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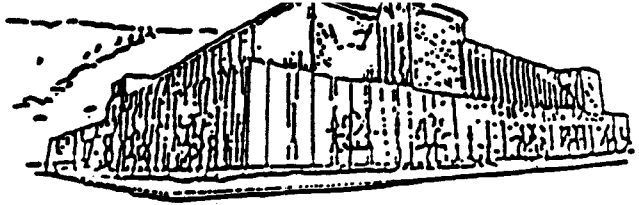
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DEATH IS NO PARENTHESIS: STORIES

by

Traver Kauffman

B.A. The Colorado College, 1998

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

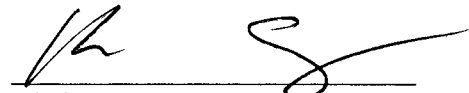
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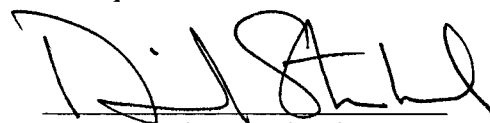
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Death is no parenthesis:
Stories

Traver Kauffman

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow,
it can also take place in joy.

Albert Camus
The Myth of Sisyphus

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Husbandry: An Account

I am a patient man. Yet when the events of the world take me to my breaking point (we all have them), I tend to react with bellicosity, physical histrionics, and, shamefully, the breaking of household goods. This I try to keep in check with regular nips of Johnnie Walker Black Label, which I take from a glass the size of thimble, every fifteen minutes. My physician explains that while this method is not the most prudent course for a man my age, sixty-five, a little degeneration of the liver is preferable to the injuries I used to come in with when my temper was fully in control of me. These, namely: deep cuts to the hands and arms, broken metacarpal bones, burst vessels bloodying up my eye whites, and an occasional broken nose when my downstairs neighbor physically objected to the noise I made during tantrums.

I now am close to anger, nervous anger, and I take the pint bottle from the glove compartment and quaff two thimbles of scotch.

My young fiancée, Carla, is at the wheel of my Cadillac and is driving dangerously on the slick winter roads. She is crying. The bridesmaid's shoes have come in and they are "bone" and not "white" as she would have liked. I, earlier in the day, argued that the hemlines of the dresses are to the floor and thus conceal the bone shoes, but Carla would not listen.

But the dresses are clearly white! she cried. Think of the contrast that will show in the wedding pictures! It is a crime against posterity!

But the hemlines, I said.

To hell with the hemlines, Carla said.

Eventually I acquiesced, and took a thimble of Johnnie Walker as a reward for my emotional control and understanding of the female animal and her attachment to weddings.

Oh, these nuptials! My interest in them, I fear, is strictly mechanical. I am no sentimentalist. What I desire is more life, a reprieve, and in Carla I see fine things, features I will not mind in miniature on the face of a child, as he or she squirms about in flannel pajamas. And while I am not sentimental, I do respect decorum, and wish to go through proper channels for a child, which means a traditional ceremony--according to Carla's girlhood dreams and the parameters set out by *Modern Bride* magazine.

But it is too late to return the shoes to the mail order people in New Jersey. Our ceremony is taking place in three days, noon Saturday. Several frantic phone calls confirmed that our recourse was to drive to the Bridal Emporium in Denver, and exchange the offending bone shoes for the proper white.

There is still Esther to think about, however. Esther is Carla's close high school friend, and she has been a problem throughout the entire wedding process because of her unusual size. Esther is six foot seven, and wears a 13 EEE shoe. Poor girl! None of this is her fault. A special bridesmaid dress had to be tailored especially to her, and at some cost to me. The process of finding a satin dyeable shoe in Women's 13 EEE took several weeks, and now that the unique shoe is here it is, alas, in bone instead of white.

Trish at the Denver Bridal Emporium fears they cannot do much for us in the way of a white 13 EEE, and this is why Carla is crying.

We drive up a narrow country road, lined with leafless trees, as I work my way into a comfortable, braced position in the passenger seat: one hand against the cool leather dash, the other gripping the arm rest handle, which is also leather. I am calculating when I get my next drink when a small form scampers into the road. The shadowy thing ambles into our path, and freezes in a crouched position.

I try to grab at the wheel. Carla leans on the horn.

Oh Jesus! she exclaims.

We hit the thing in the road, dead-center on the bumper.

There is a certain amount of bumping and screeching of tires, and Carla brings the car to a stop and slumps against the wheel, still crying. I no longer have hope that the weeping is going to cease any time soon. After another thimble of scotch, I climb out of the passenger door, and walk with Carla back twenty-five paces, where there is a sad, dark pile slumped on the shoulder of the road.

It is not an animal, but an urchin child. The boy is dressed in Dickensian garb, dirty in the face like a chimney sweep, and his pants are made of potato sacks stitched into form with a rough yellow twine. His cuffs are fraying and he is shoeless. A thin stream of blood trails out of his right ear.

I lean down and whisper at the child.

Child, I say, are you all right?

The urchin boy opens one eye and sizes up my face.

Kind sir, it hurts, he moans.

My Cadillac is vintage, I say. It is made almost entirely of steel and it was traveling at a high rate of speed. Simple physics should have dissuaded you from running in front of it.

My schooling is dreadful poor, says the urchin. Physics escapes me.

Understandable, I say. Now what is your name?

Brian, he says, and closes his eyes. He is breathing shallowly.

Carla walks up, still weeping, mascara just cascading down her face in an unsightly manner. She, too, leans over the urchin. I take her hand. We decide to cover Brian, and I put my peacoat under his head and Carla spreads her down parka over his poor clothes.

It is so sad, she says.

The poor are with us always, I tell her.

Now what will we do?

