What were the connecting threads of the proposition? Was it even for the readers and writers of novels to speculate? The Swan Princess got sleepy whenever she thought in such terms. She felt her eyelids getting heavy, like what tends to happen in bright sunlight, and it made her wonder if clouds ever got sleepy. There was this big electric light-up sign with the white and red Diet Coca-Cola logo emblazoned across its fiery surface on Bryant Street, and she wondered; did *it* ever get tired? And clouds, in their thankless trek across the airy sea of unknown associations, consequences, and shadows cast upon the whipped cream nothingness, did they ever want to just give up? To just stop drifting, transforming, and to become solid, unchanging consistencies? The question, in its simplest form, could be stated thus: did clouds ever wish that they were mountains? The Swan Princess doubted it, and Caroline probably did, too.

"I can't believe that you had sex with that loser," Caroline continued, refusing to let a dead horse die. "I swear, you've got a good, Dean's Listy head on your shoulders, but one glass of wine and you become completely gelatinous."

“Huh? How’d you even know that wine was involved?,” The Swan Princess thought of the Supremes’ song “Baby Love.”

“Umm...because that is the most obvious proposition ever planted, nurtured, cultivated, and sprouted in the long, boring history of god’s green, gray earth. And besides; I can smell it on your breath.”

“Really? Oh geez...that’s just swell...I forgot to brush my teeth this morning! Gawd...now I feel even more gross.” The Swan Princess stuck her hand in her pocket and felt the cold, metal key that rested peacefully at the bottom. It was a metallic intrusion, she thought, between the more inviting surfaces of clothing and flesh. Feeling it down there, soaking in her body heat, she felt like a cyborg. It was like she had taken the first, unsettling step into the realm of the unreal, the realm of the technologically-contrived lullaby person; mostly human, but lacking still some key (no pun intended) element that only full-fledged biologically-original human beings were privy to. She felt like a bounty hunter tracking down the fugitive, secret inadequacy of her own intrinsically synthetic soul.

October 4, 2007

The Swan Princess bit her nails. She had done so ever since she was a little girl, and her mother had made her take swimming lessons. There was this one lifeguard at the municipal pool whom the Swan Princess thought was just so great, she could hardly stop staring. She was a teenager which, to the Swan Princess, felt like a proposition that was still millions of years away for her personally, so to see this simultaneously young and ancient-seeming body in all its glory underneath a red one-piece bathing suit and adorned with whistle-necklace was something like a spiritual experience. The curvature of her

waist, hips and legs as she sat high atop her lifeguard station seemed to go on for miles and miles, and the slower the Swan Princess allowed her eyes to travel the sublime distance, the longer it seemed. It was a curve that could essentially go on forever, like one of those charted equations that forever approaches zero, getting closer and closer with each plotted point, but never quite reaching it. It was kind of sad, really, this kind of perfect beauty embodied in the young lifeguard. Even at such a young age, the Swan Princess was able to sense it. She was a very perceptive and aware child, she saw things where the other children did not, but even still, she was a terrible swimmer, and even under the constant vigilance of the angelic lifeguard, the thought of the green-tiled pool, with its invisible underwater corners, indecipherable currents, and “Deep End,” was extremely frightening to her. The combination of basking in the lifeguard’s grace and the swimming pool’s horror made the Swan Princess extremely nervous, so she started biting her nails. Casually at first, but the situation soon snowballed out of control. Every time the lifeguard’s whistle blew, whether it was directed at her or not, the Swan Princess nearly had a heart attack. She learned how to float on her back, and she’d do so while wearing sunglasses, which was the perfect cover for staring at the lifeguard’s breasts and silky dark hair, but while she was in this position, with back arched and arms outstretched, there was no possibility of ever getting her fingertips to her teeth, so she would eventually grow too agitated to keep it up. So she’d have to give up her perfectly-clandestine viewing platform, which only made her bite her nails with that much more voracity. After not too long her mother became very annoyed with her new unbecoming habit, and began to contrive elaborate methods to “cure” her. She’d wrap them in medical gauze and then dip the mummified fingers in vinegar. The Swan Princess would stand

there in her floral-print dresses with her arms held out away from her body, looking like she was about to rise up into the air. She'd drink glasses of Kool-Aid™ with her palms, change the channels on the TV remote with her nose, and turn the pages of picture books with her toes. And her mother would reapply the vinegar every couple of hours, so it never really dried. It was quite a predicament. Luckily, the passage of time saw with it the diminishing of her need to bite her nails, but it never disappeared completely. As Caroline continued to grill her about Shiro, the Swan Princess noticed that she had been biting her nails the entire time.

“Why did you go to the Historical Society again?”

The Swan Princess rested her chin on her palm and looked up at the sky. A plane was taking several seconds to cross from one end of the sky to the other.

“Aw come on, don't be like that!”

But still she sat, stared and ignored.

“All right then...be that way!” Caroline turned around to get up and leave, but then spun back around to face the Swan Princess. “Fine. I don't know why you don't want to talk about it. I have *no idea* what it could be. I can't even begin to guess what the secret might be, in the deepest, most inquisitive and insightful recesses of my psyche. I've got nuthin'. So I hereby resign myself to my defeat. Congratulations!”

The Swan Princess closed her eyes, took in a deep, even breath, released it slowly, and spoke. “Very well. Do you wanna go chase alleycats around?” Caroline crossed her arms, screwed up her eyebrows and nose, and said, “Uh...no. I've got some homework to worry about. Pretty annoying, I know, but I've got to do it.” She sat up again, this time for real, and said, “Sayonara, Kiddo!” Like a candle flame in a wind tunnel, she vanished.

The Swan Princess didn't know if she wanted to go home just yet, so she pulled out a book. Forsaking all of her course readings, this book was one she had borrowed from the Public Library a few days before. The name of the book was Paradise Lost, and it was written by a guy named John Milton. Actually, strictly speaking, he didn't "write" it. He was blind at the time, completely, helplessly blind, and he dictated the entire epic, lyrically colorful mess to an assistant, or something. She thought that was so perfect, since it inspired in her, as she read, the grandest, most elaborate visual spectacles she had ever experienced—and all in her head! It probably wouldn't have been possible, either, if he hadn't been blind. She thought it was the perfect condition for a writer late in life, after he or she had been able to amass a sufficient store of visual information. It didn't seem to work so well for Jean-Paul Sartre, but he was such a sensual writer, he probably needed all five to function properly. But Milton, on the other hand, was a devout Christian, so he was probably afraid of and disgusted with his own body, and that's why the loss of one of his senses only served to make him even that much better of a writer. He was one-fifth dead, one-fifth closer to eternity and to his god, and therefore able to channel, with one-fifth greater clarity, the secret majesty of creation.

She wondered if Caroline was upset with her at all, but soon the problems of the real world dissolved and melted into the fine hues of renegade angels, lush valleys and piercing lightrays from sunrises opening up the sky from the exact center of the horizon, in a world where there actually IS exact centers; the infinitely superior fantasy-abstraction world of literature.

October 5, 2007

The Swan Princess thought about books. The Swan Princess was surrounded by

books. This is because the Swan Princess had a workstudy job at the college library, which was located right smack in the center of the campus, which illustrated the pre-internet conception of libraries in the minds of scholasticism. Throughout the course of a standard shift there, the Swan Princess performed a wide range of duties, shelving books according to the Library of Congress™ cataloguing system, shelfreading, checking out materials to students and teachers at the Circulation Desk, helping with library searches, keeping the stacks neat and tidy, shifting, Non-Circ (which is short for Non-Circulating Book Count), and various miscellaneous odds and ends.

She liked working the Circ Desk. She enjoyed seeing what all the other undergrads were checking out, even if she was saddened by the fact that the books were almost exclusively course-related. Undergrads rarely read for pleasure. She liked saying things like, “Oh I’m sorry; this book is a reference book and does not circulate,” “These will all be due two weeks from today, except for the audio-visual materials which are due in three days,” and “well if you can please be more specific I can look it up for you in the library catalogue.” She loved stamping the due date on the little slip glued onto the back inside covers. The little mechanism in the stamp that spun around as you pressed the stamp down by the handle, revealing the side with the inked backwards date letters, reminded her of the way a mother bird feeds its young.

The Circ desk was great, and she with her pigtails and glasses looked great sitting behind it, but the part of the job that she really loved the most was shelving all alone, amongst the stacks. It was there that she made all the great discoveries, there that she was exposed to the full extent of the giddiness of libraries. While she was putting books of all shapes, sizes, and temperaments in their proper slots, who knew what hidden gem she

might unearth next? It could be anything. Lipstick Traces, Valentine Place, My Life In Heavy Metal, The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea, anything. The course of her entire internal life is threatened with complete renavigation every time she allows herself to get lost in the bookshelves of a library. She's like Gilgamesh, stepping into the forest over and over and over. And she had gone through any number of such personal revisions. Each time she finds a new book that possesses the kind of power necessary for transformation, it feels like she has stumbled upon the most powerful thing in the world, and as she holds this source of power in her hands and assimilates it, takes it into her Self™, she feels the wide-open airiness of consciousness, and the all-you-can-eat metaphysical buffet-ness of Free Will™.

The slender fingers that were the personal property of the Swan Princess found their tips being run across the surface of the cover of a very old book; a collection of the poems of Emily Dickenson. It was certainly one of the oldest books in the collection, with a copyright date of 1906. She set it aside for possible consideration for the Rare Books Room, then continued to shelve. She grew upset with herself for taking Shiro here the night before, for showing him books that meant the world to her but nothing to him, for holding his hand as she read aloud from Notes From the Underground. She had to abuse her authority as the most trusted of all the student workers at the library, and the only one with a key. "Oh god! Keys! I don't want to think about them, either!" Once again she felt around in her pocket for that *other* key, the one that had led her, indirectly, into the arms of Shiro. She knew what her actions meant. She had been trying to contrive magic where none existed. She wanted her date with this boy to run its course like a poem. It was her first date in months, and he turned out to be a complete bore, and the

Swan Princess hated him for it. Theirs was a union borne out of that hatred. The moment in which she realized that he was boring was the moment she knew that she would sleep with him. The Boredom that was his being was the justification for her hatred of that boredom. All the pleasure he received as a result of the clashing of their bodies on the battlefield of boredom, as well as his rather unexpectedly loud vocal expression of that pleasure, only served to amplify her hatred, which made her move her body even more violently. Shiro, of course, received and experienced this violence as an expression of love, meanwhile the Swan Princess was acting under the impetus of pure hatred. In the middle, where their bodies met, was the razor-thin dividing line of Boredom. It was as brittle-looking as tracing paper but impossible to tear. It was invisible but it was all she could see, like orange sunlight seen through closed eyelids, charged with a kind of sub-atomic pulsation, and it was at this level of awareness that the magic was supposed to reside. But it just wasn't there. So the Swan Princess had sex with Shiro with her body, which was the only weapon she had at her disposal, while she stabbed him to death with her mind. She imagined the blood that issued forth from the wounds would shoot upward into the sky in the form of dozens of tiny rainbows, one for each puncture hole.

October 6, 2007

Tuesdays were another story entirely. They still felt like the rosy-cheeked face of a brand-new week, but something was not right. Something was off. Tuesdays were figures without grounds, lives without histories, goals without aspirations. Free-floating nothings in the emerald sea of days, here today, gone tomorrow, entirely glossed-over and marginalized, like a dentist with a missing tooth. On Tuesday morning the Swan Princess found herself, post-egg and A-1 Sauce™ sandwich, riding the BART south to

the city of Colma™, dead suburbia in the shadow of San Francisco,™ protected from direct exposure by the buffer of Daly City.™ As she sat, and as the underground train sped, she continued to read Paradise Lost. Lucifer was in the process of establishing himself firmly as alpha male of Hell. Whenever another train passed, heading in the opposite direction on the neighboring, parallel track, it sounded like what Hell must sound like all the time. It was a terrible screech, like the sound of metal shopping carts being devoured in the jaws of some great and hideous beast. But at least it drowned out all the chatter of commuters, and gave free reign to the Words. That must be one of the advantages of Hell: you can get a lot of reading done, just so long as you take care not to let your book catch fire.

The Swan Princess turned a page just as a woman re-crossed her legs, and a standing man lost his balance and had to clutch a rail. She noticed these things and thought they were funny, or better yet, a sign of something huge, something omnipresent, something that doesn't exist. Everytime the double-doors opened she expected flowers.

Eventually the train reached the Colma™ stop and the Swan Princess put her book away and hopped out. The sky was beautifully overcast and the entire ceiling of clouds glowed with the diffused light of a sun with no outlet. Within a few minutes she was in the heart of the city, the cold, dead heart, and she found herself surrounded by cemeteries. Tombstones, monuments, markers and mausoleums of all shapes and sizes dotted the landscape for as far as the eye could see and created a marble cityscape that jutted up and superimposed itself gently against the cloudy sky. She didn't know exactly why she wanted to come here, but that was the case every time she came, so she just stopped worrying about the oppressive mental nagging of cause and effect, and just showed up

and let the landscape of memory pull her this way and that, and generally have its way with her. As she walked up and down grassy lawns, picturing what her own final resting place might look like, she pulled out a different book, this time a bulky collection of the poems of Marianne Moore, and stuck it under her arm. Moore was very popular in college, but not the best student, which is pretty much the opposite of the Swan Princess. She sometimes wonders what it would be like, to be in possession of that type of personality, and to still be able to channel the secret spirits of literary greatness. Well, if she wanted to channel spirits she was in the right place. She had 1.5 million to choose from.

It was amazing, being in a place like this, being surrounded by not so much the presence of dead people, but by the general attitudes living people have about death. It was all around her, in the form of things, material remembrances for the ones left behind, each one unique, yet each blade of grass that made up the lawn was just as unique, irreplaceable. She knelt down beside a marble cross and plucked a handful of moist grass from the earth, and looked at it. The individual blades stuck out from inbetween her clenched fingers, and the ball of her fisted palm, in all different directions, like a messy head of hair. The transformation was beginning already; now separate from the nourishment the earth provides, they are all as good as dead. Why did she do that? What was she trying to prove, either to herself or to some imaginary audience of peers? That she was calloused? It was just grass, after all, not people or bunny rabbits or anything. She opened her fist and let the blades of grass fall where they may, then she brushed off the remaining ones that stuck to her palms. There was a gentle breeze that rustled treebranches and pigtails alike, so that each felt the same in their difference.

She found a nice looking spot under a tree beside one of the paved walkways and had a seat. The stark geometry of the rows of grave markers was laid out all around her; she could see lines receding into infinity everywhere she looked, and she imagined herself a kind of nexus of souls, the location of a universal stopover on their way to the big, black hole of mystery. She opened the book and began to read. She was getting tired of this Lack-of-Narrative nonsense that made up her day to day life. Well, lack of substantial narrative, anyway, since she knew that anything could be made into narrative without that much effort. She was a writer, after all, of fairly promising prose and poetry, according to her professors.

Suddenly the Swan Princess felt some kind of furry presence at her side. She turned to see a mangy old black cat with sad-looking eyes. The cat, with these eyes that could explain, without the benefit of words, the hidden economy of loss, looked up at her and said, “meow.”

“Why hello there, little kitty-cat!,” said the Swan Princess as she extended a hand to attempt to scratch the cat behind his ears, but as she was about to make contact the cat darted off and hid behind a tombstone. “Oh! Don’t be frightened, little cat! I won’t harm you. You see, I’m a princess, and am therefore possessed of the most refined and deep reserves of compassion, especially towards adorable little animals.”

The cat momentarily peeked his head out from behind the tombstone, but then quickly pulled it back out of sight. It was no use. The Swan Princess seemed to have made the acquaintance of a genuine scardy-cat. Within seconds she could see that the cat was on the run, and already a hundred graves away. “Sigh,” said the Swan Princess, who at that moment had no recourse other than to stick her nose back in her book and dream

about...well, dreams.

October 7, 2007

Colma™ was a nice temporary escape, a nice death vacation from the land of Death Denial,™ but she had an afternoon class to think about, so she had to venture back to the goldenrod metropolis of San Francisco.™ Once again she entered the BART station, put her card in the neo-turnstyle thing, and plopped herself down on the floor and pulled out a book. This time she was back to Paradise Lost. Off to her left was a large group of what she could only call “Hip Hop Kids,” a free-floating mass of twelve or so teenagers all wearing matching white hoodies with baggy dark pants. They were all freestyle rapping, or whatever you call it, and laughing and clapping their hands and putting one hand over their mouth and pointing with the other and saying, “Oooohhhh...!” The Swan Princess thought they were either over-compensating for obviously low self-esteem with inflated displays of confidence, or they were all really happy. She thought about it for a minute but she couldn’t decide.

Her and the Hip-Hop kids all boarded the same train back into the city. They moved as one, like a cloud of atoms, as they did so. The Swan Princess also moved as one, but then, she was one. Or one-hundred, or one-thousand. What if she was herself plus every book she had ever read? And if that were the case, why not throw in every movie she’s seen, too? Maybe she’s also every poem, painting, song, conversation, blade of grass, vodka and tonic, secret handshake, meteor shower, poorly-lit Italian restaurant, snowcone dropped on the sidewalk, and awkward hug she’s ever experienced?