We will put him carefully in the car and take him to a hospital.

They'll want to know what happened to him.

Surely, I say

The police will get involved, Carla says.

With certainty.

They'll arrest me and I'll be locked up.

The guests will be saddened and I will miss you.

At this Brian sits up, eyes wide with panic.

I fear I have wasted my life, he says. Then he collapses, and is prone on the gravel shoulder of the road again. I check his breathing and pulse. He seems to be in shock or mild coma, but I find he is very much alive.

I wipe blood from the lobe of Brian's ear and kiss him on the temple.

Action must be taken, I say.

Carla decides we need to talk this one over, and we confer in the Cadillac. We stare into each other's eyes, as the car's heater cranks and whirrs. I reach for my pint bottle and have three thimbles of Johnnie Walker for the sorrow of Brian, and one more for the cold.

Oh Rex! Carla says, taking my hands.

Oh Carla, I say.

She is so lovely. I have always thought so. And she is wiser than her eighteen years, I can attest. It was her idea to have the wedding in December. It must be in May or December, she said, when I proposed to her. Clever girl! It is unfortunate that I will never love her as I should. We met over the computer, in a forum called "Barely Legal," and in the depths of our souls we know there is no way we will ever quite get around that.

Quickly, it is decided between us that we should nurse the child to health. We will put him in blankets and proper clothes, and feed him soup broth and bland crackers until he is strong enough for solids. Then he will move on to noodle soup, and we will bathe him and cut his hair. We will put him in fashionable sneakers, buy him baggy pants and a gleaming wallet chain, and drop him off at the school, where he will run to join a gang of

like-attired pals--their baseball caps askew and faces scowling and thuggish. We vow to see him grow into a right-minded boy.

But what of the wedding? Carla asks. Of the bone shoes? Of the honeymoon?

I admit, there is still work to be done, I say. The plan is not without its flaws.

Better than prison, Carla says. She smiles.

Yes, I say.

Maybe the Brennemans, in 4B, wouldn't mind adopting?

It is a possibility, I say. The wife is infertile. They are up at odd hours weeping about it and I hear them through the walls.

Brian could make the Brennemans whole, Carla says. I am so happy to help!

You have a generous nature, I tell her.

Carla and I embrace and we quickly make love in the front seat of the Cadillac.

The lovemaking is poor and confined, and during the act I manage to uncomfortably pinch Carla and also skin my right knee on the floor upholstery. In the end only one of us is left completely content. For this I apologize, and start considering ways in which I could have been more loving and efficient. Carla also offers helpful suggestions.

Following a small thimble of drink, we dress and go to find Brian. He is no longer lying on the road, though there remains a set of delicate, ashy footprints in the snow. The trail meanders up an incline and over the crest of a small hill, where it disappears in a tight grove of evergreen trees.

Child, I call. Brian?

There is no answer.

Be still, I tell Carla. I'll return with our boy.

You are soooooo brave, she coos.

I follow the trail, and brush between a pair of bushy evergreens. Brian is here, in a clearing in the circle of trees. He is huddled against the trunk of a tree, with a pile of dead

pine needles piled over his legs, against the cold, I suppose. He shivers and looks away as I sit next to him.

I ask how he feels, considering.

O dolorous pain, Brian complains.

I uncover Brian's legs and check them for injury. The blood flow from his ear is stopped, and his pupils are slightly dilated but within normal range. While I examine the twin bones of his forearm, and his filthy fingers, he looks in my face. He is deeply upset, breathing in quick huffs and sniffing.

What exactly do you want with that woman? he asks me.

Carla? I ask. I am surprised at his alertness. My fiancée?

The woman who maimed me. The woman at the wheel.

I am to marry her, I say. The ceremony takes place in three days.

And thereafter, sir?

We will mate, I tell him. Do you understand mating?

Yes. Perpetuation of the line. An assurance of immortality in the case that there is no afterlife. He frowns and rubs at his eyes. Adorable, this Brian. He will have a portable phone, a pager, a mouth brimming with gold teeth, his initials spelled out on them in diamonds, if he likes. Who might dare to say no?

Very astute, I say.

Nasty business, Brian says.

I agree. I admit to him that I cannot unselfishly love, true enough, but that Carla represents my last chance to propagate, before age finishes its dirty business below my belt line. Brian, nodding with no small amount of gravity, seems to understand the riddling issue of potency. He sighs, and shortly he wants to know if the child will be loved.

I am not loved, Brian says.

Our child will be loved, I say. It will be the sum of our parts, and we will see the pleasing aspects of ourselves in it as we would a mirror. The love for the child will be partially narcissistic, but love all the same, don't you see?

And your unpleasant qualities? asks Brian. What of those?

Good question, I say. My temper is a constant source of embarrassment for me.

And Carla's?

Carla is perfectly pleasant, I tell him. I worry about myself, only.

Then let me be the child, he says. He climbs out from under the pine needles and situates himself in my lap, calling me Poppa and lavishing my cheek with kisses. I cannot help myself. I tickle his belly and dirty feet, squeeze the baby fat on his soot-streaked face.

I see how the dangers might be avoided, I say. But what of your stock?

My parents were kind and saintly, Brian says. But they had no resources.

You were abandoned, then?

Sold, he says. It was their only unkindness.

And what do you want from your childhood?

I want to go to school, Brian says. I want to learn about the Holy Roman Empire and physics, so I won't risk being killed in the street. I would like to inscribe the alphabet and mold clay into interesting shapes. I wish to pull the pigtails of the girls.

Yes, acceptable. Of course.

You will provide me with a warnings about the importance of nutrition and hygiene, Brian says, pulling at my earlobes and pinching my cheeks.

All of this seems fair, I say.

And cartoon character t-shirts, says Brian, staring dreamily.

Let me think, I say.

I think to when I was young and serious, when hours were spent at the study of philosophies both occidental and oriental. The world angered me. The why of it. Why God seemed to punish everyone, regardless of the quality of their soul, and why the most

attractive members of the pep squad would not talk to me, and why the bananas went to rot so quickly. Unfairness seemed to surround me, and I was crazy with the need for answers. Oh! I'd say, beating myself around the head. Oh! Oh! But with age, whatever it was I yearned for left me. Yet the anger I kept, and I keep it still. And here is Brian, sweet Brian, who wants to be my child and learn physics and make clumsy with clay.

And an electric car racing track, Brian continues, whispering in my ear.

Here I realize that things can get no better. Carla and I, in years of toil at the marital bed, could not produce a boy so magnificent, so loving, so exact with the king's English. And it would take, certainly, a cretin or an atheist to ignore this show of serendipity. Brian continues, his wee simple inflected voice ringing with emotion:

Sir, save your wife the labor pains! They said I put my mother through such pains!

Yes, I detest causing her pain, I say.

And save yourself the marriage pains, then. If I may be so bold. Sir.

His logic is sound. He is a savant, and I cannot resist.

So I say: Yes, Brian, you are my child, and he climbs on my shoulders and takes my ear playfully in his teeth and wraps his arms crushingly around my neck. His bare feet beat a glad rhythm on my ribs, and he covers the side of my face and neck with filthy kisses. In this manner we walk together out of the trees, toward the car where I must tell Carla, not without melancholy, that the wedding is off.

* * *

Carla now is at the state university, and she is much happier. Her violent rage toward me is subsided. She rooms with Esther, who, according to recent correspondence, is still growing and has made second string center on the varsity basketball team. Esther's sneakers are custom-made by Adidas, and provided free of charge. A postcard from her is taped to my refrigerator. *Finally, life is kind*, it says.

Myself I confine to fatherhood and bachelor comforts. Never did I imagine the ease of being a parent; I should have settled long ago. I no longer need the draughts of scotch, so pleasant and calm is life. I walk Brian to the school each morning, and each night I ease into my chair as he does his routines. Already my dear child can recite most of the Dialogues, and he has a burlesque routine that he does regularly, just to please me, shimmying and stomping about in Esther's 13 EEE bone bridesmaid shoes. He whirls his arms and Charlestons. He does kicks and splits. When he collapses, spent, covered in sweat and wheezing, I carry him to his bed, which is customized to look like a Italian sports car, and stand casting shadow over his thin, sleeping person. All though the room is life, life sweet, and newly formed.

Oh, my Brian, I say. Oh, my barefooted son.

I tuck up his covers and creep away. In an empty nook in the house, my body finds a resting place and I sit for hours in the sepulchral silence, smiling a smile that is so relentless it hurts. Darkness everywhere. Solitude, as well. Often the dark and the quiet are so great that I do not know if my eyes are opened or closed, if I am awake or if I dream, if I am accompanied or alone. But I am quite overjoyed, so it is a surprise that my body trembles and that I am weeping, weeping, weeping.

The North

Fissle at last received what it was he waited for. What it was was a check made out to him, in the amount of twenty-five hundred dollars. He felt full of easy, relentless joy. He had been in bed, reading a paperback--a book which so happened to be a fictional account of a writer of travelogues, concerning a character (the travelogue writer) sent on a mission of fact-finding to a remote western location. This undiscovered country also was entirely imaginary, though it was of course an ersatz American West. Fissle found the allegory pleasant. The doings of the travelogue writer purported to be written by a companion and confidant, who spent *many a night* drinking home-distilled potato alcohol with the protagonist, seated near a warming stone fireplace.

The reading was disturbed by the clanking of the mail slot flap, a high, tinny explosion about which Fissle held mixed emotions. This particular resonance annoyed his inner workings, but it also meant the arrival of mail--bills, and personal correspondence, and often ghastly bright catalogues, which he liked to leaf through slowly, devoting the better part of an afternoon.

It was Saturday. The mail consisted solely of the twenty-five hundred dollar check, folded halfway and nestled timidly at the lower corner of a 9x12 manila envelope, its glue pasted fast, its metal wings unfolded and in use. A useful thing, this tab, Fissle thought. Simple and roughly insectoid, but entirely pragmatic. He had reached into the envelope and employed his first two fingers as a pinchers, drawing it forth. The boxed numbers he viewed with relish; the memo line simply read: settlement of estate, G.M. Fissle. His mother, of course. He didn't know what a settlement of an estate was, or who in fact had been responsible for settling. It was not his business to know. One of his brothers had undertaken the task--his business. Fissle remembered the process involved the selling of jewelry and other possessions, perhaps some bonds or similar such. The

twenty-five hundred must have represented his one-sixth share of the total after the funeral expenses and outstanding debts were erased. So he imagined. He couldn't be sure.

This was the best. The check above all meant the start of the new days. He wanted to remain in bed in his pajama bottoms and finish the paperback, but his plans required the money in cash, and the bank closed at one o'clock. Fissle quickly dressed.

His bicycle lay in the piney creeping shrubs alongside the house; he was no longer allowed to operate a car. Restriction imposed by the state and its court. Fissle found this reasonable and not much of a burden. He liked the cool, stern wind on his face and limbs as he rode; he didn't know what it meant, but still, he liked it. This day's weather was clotted with dirty, bulbous clouds which obscured the sun but insulated and kept the air warm, with a unstrenuous breeze gusting up, on occasion. Fissle smiled as he rode. Joy. The word itself dominated his thoughts--it was there, a thing, in tall orange letters, floating atop a dark water in the smooth-domed cavern he imagined his mind to be. Enrapt, he pedaled with confident yet leisurely pumping of the legs and weaved through the rushing noonday traffic. He carried the settlement check still folded in two, in the front pocket of his brown corduroy coat, over his exercising heart.