After a typical passing of time and space, she was back at school. She looked up into the overcast sky and saw that a small patch of blue had opened up directly overhead,

and with this new reference point as a guide, she could now tell how fast the clouds were moving, which was seemingly pretty fast, but it might have been a little bit misleading, in light of the fact that the clouds always hung so low above the city. In any event, the sight of the fast-moving clouds reminded her, and set her mind to thinking, about a funny little concept known as the Passage of Time.TM It was silly, really, because wasn't a "passage" a set course of travel, defined by a clearly established set of special boundaries? And isn't Time supposed to be everywhere? Where exactly is this Passage of TimeTM? She wondered if she had ever inadvertently wandered through it on her way to the grocery store, or to pick dandelions in the undeveloped fields surrounding her parents house when she was growing up. And just how wide could this passage be expected to be? Maybe it was so big that it encompassed the entire universe, and time was flowing through it, washing over all of existence, from one direction to the other, directions that have no relation at all to the directions we rely on in our day-to-day endeavors, or even the more grandiose ones we use for massive cosmological calculations, or even the even *more* grandiose ones, ones that are admittedly vaguer and less direct, that we use for the mapping out of our spiritual and religious lives. And if this passage is indeed a passage, were there ever times when there was no time passing through it? In other words, did the passage have autonomous existence separate from the time? Could the passage ever be empty, lying in wait for the next pulsation of time, like the freeway waits for rush hour? Or did the passage only have definition in so far as it was the outermost edges of the form, streamlined and silver as a fish, that time took as it flew, and was pulled skinnier and longer, like an over-rolled mass of dough, by the sheer massiveness of it's own ever-escalating velocities? Was the passage an illusion, a place-holder, a representation, like

the swirly lines an illustrator uses to denote wind? And if this was the case, then what contains time? Why does it move in a linear fashion in the first place? What exactly is its basic nature, that, without a container to give it form, it does not spread out across the path of least resistance in all directions, like water? Is time a liquid or a solid? A concept or a law? A verb or a noun? Was time a son or a daughter of some failed revolutionary generation, did time revel in the thought of being touched by the trembling hand of an expectant lover in a dark bedroom, lit only by the neon signs and traffic lights of the world on the other side of the glass windowpane? Was time unbearably shy, except when surrounded by close friends and family? Is time a cat person, like the Swan Princess, or a dog person, like Shiro? This line of questioning could, unfortunately, last forever, a prospect time itself might regard rather dubiously, but unfortunately for the Swan Princess, her newly re-established awareness of the Passage of Time™ made her realize that she was late for class, so she had no more time to indulge in a chain of endless sentences that ended in question marks. As the Swan Princess ran across the curving walkways of the campus, dodging potted plants and undergrads, her moving body through space formed its own kind of passage, not that she was giving it much conscious thought, and this passage was delineated by the flap of pigtails and untied shoelaces, set to the rhythm of the sped-up beat of a young woman's heart, a young woman who was deathly afraid of anything that even remotely approaches the realm of the B+. As she darted around a blind curve, her copy of Paradise Lost slipped out of her hands and flew up into the air several feet in front of her. After a second's hesitation, she lunged forward and, arms extended, caught the book before it landed in a sinister-looking puddle of mud. If there was one thing she hated nearly as much as a B+, it was a damaged library book.

After quickly inspecting the book for any structural flaws that appeared to be newly-inflicted, she continued her mad dash to class.

She was nearly there. She burst through the doors that separated the inside of the English Department building from the rest of creation, and as she did do she ran between two amorous students, a jock and a cheerleader, who were about to give each other a big wet kiss, and who inadvertently each gave the Swan Princess a kiss on either cheek. The Swan Princess blushed as she spotted the door to her classroom. The class was “Hemmingway as Metaphor for Hemmingway” and, looking through the small rectangular window in the door, she could see that all the students were seated and class was already in session.

October 8, 2007

At first she hesitated, but then she realized that the only alternative to going in was not going in, and not attending class was far, far worse than being late. She anticipated each set of eyes on her as she entered. It was so awkward! She held her breath and turned the bronze door handle, then, with what could probably be called an excessive amount of force, shoved the door open and in the process tripped on an untied shoelace and tumbled headfirst into the classroom, a tangled mass of books and papers struggling to free themselves from the dust cloud that was the Swan Princess. As she sat there on her smarting knees on the cold tile, in a daze of disbelief and swollen expectation, she waited patiently for the first sound, whether generated by human or act of god, that would swoop down to rescue her from the excruciating nausea of her situation. It was a scene drenched and dripping with the nervous sweat of silence. She noticed a trail of ants making its way across the expanse of the floor and up a desk leg to a half-eaten candy bar resting on the

edge of the desk of a fat kid. She saw the hands on the wall clock progressing one tick at a time, but the whole world seemed to be rotating with them in a synchronous and compensatory fashion, so that nothing was getting done.

The teacher sat behind his desk with a look of mild annoyance upon his weatherworn, baby intellectual face. Finally, he was the one to break the indestructible silence. With one eyebrow raised he adjusted his glasses and said, “Well are you just going to sit there all day? There *are* seats available, so I suggest you take one. You’re not hurt, are you?”

The Swan Princess scrambled to collect her papers and other scholastia, and said, “Oh! No! I’m—I’m fine! I—,” but then she stopped herself short and waited for her body to take over for her mind and then to get them both into a desk. A few students chuckled and whispered to one-another as she made her way to the back of the class, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. She noticed, as she walked that lonely mile, that a lot of them were secretly listening to their Ipods™ with one earpiece shoved in and concealed by a strategically placed hand, so they didn’t even notice the commotion.

The teachers name was Professor Greensleeves, and he carried with him at all times the kind of air of smugness that can only belong to one whose failed attempts to enter the Shangri-La world of scholarly discourse were becoming more and more disheartening with each new milestone reached in his hairline’s steady migration northward. After having an essay on his beloved Hemmingway published in a Midwestern literary journal of mild regard, he finds himself today, seven years later, still stuck teaching at the same college to a bunch of undergrads, some of whom were actually attending the college at the time of the historic publication.

The Swan Princess took a seat in that lonely avenue of broken dreams—the back row. She found herself among the kids who were only in college because there was nothing else to do, or else because their parents were rich, or else because they played sports. She hated the back row, but what could she do? She didn't dare presume to sit in the front after that horrific little display. It just occurred to her, that is, she just had the feeling, that she had talked in her sleep the night before.

“All right! Are we all alive this morning, or afternoon, or whatever it is?” the professor asked as he pushed his rolling chair backwards and stood up. “No more crises? No more surprises? Good! We've got no more room for surprises because today we're going to talk about...Hemmingway! Everyone get out your copies of In Our Time and turn to the short story entitled “A Very Short Story...”

The Swan Princess wanted to like Hemmingway, honest she did, but she just couldn't do it. One time she even broke up with a boyfriend over it. It wasn't as if she didn't acknowledge what he did for modern literature, she knew of a lot of writers of subsequent generations who were influenced by him heavily whom she really admired, a lot more than him. And it wasn't like she thought he was terrible, either, it was just that she thought he was *not* great, even kind of boring at times. That was Hemmingway: forever chasing after a really big fish, but then when he catches it he just throws it back.

She flipped through her paperback copy of the book and watched as the type became animated within its eternal prison of horizontal lines within a rectangular container. Next to Ernest Hemmingway, she felt like a total failure as a writer. She felt like she was already way better than him, but she knew no one else would feel that way. If his writing was beef jerky, hers was bubble tea. If his writing was etched in stone, hers

was written in sky-writing, the kind that only remains visible for fifteen minutes or so. She scolded herself for even caring at all what other people thought of her. She was in the back row now, so what did it even matter? Hemmingway was Hemmingway, a metaphor for himself, and she was nobody, a metaphor for nothing. As Professor Greensleeves went on about Hemmingway's simple sentences which contained only the bare minimum of commas, she thought about what it might be like to live inside of Hemmingway's prose, with its directness and sparseness and wide-open spaces free of extraneous debris on which to trip or stub your toe, just the freedom of unobstructed movement, it seemed like a big field of daffodils, an endless lark, in these terms. She sighed. At least he understood the rules of grammar well enough to break them properly.

October 9, 2007

The Swan Princess always dreamed of going to Hollywood. She always thought of that once famous quote, now already becoming obscured by the obstructing, milky fog of the fads and fancies of each era, stacked higher and higher on top of each other, "Underneath all that fake tinsel, there's real tinsel." She, herself, couldn't even recall who had said it, so strong was the hostile alien force known as Forgetfulness. It was a famous actor from the 1930's or '40's, she was pretty sure. In any event, this straightforwardly beautiful utterance of truth made her think of a line from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (the movie version) as well: "She's a phoney but...she's a real phoney." That was Hollywood, as far as she was concerned. It really is a dream factory manufacturing images of our collective subconscious, even though she didn't believe in the subconscious mind. Anyway, we told Hollywood what we wanted to think, and Hollywood, in turn, told us what to think. Our relationship to motion pictures is that of a surreal loop, the notion of

origin as irrelevant as the name of the man who had said that thing about the fake and real tinsel. Hollywood creates us, just as we create Hollywood. It's the gift that keeps on giving, and the Swan Princess really wanted to visit one day, maybe even live there. But for now she was here, and it was there, and squirrels were running up and down tree-trunks as a drop of rain hit her on the top of the head.

She looked up just as the first drops were appearing. There was this point in which the drops crossed a threshold; the threshold of visibility, and they seemed to just spontaneously spring into existence, with no need of clouds at all, like imagery in 3-D video games whose memory capacity only allows for so much visual information at one time, games in which the very act of walking forward causes mountains to rise up in the distance, one polygon at a time. And that was the way the rain was falling: one sheet at a time.

Now that she was outside in damp air, she wanted to run. Not as a declaration of freedom, but as an admission of being trapped, caged. She wanted to run because there was a need to run away from something, and it was this notion that she most wanted to express at the moment. There were times for embracing Life, and times for running away from it. The literal act of running was a way to express both, and both were valid. She was glad Professor Greensleeves' class was done for the day. She was thankful for everything being true at once, and thankful for the constant tug that truth precipitated. She was thankful for the rain, thankful for the empty spaces between the drops, and thankful for her legs.

So she started running. The idea passed through her head of trying to run away from her own legs, in which case she'd be doubly thankful for having legs: once for

having the means with which to run away, and again for having something to run away *from*. She dashed around the corner of a building and past cars circling the parking lot waiting for an open spot. She remembered some books she read as a child in which this guy, who was supposed to be a really fast runner, went out jogging in the rain and when he got home his mom was surprised to see that he wasn't wet at all, because he had run so fast that all the drops missed him. Now she was off the campus and into the city. Her pigtails did all they could to keep up with the rest of her body, but they were always just a pace or two behind. She ran across a street of moving vehicles and a bunch of construction workers put down their sledgehammers to whistle and call out various suggestive phrases. Then they picked up their sledgehammers, and the thrusting of civilization into the future was resumed. She saw the giant red radio tower on the top of the hills to the west, was it? She had lost all sense of direction, and on the inside surface of the lenses of her glasses, she suddenly became aware of the faint reflection of a tiny portion of her own face superimposed on the city that enveloped her. She saw the tiny hairs of her eyebrows, suddenly jutting out of the hills as well, and dwarfing the radio tower, reducing it to insignificance. She looked up, and if these tall buildings were said to be scraping the sky, then her eyebrow hairs were puncturing it, leaving it permanently scarred. Every twist of her neck was a twist of the knife into the soft underbelly of heaven, and every time she repositioned her glasses upon the bridge of her nose, an angel fell from the clouds.

She stopped on a street corner, out of breath. She put her hand to her chest as she inhaled and exhaled greedily. The sounds of the city reached her as if through a fine filter; it was all exactly as it should be, but the level of intensity was somehow off. For

example, the blare of car horns was just as loud as ever, but somehow “just as loud as ever” didn’t seem all that loud anymore. Either that or it seemed to be reaching heretofore unimaginable heights. And the rain seemed to have stopped...or it was coming down twice as hard. The intensity of sensation, and her ability to effectively discriminate between different levels of this intensity, seemed to be being, all at once, called into question.

She spotted a section of the sidewalk in which the concrete was being pushed up and remolded by the tree roots which grew underneath. The entire typography of that tiny little section of the city was altered. It was as if Nature had written a tiny, yet compelling, manifesto, and then wheat-pasted it onto that exact spot. The Swan Princess dug in her bag for Paradise Lost. She flipped through it to try to find a comparable passage, but was unable.

October 10, 2007

She dug into her bag and grasped at the solitary stick of gum she knew had been resting at the bottom, under the notepads, pens, pencils, loose change, and first lines of abandoned novels scribbled on crumpled up sheets of yellow lined paper, for several weeks now. People walked by, at one point someone bumped into her and said, “Watch where you’re standing,” but in a polite way. She clutched the stick of gum and began to peel back the glistening foil wrapper, underneath it was green with white speckles and several rows of zig-zag lines running the length of it. It’s texture was somewhat coarse and malleable, like wet seaweed dragged through sand. She stuck it in her mouth and began to walk down the sidewalk. She didn’t know where she was going as she passed small markets and vegetable stands, Mexican restaurants and Walgreens™ Pharmacies,

but she knew that wherever she was going, sooner or later she'd get there, and then there she'd be, like a reflection that showed up on the mirror before the object. She chewed her gum as she thought about how whenever you bent your arm at the elbow you were creating this bony protrusion that was, in a way, the most insect-like spot on the body. This sudden thought may or may not have been induced by the way the Swan Princess articulated the motion of her appendages as she walked, but the author doesn't feel as though it's his place to go into too elaborate a description of the way she walks, since he believes that some things are better left mysterious. As for his individual choices regarding what to describe in depth, and what to gloss over; let us just say that he does *not* choose to exclude a description of her walk because she walks funny. That would be too easy. No, it's something else, and he asks you to trust him on this point. Now, enough of these kinds of writer/reader referrals; they are nothing but trouble.

The rain collected on the surface of the Swan Princess' glasses, adding yet another layer to her visual experience, which grew denser and denser each time she thought about it. A kid walked by holding the string of a red balloon that bounced around on the air currents as his mother led him quickly down the sidewalk by his hand. As he passed the Swan Princess he looked right at her with piercing yet non-confrontational eyes and let his grip on the string loosen until the balloon was set free, and began to rise up away into the rainy sky. The drops of rain, as they hit the balloons surface, caused it to waver and flinch slightly in it's course, but it never stopped rising. As it rose, and as is common in the realm of the way we perceive things out in the world visually, the balloon appeared to grow smaller and smaller as time passed, but in reality it was just getting farther and farther away. Okay, maybe it was literally getting smaller, as well, since the

helium was probably slowly seeping out of it, but the actual rate of physical shrinkage was, for our purposes, negligible in comparison to how fast it was drifting off into the upper reaches of the stratosphere. It was like a soft, reverse meteor.

It should probably be added that the Swan Princess was not in the least bit aware of the plight of the balloon as it flirted with the idea of Outer Space. She was, instead, focusing her thoughts on the eyes of the boy who let go of the balloon. He seemed to contain the wisdom of a ninety-year-old samurai behind the glossy globes he used to stare into the hidden guilt and carefully veiled megalomania that was this simple, yet eloquent, college over-achiever. There was a feeling that rose up inside of her. She did her best to shake it off; it was not a feeling she was well-disposed towards. She felt like thousands of tiny and writhing segmented worms were sliding down her back, underneath her clothes. She winced at the thought of their little slime trails as they navigated around the graceful curves of her shoulderblades, or stood perplexed in the face of something as out of place, geographically, as a single pimple on a vast unbroken plain of otherwise unblemished skin. She imagined them halting in their tracks, completely perplexed, as if they had just, for the first time, glimpsed the Great Wall of China, as they first set eyes on the towering showstopper of the side of a bra-strap. For the first time in her life she was almost glad that she had to wear a bra. Almost. She scratched her back as she rounded a familiar corner in a familiar neighborhood. She knew exactly where she was. Somehow, by chance or design (what's the difference, right?) she had ended up at the one place she had been telling herself that she *must* avoid. Before her there stood a large glass storefront with large block letters affixed to the panes from the inside. Beyond the glass could be seen a, for the most part, black, lightless interior, punctuated here and there by flashing,

strobing, pulsating, and otherwise mesmerizing conglomerations of light, light that seemed to be calling to the Swan Princess from the other side of a great ocean. The letters in the window spelled out, in all capitals, “THE POLYGON EMPORIUM.” She swallowed her spit as she gazed upon the wobbly yet sturdy-seeming wood cutout letters painted a rainbow-array of colors, and in so doing inadvertently swallowed the piece of gum she’d been chewing on. “Aces!,” she thought, “now that cancerous mass will be in my stomach for seven years!” She knew all about cancer; she had them growing everywhere: in her past, in her present, and in her future. She approached the front door and pushed it open, and stepped inside.

October 11, 2007

Being inside of the Polygon Emporium™ on a Tuesday afternoon was like being on the inside of a pinball machine, and at that moment the Swan Princess felt like the silver ball, the shiny little stand-in for man’s helpless plight existing in a universe of forces that seem to emanate from impossibly far reaches of space, beyond all reason or compassion. The Swan Princess, too, was at the mercy of the paddles of fate, so to speak.

The space, which appeared at one time or another to have been a small warehouse, made for an unusually large video arcade. At the moment it was filled with kids from elementary through high school, stopping in for a few rounds of Marvel Vs. Capcom,™ or, for the purists among them, Street Fighter II.™ The kids were loud, the games were loud; it was the arcade aesthetic: disparate sensations in conglomeration, wrapping you in a cocoon that kept you safe and nurtured as you focused in on one game. There were all different types of games, the Swan Princess knew this as well as anyone: action games, fighting games, first-person shooters, stealth games, puzzle games,

adventure games, side-scrollers, overhead shooters, role-playing games, simulation games, sports games, strategy games, war games, and on and on. She knew, as well, that the game she was about to step into was all of these. On the other side of the room, wearing the red polo shirt and green slacks that was the uniform of the Polygon Emporium,TM as well as a quarter-dispensing utility belt which he was utilizing at the moment to hand out quarters to a raging sea of kids extending waves of one-dollar bills high up into the sky, was Shiro. He hadn't yet spotted her, and as he stood there, nearly overcome by the machinations of pre-adolescent hysteria and impatience, desperately trying to keep up with their demands, she felt almost sorry for him. He was, after all, a pinball too, and subject to the same whims of causality. But she quickly shook off her misguided sympathy and deemed it an inexcusable show of weakness. He was, after all, guilty of the gravest crime of all: the crime of being boring. And what's worse, of encroaching, in his boringness, into the life of the Swan Princess. She leaned against a TempestTM cabinet with snowflakes in her eyes, snowflakes which quickly turned to fire. The polished and painted wood surface of the machine was cold to the touch, and she could also feel a slight vibration that came not from that game, since no one was playing it at that moment, but from the network of games as a whole, and the conduits that separated them.

October 12, 2007

Shiro hated his job. He hated video games, he hated kids, and he was completely indifferent as far as literature was concerned. What he did like was non-profit public radio, "the arts" in abstractia, current events, the stock market, genealogy, and girls. He liked girls of all shapes and sizes, all colors, all ages (as long as they're under thirty-five),

and all professions. He liked the authority afforded one by a finely-stitched and well-pressed pinstriped business suit. He liked the idea of tipping generously, and then some. He liked dog beaches and amber-colored condominiums reflected on the surfaces of man-made lakes. He liked his mother's tuna casserole, and as he looked up toward the entrance he was pleasantly surprised to see something else he liked. To Shiro, the sight of the Swan Princess at that instant was like the apex of a pyramid formed by a team of high school cheerleaders. She looked as fragile as a field of pansies a millisecond before it was struck by lightning. She looked up and their eyes met, hers seemed to be filled with passion, as well as the reflected glow of dozens of video monitors. She looked like a cat on the side of the road, with pigtails sticking out of the top of her head instead of pointy ears, as you drove home from a night of heavy drinking.

She saw that he had been alerted to her presence, and a wave of panic rushed through her body. Why had she come here? What was she doing? Why did she care so much? Then, without warning, he dismissed himself from the congregation of kids and began to make his way towards her. At this she really began to panic. He had this dumb half-smile on his face, and the half of his face that wasn't smiling seemed to be saying, "Yes, I'm happy to see you, but only so much." The Swan Princess quickly lunged for Paradise Lost and opened it to a random page in front of her face, but it was too late. There in front of her, in his ridiculous uniform, was Shiro.

"Hi," he offered, as the one-syllable key that promised to open the door to their continued romantic entanglement.

She slammed the book and nearly took off her nose. "Oh...hi! Hey...Shiro! I forgot that you worked here. I was just here 'cause the last time I played Galaga™ one of

those blue alien ships, well...they're not always blue...they're green initially until you shoot them once, and then they turn blue, you know! Anyway, one of them captured my fighter, which was, of course, playing right into my hands, except that it backfired, which happens sometimes, when, as I was trying to recapture it, I accidentally blew it up! Um... like I said, these things happen, and it's usually no big deal, except in this case it was my last life and I was pushing level twenty-six, and I was a mere three-thousand points—three thousand?, well maybe six thousand, a mere six thousands points away from the high score for the machine. Can you believe it? Um, so I haven't been able to stop thinking about that unfortunate captured fighter...ummm...can I borrow a quarter?"

Shiro, of course, mistook this outburst as poorly-disguised giddiness from laying eyes on him again, and as such, lost none of his finely-honed confidence. "But baby, you've already got the high score on Galaga!"

"Yeah, but...it's even more satisfying when you break your own high score, anyone will—"

"Relax, baby! You're gonna get your pigtails all tied up in knots...I'm really glad you showed up here today. You can imagine how I felt yesterday morning, waking up all alone on the floor of the school library. I mean, you never even gave me your phone number."

The Swan Princess flipped through her book rapidly. "That's because...I don't have a phone, yeah! I know it's a pretty big inconvenience in this day and age and all but...can I give you my email address?" She bit her lip. She hated how she was acting, she was acting like she really did like him. She was acting like the fallen pine cone that wanted to be reattached to the pine; foolish. If she wanted to regain the upper hand she

never had, she had to reacquaint herself with her hatred. She had to stick her hand all the way into the Jell-O™ mold of her heart and pluck out the frozen strawberry of animosity, and while she was in there, a handful of malevolence, as well.

“That’s alright Swanny.” She hated it when people called her “Swanny.” He leaned in closer. “We don’t need telephones to connect.”

At that statement the Swan Princess found what she was looking for. She stood up straight. “You’re right, we don’t need phones to connect when we’ve got...,” she poked him on the nose with her index finger, not the gesture Shiro was hoping for or expecting, “...Ms. Pac-Man™!”

“Huh?” His chest seemed to deflate by three or four pounds.

“You know, Mr. Video Arcade...Ms. Pac-Man™! Let’s play a round—two players—to celebrate over a quarter-century of Fun!” She slapped him on the shoulder, a decidedly unsexual gesture, then adjusted her glasses, took them off, held them up to examine the lenses, wiped them on her t-shirt, and put them back on. Then she adjusted them again. Her t-shirt was yellow, and in green block letters across the front was written “Tales From the Secret Annex by Anne Frank.”

“Uh...okay...but what about Galaga™?”

“Oh, I can get around to that any old time. Like you said: I’ve already got the high score, right?” That embarrassing incident in Mr. Greensleeves’ class felt like it was a million miles away, like it happened so long ago that to even assign it ownership by a specific Ego that exists today would be a completely absurd notion, would be to miss the point entirely. There is no dominion over the past, and the past, itself, holds no sway over the subsequent progression of reality that serves as the past’s executioner. Stars bob up

and down in the sky, they twinkle and emit light and colors, and they create and they die. The textures of the sky, like thick globs of paint running down the sides of a nuclear-impact crater, screaming for recognition in swirly masses of pink, magenta, yellow, and turquoise, say things out loud only when they wish to be heard. The rest of the time they just think them in their head, a much more private place for such blatantly universal redundancies.

She knew from their conversations on the night of their date that, though video games held no interest for him, he was, or at least he claimed to be, fairly proficient at Ms. Pac-Man,TM solely because of the long periods of down time during his eight-hour shifts. And not only that, but when the subject of high scores came up, she learned that his was actually significantly higher than hers.

“Alright,” said Shiro, “I’ll just set it on free play...”

“No!,” exclaimed the Swan Princess, “We’re going to pay just like everyone else, or rather, *you’re* going to pay.”

“But why? It’s no hassle at all for me to—“

“No questions!” She pointed her index finger squarely in front of his face. “Just insert those coins!” For the first time she became aware of fake clanking-of-quarters sound effects playing at all times from speakers affixed to the walls. It was fairly annoying, at that.

“Alright already! What’s gotten into you, anyway?”

The Swan Princess resented this question, if only because it implied that Shiro knew her well enough to ask it. “Seeing someone naked isn’t everything,” she thought, and a faint shudder traveled down the length of her spine. She remembered, in a sudden

flash, that at one point during their lovemaking, a book had fallen off of one of the shelves and struck her on her thigh. The book was Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, it hurt, and she had let out a small cry, which, upon hearing, occasioned Shiro to tighten his embrace. She knew exactly what had happened and felt annoyed as she tilted her head to examine the object that would, quite possibly, leave a bruise come morning. She had forgotten about that. She'd have to remind herself to check next time she was able.

Once she had fallen out of a tree, and all she had ended up with was a bruise. Her mother scolded her and told her how lucky she was that that was the extent of the damage. The Swan Princess was sixteen at the time, and she happened upon a baby sparrow that had fallen from its nest. What else was she to do? She spotted the nest from whence it plummeted and naturally went about attempting to right the wrong. The injustices of gravity are multitude, and she was only doing her part.

October 13, 2007

The Swan Princess, at that moment, did not want to be where she was, but at least the fantasy refuge of video games would afford her temporary relief from the unrelenting full-time job of selfhood. She loved video games because of what she understood as their central paradox: that of absolute freedom existing side-by-side with complete restriction of movement. This paradox exists on several levels; first, the obvious one in which the illusion and the activity of action is being played out while the body remains almost completely motionless. But also, and much more interestingly to the Swan Princess, a video game screen is a field in which there are no pre-set paths that a player *must* take, and the only restrictions, just as in "real life," are the internal laws of the video games "universe," yet, and this becomes even more true the better you get at any given game,

once a goal is introduced as the sole motivating factor (such as amassing the highest point total possible), the possibilities for movement, A.K.A. choice itself, become narrower and narrower. Attainment of the goal becomes the only criteria for the “correctness” of an action, superseding any other aesthetic, moral, pragmatic, religious, philosophical, or what have you, considerations. In other words if you want to do well, you *have* to do certain things, make certain moves, and take certain paths. The Goal is the singular point of light, the central meeting point of all infinite contractions, the vanishing point, the origin of the world. The Goal is the funnel through which all endeavors are directed. If you want to be really good at a game, this submission, this willful relinquishing of will, is your only option, and if you only have one option, that’s really the same thing as saying No Options.

Ms. Pac-Man™ is a perfect illustration of this. It is a maze, a grid, and the character of Ms. Pac-Man herself is like a feminist-revisionist Art History, one that navigates the grid and chomps away at its myths one by one, one pellet at a time. In this light it becomes exceptionally clear why Ms. Pac-Man never married. The Swan Princess often wondered if these ideas of hers were too obvious to be profound, or even mildly interesting. She was about to experience the Paradox of Video Games™ firsthand, and that was the important thing, anyway. Maybe “charming” was a better description. If not profound, she’d settle for “charming.”

“All right, Princess,” Shiro said, interrupting her train of thought, “I hope you know that I’m not going to go easy on you.”

The Swan Princess feigned amusement, then countered, “What a trite little witticism you’ve uttered.”

“*Ouch.*” He wasn’t sure how to react. Was she being playful or just outright mean? His uncertainty festered as he slid two quarters into the slots. After a sudden clink from within the cabinet, the demo screen switched to the actual screen of the first life of the first player. “Wait! Who’s going to be player one?,” Shiro asked.

“Out of my way!,” commanded the Swan Princess, and she took the joystick in hand. She stood with eyes focused on the screen as the intro music played, an upbeat little tune with an underlying “baseline” that always made her think of bobbing for apples blindfolded. She widened her field of vision to encapsulate the entire screen, then retracted it to exclude everything else in the universe. She gripped the joystick with a touch that was at once so delicate yet so controlling, it would make the most accomplished neurosurgeon in the world green with envy. After a moment of silence the chase began, and with it the first decision of the game: should she move immediately to the left or to the right? The Ms. Pac-Man avatar always appeared on-screen facing left, so the Swan Princess’ rebellious nature caused her to lean in the direction of right, but what if that was foolish? What if the programmers, by having Ms. Pac-Man face left, were intentionally trying to get players off on the right foot, so to speak, even though the character had neither arms nor legs? You could assume that the real, fundamental question here was that of the goodness or wickedness of the programmers. If left is the proper choice then the programmers are good, if right then they are evil. In light of the Swan Princess’ nagging yet annoying belief in the innate goodness of human nature, a belief even she was not sure was actual or self-enforced, she went left.

As she turned the pale pink corners of the maze, Ms. Pac-Man’s mouth opened and closed with an insatiable appetite for life or love, or something else entirely. She

gobbled up pellets like a thing possessed, and for a second the Swan Princess' ego surfaced to ask how good of a player she could possibly be if she made such a big deal about the very first decision of the game? But it was quickly squelched, and she disappeared once more into the liquid crystal flatness of the world in her eyes. She gobbled as many pellets as she could while, one by one, the ghosts entered the arena, all the while awaiting the opportune moment in which to swallow the first power pellet, and then to eat the ghosts as they blinked blue and white, like a nation infected with the insidious virus of Manifest Destiny. All of her turns were aligned with the four cardinal points. The first cherry bounced into the scene, as well as did the first bead of sweat trickle down the Swan Princess' brow. She had successfully lured all four ghosts into one corner and positioned herself, wedge-shaped mouth agape, so close to the white orb that she was practically drooling on it. She made her move! The ghosts attempted to scramble, it was every ghost for himself, but to no avail, for as soon as they became aware of the dreaded skin-color change that had overtaken them all, Ms. Pac-Man was upon them like a shark on a drop of blood at a public beach. Two-hundred, four-hundred, eight-hundred, and finally sixteen hundred points were hers, but the Swan Princess had to be sure not to become overconfident, for the ghosts were resourceful, Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Sue, red, pink, blue, and orange, and Shiro was a ghost as well, a ghost of a decidedly different color.

October 14, 2007

As the Swan Princess continued to maneuver the Ms. Pac-Man avatar like a guided missile in the airspace of a third-world country, Shiro, far from the flat yet infinitely deep world of the game screen, examined, instead, the curvy yet infinitely

mysterious contours of the Swan Princess' undergrad body. It was still fresh in his mind, like a recently-completed oil painting that had yet to dry. She was all there, but he knew he shouldn't touch, and the restriction only made him want it all the more. She, meanwhile, was completely unaware of her own body, let alone the young man's she had given it to who now stood beside her. She was approaching the much-coveted Video Game State of Grace,TM and as she did so, her body dissolved, like a landscape seen through a rain-smearred window in the country. The point of contact, that is, the joystick and her hand, was the only place where a vague awareness of physicality still existed for her, but even this small vestige of sensation was too much. It meant she wasn't there yet. She was not yet a perfect being of pure and radiant oneness. The sexual implications of the joystick were, incidently, the last thing on the Swan Princess' mind and the first thing on Shiro's. His desire to re-establish physical contact soon got the better of him, and he found himself crowding her with the pretext of moving in for a closer look at the game, and when he felt the time was right he inched his arm around her waist, underneath her t-shirt.

At this the Swan Princess jumped twenty feet in the air, so suddenly did Shiro's touch jar her back into the world of seeing, breathing, standing and feeling, and she, as a result, lost control of Ms. Pac-Man, who chomped ahead blindly, stopped against a wall (in only the third maze), and was brutally massacred into nothingness by an overjoyed ghost, his only reason for existing having become reality.

“What the heck did you do that for? Is winning really that important to you?,” she exclaimed. In reality, winning was everything to her and nothing to him, unless you looked at it from the semantic point of view of “scoring.”

Shiro didn't like the way things were progressing, but before he could respond to her allegations he realized that his turn was going to start in mere seconds. "Oh! I guess I'm up!"

"How convenient..." quipped the Swan Princess, crossing her arms over her chest and tapping her foot in a clichéd yet effective show of annoyance.

He took hold of the reigns, annoyed himself at what felt like a petty obligation in the grand and epic chariot race of courtship. His palms itched, but he was powerless to scratch, since he now had to pretend that he was concentrating on the task at hand. He navigated Ms. Pac-Man through the first maze with a highly competent, yet stiff and uninspired, display of skill. It wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say that while he played the game with his right hand, he raised his left up to his face to conceal a yawn. That was the nature of the terrain he was mapping, that he had mapped before, but that, nonetheless, felt brand new. The chief interest of Ms. Pac-Man™ to Shiro lay in its manipulation of Woman. He loved the idea of, through the mediator of the joystick, controlling her every action, deciding which seed she would consume first, but knowing that, ultimately, she would have them all. As far as his schooling was concerned, he was as yet unsure whether he wanted to major in Law, Business, or Medicine, but he did know that he wanted to be a participant, a player in the great quest, the penultimate game of Capitalist Society. He was sure, he had enough confidence in himself, that he could succeed in such a context, even thrive. He was as confident as a dinosaur, but a dinosaur that made it through the hard times, one who had staved off the overwhelming pull of extinction. Life was meaningless without goals. That was, at least, one thing Shiro and the Swan Princess could agree on. The present, though theoretically perfect in every way,

still contained a certain lack, a lack that could only be compensated for with inflated notions of what, for lack of a better term, we have settled on calling “the Future.” On the other side of the arcade, a kid spilled a soda, and as quickly as this sentence was written was this event relegated to the underground cellar of “the Past,” which is another issue altogether, perhaps the most loaded issue of them all. Actually, it is *definitely* the most loaded issue of all, since in order for an issue to exist at all, it must be an issue about something, that is, a present which points to a past. So you see, it all can be traced back to the Past, which is quite possibly the most obvious thing anyone has ever written, or said.

Lives began in a present, but so quickly became Past that they might as well have been said to be Past all along. Who among us could be honestly said to make the distinction without prejudice?

Nothingness contains within itself everything without discrimination. It is the neverending chain that comprises the totality of the Hall of Mirrors, the baby who knows of nothing outside of its crying, the grey stormcloud hoarding the rain over a desert. Shadows creep over city sidewalks, arcade screens flash and pulsate as information is demystified and made accessible through the democratizing concept of “Fun.”

October 15, 2007

Shiro’s turn ended, a ghost finally caught up with him, and the Swan Princess, a.k.a player one, was back in the spotlight, and she found herself facing a fairly steep deficit. She was several thousand points behind. To the right of the game cabinet, on the wall it was plugged into, a crack rose up from the ground in the purple-painted stucco. It looked like a leafless tree against the night sky, and the Swan Princess had a similar aire about her as she stood with her feet firmly planted on the tightly wound carpet.

Outside birds sang in the sky, on telephone wires, on sidewalks, all of that. The clouds moved through that sky with an admirable sense of urgency, like the character in the play whom you don't realize is the single most important character until the last act. Then there were the buildings, with their weather-worn facades and ethnically-inclusive murals, people streaming to and fro, into one building and out of another, into another and out of one. The Polygon Emporium™ was one of these buildings, a single pixel in an image of spectacular visual clarity, an image of angels fighting over a cloud, of a single string on a guitar plucked and then allowed to reverberate until the sound ran its course. An image of the city of San Francisco,™ which was itself but a pixel in a larger image.