A polite, plump girl stood helped Fissle with the check. He walked up as she stood snipping at the ends of strands of her hair with a small scissors. She wore a green ribbon in her hair, tied in a bow. She pointed out where he should apply his signature for the endorsement, and also asked if Fissle held an account at the bank. He said he did not.

--One moment, the girl said. She produced a small, circular plastic case and snapped open the top, revealing a ochre-colored ink pad. She asked for a fingerprint.

--Is it necessary? asked Fissle. He suffered from several compulsions, one of which involved the skin of his hands. It upset him to dirty them, and lotion was forbidden. Even water he found unpleasant, and he dried his hands quickly and thoroughly with a hand towel after washing.

The girl said the fingerprint was required. Security purposes, she explained.

Fissle gandered at her green ribbon, thinking.

--I do not like it, he said finally. He held up and wiggled his fingers at the girl.

--The ink is invisible, sir, said the girl. It doesn't leave a trace.

--What is the purpose, then? Fissle assumed an expression of painful cognition.

--Sir? asked the girl.

Shortly Fissle brought forth his point about the uselessness of invisible ink, to which the green-ribbon girl answered with an explanation about infrared and the sensing eyes of machines. It bored him. He ceased listening and poked his finger into the pad while she spoke and planted his covert mark. He said a silent prayer to faith.

--Faith is a fine invention, Fissle told the girl.

In fact he didn't. He thought to. In fact he thanked the girl and watched her withdraw the money from a drawer. She separated the cash into five piles of five and nestled them into envelopes printed with the bank logo--a heroic silhouette of Washington fording the Delaware. She fastened the envelopes with gum flaps and slid them to Fissle.

He thanked her and secured the envelopes in his inside pocket, exited, the door responding with a pneumatic hiss, and retrieved his bicycle, propped neatly against the bank building's brick. The twenty-five hundred, safe. Fissle patted it. He threw a leg over the bicycle's top bar and launched with a strong push from the curb. Not unhappy, but less happy (part of the day's potential realized and therefore irretrievably exhausted), he began retracing his path at a brisk clip.

Now traffic choked up the road, and Fissle felt for the first time that he was in some peril. He angled himself closer to the curb for safety. His breathing brought in air smoky from imperfect combustion, and also the grisly odor of oil, which he found not unpleasant, but a nuisance all the same. Soon he began silently cursing the drivers--congratulating himself for a more serene and right-headed form of transportation. He considered that he had been forced into it, and that he had been happily among those for whom he now had nothing but disgust--but wasn't what led him here also a choice,

and therefore through fortunate fall didn't he find himself in the place of virtue, nonetheless? He imagined he did. This calmed him. And after all the day had kept warm and a forceful breeze whistled its music as it passed his naked ears.

And so as he rode--pumping at a gallant pace, with a loose grip on the handlebar--he thought back to the travelogue writer in his paperback, which awaited him on his bed, its dense mouth held open with a paperweight made of stained driftwood. The writer, O'Figg, found himself commissioned by an eccentric newspaper mogul to search for a certain lake in the woolly western reach of the country. This lake was the focus of various muddled legends; according to an academic who specialized in codifying the myths of the west's indigenous peoples, the lake (its true name unpronounceable in the American tongue) formed when healing waters flowed down into the impression made by the foot of a demigod. It was known as a nexus for earth powers, and tales ascribed to it miracle cures of maladies and black curses. This whole affair excited the mogul. His money allowed it. Specifically he thought he could--through O'Figg--reach his proverbial arm across the country and feel out the mystery of the lake. And O'Figg had succeeded. He settled a camp down in a wooded stand near the perimeter of the lake and took his notebook out at the start of the day to begin his account. Here, he was overcome. A wind textured the lake's surface with small waves, and the rays of the sun imbued the water with the image of a hundred million fiery needles, glittering. The beauty of it was pure. Even the birds ceased delivering their morning message. O'Figg, heretofore not of religious conscience, wrote a single word in his notebook: *benediction*. He closed his book and set to felling trees for the building of a homestead.

Back at home Fissle replaced his bicycle. He took the five envelopes in his hand and hung his coat--the envelopes went under a couch cushion for the nonce. Then he went to the sink and washed his hands under unbearably hot water for a long minute. He checked his fingertip. There had been no stain before; there was none afterward. Ineffable. Fissle couldn't decide if the washing was done, or if it had just commenced, and

he rubbed a towel over the finger with agitation. Still feeling the remains of some indecent imprint, he went to pack a travel bag.

His plan was simple. Life he found unsatisfactory. His job selling stamps at the university mail counter, viewed from outside, looked steady and sedate. The flow of customers, leisurely: a perfect scenario for a person of contemplation. He reflected on this, and found that the problem was he could not live the life from the outside--god knows he tried. Detachment he discovered to be impossible to sustain for long periods. Life, his life, demanded to be experienced from the gory insides, the slog, the place of pounding machinery, stink and shit. His boss and co-workers were kind, all. That wasn't it. The nature of the job didn't allow for any of his joy. All attempts had been quashed. To lighten the day he often tried to recommend to customers an unorthodox combination of stamps that added up to the proper postage. He brought out the sheets of smaller denominations and slid them across the counter, trying for a suggestive smile and a conspiratorial wiggle of his eyebrows--and it was more than a gambit. In fact he delighted in these certain stamps, emblazoned with the monochromatic portraits of lesser eminences; in his opinion these people would be the most excited to appear on a stamp. A simple stamp paled in comparison to a resume of wartime heroics or blind basket-catches deep in center field during a world series, the crowd aboggle and howling in embarrassed pleasure. But to the perhaps unassuming citizen, set apart by a single idea or act....