The Swan Princess labored. It wasn't coming naturally, she was feeling very conscious of both her Self and her surrogate Self. It was just this kind of double-awareness that was impossible to maintain. Sooner or later one of the Selves was going to have to go. She thought again about the boy with the balloon, then about the idea of balloons in general. It was an enduring fascination, but what was it about the balloon that caused this reaction in us? Was it the string? The fact that we can, in effect, keep the free-floating thing, the thought bubble, the concept, on a leash? She could not be having these thoughts, she *should* not be having these thoughts, she should not be having thoughts at all. She should not be having or doing anything. Things should just be happening, like physics, and that was all. She rested her left hand on the control panel and leaned in dangerously close to the screen, flirting with double-vision. The ghosts rounded corners, they seemed to be studying her and learning her ways, strengthening themselves against her once-feared onslaught in the process. The ghosts split up, went through warp corridors to appear miraculously on the other side of the screen, wrote contracts in the

black negative spaces of the maze, creating in the process a new language to do so, then signed them in ectoplasm. By the end of the Swan Princess' second life, she had managed to overtake Shiro, but not to a sufficient degree in light of the fact that it had taken her two lives to do so, whereas Shiro was only just beginning his second life.

“So,” Shiro began as he played, “what are you doing later? I was thinking, if you're not busy...”

“Just play!”

“Okay! Okay!”

And play he did, once more making it clear that he could, one day, be a doctor, but never a poet.

“You know, you've got some nerve,” she couldn't stop herself from saying, “coming in here and putting your hands on me like that!”

“What?” He was sincerely perplexed. “Me...coming in here? But I work here! You're the one who—”

“I've been coming here since I was eight years old...” A trace of sadness crept into the Swan Princess' voice as she uttered these last words, and a silence fell over the pair, a silence underlined in the rhythmic blips of a yellow circle missing a wedge-shaped piece, with an unrelenting hunger that does nothing to fill this unalterable void. And that is the tragedy of Pac-Man and Ms. Pac-Man both; that no matter how much they eat, the hunger remains. The Swan Princess felt this lack, and she didn't know what to do about it anymore. Pouring everything she had into her studies helps, it gives her something to focus on in the general blur of indecision that is her life. Shiro felt this lack, as well. When he was younger he wanted to be a professional baseball player or president of the

United States of America,TM and as time passed and it became ever more apparent that these things were not going to happen, he lowered his expectations for himself, shooting instead for professional careers that were not, themselves, without prestige, but which nonetheless lacked the sort of media coverage and heroic general interest his earlier choices inspired in the public at large. The truth was that Shiro wanted to be famous, and the attainment of this prize could take many forms.

What the Swan Princess wants is not all that different. She doesn't desire fame or notoriety, per se, but oftentimes these things and what she's after go hand in hand. What she wants is Greatness. She wants to shine like an icicle hanging from the neon polestar of literature. She wants to melt and refreeze, to envelope herself in this process for thousands of years. She wants to be Anais Nin, and this Shiro character is no Henry Miller, not by a long shot. He's not even one of Henry Miller's fingernails, or his belly-button lint. So why was she here? Was it her greatness that was being called into question, or just her judgment? She had all of these feelings. Why were they so hard to translate into words? Where was the Rosetta Stone when she really needed it? She watched Shiro play the game, and she thought he was like a child, weak in his aspirations and premature in his posturings. She couldn't understand why there had ever been a space reserved for one such as him on god's green earth. The very notion seemed to speak to a fundamental gap in her picture of the universe, a missing pixel or even a whole cluster or pixels.

October 16, 2007

It came down to the last life. The Swan Princess stepped up to the joystick with the solemnity of a girl who, through the accidental death of a beloved family pet, had

become aware of mortality for the first time. She was a few thousand points behind Shiro, so not only did she have to overtake him one final time, but she also had to amass a lead sizeable enough to absorb whatever final scoring he might do on his last life. The sound of Ms. Pac-Man's chomping, beating heart began again, and though it seemed to sound exactly the same, one could speculate that it was actually going slightly faster now that so much was at stake. Victory or humiliation. Everything or nothing. She wanted to tell Ms. Pac-Man these things, to really pound the point home, to be sure that she knew just how monumentally important it all was. Every pellet in the maze represented a marker in space and time, and one by one they disappeared, leaving behind them only our apprehension and uncertainty with regards to what lies outside of space and time.

Shiro looked on, for the first time worrying that he was neglecting his duties. Even if he didn't like the job, he still felt the all-important Duty to a sense of duty that tugs at so many Americans,TM borne of some leftover Puritan work ethic DNA or something equally as nonsensical. Each regular-sized pellet was worth only ten points, and that was the lowest denomination in the game, which raises the question of why they didn't just have the pellets be worth one point each? It seems like that would be more honest, more straightforward, and more "Puritan," since you'd have to work ten times as hard to get the same score as the point-system stands today. But of course it's all relative; a score of one-tenth of your high score under the current system would amount to the same thing. You'd get an extra life at one-thousand points instead of ten-thousand. It seems that once again the motivations of the programmers are being called into question. Are they being manipulative? If the "ones" digit is always zero, then why does it need to be there? In basketball, the only reason a field goal is worth two points is because a free

throw is worth one. Are they trying to pump up the players sense of pride so that they will, in turn, pump more quarters into the machine? What exactly is a person's reference point? What makes a respectable high score? The answer to this is simple: it's the scoring systems of all other video games with similar obstacle/reward dynamics. It's obvious that Ms. Pac-Man™ simply inherited its point values from its immediate predecessor, Pac-Man,™ but that doesn't explain why Pac-Man™ chose to adopt it. Is it because of Space Invaders™? At what point was the standard set? In answer to the earlier question: yes, the programmers *are* being manipulative in this one aspect of the game, yes, it is their goal to relieve you of your quarters. But that doesn't mean that it's not a really great game.

As far as the idea that the point system serves to play on the players ego: well in the case of the current state of affairs surrounding the Swan Princess, this just wasn't so. Her level of confidence regarding her own abilities was so low that she simply tried never to think about it. If each pellet was worth a million points she wouldn't feel any different. She was smart enough to see through the subterfuge. At the moment she was doing a good job of anticipating the ghosts moves, but during a *really* good game the concept of anticipation becomes a false notion, since there is nothing but an eternal present to worry about.

The Swan Princess' hand was beginning to ache even more than her heart as she matched and then surpassed Shiro's point total. They had already both broken the record score held previously on the machine, but it wasn't enough. Ms. Pac-Man always continued to move in whatever direction she was facing until she hit a wall. This wasn't the case with the Swan Princess. It wasn't automatic, it was a day to day, moment to moment struggle. That feeling of futility that you get between the moment the alarm

clock goes off in the morning and the actual act of getting out of bed, that rest- and comfort-hungry despair at the thought of having to perform tasks as rudimentary as putting on shoes, brushing your teeth, or bending down to pick up the newspaper, that was how the Swan Princess felt pretty regularly. To her, life was a constant process of questioning its own validity. Life was an ever unraveling scroll containing a narrative account of weariness. Except for when it wasn't. When it wasn't it was like these two Japanese kids at the other end of the room. They were playing Dance Dance Revolution™ and they couldn't have been older than eight or nine years old. As they jumped up and down on the four-point dance pad they also sang along to the lyrics of the song they were dancing to. This was doubly impressive: for one because it was a really fast techno-dance song, and also because it was completely in Japanese. The Swan Princess, if she had been aware of their presence, would have wished she was hanging out with them. Her thumbs ached, both of them, and she wasn't sure why.

She was far into the game, and at this point the ghosts moved very fast. They were unrelenting, and even if sometimes their trademark idiocy showed through, it was more than compensated for by sheer speed, as well as by the fact that it was four against one. She was in a section of the maze with no pellets left, which meant she was moving without collecting points. She went up. No good. Back down. Things were looking bleak. She managed to make it into the corner where the last remaining power pellet resided. All four ghosts were right on her tail, which presented the Swan Princess with a golden opportunity to pull off the coveted quadruple ghost-eating gambit at such a late stage in the game. She positioned herself and waited for the precise moment in which to strike. That moment arrived and she lunged downward for the power pellet then up to take care

of the ghosts before they had a chance to run too far away, the poor fools! But in her haste to snatch up the pellet then begin the pursuit, she accidentally pulled the joystick up a fraction of a second too soon and missed it, and proceeded to crash headfirst into the very ghost whom she had expected to devour, and was instead devoured herself.

October 17, 2007

She stood there, mouth agape, trying to think of the right thing to say. “I’m a writer, right?,” the Swan Princess thought to herself, “I should always do able to come up with the right thing to say at any given moment, and in any given situation! I should just have faith in my command of the English Language.” Closing her eyes and stepping away from the joystick, she decided to do just that. This is what came out of her mouth:

“Oh drat!”

She stomped her foot on the ground.

“That was pretty well done, but I guess now it’s my turn one last time,” Shiro commented cordially.

She didn’t know how to feel. She *was* in the lead, that much was true, but now Shiro held his destiny in his own hands. The last move was his.

“Oh why did I insist on being the first player?,” the Swan Princess thought. “If only I had exhibited some good old fashioned courtly patience! Then I wouldn’t be in this predicament! Well...maybe he’ll slip up and he won’t beat my score...”

But as she watched him navigate Ms. Pac-Man through the mess she had gotten herself into by being born, the Swan Princess could sense a dire situation. He was just too good, and it was only a matter of time before the inevitable asserted itself, as it tends to do. She began to panick as he gobbled up pellets, ghosts, bonus fruits; with him there was

no discrimination. She saw his hand guiding the joystick, and she saw his stupid uniform, and the stupid look of concentration plastered upon his face. Her legs began to twitch as the score inched slowly closer, slowly began to impede on the territory she had worked so hard to conquer. The high score! Just imagine! She started biting her nails, then she looked down at her hands as they floated, palms inward, in front of her face. She studied the lines on her palms, followed them with her eyes, traced them in invisible ink. What was this all about, anyway? Was it about the high score? Or was it about Hatred? Shiro was now within one-thousand points and she knew what she had to do.

She flung her arms in the air and curled them around Shiro's neck. "Oh Shiro! I can't stand it anymore!" and as she planted kiss after kiss upon Shiro's neck and face, he stepped away from the cabinet. Ms. Pac-Man, now a soulless husk, chomped her way into a wall and Sue, the one ghost with an unambiguously female name, swiftly descended to deal the death blow. The Swan Princess saw this final transaction in the pixilated currency of Pac-Blood and such a wave of elation passed over her at that instant that she began kissing him even more passionately. It was like she had swallowed a power pellet herself. Shiro, recovering his bearings and forgetting all about the game he had just forfeited, slung his arms around her waist and stuck his tongue down the Swan Princess' throat. She almost gagged, then pulled herself away and began to grab at her tongue with her hand.

"What's the matter, Swanny?"

"I had a hair on my tongue."

"Did you get it off?"

"Uh-huh," she said as she looked up into his eyes. Then they started to make-out

some more. She felt like, once again, she was making a horrendous mistake, but she couldn't stop now. If she did then Shiro might accuse her of using this amorous display to further her own ends of arcade dominance. She had to keep him from thinking, which, she mused, didn't seem all that hard a thing to do. She pressed herself up against him and whispered, "there are kids staring at us, maybe you should go give them some quarters or something," thinking she could use that as opportunity to sneak away.

"I've got a better idea," Shiro said through heavy breathing, "why don't I just close the arcade early?"

"What?" She pulled away. "You can't do that! Think of these kids! Do you really want to deprive them of this one, last wholesome after-school activity they have left?"

"Wholesome? These are video games you're talking about. I don't see anything wholesome here. Just violence and sensationalism and these kids' desensitization thereof. They're better off watching the evening news with their parents who don't love them!"

The Swan Princess was about to raise a protest against these ridiculous remarks, but suddenly she felt very weary, weary of fighting any and all forces that come from outside of herself. Too weary, even, to focus in on her hatred or her zeal, on anything at all that she could use in defense against the slow-rising yeast of boredom. She thought about looking to Paradise Lost for answers, but quickly disregarded that thought. The mountain-climbers scaling the Alps didn't need Milton, and why should she? Like Lucifer, who was, she thought, the real hero of the poem, she was burdened with the gift of absolute freedom in a universe with rules. This was why she wanted to write. This was why she excelled at school. This was why she always thought about flinging herself over the side of the Golden Gate Bridge,TM but never did. All of these things were conditions

of unlimited freedom checked by unlimited restraints. As she looked around at all the colors of her surroundings, at rest upon a curtain of blackness like Christmas™ lights, she wanted to write a poem. It didn't even have to be a good one. She just wanted it to be about this one really specific subject: she wanted it to be about the fish who live so far beneath the sea's salty surface, so far-removed from the sun's rays, that they have evolved their own built-in light sources on the tops of their heads. She wanted to sing the bodies electric of these little role-models. She wanted to grab ahold of one of their tailfins and be swept up wherever the tides of chance might take her. She wanted to be alive in Death Valley.

She pressed her lips gently against Shiro's forehead and said, "Okay."

October 18, 2007

She awoke to find herself lying on the floor of the arcade, in a secluded little nook between Ice Climber™ and Pheonix,™ with a plastic blue tarp draped over her, and a warm body at her side. She looked over at Shiro as he lay sound asleep, snoring, with his Polygon Emporium™ uniform all bunched up as a pillow under his head. She raised up the tarp slowly and had a look underneath, and blushed. Then she hit her forehead inbetween her eyebrows with her open palm, and noticed that she wasn't wearing her glasses. After a quick scan of the area she found them, along with her clothes, hanging from the joystick of Moon Patrol™ like a spiderweb on the end of a broomstick. The first rays of the morning sun were washing over the city and making their way through the glass storefront as the Swan Princess stood up, careful not to crinkle the noisy tarp too much and wake up her twice consummated lover. She grabbed her clothes and glasses, and put the glasses on first, which proved to be problematic when she pulled her t-shirt

down over her head, but that was the way she did it. As her head emerged from the top of the t-shirt, like a newborn baby, pigtails kicking, it did so already wearing glasses. And they were only slightly crooked. She grabbed her bag, checked to make sure that Paradise Lost was still there. It was.

October 19, 2007

She took one last look over at Shiro where he lay on the ground, and silently tiptoed her way out of there. She unlocked the front door and slipped away. It was like passing through a portal, she felt as if she were experiencing some kind of cherry-blossoming of space and time, a sort of floating effect. Suddenly she was out on the sidewalk in a city, an actual city. It was now Wednesday, which is probably the day in which the Myth of Sisyphus was invented. It was the fabled middle day of the school week, and as such it stood out like a kid with a big forehead. Wednesday didn't know whether it was coming or going, which is possibly the way a bad writer might describe it. The Swan Princess was also, for lack of a better term, not sure whether she was coming or going. She didn't have time to go home, she had to go straight to school. She thought maybe if there was an American Apparel™ around she could at least shoplift a heather grey/white striped tshirt, but there wasn't one near enough, so she'd have to go to school wearing the same clothes as yesterday. Besides, she wasn't in the right frame of mind for shoplifting anyways, even from a place as easy as American Apparel.™ Her mind felt like the clouds that tickled the tops of the tall buildings above her, and her body felt like the tall buildings, very geometrical.

She stopped at a coffee shop for some green tea, then, steamy paper cup in hand, continued on her way. She remembered that she had dreamt the night before that she

worked in a library that was on a cruise ship and that sailed all over the world. She wondered how that would effect certain aspects of circulation, like overdues and renewals, and also how it would effect the general demeanor of the librarian, since the desk where they sat behind would then be subject to the whims of the waves, and not as stable as if it were planted atop the rock of Knowledge as is normally the case.

Sometimes she felt as if San Francisco™ itself were a ship at port, docked at America™ only temporarily, and that one day soon the entire peninsula would break off and make it's way somewhere else, like Japan™ or Antarctica.™

She looked straight ahead to the point where the sidewalk disappeared over a hill, and mentally pictured herself at that spot; on the top of a hill with the sky and clouds as her backdrop. The sky had cleared up considerably since the day before, it was very possibly an exact fifty-fifty white to blue ratio, and this pleased the Swan Princess, but only in a vague sort of way. She made her way down the sidewalk and her frazzled pigtails pointed in opposite directions, like the bunny-ears of an old television.

October 20, 2007

Once she arrived at the campus she found a bench to sit on underneath a row of trees, and since she still had a little time before Professor Polkadot's Modern Russian Lit. class, she pulled out Paradise Lost and tried to lose herself. The leaves might have been said to be changing colors, if this novel took place in the autumn, and it very well could, but that isn't necessarily the case. It's also very possible that there were no leaves on the trees at all. It isn't entirely clear. The bench she sat on was painted green, with bits chipped off here and there, as well as carvings made by students, in all sincerity, as offerings to the spirits of personal externalization, they who would try to capture the

future with nothing but a butterfly net and a prayer. There was also a marking of a slightly different character, though the Swan Princess knew nothing about it because she was sitting on it. It was a sentence written in Magic Marker™ which read, “THIS SENTENCE IS WRITTEN IN MAGIK MARKER.” If the Swan Princess would have noticed it, she probably would have seen a certain amount of intentionality in its words, all the way down to the misspelling of the word “magic.” Was the one who wrote this convinced that what they were doing was truly a “magik” act? Could that be inferred? That through this slight misspelling of a brand name new meanings might arise? Some might take a company’s use of the word “magic” at all to sell a product as being slightly audacious. Maybe though, on the other hand, by mass-producing an object and calling it magic, the company was doing a huge public service, spreading the word by way of grocery stores all across the country that the potential for magic in our day to day lives was simply that easy, and that anyone could be privy to the spectacle of a life lived through the prism of infinite possibility. Were they saying that magic was a function of mark-making? Of the creative act in general? It was impossible to say for sure.

As she sat with her book, the Swan Princess became aware of a shadow creeping up at her feet, then up her legs, then coming to rest on the open spread of pages of her book.

“Hi kiddo,” said Caroline through a smile that could stop the world. “Did you do the reading for Polkadots class? I started to but then I got distracted by the smell of mint wafting in through an open window in my apartment. I ended up just walking around the neighborhood for awhile, then I went to the public library to do some research on cactuses. I’m thinking of starting a cactus garden...” She scratched her head.

“No,” the Swan Princess bowed her head, “I didn’t do the reading, though I have read The Brothers Karamazov once before, when I was thirteen...”

“Really?” Caroline looked completely perplexed, and had a seat beside her. “You didn’t do the reading? The Swan Princess didn’t do her homework? When was the last time *that* happened?”

“I can’t remember...”

“Wow...what’s gotten into you lately?” She leaned in and brushed her hand gently across the Swan Princess’ bangs in a show of genuine affection. “Up until recently you were just aces! You were really excited about writing and school and stuff, you were just majestic! Now you seem—hey...wait a minute...you didn’t even change your outfit from yesterday!”

She turned to face Caroline as a ladybug zipped through the sky between them, took off her glasses, and set them on the table in front of them. “I...um, well, I now own the high score in Ms. Pac-Man.TM” She picked up the glasses, rubbed the lenses with her t-shirt so that her bellybutton peaked out to say “hi” with a wink, then placed them back on her face like a mask.

“Really? Well hey, that’s great! I—hold it!” Her tone became stern. “You went to the Polygon Emporium again, didn’t you?”

“Yeah...” It sounded like a sigh.

“Soooo...was Shiro there?”

“Yeah...”

“Umm...I’m afraid to ask, but, uh, what happened?” Caroline bit her lower lip.

The Swan Princess began chewing on her fingernails, and remained silent.

“What’s with all the secrecy lately, huh? We’ve been friends for a long time, and you never used to keep secrets like this before. We told each other *everything*. We were like poets in elementary school, but only with each other, remember? Because we knew no one else could possibly understand! In junior high and high school we were each other’s diaries, and not just any old diaries, either, but the really good kind in which nothing is left out, none of the love and angst, none of the metaphysical heartache or petty acts of vandalism! Nothing! No One! Never! We left out nothing, and now for the first time you’re doing just that!”

Caroline was looking intensely into the Swan Princess’ eyes, which had grown as shiny as two pearls just washed up on the beach, under the light of a low-hanging full moon.

“I don’t know what to say,” she forced a smile as she held back tears, then looked off into the sky. “I just...sometimes I just don’t know what I’m doing at all, not in the least. I mean, I try to make all the proper decisions, I try to live each moment in haiku form, and even when I pull it off it still doesn’t work. The universe is just too arbitrary, too cold, too rational, to contain anything as unpredictable as us, anything as beautifully oxymoronic as the human mind. We just don’t belong here, Caroline! And it’s not that we don’t *deserve* to exist, no, that’s not it at all, it’s that existence doesn’t deserve *us*. We all get lonely, we all feel sad, we all die, and it’s *not our fault*! I don’t care what anyone says! When all is said and done we are innocent, profoundly innocent creatures! We were never, not for a second, willing accomplices to this mess! It’s just not fair! And not only that; it’s not fair that it’s not fair! It should be fair, right? I mean, why not?”

By this time the tears were streaming down the Swan Princess’ cheeks like highly

diluted acrylic paint off the primed surface of a well-stretched canvas, and she fell into the open arms of Caroline, who accepted her trembling form without hesitation.

“There, there...calm down...” She paused for dramatic effect. “I’m not going to lie to you and say that everything is alright, because it’s not. You’re right. If God™ existed then he would be the biggest, meanest, smelliest bully in the schoolyard, no question. And you’re right about the oxymoronic nature of the human mind. It’s no good...but within that fundamentally impossible network of contradictions lies our only chance! It’s impossible, what with things as they are, that we are *ever* happy! If our natures made sense we’d be unhappy all the time. THAT would be rational. THAT would be the fate of a species as smart as ours that actually fit into the universe. Our moments of joy and ecstasy, of unbridled enthusiasm and elation...these are the things that are out of place—and they’re our only salvation! Don’t you see, Swan Princess, we *need* the spectre of the Oxymoron to hang over us as much as our planet earth needs the sun! For it creates the necessary conditions for the moments in life that *are* intrinsically good, and that make all the others worth living through. I don’t know about you, but I’d sit through a hundred years of boredom for one day of laughter, or one night with the boy that I love...or even a moderate amount of physical pain...”

“Maybe,” The Swan Princess said through sobs, “Maybe I’m crazy, but right now everything appears to be glowing. Yeah...everywhere I look, it’s all so clear. And I don’t mean “clear” in the sense of “easy to read, or understand,” I mean pure visual clarity.” She took off her glasses and continued to look around. “And now it’s all fuzzy, but it’s still clear, vibrant. I guess it’s ‘cause I know that the fuzziness is a natural result of the condition of my eyes...it’s how they are...unsatisfactory...”

“Aww...they’re good enough, Kiddo...except for when it comes to choosing boys!,” quipped Caroline.

“Hey!,” she sniffled, “Shiro’s not bad looking, he just doesn’t have much else going for him.” At this she let out a series of short, convulsive laughs. Caroline laughed, too, and they rocked back and forth in eachothers arms.

“That’s more like it!,” said Caroline, “Now isn’t this one of those intrinsically good moments? Isn’t it?”

“I guess so,” said the Swan Princess meekly, but in fact she wasn’t quite sure.

October 21, 2007

If the Swan Princess could taste the sky at that moment, she’d probably say that it tasted like vinegar, no matter what it really tasted like. She would stick her finger up into the air, slowly drag it across the space above her head, then bring it down and around to her mouth to give the sky a taste-test. If she was lucky maybe she’d be able to snag a swirl of cloud, which would be like the whipped-cream on top. Maybe the sky tasted different at different times of the day; sweet like chardonnay in the morning, all the way to the robustness of merlot at night. But if you wait too long, it will just turn to vinegar. That was the important thing to remember, the most important phone number in the little black book of the stratosphere. If the Swan Princess’ brain was a pencil, at that moment it was definitely in need of sharpening. All of her metaphors were strained, clunky and ill-advised. They rattled around behind her like the empty tin cans tied to the back of the limo of the newlywed couple on their way to the honeymoon suite.

She sat in the front row of Professor Polkadots class, as usual, with an open pad of notebook paper perfectly centered on the smooth, fake woodgrained desktop that also

served as support for her elbows, which braced her forearms which, in turn, gave her hands something to be attached to, hands that firmly cradled the face of a young woman who was unable to pay attention to the day's lecture. Her pencil was stuck behind her ear, and there it would remain, for the Swan Princess was too preoccupied to even begin to worry about taking notes. She didn't move much, or give any outward signs of taking even the slightest interest in anything Professor Polkadot was saying. Every once in a while she'd look up, as if suddenly startled by a sound that only she could hear, or maybe like she'd just become aware that she was indoors, and the sky was nowhere to be seen, save in little square patches that intruded on the absolute sovereignty of the wall opposite the one connected to the hallway.

October 22, 2007

The Swan Princess looked over at Caroline, who sat at her desk like the overflowing clothes in a laundry hamper belonging to someone with really good style, and who always sat in the front row so as to be near the Swan Princess. She was making a series of drawings of girls sleeping with cacti in their arms, and at the moment she was working on one of Ashley Simpson, the famous singer, or actress, or something. Whenever she drew she would stick her tongue out and assume a look of deep contemplation on her face, and hover over the paper like a mosquito net. As Professor Polkadot's lecture progressed, Caroline's mark-making gestures became increasingly more pronounced, more erratic, and just as the drawing was nearing completion a midnight blue colored pencil slipped out of her hand and landed with a little "tic-tic-tic" before coming to rest on the teacher's desk, behind which stood a slightly irritated, but composed, Professor Polkadot.

Everyone in class held their breath as they waited to hear what the teacher was going to say, and more than a few muffled bursts of laughter could be heard.

“Caroline,” Professor Polkadot began, “If you continue to insist upon letting your artmaking practice spill out of the hallowed, monastic-like confines of the Undergraduate Visual Arts Studio, and, you must admit, I’ve been fairly lenient in allowing that spilling out to take place in my classroom, then *please* at least be kind enough to keep it off of my desk!” She picked up the colored pencil with thumb and index finger as if she were lifting a dead mouse by the tail, and the class let their laughter flow more freely.

“All right class, that’s enough,” She went on, “and Caroline, you can pick this pencil up after class.”

“But Professor!,” Caroline pleaded, “I need that color to finish the drawing, and I’ve got a crit right after this class!”

“I guess you should have thought of that before you flung your precious drawing implement carelessly into the heavens,” the professor grinned.

Caroline slumped down in her seat. “I knew there was a reason why I hated drawing!” She looked down at her drawing sadly, then suddenly her face lit up. “Actually, maybe I’ll just use this mango-looking color, instead. That’ll be way better! What a Coup! Thanks, Professor Polkadot!”

The Swan Princess seemed to be noticing none of this, and Professor Polkadot noticed the Swan Princess not noticing, but restrained herself from becoming noticeably concerned. The Swan Princess, meanwhile, believed that she was seeing the water of the San Francisco Bay™ in a way that was more real, more convincing, than if she was actually there. The spot that she happened to be seeing at the moment was a patch

somewhere under the Golden Gate Bridge.TM Golden Gate to what?, she wondered. Her thoughts undulated and sparkled like the glittery, silky surface of water reflecting sunlight. If only she could peel that surface off, like the skin of a potato, and wear it like a dress, and in so doing spare herself the fearfulness of the blackness below.

Before the Swan Princess knew it class was over, and she was startled back to the world of college life. Everyone was already filing down the aisles with their backpacks slung over their shoulders and their IpodTM headphones shoved into their ears. The Swan Princess scrambled to collect her things and catch up with the departing crowd, when she heard a familiar voice address her from behind the teachers desk:

“Swan Princess,” Professor Polkadot intoned, “May I have a word with you?”

The Swan Princess looked up, then looked from side to side and pointed to her chest with her index finger as if to say, “Me?” Soon the class was empty, save for the teacher and her best student.

“Yes, Professor Polkadot? May I help you with something?,” the Swan Princess asked timidly.

“Swan Princess, I’m concerned with your lack of participation in today’s discussion. You’re usually the first with your hand up high, bristling with enthusiasm just under that proper academic façade, but you seemed a million miles away. I was wondering...how are things at home? Any problems with the family?”

“Oh Professor I’m so sorry! I just didn’t get much sleep last night, but I’ll be fine, really I will! I don’t want you to think that I’m exhibiting the first early-warning signs of a kid going bad, or anything like that! And besides, I don’t even live at home, I have my own apartment in the heart of the city, so as you can plainly see, domestic trouble is the

furthest thing from my mind...”

“Calm down, dear! There’s no reason to get all worked up, I just thought that maybe you might need somebody to talk to, I mean, you do seem a little out of sorts. Correct me if I’m wrong...”

“Don’t worry about me, Professor! I’m just swell! I’ve just been studying really hard, and picking up extra shifts at the library, and trying to be a good writer, and...Oh, Professor! I really want you to like me! Really! Your knowledge of the economic and social conditions that helped shape the minds of the greatest generation of writers the world has ever known, as well as the actual content of their bodies of work, your keen interpretations of certain—”

“Swan Princess, do calm down!,” she said with a look of surprise. “Do you—do you think I don’t *like* you?”

“Well, I, um...uh...”

“Why of course I like you! You’re one of my brightest students! You’re kind, well-spoken, and a pleasure to have in class. In fact, I’d say that you’re an all-around charming young woman!”

At this last remark the Swan Princess lit up like a Christmas tree. “Really? You think I’m charming? Oh I was convinced that you didn’t like me! Caroline thought I was crazy, but—”

“For once it seems that Caroline was right,” said Professor Polkadot. “Now tell me...why on earth would you get such a fanciful notion in your head?”

“Well,” she hesitated and looked down at her feet, “because...you never let me clap out the chalk erasers at the end of class!” She just blurted out the last part of the

sentence, as if it were one very long, very anxious word.

“Excuse me?” Professor Polkadot asked, standing perplexed, looking at her double reflection in the lenses of the Swan Princess’ glasses.

“Oh...nothing! Anyway, I’m fine! Life—the Great Adventure, right? Well it was really great talking to you, Professor, but if I don’t go now I’m going to be late for my shift at the library. Duty calls!”

And with that she spun around and darted out of the classroom like a grocery store check-out line author had just walked in. The professor sat back down behind her desk and began a process of slight readjustments of the positions of all the objects on the desktop; papers in stacks, a glass vase, a stapler, a picture of her dog, other stuff.

October 23, 2007

The arms of Thursday stretched out from the body of the week and reconnected at the very end to form a pair of praying hands. Now a single unit, the hands coupled and the fingers interlaced so that the brain of the week would have a hard time giving commands to specific ones, the praying hands of Thursday sat awash in stained glass-filtered moonlight. Thursday was the day of the school week that was always most anxious to please, and to be liked. It was like a kid who was really smart and nice, but who had no real creativity to speak of. You knew they’d made good money when they grew up, they’d maybe even manage, but they’d never lead.

Thursday struggled to look over something to see...something, and in this respect, at least, it was similar to the Swan Princess. Don’t get me wrong, the Swan Princess is smart, nice, *and* creative. In most ways she is nothing like Thursday. In fact, on Thursdays she usually thinks that it’s either Wednesday or Friday. She forgets about

Thursday altogether, and speaking of forgetting, on Thursday morning the Swan Princess found herself back at the Historical Society, which was a fortress built to protect against just that. She had arranged, thanks to her exceptional academic standings, to be allowed into the back area that was normally closed to the public.

“All right,” said a smiley old lady who was about a hundred years old, “feel free to rummage, browse, peruse, sift, and otherwise and otherwise, etcetera and so on, to your blessed heart’s content. We here at the society know we can trust a young lady who, aside from her exceptional academic standings, is also a devoted and hard-working library employee, and who therefore has the proper knowledge of, and respect for, the time-honored art of archiving, as well as a keen understanding of what it implies about the human condition.”

“Thank you very much,” said the Swan Princess, “don’t worry, you can count on me to show the proper respect!”

“Just let me know if you have any questions, I’ll be manning the gift shop,” said the old lady, “which you should be sure to stop by on your way out.”

“I’ll be sure to!,” she smiled, and immediately spun around and took a panoramic glance at the room. She saw boxes with little slips of paper of various sorts sticking out of the tops, like moss-covered rocks made out of cardboard. These boxes were stacked, in some instances, all the way to the ceiling, in others, only two or three high, so a kind of cityscape effect was created. There were also tables with photographs and old books spread out over the tops, as well as scissors, glue, various kinds of tape, and other materials necessary for primary document life-extension. On the walls were old posters, calendars, and advertisements, some framed and behind glass, some tacked up like in a

teenagers bedroom.

She didn't know exactly what she was looking for, just that it was here. Actually, she didn't know it was here, because she didn't know what it was. She didn't even know if there was an "it," and if there was, why "it" would have to be necessarily contained within a specific location, or even time. In fact, she didn't even know if she was looking for something at all, and she didn't know if "she" was at all. She didn't know if she "knew." She didn't know what "for" was for, or what was the use of "what." She just wanted to look at photographs. She wanted to have them in her hands, as an antidote to the pure reception of information that was becoming the norm in the world today. She also felt that, within the context of a mode of existence that reduced the idea to utter absurdity, she was, in fact, tying up some kind of loose end. That "mode of existence" is Life, the only one that has managed to distinguish itself from all the rest.

She chose a box at random and set it on the ground in front of her. Her first impulse was to turn it upside down and shake as all the contents came cascading out, but she knew she couldn't do that. The old lady trusted her, and she would never in a million years betray the sacred trust between people who were interested in stories. This place tied into the sequence of events that was her life, and she came here to hold, in her hands, the lives of others.

She pulled out a stack of old photographs and allowed herself to fall into their black-and-white, flattened universe. She saw families smiling, not for themselves, but for her, passed down through time to a girl they'd never know. She saw kids running in sprinklers, dogs chasing close behind. She saw wedding days, but no wedding nights. She saw multiple photos at the beach, but none underwater. It was fascinating to the Swan

Princess that she could flip through these pieces of paper and seemingly speed up the process of peoples lives, and at the same time randomize them, shuffling them like a deck of cards, so that people who had never met, and who could never have met any other way, do to social mores and restrictions, and other less imaginary factors, could now be thrown together like inmates in a prison, ones whose crimes are as diverse as snowflakes, but whose punishments are all the same. In fact, that was what was happening anyways. Through the accident of birth, a child is given parents, and it just goes from there. Most of the people in these pictures were dead by now.

The Swan Princess sat on the ground, her legs bent at the knees, and she smoothed out here skirt upon her lap. On her white t-shirt was printed, in black, boldfaced type, “MY PROBLEMS ARE SO METAPHYSICAL IT’S EMBARRASSING.” She scratched her calf by reaching her arm around behind her back, and as she did so an image of a gigantic field of glowing white flowers filled her mind, with a sky of dark lavenders, yellows and magentas swirling overhead, threatening to engulf the whole scene. It was so beautiful to her, at that moment she was willing to forego all questions of privacy and personal autonomy, if only someone would invent a machine, a camera, that could take pictures of the things that are only seen on the insides of peoples heads. If anything was lost, any freedoms or liberties, it would be worth it.

October 24, 2007

She had found a picture, which wasn’t all that surprising considering the fact that she was surrounded, at the moment, by more photographs than there were cells in her entire body. The one she held in her hand, though, was more than just a photograph; it was a *picture*. It was a picture in the sense that it held specific, personal interest for her, it

was an image in her mind. She was already there before she saw it, and it was already in her hands before she found it.