But the customers disliked his attention. It explained to Fissle the near extinction of happy trifles--most want to be attended to and then get on with the business. Once, to a man mailing a thin manila, Fissle suggested, in the place of a 55-cent, two twenties, three ones, and four threes, arranged in a pyramidal. Perhaps it was another combination. He could not remember. But the man insulted him and Fissle's reply nearly resulted in a fistfight. The man later lodged a written complaint and caused Fissle to be called into a private conference regarding his relations skills.

So with the settlement money he would escape, namely by train. A romantic form of transportation, he thought. He considered nothing in his life invaluable, and he planned to travel by rail as long as the money allowed, stopping here and there. Perhaps he would settle entirely elsewhere, perhaps return to his home. The shape of the journey remained nebulous, as intended. He found this very exciting and pleasant, in opposition to the monotonous ellipse that circumscribed his existence up to that point. During his day he scrupulously kept himself from imagining the path, so as not to determine a set course and ruin the mystery altogether. He wanted to forge ahead blindly, bolstered only by whim and the fickle chancing winds.

Fissle went into his bedroom closet and took down a worn army duffel. His room he had furnished stoically: a simple bedframe and mattress with a thin, rough sheet pulled over, a chest of three drawers, a circular mirror glued to the wall, and a potted ivy plant in an orange plastic pot on the low windowsill. The paperback lay in the center of a pillow on the mattress. He had found it on the sidewalk outside a coffee shop, partially open and propped against a curb, a corner of its text block soaking up the contents of an oily after-rain puddle. It became his only book. He didn't own any others; he believed in libraries.

All clean items of clothing he stuffed into the depths of the bag. The dirty clothes he no longer cared to claim. He rolled up a rain slicker, danger orange, and put that in as well. Also, one pair of low boots, sneakers, old binoculars with one lens cap misplaced (an impenetrable knot in the strap which shortened it almost beyond use), a toothbrush and floss, handtowel and soap in a plastic case, a collapsible cup imprinted on the lid with the *fleur-de-lis* logo of the Boy Scouts of America, four bars of granola from the kitchen, a nail clippers and file, a blue ink pen, and a dull-bladed pocked knife. His behavior medicine he kept on his person always. The wood weight Fissle removed from the paperback's jaws and put on top of the chest of drawers. Fictitious O'Figg, clad in red, settled in the bag. Fissle reflected on the ivy plant. He would let it die. He hated to lose

his bicycle, but decided to keep it parked in the bushes and hope it would be ignored. This left only the business of the dog and he sat down on the mattress to think on it.

There was a dog. There had been one. It announced itself one day, scratching around the garbage cans and weaving purposefully across the lawn, its nose snuffing the grass. Fissle took it in and named it Lucky. Either Lucky had had a name previous, or he was unfamiliar with the concept--he never took to answering Fissle's calls. At any rate, Lucky proved a clean and quiet companion (just what Fissle expected from a border collie--a smart breed--although he wasn't sure Lucky was a border collie, just that his black and white markings were consistent with that particular animal). Lucky especially liked to eat dry food out of the hand, and also liked sleeping with his warm pink belly heaving on the top of Fissle's shoes. This companionship went on for a period of three weeks, perhaps more, and one morning Fissle awoke to find Lucky missing, slipped out in the night. This was not unusual; the doors had been left slightly open to accommodate Lucky's whims. And Fissle felt envious rather than sad. The food he started to leave out disappeared piecemeal, but there was no way to know by whom it was enjoyed.

Now he faced the idea that this charity might be the thing keeping Lucky alive--the lack of it possibly disastrous. Letting the ivy plant go was one thing. A person can't work up much regard for ivy. Yet Fissle figured finally that the odds were that his food went to the roving cats and that Lucky was either far gone or able enough, after this long, to find his meals and love elsewhere--or anywhere for that matter. The whole idea provided him hope. He would do well to take the example of the dumb meandering beast. He stood up and took his bag on his shoulder. The five stuffed envelopes he retrieved from under the couch cushion and replaced in his breast pocket.

He left the house unlocked and started walking north. This was all to plan. He decided not to risk leaving his bicycle at the train station. Calling a cab--he preferred not. There was no telephone in the house, besides, as he'd gotten himself into arrears with the

company and the service had gone out. Walking calmed him, even more than bicycling. And so it was decided, and so he went out in the lessening light.

He hoped his departure wouldn't upset the landlords, an old nonplused pair, older than himself even, a veteran with tattooed forearms and his wife--she in charge of all business. Once a month, Fissle saw her skirting his house, searching the windows with her working right eye. (The other was clouded with a milky-blue membrane and quite terrible to look at). Fissle had talked to the snoop two weeks before, as he knew the settlement money to be on its way, amount unknown. His intention was simple: the announcement of his plans, such as they were. Even in the absence of understanding, candor and propriety represented a good man's intentions (he thought). On the whole, however, the encounter frustrated him.

He found the woman, Mrs. Mitchell, on her hands and knees along the westward wall, peering into the flowerbeds. Dirt trickled through her fingers, returning to the earth in a dusty cascade. He let out a loud hello and moved to starboard, maneuvering himself toward a position friendly to her limited vision. There, in slow and concise terms, Fissle explained his intentions in regard to designs of travel, the undetermined length of said travel, and the itinerary--a pleasant mystery he decided to unravel at his own discretion and to his own pleasure and surprise. He finished with an apology for being unspecific. Perhaps there would be no trip; perhaps it would last a day. Poor Fissle, slave to the four winds! He smiled sheepish and bowed a little.