The picture was of a young woman, probably about the same age as the Swan Princess, standing above a concrete gravestone, painted white, and in the shape of a cross. She was very pretty, her long, dark hair pulled back and wrapped up in a bun on the back of her head. She wore a long, flower-print dress that dragged, at its frilly bottom, along the moist grass. Cradled in front of her chest was a bouquet of flowers, the real-life equivalent of the print on her dress, which stood in stark contrast to the rows of identical graves that lined the lawn behind her. The sepia-tone of the black and white image seemed to be emanating from the young woman's mood, it was probably exactly how you should act if you are going to carry flowers around in a graveyard. Upon flipping the photograph over the Swan Princess found a short inscription. It said: "THIS NOVEL BELIEVES IN NOTHING," and there was also a date: "AUGUST 6, 1945." Without exactly understanding why, a wave of acute fear passed down her spine, and she felt a certain coldness, one that seemed to come from inside of her. She didn't know what the message was referring to, or why, or even how, someone in the year 1945 could make such a statement. It seemed so improbable, like a sentiment was expressed that was solely in the domain of the present-day.

She turned the piece of paper over again and thought about its brittleness, pictured it turning to ash in her open palms and then being swept up by a sudden breeze and carried away to far-off corners of the world. She continued to study the image. The girl was so pretty, so youthful and vibrant, even though the vibrancy had, for the moment, been turned off as if by the flick of a switch. But that was the moment that was captured

by some unknown second person, and the dead makes three. An anonymous girl, her sadness visualized before the eye of the camera, an even more anonymous photographer, erased forever from his or her work, and the most anonymous of all, the dead. Nothing even needs to be said about their level of anonymity. They are, as the saying goes, like drops of water in the ocean. Upon closer inspection, the Swan Princess noticed something interesting in the picture. In front of the girl's face floated, light as a feather, what appeared to be a single snowflake, which would have been odd if the picture really was taken in August. She looked at it closer, zeroed in on the little white dot that hung there, as if engaging the mourning girl in a conversation. The Swan Princess supposed that it could just have been an imperfection of the photographic print, but that didn't seem to be the case. It looked like a snowflake, the tiny tip of an icicle flaked off of the bottom of a frozen cloud. She looked from side to side, her eyes making a full sweep of the room, even though she knew she was alone. She discounted the idea of there being hidden cameras anywhere in the area as being antithetical to the Historical Society's whole operation, as a negation of the validity of the physical archive and, with a twinkle in her eye that spoke more of the dread of what she was about to do than of the freedom such an act might afford her, she put the photograph in her bag. The initial wave of apprehension that was glued to the act poorly like bad collage was soon replaced by the glee of knowing that she was officially in the clear. She breathed a sigh of relief seasoned with a hint of glib self-satisfaction, and relaxed her muscles as if she had just had a really mediocre, but good enough, orgasm. The kind that makes you think, "at least, in the drabness of life as we know it, we have this to fall back on."

She wasn't sure exactly how much time had passed since she had entered the

building, but now she knew that it was time to leave. She used these occasional acts of “badness” (but not too bad), in the same way that historians use wars to break up history, as unfortunate, but ultimately useful, benchmarks for understanding the progression of her life. It was the only Grand March she was really interested in. This petty theft, even though it was of an insignificant trifle of a document amongst myriad documents, felt so much worse than when she would shoplift from American Apparel.TM At least that was a corporation, whereas the Historical Society was a genuine agent for positive social dialogues and, uh...stuff. The lights that swung from the ceiling threatened to pass some sort of judgment upon her, but fortunately for her, never managed to make the full commitment. They swung with ambivalence, which, in some circles, was still considered to be the only way to swing. Tiny specks of dust bobbed around in the light as she made her way to the exit, and just as she was reaching for the doorknob, the door swung open before her and the really old lady stood before her.

“Oh hello, dearie! I just thought I’d come in to see how you were doing...so... how are you enjoying our humble little non-profit organization this fine day?” The old lady betrayed a spring to her step that seemed to defy the decades.

“I’m fine,” the Swan Princess smiled with her teeth lined up like the planets of our solar system during a pagan religious holiday. “This is really some place you’ve got here...some place, indeed. Yup, it’s got a little bit of everything.”

“I’m so glad you’ve enjoyed your time here! That’s why we exist, after all, to further the pursuit of pleasure of the young with the ephemera of failed generations passed.”

“Well in that respect you’ve certainly succeeded...bravo!” Sometimes the Swan

Princess had not the least notion of what she was saying. These things called “words” would just fall out of her mouth, then she’d wipe her chin and lower lip with the back of her hand as if she’d made a mess. It was strange, this idea of interacting with people, while at the same time navigating these slippery ideas huddled around “the truth.”

October 25, 2007

The city had this kind of uncanny knack for breathing new life into itself just by getting up for work in the morning. It was very clever the way the city aligned its cycles with those of the sun, and that they both woke up at the same time. There were lots of animals, too, that followed this queue; seagulls, mice, deer, humans, cats, well, maybe not cats. Maybe some cats. Streetlights worked in reverse, this much is true, waking up in the night and getting to rest only when everything else is just getting going. The Swan Princess could definitely be said to follow the patterns of the city. She woke up every morning, sometimes hating life, sometimes loving it, but in either case she was always awake, even if, as was the case on certain weekend mornings, she took several hours to get out of bed. She’d just lie there and think about things, or read a book. She’d run a fingernail slowly down the length of her leg in a deliberate attempt to give herself goose-pimples. She’d mess up her hair, try to decide whether or not she wants to own a typewriter, make up names for fictitious bands, scratch the tip of her nose, and gaze longingly out the fifth floor window.

As the Swan Princess was leaving the Historical Society she dug her arm deep into her bag and pulled out the old photograph. She had to remember to be careful not to bend it or scratch it. She was, after all, dealing with a precious, one-of-a-kind piece of the collective human experience. She reached into the bag a second time and her hand came

up with the public library's copy of Paradise Lost, which she opened up to the page she had left off at. She then slipped the photograph into the book so that it lay flat, smoothed it down with her hand for good measure, and closed the book gently upon it. There, it would now serve as her bookmark until she decided what else to do with it.

The sky was threatening rain again. The Swan Princess thought about it for a second, and came to the conclusion that of all threats, those that came from the Sky had the most potential to be terrifying. Second would be, maybe, those that came from the ocean. The sky could probably make *any* threat whatsoever seem like the worst proposition in the world. For instance, if the Sky threatened to box your ears you'd probably scream nonstop for a month, even if the threat was never carried out. It's just the very idea of it. The sky floats over us at such an angle that we can't help but regard it as scary.

The Swan Princess walked down the sidewalk with either a spring in her step or dread in her veins. The sidewalk, itself, allowed itself to pass below her feet, not knowing what to make of her movements.

October 26, 2007

She was thinking about Ice Ages, and what they entail. The entire earth covered in snowflakes, millions, billions of them. Humongous glaciers scraping their way across whole continents before plunking into the ocean and bobbing around for a few millennia. Dominant species being wiped out, clearing up ground for the underdog species, the ones no one ever regarded seriously. The whole earth becomes one giant snowball, frozen at the core and highly susceptible to shattering if ever it crosses the long orbital path of one of the solar system's many wayward asteroids. And just think; the last Ice Age was only

around ten-thousand years ago. Even though the Historical Society's record-keeping didn't go back nearly that far, it still didn't seem like that long ago, all things considered. Ten-thousand years? She thought it was ten-thousand, but maybe it was more like twenty or thirty. Now all of a sudden she wasn't sure. Oh well, the important thing was the images it conjures up; those of polar bears sliding down ice patches in Golden Gate Park,TM or penguins walking across the Pacific OceanTM to have lunch in Hawaii.TM The silence of whiteness; how the Swan Princess longed for such a world sometimes! A world made ambiguous by the confusing presence of too many colors to know what to do with, that was the sad state of affairs today. This over-abundance of choice, in the form of color, makes people a little bit crazy, therefore what we need now is another Ice Age.

On Thursdays the Swan Princess had to work at the library. She found herself, on this particular Thursday, shelving books and thinking about Ice Ages. It was just the way it went. She wondered how the library itself would deal with the profound climatological changes that would sweep the Bay Area,TM as well as all of AmericaTM and maybe even the whole world. Then she remembered that disaster movie "The Day After Tomorrow," in which an Ice Age does take place, and then a lot of the characters take refuge in the New YorkTM Public Library, where much of the movie takes place. The series of events progresses in such a way that at one point they naturally decide that if they want to survive, they will have to burn books to keep warm. The Swan Princess smiled as she remembered the scene in which they were about to burn a book by Nietzsche, but then this one guy stops them and says something like, "You can't burn that!" Of course the average, pragmatic, movie-going AmericanTM would scoff at such romantic nonsense in the face of dire circumstances, but then again they probably think Dennis Quaid was a

good choice to play the main character scientist-guy, so what do they know?

She pushed her book cart over to the aisle she'd occupy for the next half-hour or so. It was filled with dictionaries and language books. It wasn't her favorite section, but still, she did not feel displeased. She thought about ice bridges that would form over oceans so that people who spoke different languages might find themselves walking past each other between AlaskaTM and Russia.TM What would it be like after the breakdown of the internet and all the other technological systems that lay claim to making our gigantic planet into a tiny one? Would her transcripts still exist?

She took the corner of a Japanese-to-English Dictionary and pushed it into her belly button. The binding felt cold, and she had the sensation that she was about to sneeze, but then she never did. It was a false alarm, which happens a lot at the library because of all the dust that accumulates on the tops of books that never get checked out. It was like the library had, within its walls and ceiling, its own kind of snowfall, grey and speckly, that fell regularly upon the landscape, keeping it honest, never for a second allowing it to forget its own boredom, or its need for maintenance and classification. She sat down on the floor and held a book in her hand, just so she could pretend to be working and quickly shelve it if her boss happened to walk by. All she wanted, all she asked out of life right now, was to be able to understand all of these intense emotions and their sudden shifts. It was like turning a corner only to run into a brick wall, over and over again. What is it in her life that has triggered this sudden shift? Surely external events cannot be said to be the sole cause. Sure, Shiro was a jerk not worthy of the Swan Princess' time or effort, but what was the big deal? So she had sex with him a couple of times. So what? Why did she care so much? Why did she care at all? After the first time

she vowed never to see him again, but then she quickly broke that vow. Now, after the second time, did it even make sense at all to think in terms of vows or declarations, or anything that claimed to be a tool that would give you control over the future? She knew, and this is the belief of a girl who fancies herself a writer, that the Past was the only one of the three states of time that we have even the tiniest amount of control over, and this is achieved solely through the revisionist wish-fulfillment of fiction. Fiction is, in the end, our greatest weapon against all the forces in the universe we can never hope to escape. It is the means by which we, in the absence of the possibility of escape, choose instead to *transform* the version of the world around us that exists in our own heads. Fiction is the undertaking of the helpless but hopeful, the speck of dust that contains within it the idea of infinity. The Swan Princess knew she wanted to write for this reason, even if she was never any good. The act itself, coupled with this belief, she hoped, would be enough.

October 27, 2007

“Hey, did you know that Twinkies™ have the single greatest set of abstract, visual qualities of all foods?”

The Swan Princess looked up, slightly startled, to see Caroline standing above her, leaning against a bookshelf, wearing big black sunglasses and eating a twinkie.

“Umm...,” the Swan Princess began, “you can’t eat in here.”

“It’s nice to see you, too,” Caroline said, and then shoved the last of the yellow, cream-filled sponge cake into her mouth. “There,” she smiled, “all gone!”

“So how did your crit go yesterday?,” the Swan Princess asked while examining a book absently.

“Oh, you know,” Caroline said, “the Art Department at this school thinks it’s still

the 1970's. I swear, if I hear the names Michel Foucault or Vito Acconci one more time I think I'll puke! And this drawing class! It's the worst! Why do artists have to make things, anyway? I just want to be and to do, you know what I mean?"

"Uh huh," said the Swan Princess, secretly not sure if she did.

"So I tacked up my "Girls Sleeping with Cacti" series on the wall so they could be crucified, and sure enough, no one understood what they were about! All they do is say 'Foucault this,' and 'Foucault that,' and use words like 'Hegemony.' They all thought I was making some statement about social positions, women as victims, all pretty and passive or whatever...but they were completely missing the point! You understand the Cactus Girls, don't you, Swan Princess?"

"Umm...I think so," she treaded lightly, "they're about Boredom, right?"

"That's right!," Caroline spun around triumphantly. "They are a calculated and artificial response to Boredom. What's the least boring thing in the world?"

"Uh...pleasure...?"

"Wrong! It's pain! It's impossible to be bored when you're experiencing physical pain. You're zeroed in, you're undistractable, you're completely, one-hundred percent occupied with being yourself, whatever that means. But you're there, and no where else! Boredom is, more than anything else, the longing to be other than what you are, right? But, I mean, pleasure is important, too. These girls, in their embrace of these objects that are, essentially, unembracable, are also embracing the very notions of pain, as well as pleasure, companionship, comfort, and also longing and not caring at the same time!"

"Wow," the Swan Princess said, "It's hard to believe the drawings didn't go over well when you had that thought-out a concept behind them."

“Oh, I didn’t know that’s what they were about when I was making ‘em,” Caroline said, “I wasn’t able to formulate all that until after I heard all the idiotic remarks in class. So actually, I guess they were pretty helpful. So are you gonna come to my performance tomorrow?”

The Swan Princess reached her arm up and scratched underneath her bra-strap. “Oh! Are you doing a performance?”

“That’s what I said, kiddo!”

“When and where?”

“Rush hour, the southern-most tower of the Golden Gate Bridge™!”

The sound of that name startled the Swan Princess. She didn’t know why, which is, she supposed, a necessary condition of such responses, but a vague feeling of apprehension, even dread, enveloped her. She thought she saw a ladybug fly out of the disk drive of a computer behind Caroline. She thought she understood something cute about the cosmos, something beyond words. “It isn’t going to be dangerous, is it?”

“Only if you don’t consider the danger as a necessary element that exists in direct proportion to the success of the piece.”

“So yeah...it’s pretty dangerous, right?”

“You could say that,” Caroline said while suppressing a giggle with her hands. “But don’t worry, darling. I’d never do anything to put myself in harms way so long as I know that you need me to talk you through all your indefinable emotional crises.”

“You’d better not!,” the Swan Princess said as she rocked back and forth on her backside with her arms around her knees.

“Well I’ve gotta run, kiddo. But show up a little bit early if you want to help set

up.”

“Okee-dokee.”

“You will be there, right?”

“I do declare,” she got formal, “by royal decree, that I, the illustrious Swan Princess, will be there!”

“Aces! Well I’ll see you tomorrow then.” She bent down to pat the Swan Princess on the top of the head, and was on her way, leaving the Swan Princess to carry on with her daydreaming.

“Another Ice Age,” she thought, “wouldn’t it be lovely?”

After not too much longer her shift was over and she said goodbye to the library until next week. She waited at her usual bus stop until her usual bus arrived, and it took it’s usual route which included the spot where it dropped the Swan Princess off a few blocks from her apartment. Once she got inside the lobby, she usually took the elevator up to the fifth floor. She’s taken the stairs a few times, too, just to catch a few fleeting glances at the four stories that keep hers from being on the ground. Today, though, regardless of whether or not she took the stairs as opposed to the elevator, she did make it up to the fifth floor, then made the short walk down the hallway to her apartment door, fumbled for her key, placed it in the lock, then turned it and pushed the door inward with her body.

October 28, 2007

The Swan Princess leaned out of her kitchen window, confident that the notion of it being another Friday morning in the cyclical march of social time would not effect, in the least, her behavior for the day. She really believed that it was time for her to start

living outside of abstractions. She really thought she could do it. There was a strong, cool breeze blowing into her kitchen through the opened window at which she was stationed. It felt good upon contact with her skin, but it was so brisk it made her eyes water a little bit. Her glasses were hanging on the collar of her t-shirt, making it look like a v-neck, though it was really a crew-cut. It was a new shirt, and across the front of it were the words “PARADISE LOST” in big block letters. The sky that clung to the buildings like ciran-wrap was pink where it wanted to be, blue or white when it was appropriate, and even a peculiar shade of orange that made you think it was in danger of becoming self-indulgent.

Suddenly a high-pitched whistling from inside told the Swan Princess, like a blinding light that swooped across the inside of her head, that the water in the kettle was trying to escape through the very crafty technique of changing it’s physical state from liquid to gas. She hopped down from the window sill and over to the stove-top, slipping her hand into an oven-mitten covered in prints of tiny kittens, lifted the tea kettle and swung it over to her empty mug. A boiling waterfall curved downward like the part of the rainbow that touches the treasure, and filled the mug to the point of overflow. She then opened her cupboard to reveal a veritable wall of boxes of tea of all varieties, in all different colors, with text of all different languages. As if all the others didn’t exist, she reached for a box of Cherry Blossom Tea and grabbed a tea bag. She glanced over at the egg frying obediently on the pan, the toaster with it’s two slices of bread hidden deep within its womb, the slices of cheese and tomato resting on old homework assignments with red “A+” marks stamped approvingly across the tops, and one bottle of A-1 Steak Sauce™ standing upsidedown™ on the countertop, balanced on its narrow lid so that the

last of its contents will yield themselves unproblematically to her breakfasty appetite.

In no more than two minutes time, all of these disparate elements converged into a single infinitely dense, infinitely massive sandwich. No matter what was going on in her life, no matter how apocalyptic it seemed at times, in moments like these things always seemed okay. A feeling of deep-seeded peace swirled around her heart, like the steam from her mug around a stray thought. Since she didn't have a kitchen table, she rested her plate atop a stack of books and sat down on the floor, cross-legged, in front of it. As she took the first bite she thought about billboards, about how they were everywhere and they all vied for your attention, and they all wanted something. It was kind of sad, all these graphic designers out in the world of professional advertising, using all of their abilities to create these colorful images of unrequited love, images they didn't dream, images that belonged to another. She pictured these billboards in the rain, with water from the sky streaming down their vertical surfaces without ever pausing to consider the content of the images and words. In the trajectory of the rain, thought the Swan Princess, lies the secret of the corporation's insecurities. Another cursory peek out the window told her that it might rain today, and that she should think about bringing an umbrella when she went out.

She looked at the tips of her fingers, speckled as they were with breadcrumbs, tomato seeds and A-1 sauce.TM She stared at the mixture of food ephemera for a long time. "Wanting things is the keenest tragedy," the Swan Princess thought. Or did she say it aloud? "There's nothing sadder, really, even for one who always gets what she wants. Just the very idea of there being things outside of yourself that make you aware, painfully aware, that you are incomplete." She took a bite, and it tasted yummy, then washed it

down with a sip of tea. “And what about,” she continued, “what about all the times when you don’t know what you want? What about all the indefinable longings and urges that pull you you-know-not-where? Are those real? Are they willful self-deceptions?”

The Swan Princess stared into the face of unanswerable questions, and sighed. At the bottom of the ocean, tiny and huge aquatic creatures struggled with exactly the same questions, only they used a totally different language to articulate them, a language that involved, among other things, bubbles. Every bubble that popped or dissipated represented another question unanswered, another intricately-populated belief civilization decimated by the neutron bomb of doubt. She set down her sandwich and moved back over to the window. She looked down at the tiny people walking the sidewalks, stopping at intersections whenever a “Don’t Walk” sign flashed in their direction, even if no cars could be seen. She thought that maybe she’d like to own a fish tank. Fish were the only pets the concierge would allow, though the Swan Princess knew of a lady on the third floor who was secretly harboring a kimono dragon.

October 29, 2007

It was Friday, and the Swan Princess had no classes, no work, and generally no obligations to the outside world, and that left just the one, ongoing responsibility to herself. She wondered how she should fulfill it. She took her breakfast into her bedroom, set it down on the “nightstand,” and opened the east-facing window. The sun was fully alive and wanting everyone to know about it. It’s golden light filled the folds of her disheveled bedsheets like stucco in the cracks of an old building. She then fell backwards, allowing herself to collapse back into the bed she had only recently departed, as if it had it’s own gravitational pull, and she was helpless to resist it. Her arms bent at the elbows

as she placed her hands behind her head and stretched out. The ceiling above was white and textured and it played with her accepted notions of Infinite Space.TM She stared up at it for a long time, and eventually patterns began to emerge in the whiteness, and they began to drift.

She sprung up and found herself standing in front of her full-length mirror. She looked herself up and down, then down and up. The sun bounced off of a corner of it and faded into blinding whiteness, taking with it anything caught in its wake. Was Death, she wondered, white or black? Was it all colors simultaneously or was it the complete absence of color? She tried to imagine, based on her own experiences of fading away into the annihilation of sleep each night, as well as what the religious say and what the poets write, what color Death was. The mirror in front of her seemed to be providing some clue, some primary document as-yet-untranslated. The mystery of Death, as conceived by a young girl in the prime of Life, seemed to be contained in the lightrays that bounced and proliferated within the four walls of the Swan Princess' bedroom. She shuddered at the thought, and her reflection vibrated. Death was the one thing we couldn't know, didn't want to believe in, and at the same time, the thing we based our whole lives around, like the donut forms itself around the hole. She hugged herself, just because she was still alive, kissed the mirror, and prepared to leave the apartment. She didn't know what to make of the weather. The sun was shining brightly, but it was through a window in an otherwise dense cloud cover, a window that looked to have been fashioned expressly for that purpose. In other words the sky, which really shouldn't be trusted under *any* circumstances, seemed indecisive, and therefore more suspect than usual. She put on a semi-lightweight jacket, then wrapped a scarf around her neck, and tied it too tightly at

first so that it had to be redone. Then she stocked her bag with the necessary supplies: bus fare, Paradise Lost, a knitted cap, a spiral-bound notebook, and plenty of ballpoint pens. Not knowing exactly where she was headed, she made her way out of her apartment and proceeded to head there.

The hallway seemed long, as if stretched nearly beyond recognition by some kind of camera lens effect, but the Swan Princess' legs were proportionately long, and therefore her steps were able to take up the slack.

Stepping outside and onto the sidewalk that was fashioned by man in all of his blind ambition, and which was predictably cracked and falling into general disrepair, the Swan Princess felt the breeze animate her pigtails and make the tip of her nose itch. Now she was one of the tiny people she watched from her fifth storey window, and perhaps someone was watching *her* from even higher up. She looked around, as she walked, for windows with curtains drawn, the sheen of the reflection from the lens of a telescope bouncing coldly onto her forehead. She saw no such windows, but that didn't mean they weren't there. Her arms swung from front to back, her legs performed in a similar fashion, except that their obligation was twofold: to both her torso and the ground. She wondered what she should expect from Caroline's performance art piece this evening. Some of her past performances had been fairly impressive, but she had spoken lately about upping the ante. The Swan Princess, or at least one part of her, didn't even want to *think* about it. There seemed to always be so many things that could go wrong in Caroline's schemes. Another part of her, though, was hopelessly curious. Caroline was just such a fascinating girl, and the Swan Princess knew that one day she was going to be a really big Art Star,TM and an impossible-to-overlook presence in the international art

community. It seemed fairly exciting and glamorous, but she preferred the more solitary life of a writer. She was pretty grateful that the existence of great works of literature was not contingent upon galleries, museums and curators for its proliferation. Compared to these entities, the publishing industry seemed like the most innocent thing in the world. Or maybe she just held that opinion because she, herself, was a writer, and therefore prejudiced. She had to admit that it would not be untrue to say that, at certain points in her earlier undergrad and high school life, she had in fact harbored fantasies of devoting her life to painting. But those were merely the fleeting fancies of a girl who had not yet taken the plunge into the full devotion to the ultimate abstract magic of words. Once she realized how far superior writing was to all other art forms, once she had read Tropic of Capricorn, she knew that she had crossed the point of no return. Writing was the One, true God, and everything else was mere false idols in comparison. Even if someone wanted to defend one of the other artforms they would have to fall back on words to do it, and literature's heart would rejoice in one more small victory.

October 30, 2007

Anxiety was slowly creeping its way into the Swan Princess' heart, and she didn't know why. She didn't know what time it was and just that simple, insignificant lack of information brought with it a tiny speck of paranoia that hovered behind her head. Everytime she turned around to try to locate it, it had already shifted. It was like she was waiting for an event she knew would never take place. As the day wore on the sky became duller, like an old pencil, filled with broken lead. When she was a kid she loved the movie "The Dark Crystal," and the idea of the Great Conjunction fascinated her elementary school mind. The three suns all lining up in the sky and signaling some great,

Darwinian leap, some unimaginable change. The scenes in the movie in which the suns were just on the verge of alignment, the “one-minute-before-midnight,” pre-doomsday scenario feeling of being a tiny little nothing, but still privileged enough to be able to witness the spectacle; that was how she felt at that moment. All around her she saw the absence of belief, the pure, terrible physicality of things. She was sitting on a bench in a little public park. People were jogging by with their Ipods,TM sunglasses, and dogs. The sounds of the city were intruding on the more fundamental underlying silence that filled all open space, permeated every crack. She knew that it was there, this silence, and even the most cacophonous, deafening noise in the world wouldn’t convince her otherwise.

The sky was now so white it looked like it wasn’t there at all, like the buildings, trees, streetlights, and cellphone towers were intruding on a blank universe, a universe wholly and exclusively created by humans, made up by us as we go along. She didn’t, of course, believe in such nonsense, not for a minute, but the idea was pretty poetic to her. “All right,” she thought to herself, “It’s time that I start heading for the Golden Gate Bridge.TM” A little dog suddenly darted past the Swan Princess, with a long leash trailing behind it, flopping around and slapping the ground. Then, a few seconds later a woman, presumably the dog’s owner, sprinted down the path in the same direction.

“Tofu! Oh Tofu! Please stop! Oh do come back!,” the woman shouted as she ran. The Swan Princess watched as they both disappeared into the fog behind her, then she made her way northwest. After several blocks of zig-zagging the city streets, up and over, up and over, she found herself at the bay, that big splash of water where the Pacific OceanTM still has yet to decide whether it would rather overtake the continent or stay put. She was at the edge of the Presidio, which meant she still had quite a ways to go, but for

some reason the long walk didn't feel tiresome at all. It was like thinking; it was going to happen whether she wanted it or not, so she might as well just accept it. The less she attempted to obstruct the natural linear flow, the more she'd get out of it.

Her surroundings had become greener and traffic, both automotive and pedestrian, seemed to be thinning out. The sky, on the other hand, was denser than ever, and it swirled in opaque layers all the way down to the Swan Princess' feet. She could smell the first raindrop several seconds before she felt it on the top of her head, and after that first one a very light, but regular, procession of raindrops made their way down to the ground like pioneers taking the first hesitant steps into new frontiers. She could now see her breath. She reached into her bag, careful to shelter the contents from the rain, and pulled out the knitted cap her grandmother had made for her many, many years ago. It's design consisted of rows of pink, baby blue and pale yellow geometric shapes, broken up in the center by letters that spelled out "Princess." When she put the cap on her head it forced her pigtails to lie down close to her head, but they still made two noticeable bumps on either side. She tied the earflaps down with the piece of string that dangled down from each respectively, but after only a few minutes it came undone, and the earflaps kind of stuck out asymmetrically. She didn't really even notice, though. She really liked the cold weather, so long as she was dressed for it. She didn't understand why everyone always associated sunshine with happiness and rain with gloom. Well, maybe she kind of understood, but she simply didn't agree with it. To her overcast days were just pleasant, like drinking the leftover milk from a bowl of sugar cereal. It helped to put things into the proper perspective, somehow. After all, you couldn't have sunshine all the time, anymore than you could be happy all the time. It would lose all of it's meaning.

To her left the surface of the bay sat there like a horizontal, unpolished mirror. To her right was a row of trees, and the road. To neither her left nor her right, neither above her nor below her was *her*, a girl whose hands were in her pockets, a girl who, at that exact moment, was illuminated by the glow of headlights, and who, in that fleeting flash, saw her first glimpse of the bridge through the fog, like a secret behemoth safely tucked away within a veil of smoke and mirrors. For a second she saw the rows of metal suspension wires cutting the fog like the trails of diamond snails over a sidewalk of glass, and farther off in the distance, she saw the tower where she was supposed to meet Caroline. Then, as the cars sped past, it all became white again. She exhaled, and her breath looked like a thought bubble. Suddenly she realized that her feet were, in fact, sore. She *had* done an awful lot of walking today, but now she was nearly at her destination. She noticed that there were a lot of cars on the road, going in both directions, and that traffic was slowing down considerably. She heard the occasional car horn blare, along with other sounds of the road; engines running, ridiculously overwhelming bass pulsating from stereos, the sounds of a living, breathing...thing. She walked alongside it, very conscious of being the only person on foot in sight, which wasn't very far in any direction, thanks to the fog. It had been ages since she'd last set foot on the bridge. She remembered biking across it once with her family. She remembered she had fallen and scraped her knee.

October 31, 2007

The color of the bridge, as seen through the wisps of fog, bled through like a dying sun struggling with the issue of its relevance on the surface of a planet with a really dense atmosphere. As the Swan Princess approached the foot of the bridge, the south

tower, with its four horizontal bars spanning the expanse between the two pillars under which the traffic flowed, seemed to float in and out of existence, a thing both massive and airy. As she made her way down the sidewalk, cars passing in both directions on her left, and the orangish-reddish railing on her right over which she ran her hands, smooth and slick save for the bolts protruding at regular intervals, she realized she had yet to spot another person who was not in a car. The closer she got to the tower, the more curious she grew about Caroline's performance. As she approached, the suspension wires running down from either side of the tower's top seemed to open up, as if in anticipation of taking you in their arms for a long, warm embrace.

She walked across the bridge, thinking of what the fog concealed. Straight ahead; Marin County and the Headlands, below and to either side; the ocean's surface. As it stood, though, it was a bridge to Nowhere, jutting out over an expanse of Nothing. The top of the tower disappeared into whiteness, as did its base. It was only the middle that was visible. It floated perfectly vertically, perfectly still. It all looked exactly as it always had, all through the Swan Princess' life, all except for one small detail; hanging from the bottom-most bar of the tower, the one that formed the doorway through which the cars traveled, was what appeared to be some sort of rope, dangling well above the cars and swaying slowly back and forth in the wind. "Some sort of remnant from recent construction," she thought.

Then in a sudden shift of the wind the fog lifted up and there stood Caroline, dressed all in white at the base of the tower. She looked up and became overjoyed at the sight of the Swan Princess, and ran over and jumped into her arms, causing them both to spin around.

“Hi Kiddo! I’m so glad you made it! I was afraid maybe the weather might’ve held you up!”

“No not really,” the Swan Princess said. “I walked here, so it really wasn’t a factor.”

“Walked here? From where? The bus stop?”

“From home.”

“From *home*?,” Caroline exclaimed through a laugh, “Geez Louis, you live all the way downtown!”

“Yeah,” she said calmly. “It kind of took a long time, but I just felt like doing it, you know what I mean, jelly bean?”

Caroline looked at her for a second, then said, “Yeah, I know what you mean.” She smiled. “I’m just glad you’re here! This is going to be so great!”

The Swan Princess looked Caroline up and down. She was wearing a simple, yet elegant, white dress, which tapered in at the waist and fell down to her ankles. On her feet were a pair of beat up, old, white Converse All-Stars.TM Slung over one shoulder was a red backpack, half unzipped, with a lot of silky, shiny white rope hanging out of it. The Swan Princess saw the rope and looked immediately over to the rope she had seen dangling from the tower. Sure enough, it appeared to be identical.

She grabbed a length of it and examined it. It was very finely woven, and very beautiful. “What *is* this stuff,” she asked.

“Swan feathers,” Caroline replied without hesitation, “Swan feathers woven into a super-strong rope! See how it glitters!” She held it up to the light and it looked like it could have been made out of the fog itself.

“Umm...swan feathers? Really? How on earth did you get ahold of this stuff?”

“There’s, you’re not gonna believe this, there’s this Swan Farm up in Marin County that I’ve known about for a while, so I went up there and asked the head farmer... maybe he’s more of a rancher...uh, anyway, I asked him what it would take to get ahold of a bunch of swan feathers, and he said I could just walk around and pick ‘em up off the ground! They were just lying around everywhere! It was just aces! And no swans were harmed in the making of this performance piece!”

“Umm...and that leads to the question...just what *is* the performance going to be?”

“Of course! Well, here it is...oh, have you met my assistant yet?” Caroline then reached her arms out to one side and pulled a person out of the fog. “This is Johnny. He’s a painting major at school.” The parting of the fog reveals a skinny young man with messy hair and pink-framed sunglasses. He’s wearing blue jeans and a t-shirt that says “DESTROY ALL ARTISTS” in big, block letters. Without making a sound, he nods his head in the direction of the Swan Princess.

“Hi,” the Swan Princess wiggled her fingers at Johnny.

“Johnny,” Caroline goes on, “is my technical support, plus he’ll be documenting the whole thing with his mom’s video camera. Isn’t that nice of him?”

Johnny pulled out a pack of cigarettes and stuck one in his mouth and lit it.

“So,” Caroline continued, “you see this beautiful pulley system Johnny and I have devised?” She pointed her finger up along a network of metal loops, swan rope, and various other odds and ends that had been attached to the side of the tower and that climbed up it’s surface and over the busy street about a hundred or so feet below. A

length of silken Swan rope dangled from the center of the beam there. “And you see this harness that I have strapped to my body underneath my shimmering gown?” She pulled down her dress in the back to reveal the harness, complete with little, silver hooks and buckles running along the middle of it. “And you see all these people in their cute little metal death traps, speeding to-and-fro to god-knows-where, god-knows-why...is it all coming together yet?”

“Umm...,” the Swan Princess looked down over the railing at the water below, veiled as it was in mist and mystery, then she looked back at Caroline. “I think maybe... kinda...sorta...”

November 1, 2007

“It’s very simple, actually,” Caroline continued. “I’m just gonna hang out up there, over the traffic, and read a book for an hour or so, starting a five o’clock.”

“Oh...okay,” the Swan Princess said, feeling the chill of the wind on her cheek, thinking about the ocean she could not see.

“Umm...I’d rather not explain it too much...,” she said as Johnny crouched behind her and attached everything that needed to be attached and buckled everything that needed to be buckled. Caroline looked over her shoulder at him and said, “Is everything ready, Johnny?,” to which Johnny gave an approving thumbs up sign, his face as stoic as the side of a red brick building.

“All right, then hoist me up!”

Johnny began to pull on the swan rope and it slowly but surely became taut, until eventually Caroline felt the first tug at her back.

“Oh! Wait! Wait! I almost forgot! My props!” She tried to bend down to reach for

her backpack, but the swan rope that was forcing her onto her tippy-toes prevented her from doing so. “Swan Princess! Could you do me a favor and hold my little red backpack up in front of me?”

“Yeah! Of course!” The Swan Princess hesitated for a second after answering, as if she didn’t quite understand the question, then she dove to the ground to grab the backpack, and held it up for Caroline.

“Thanks, kiddo!” Her hands plunged into the bag and emerged with, first, a pair of white-framed sunglasses, which she immediately plopped on her face, and second, a white paperback book, which she turned around to show to the Swan Princess. It was called Women Poets of Japan, an anthology, it appeared. “This is my favorite book right now!,” Caroline beamed. “It’s got some *great* stuff from the Tokugowa period!”