Mrs. Mitchell's face fell into a scowl, and she stared at Fissle.

--You running out on the rent? she asked.

--No, he said. You misunderstand. It is difficult to say for certain what I will do, and I must speak in theoretical terms. I simply wish to inform you that I may take a short trip, and it is possible I may relocate for good--in which case I forfeit--"

--When they leave without notice, me and George go in with garbage bags. I don't feel anything at all for them. No, sir. We pack it up and take it straightaway to the dump. Then we go out and have a meal on the deposit money--that's our right.

--They? asked Fissle, weakly

Mrs. Mitchell poked a finger at him. It slashed the air, repeatedly, metronomically. Her fine eye focused hard under her brow; the milk-eye quivered and rolled, clearly under its own revolting animus. Fissle had to look away, kindly.

--I tell them first thing. I say: fair treatment all around as far as I'm concerned. That's good business, as George says. But a line is drawn and they can't expect much if they get it in mind to go crossing over.

--Yes, certainly.

--And we've had them skip out, Mitchell continued. Believe it. Had a young couple moved from Iowa, I think, with a baby daughter. They signed for six months and were gone in about two or three. It doesn't matter. Well, we waited on them for another two months and then we went ahead in there. And you know they came back? For toys for the baby, they said, and I just had to tell them that that was buried under two tons of garbage months ago.

Fissle was distraught, silent.

--But it don't hurt my feelings a bit to do it, Mr. Fissle. Long as I give fair warning. I sleep calm like little baby Jesus.

--Warning, yes, Fissle stammered.

--I tell them like I tell you: don't do me dishonest. That's all I'll say.

Mitchell had ceased poking her finger at Fissle, and he managed a smile and retreat, his arms folded tight to his empty chest. The shame of being cruelly misunderstood, again! It had him on the verge of a childish sob, but he may even have thanked the woman, habit being so relentless in him.

Now, Fissle thought only of finding the station as he walked. He noticed the day cooling down, and the nice sound of his shoe soles on the concrete--a poetic meter, or a heartbeat echo--and the swish-swish of the swinging duffel against his corduroy coat, but this he thought pleasant and immaterial, after all. He was worried. He admitted to himself he didn't know the way to the station. Someone had taken him there years ago, in childhood--perhaps his father--and he remembered the wood platform and the huffing train, slowed down and crawling in like a great black insect. He remembered thinking of a beetle. The train doing a slow beetle-crawl. But that was all that remained. Perhaps even that was a false memory, and he simply assumed something he'd read or seen on a television, in the days he used to own one. It didn't matter. The fact he painfully kept mulling over was that he didn't know where to go, except north.

He knew to catch Guggins and keep to it, cross the river on a bridge, wade through the downtown, and forge on when the downtown petered out. This is what he did, eventually. But immediately he walked concerned and tried to picture the north part of town in his head, and think back to when he'd seen it last.

It was not a large town. Fissle couldn't say for sure how large it was. He didn't retain figures well, if in fact he ever heard them in the first place. If he had, the zeroes tended to multiply themselves, or sneak away with him unawares, so that two hundred became two thousand, or possibly twenty. This caused occasional problems at the cash register at the mail counter. But the point was the town--sprawling and undetermined--was not small, and yet Fissle never went into the north part. He held no grudge. It was simply unnecessary. His life resembled a nesting puzzle, where the father is halved to reveal the mother, she is halved to reveal the eldest brother, and so on until the unbreakable germ in the center of the thing--the swaddled babe or the family pet perhaps. The town accounted for one shell, the north for another, and he moved within--or, was it the town, then himself, then the north? The logic broke down as he

thought about it. It was a confused and difficult logic. He reconsidered the whole idea; his life might not be like a nesting puzzle at all.

Fissle walked. He did not know where to go. Each step upset him, increasingly. Shortly his lungs heaved and his mouth tasted of metal and panic. He reached into his coat and took out two plastic bottles of behavior medicine, his calmatives. Three purples and a half blue-half white, this constituted the proper prescribed dosage. Fissle worked up a mouthful of warm moisture and then ate the pills, swallowing roughly after a few spastic, abortive attempts. He replaced the medicine bottles and waited to feel better.

He considered what actions an O'Figg might take in this case. Mighty O'Figg. He went out and prevailed, against sporadic disease, fear of darkness, depletion of rations, and the *ever-present threat of violence perpetrated by the indigenous peoples of that land*. O'Figg, successful and bold, had been defeated by the ethereal beauty of the lake. He decided to settle down on its perimeter; any account he made he knew would be poisoned by that first glimpse, and he'd be thought either facile or mad. It was his intention, then, to make the account of the lake the project of his life; over the course of several decades he would know the water and surrounding geography as well as a man could, and he would write the definitive account--it would be, if not unbiased, extremely wise and exhaustive. So he began his life there. In the east, the newspaper mogul fumed, his scheme moribund. More undertook the journey and the west became peopled. O'Figg had encounters, then visits, then neighbors. And the project did not become any easier. He found the account impossible to write; he felt he needed more time, more experience. *One day more, and I will do it*, he told himself. He informed the narrator, his drinking companion, as well. The drinking companion recorded it: *one day more...*

Night descended; the path came to a resolute end, a closed quadrangle standing at the terminus of a row of old, severe brick apartments. Still, Fissle set down his duffel and wiped his sweat and thought he'd found what it was he sought. He, breathing in an obscene huff-and-puff, quietly congratulated himself: new O'Figg of the north.