November 2, 2007

As Johnny tugged and tugged on the swan rope from his spot at the base of the tower, and as Caroline rose and rose up above the traffic moving in both directions below, the Swan Princess looked on in quiet wonder. Why was Caroline doing this?, she wondered. Not that it wasn’t a really good idea, because it was. No, what the Swan Princess was really wondering, you could say, was why do artists *Do* things at all? She didn’t really know what she was thinking, it was just that there was this kind of limitless interest in the fact that this was *really* happening, the fact that this is an event that is existing, for her, the being who is there to perceive it.

After a few minutes Caroline had reached her destination, and there she dangled like a bird-feeder from the tree in someone’s grandparents’ backyard, like something that had always been there. The rope that suspended her was all but invisible to anyone

looking up at her from below, it seemed to have found it's home in the fog, and having found it's home, went inside and latched the front door gently behind it, without making a sound. She opened her book, pulled out an intact swan feather she was using as a bookmark, and started reading.

“She looks so beautiful up there, doing nothing...” the Swan Princess said to no one in particular, as Johnny leaned against a plaque on the wall and took a long drag on his cigarette, apparently completely indifferent to the spectacle. At his side was a video camera, mounted on a tripod and pointed up at Caroline. Maybe he figured he could just watch it later...

November 3, 2007

The Swan Princess looked at people in their cars as they drove by. The reactions from the commuters was somewhat mixed, as far as she could tell. Some people looked and pointed, some people seemed confused, some seemed to not even notice at all, but regardless of who did and did not care, Caroline floated above all and did not discriminate. Every few minutes she'd turn the page in her book or scratch her nose, but for the most part she remained motionless, her body rotating slowly as the rope twisted, the two black lenses of her sunglasses seeming to be the only things that fog was unable to assimilate.

She was about one hundred feet up. In a sense what she was doing could more accurately be called a “presence” than a “performance,” since she wasn't really performing much of anything. Or maybe she was performing her presence. What she was doing was *being*, and being *seen*. Meanwhile, down on the sidewalk below, the Swan Princess had decided to make herself more comfortable, so she sat down and pulled out

Paradise Lost. Johnny had already made it clear that he wasn't interested in chatting. The wind and the slight rainfall, though, were making it difficult for her to read, since not only did she have to shelter the library book with her body against possible water damage, she also had to be constantly making sure that the pages weren't blowing all over the place, as if the wind itself were reading the book, and at a pace much, much faster than her. She couldn't understand how Caroline was making it all seem so effortless, since these conditions were surely even more pronounced way up there. It was as if Caroline were, in fact, becoming one with the clouds and the very natural elements themselves, and therefore not subject to their whims. The Swan Princess felt like she, herself, had not even come close to entering such an existence. She felt so separate from everyone and everything, like a manuscript no one ever read lying on the floor of a dark closet.

November 4, 2007

The rain was so light and so evenly spaced out between drops that it seemed like a spreadsheet, one that contained the logistical information of all life on earth, all the angels in the clouds, and all the empty space in-between. Through the rain and the fog, a single bird could be seen flying around in a big circle above the towers. It seemed to be reveling in the weather, which may or may not be against its nature. When a creature goes against its nature, is it only natural for it to do so? Or is it, rather, impossible for anything to go against its nature, ever? And what *is* nature, anyway? It's possible to say that Nature is everything there is, and everything that happens, but then there are the people who say that nature is everything that lies outside of human civilization, but then that seems silly when you stop to consider that those same people usually believe that

humans have a “nature.”

The Swan Princess flipped ahead through the pages of Paradise Lost and found the old photograph she had stashed there. She looked at the picture of the girl in the graveyard for a few minutes. A few drops of rain collided with its surface, slid down, and rolled off the bottom. As the cars continued to pass, Johnny continued to lean, and Caroline continued to float, the Swan Princess stood up and made her way over to the railing at the side of the bridge. She looked down at where the water should be, but where instead was that rolling carpet of fog, and thought about all the people who commit suicide by jumping off. It seemed like such a poetic way to die, but if you still had such a strong sense of poetry in your life, why would you want to die at all? On the other hand, maybe people just did it that way because it was easy, and a pretty sure way to make sure the job gets done.

She held the picture out in front of her, as if trying to insert it into the scene, thinking about her grandmother, who never failed to produce a fresh tray of chocolate chip cookies every time the family would visit. Then the young princess, her smiling face smeared with chocolate, would sit on her lap while her grandmother would read to her aloud from a book of poems by Marriane Moore. Without even realizing it, the Swan Princess was soaking up every word, every line, every metaphor, every sentiment, every thought, and every puff of smoke. What the Swan Princess was conscious of at the time was the motion of her grandmother’s lips as she formed the words, and then the pure sensual delight of their various sounds as they rolled one by one off her tongue and into the air. Then, with these images in mind, she let go of the photograph and watched as it fell down into the whiteness below. It swung back and forth like a pendulum, taking only

a few seconds to disappear as completely as if it had never been at all. She stared at the spot where she had last seen it, her hands gripping the railing and her feet on the tip of her toes so that she could lean out as far as was safe over the water. She didn't know exactly why she had done that, but then again, she didn't know exactly why she had taken the photograph in the first place.

Lost in thought as she was, she was completely unprepared for the greeting that she then received. It was an all-to-familiar voice addressing her by an all-to-familiar nickname that she detested:

“Hi, Swanny!” said none other than Shiro; He-Who-Had-Been-Ditched-Twice-At-The-Site-Of-The-Act-Of-Physical-Love.

November 5, 2007

She didn't turn around, and after a few seconds hesitation, she said, in a completely neutral tone, “Hello, Shiro.”

“Hi,” he repeated, positioning himself beside her and resting his elbows on the railing. “I've been looking all over for you. That morning at the video arcade, when I woke up and you weren't there, well, I kinda didn't know, that is, uh...so what have you been up to this week?”

The Swan Princess looked down into the fog and spit. She was going to count how many seconds it took for the little glob to hit the water, but it disappeared long before she could make an accurate count. She then glanced over at Shiro out of the corner of her eye and said, “Oh, you know, I've been going to class, working at the library, reading, writing...the usual...”

“Oh, okay. Me? I've actually been really busy. Lots of stuff going on. Luckily I

didn't get caught spending the night at the Polygon Emporium.TM I was able to slip out well before the owner showed up in the morning. Oh my brother came up to visit from Riverside,TM he needed help planning his 401K, or something. I told him I didn't know all that much about the subject, which was a lie, to try to dissuade him, but he came anyways, so I had to show him around town and stuff. He also wanted a tour of the school, since he'll be graduating from high school next year..."

"Shiro," the Swan Princess said, "what are you doing here?" The top of her head itched, so she pulled off her knitted cap and stuck it in her jacket pocket, and while her hand was down there, she felt the cold, metal key that she had been carrying around all week.

"Well, I came to see Caroline's performance." He turned his body around and motioned up towards Caroline's dangling form, glittering with little droplets of rainwater that were sticking to her dress.

"But, um...how did you even know it was going to happen?"

"There's flyers up all over campus and, well, the truth is...I knew that this Caroline girl was a friend of yours, since you went on and on about her at dinner the other night, and so, I was, uh, kinda hoping *you* would be here, since you're so impossible to track down, and you don't own a phone, or anything..."

Shiro looked over at the Swan Princess expectantly, but if she gave any indication of having any kind of opinion on the subject, he certainly could not see it. She was as unmoved as a field of daffodils on a windless day. Suddenly she turned to face him, then she grabbed him by both shoulders and just stood there, looking into his eyes intently. Then she dug once more into her pocket and pulled out the metal key and, grabbing

Shiro's forearm and pulling up his hand so that it rested open-palmed in the air between them, she dropped the key into the palm of his hand and closed his fingers around it.

"What's this?," Shiro asked, but before he could inquire further the Swan Princess reached out and put her index finger over his lips and said, "Shhhhh! We can talk about anything you want to talk about, anything except this key."

"Oh, okay," uttered a confused Shiro, "You know sometimes you can get pretty strange. You do know that, don't you?"

"Do you like raisins, Shiro?"

"Huh? Raisins? Well, sure, yeah..."

"Shriveled, spent little grapes. Umm...they're kind of like grandmothers..."

"Awww...Swanny, that's a horrible thing to say! Why, if my grandma heard you say such a thing, she'd..." but Shiro's sentence was cut short, because at that moment a large gust of wind swept across the bridge from east to west, animating the Swan Princess' scarf and pigtails, but not moving Shiro's perfectly sculpted, gelled hair one bit. Still, he had to turn his face away because the chill of it was stinging his eyes.

Up above, the effect of the wind appeared to affect Caroline, as well. She began to sway back and forth inbetween the two side-structures of the tower. All the while, though, she never lost her composure. Her eyes, underneath the dark sunglasses, continued to scan the pages of the book in her hands. Sometimes she even appeared to be reading aloud, though no one could hear what she was saying.

November 6, 2007

The fog itself was what the Swan Princess wanted to say, was what she wanted desperately to get Shiro to understand, but she didn't know how to say it. It was

everywhere she looked, all around her, so it should have been easy. It was like a dispersed, floating thesaurus, just waiting there, hanging around to be utilized. She looked up at Caroline. Was she the only person the Swan Princess could really talk to? Was that it? Do we all just get one person, given to us when we're young, then, after the inevitable process of alienation and the slow, sometimes imperceptible drifting apart, do we spend the rest of our lives trying to find another such person? At this point in her life, it was still much too early to come to such conclusions with any degree of certainty, but she had a feeling. She felt it. As Caroline floated in the fog, in the soft melody of rainwater without rhythm, the Swan Princess swallowed her spit with the cold, metallic certainty that she really had no one to talk to. No one, at least, not in the way she wanted. If what she wanted was like the fog, then the thing that was keeping her from it could be said to be equally like the fog. It was the plastic and artificial layers of social conventions, the stuff that floated all around us in soft, nearly invisible layers. The thing is, though, that most people don't seem to know that it's not solid, and that you can just walk right through it. All you have to do is walk like you would normally if it wasn't there. It made the Swan Princess so mad sometimes, the way people were. And here was Shiro, perched beside her like a puppy, a hopeless and obvious victim of the plague of social conventions, and he, himself, was acting like a plague upon her life. He was a plague of boredom, self-administered originally as a possible antidote to boredom, but instead causing it to spread all the more rapidly, until the Swan Princess' whole being had eventually become so super-saturated with boredom, it had reached such an extreme, that at that point she couldn't *possibly* be bored any more. This was one possible theory for her current situation, but quite frankly, she didn't believe it. The whole thing just seemed

wrong.

A smallish cargo ship was just then becoming visible as it passed underneath the bridge, and it caught the attention of both Shiro and the Swan Princess. Shiro used it as the excuse he needed to reinstate the conversation.

“Wow...look at that! What do you think they’re hauling down there?”

The Swan Princess puckered her lips off to one side and gave the simple question some honest thought. “Umm...I think that they are carrying...child safety seats that you put your kids in when they ride in the backseat with you in your minivan. The kind that you have to buckle to the seat with the car’s seatbelt, and which, in turn, have their own built-in seatbelt that you use to secure the child. So what you have is a child sitting in a seat, sitting on a seat in a car, a car that is on the ground, the curvilinear surface of the planet earth. The earth, on the other hand, has no such concrete support system in place, just the invisible tetherball rope of the sun’s gravitational pull. It’s kind of like the way the Golden Gate Bridge™ appears to be hovering in the void right now, like Christmas™ lights without a tree or a house. I don’t know...do you ever feel like the planet earth, Shiro? Like you can’t understand why you feel any connection at all to *anything*, but then you keep coming back for more? What is it about me—I mean, about us, about the whole planet, that makes us act the way we do? Why does everything always have to be so invisible?”

The Swan Princess’ monologue concluded, Shiro waited through the silence in a panic for the right thing to say at this, the opportune moment he had been waiting for all week. She finally seemed to be opening up to him, to be really taking him into her confidence. He took a deep breath and said, “I, well, I think we all feel that way from

time to time. Sometimes our situations, the places we end up in, don't go exactly the way we planned, and it gets tough, it really does, to know what you're supposed to do. But that's why we have friends and family, people we're close to. They can help get us through the hard times, right?" He put his hand on her shoulder, and smiled.

She looked up at him and her facial expression became stern. Her face fell into a pile of rocks at the base of a failed mountain. She knew then that whatever hope she had held out that maybe, just maybe, there *could* be something between them, was completely unfounded. He had completely missed the point of what she was trying to say. She touched her two elbows together, just because she thought of doing such a thing at that moment. It's actually a slightly strange sensation, like banging together two socks filled with marbles. The fog, which she never grew tired of thinking about, seemed to be creeping up her stomach and into her belly button, underneath her t-shirt.

November 7, 2007

"So," she said, "What do *you* think is in the cargo ship?"

"Huh?," Shiro said.

"I'm just asking you your own question. What do you think they're carrying down there? TV's? Toothpicks? Tortilla Chips? What?"

"Well...I guess maybe...they could be carrying..." Shiro was really struggling with the question, making him second-guess his decision to bring it up in the first place. "Ipods™! Yeah! I bet they're carrying Ipods™!" It was better than nothing, Shiro supposed.

"Ipods™? Why the heck do you think that?" The Swan Princess would have been pretty disappointed if she had any expectations.

“Oh...I don’t know. It’s a pretty hot commodity, they’re small, so you could fit a lot of them on a small ship like that. And just the other day I was reading in Money Magazine™ that the market is about to undergo—”

“Isn’t Caroline beautiful?,” The Swan Princess interjected. “She looks like a polished stone, brand new in it’s ancientness, set atop a huge, intricately decorated birthday cake!”

Shiro scratched his head, careful not to mess up his hair, and said, “Yeah, she’s pretty. Let me ask you, what is it exactly that she is doing? I don’t really understand art, I’ll be the first to admit, and *this* I understand even less than most stuff. Listen, Swan Princess, I know you think I’m stupid, but I just dedicate my faculties to other things...ya know, you’ve got to respect diversity in this day and age, because if you don’t, you’ll be left behind in the ever-expanding Global Economy™ of the future. It might sound silly, but it’s the way it is.”

November 8, 2007

“Sure, Shiro.” The Swan Princess sighed a long, lonely sigh. She was thinking about Halloween, and what she was going to dress up as. There were so many possibilities in the literary universe! So many bright spots of character, integrity and neatness to sift through, and then after she’d made her choice, there was the fun of re-reading the book to get all the fine details of the character’s dress, features and mannerisms. Maybe this year she could be Madame Bovary...

She turned away from Shiro and from the performance, and looked back towards the city of San Francisco.™ It was visible once again, now that the fog was being chased away slowly by the careful whisper of the sunset, a whisper that was too quiet for some

people to hear, a whisper that was all too susceptible to being drowned out by talk radio, Ipods,TM cell phone conversations, mental shopping and to-do lists, internal monologues, cries for help, private longings and laments of life choices.

The buildings, in their stark geometry and rigid self-restraint, all vied for the attention of anyone who bothered to look. The cityscape, contrary to the aspirations of city planners, never quite achieved the sense of unity of a natural landscape. There was always one last piece to the puzzle that kept it all from falling into place, and whenever that piece was found, another puzzle-piece-shaped-hole would open up. There were always buildings-in-progress, there were always cranes erected to hoist the skeletons and internal organs of these new buildings, cranes that had no claim whatsoever on the long-term gestalt of the city, but which were, nevertheless, always there. They were the slaves of architecture, and what society can be said to be complete without having dealt with the internal contradiction of slavery? And let's not even get into the presence of all the dead and dying buildings, crumbling in the aquamarine shadows of cranes and wrecking balls. That was just too depressing for the Swan Princess, or anyone else, to think about. And if all of this internal compositional awkwardness weren't enough, there's also the bigger issue of the city, disorganized and amateurish as it is, being in constant competition with Nature itself, which is, in comparison, like an ancient, established, militarily dominant and financially secure super-duperpower. How is a city supposed to compete with Nature? Even if all the cities got together and joined forces against Nature, they'd still be pretty hard-pressed to do much of anything noticeable. The cities would still be playing on Nature's turf. Nature would still have home field advantage. Also, nature has time on its side. If nothing else, it could just wait us out, wait until our artfulness and ambition

simply fades out, like an unpursued thought in the mind of a hyperactive child.

Still, the city she lived in would outlast her, if nothing else. It was so weird, the Swan Princess thought, the idea of things that were made by people lasting way longer than the people themselves. This kind of aspiration felt like nothing more than self-hatred at times. But then she thought, maybe it's not so much self-hatred, but rather love for the ones who come next. We sacrifice a part of our generation so that the next generation will be able to do the same for the next, and on and on for as long as we can possibly manage. Staring into the infinitely dense void of the time that will surely exist after we, as individuals, cease, it's nice to know that maybe something that you approve of will still be going on. It's comforting, or something. It's like going to bed at night and looking forward to just a little bit of oblivion, but then knowing that in the morning you'll be right back where you started, safe and sound.

She looked down and saw that she had legs, and at that moment it became exceptionally clear that she should use them to transport her body somewhere other than where she was. So she proceeded to do just that. She craned her neck and looked up at Caroline and smiled. She waved, but she wasn't sure if Caroline saw her or not. She definitely gave no indication of having done so. She was an unmovable, professional performance artist. She looked over at Shiro and Johnny and saw that they had engaged each other in conversation, which she thought was kind of funny. As she headed back down the sidewalk toward the city, with all of its convolutions and prose poetry, its concrete and its contracts, the Swan Princess felt like an empty page, waiting to be written on, and each and every one of her movements were accompanied by a kind of bracing herself for the first poke of the pencil upon her unblemished, white surface. She

realized that it couldn't be done by herself, at least, not yet. She hadn't yet reached that point, and in the meantime she would submit herself to being written upon by the staunch, irreparable and blindly scribing hand of Experience. Every step she took was a word, or maybe just a letter. She didn't really know how to break it up, or how to decide what constituted experience's most basic units.

November 9, 2007