This seemed to be the station he remembered. The building sat low and it sagged, suggesting an animal in an attempt to press its body safely to the ground. Fissle caught the sight of a platform, a dark corner of raised wood planks, just jutting out beyond the front left corner of the building as he approached from the right. All windows seemed to be boarded, but a sign read “Depot” in what, in the streetlight, looked to be fresh paint. The letters glowed--as far as they could--in the hue of a bold sunlight. Foot traffic was sporadic, but as Fissle sat down on his bag to rest up, he found he was not alone. Two girls in skirts, stockings, and heavy coats stood fifteen feet to his flank, smoking cigarettes. They talked with no respect to privacy, and emphasized with hand gestures, the tips of the cigarettes (which, Fissle noted, seemed to be there only for the entertainment of the fingers) rounding out the sentences with burning punctuation marks, in fiery orange.

Fissle sat, tired. From here, he did not know quite how to proceed. He reflected that there might be a substantial wait for the next train. Hours, perhaps. Perhaps the next morning. And where could he find a proper schedule? He scanned the front of the building and did not catch sight of such a thing, though he decided there should most definitely be one. The station looked darkened and rather asleep. He sighed. Shortly he would have to explore the grounds, to search out an authority, ask questions, embarrass himself. He was in no hurry for this, and so he waited for his breath and watched his companions, now giggling and holding themselves in their own arms because of the cold. Having no choice, he eavesdropped:

--And then he came home one day with his hair dyed, one girl said.

--What color?

--Black. Dark as midnight. He took off his hat and showed me.

The second girl let out a cough of displeasure. Her friend continued.

--So I started playing this little game with him, you know. As a joke. I wouldn't call him his real name. I called him Joaquin, after that boy--

--I know.

--You know. And he started calling me Allison. Don't ask me why. And then I called him Joaquin and he called me Allison and we did that for about two weeks for some reason. We stopped calling each other by the actual names.

--Strange.

--Yeah. Don't ask me why. But here's the strange thing, really.

--Go ahead.

--All right. Well, hold on a minute.

The girl went into a pocket for another cigarette and dropped it on the ground. She bent and felt around for it, scrabbling the sidewalk with her fingers. Finally she recovered it and lit it with the last glowing ash of the previous cigarette--she exhaled a diaphanous blue cloud of warm smoke and breath. Then she sighed. Fissle realized he was staring at her, trying to make out her face. He imagined weathered red skin, short eyelashes, and two deep-cut lines running down and bracketing her mouth, indelible, experiential. Or she could be young, apropos of the easy bluster of her voice. He didn't know. He wanted to. He kept listening.

--Anyway, what was I saying?

--Something strange happened.

--Right. So I spent the night at his house one night about two weeks ago and I got up in the middle of the night for water. A glass of water. It's dark in the house, right?

--When'd he move to a house?

--The apartment. It's dark in the apartment, okay? Anyway I'm trying to be quiet and I get back into bed, next to him. Then I looked at his face. The light must have hit it funny or something. I don't know. Something. But I looked at him and I didn't recognize him at all. I mean I thought I was getting into bed with a stranger. I kind of screamed.

--You screamed?

--I was afraid. It was the light. I don't know what it was.

--But you screamed.

--I screamed.

--And he woke up, then?

--He woke up. He didn't jump or bolt up. He just opened his eyes and looked at me. And all I could think was: oh, it's Joaquin. But it wasn't, right? I tried to think of his real name but I couldn't remember it. I kept looking at him and he looked at me. And I don't think he recognized me, either.

--What did he say?

--He didn't say anything. I could just tell. It was in his eyes.

Then they were silent and stood smoking.

Fissle enjoyed the conversation. He very much hoped they were waiting for the train, whichever train he chose to take. He figured he could do worse for traveling companions than these girls, so long as they told more stories. And if not them, others like them with interesting narratives to pass them time. He didn't mind. Perhaps he had just heard the only interesting story these girls held between them. In that case there would have to be other girls. And if it happened that it was these girls, and that they were out of stories, he decided he could appropriate O'Figg and pass the hours with his adventures. He might introduce himself as O'Figg, if necessary. His opinion, which he thought he shared with most people, was that adventures told better in the first person, for visceral reasons. Also for immediacy. Empathy. It did somewhat ruin the tension in the outcome, since the narrator (here he is in front of you) must have survived the ordeal. But how, exactly? By what strategy or hurried and brilliant contrivances? A length of rope and an ornamental brass buckle broken from the saddle; forged papers; an escape that involved doubling back, splashing a stream to lose the scent, and hiding under cover of a stand of trees, belly to the earth as the dogs bark and air is glutted with the sinister beat of circling footfalls. Yes, he would be O'Figg. Intrepid O'Figg, yeoman of the west.

He must be introduced, first. First, always, proof of bravery. He decided on a slow approach, and a casual question relayed by a voice and countenance that could mean only no harm. Fissle rose, hands in pockets. He wished he wore a hat--he would certainly doff it, at a time such as this. He made certain his walk kept slow and careful. His approach was noticed by the two girls and they turned their heads and edged toward one another, perhaps further guard against the late chill. They whispered.

--Just a minute, one said.

Fissle stopped. He stood too close, he knew. He took one step back.

--Good evening, he said. Ladies.

They looked quite young, in fact. Perhaps in the late teens, Fissle calculated. A pleasant age he could no longer remember, but for a kind of sensuous metaphor that remained--a jar, its lid half-unscrewed, filled with a viscous yellow light that spilled over, warm and smelling of honey. Praise be to them to be alive at such a time, he thought.

--No money, one of the girls said.

--What? asked Fissle. He kept working at a smile.

--We have no money to give you, said the other girl. They wore the same costume, and their hairstyles matched--an upswept look held in place with sticks, spiked tendrils spilling all over the top of the head.

Fissle began to laugh. His blood warmed uncomfortably, and his faculties dimmed.

--My, oh, good God, no, he sputtered. Money, no. Of course not.

The girls kept watching as Fissle reached a trembling hand into his inside pocket. Of course. He felt at the envelopes, reassuring himself. He withdrew his hand and fanned himself with his jacket lapel, and concentrated on slowing his breathing so he could speak again. He made a small, shapely flourish with one hand.

--I mean to say, how does the night find you?

--Fine, they said in unison.

--And what are you ladies doing here?

He knew this sounded awkward--it was not what he wanted at all. He meant something quite different, something charming and innocently earnest. But this had come tumbling off his tongue. It hung in the air, noxious. He wanted to wave a hand around, dispel it, begin again.

The girl on the left let go a impatient breath.

--None of your business, she told Fissle.

--We're allowed, in case you didn't hear, said the other.

Fissle began to sweat. His breath became huffy, and he let out little clouds of frustrated steam like a timid, choking engine. He tried for a pleading expression, squeezing his brow and tightening the skin of his cheeks to pull his mouth into a grimace.

--No, he cried, you don't see what I mean! I mean to ask where you are headed. I want to know which train you're planning to take. Perhaps we are headed the same direction. That is all I want to know!

The girls met eyes and one shook her head. The other looked simply tired.

--Mister, there's no train, she said

--None tonight? asked Fissle.

--None tonight. None tomorrow. This is a museum, all right? We both work here, taking kids on tours and everything. There hasn't been a train running for like fifty-five years.

--Fifty-seven, said the other girl.

--Right. Fifty-seven years. Now leave us alone.

They started to move and Fissle called after them, asking for the location of the nearest depot. He waited. Finally they turned and named a town thirty miles away; then they turned a corner and left him there, impotent, alone, solitary man in the low light of the street.

Fissle's reaction was purely physical. His emotions remained steady while his muscles, bones, and guts betrayed him. He slumped to the sidewalk and laid there resting

against his duffel. If anyone had asked he would have said he wasn't feeling well, and to let him alone for a moment. He couldn't calculate how long he remained still. Not long. Long enough. What difference did it make, he wondered. All he wanted was a certain undetermined length of time in this state, where he could take stock with surety, perhaps eat some of his medicine. The night felt cold. It was night. He did not know the exact time, but it was dark. His pocket held envelopes. The envelopes held money. It was twenty-five hundred dollars. Yes? He was not good with numbers. Perhaps it was two hundred and fifty thousand. Or twenty-five? He rested on the walk in front of a museum on the north side of his town. There is no train. No train tomorrow. There was medicine somewhere on his person. His bicycle waited in the bushes. His dog circled the house, hungry. The ivy plant drooped. His name was O'Figg. No. It was certainly not. His name was Fissle. Who is O'Figg? A shell, with Fissle nesting inside. The worn red paperback.

In time he calmed and drew himself up and scooted his body against the wall, dragging his duffel along--here he reached into the bag and took out the red paperback. Fissle angled himself to gain enough light. Enough to illuminate a page, he hoped. He drew back the covers with his thumbs, rested the thin spine on a bent knee. He held the book in one hand, one thumb stuck in the mediating crevice, scanning lines with his forefinger, the marked finger, now burning. And he found O'Figg on his deathbed. The narrator, nameless, was speaking. He sat with O'Figg during *his last fortnight on this humble, imperfect coil*, as O'Figg--committed at last to bed--tore madly at the pages of his journal to get down his account of the fabled lake. *It is time*, he said to himself. He said this repeatedly, and with a melodic delivery, as if in prayer, or *the last feverish throes of a mad death sickness. The order of the night was silence. O'Figg did not cease in his writing but kept on, dipping his pen angrily, all in attempt to keep apace of the diminishing candle at his bedside, and ahead of the galloping horse of hoary Death himself. He lifted a cup of liquor to his lips with his free hand, gulping, drunk with*

desire and no longer with a care toward mediation or propriety. It was a spectacle unmatched. Even after the candle snuffed and darkness fell in a heavy veil upon the frigid room, O'Figg kept on, the scratching of his nib against the paper his brave, singular protest against the soundless void...

Here the narrator took his leave. He walked out into the night and retired to his own bed, where his sleep was dreamless. It was late when he came to O'Figg the following evening--something had kept him, it always does, oh mercy, is it not the truth? The chamber was in disarray; O'Figg mad. His skin transparent like onionskin. His gray, papery, hairless legs were on display, sticking out from his hitched-up bedclothes. He stood at the fire, bestowing the torn pages of his account into the hearth, foolscap for the flame. *It is not possible, not possible!* he exclaims. His life work burns. The narrator *dashes across the room, in great distress, and a struggle ensues...*

Fissle was slow in closing the book. Yet he did, and when he did he cast it away, as far as strength permitted. He did not care to see O'Figg die, in vain. He lowered himself again, pillowing his head on the duffel. He took the day's final account of what it was he believed he knew. There is no train. This is defeat. He is away from home, in the north. His bicycle is at home. He is expected at his job. His job is not in the north. A plant is dying. Perhaps a starving dog, as well. His pocket is full of envelopes full of money. It may be twenty-five hundred dollars. This money is enough money to settle in the north. There is no train. Perhaps his business in the north is not done. He cannot leave the north by train. He cannot return home by bicycle. He cannot return home. The night is cold, but the darkness soon lessens. He is free. His name is O'Figg. He is newly arrived into a country he does not know. It is his project perhaps to know it. It will take time. In the morning light he can find his feet and make a home. There is something to be found. It is a struggle to find joy. It is a struggle. Always.

The Anarchist

When the first Messiah arrived, the town was skeptical. The citizens were a no-nonsense people. The first Messiah, clad in unrefined robes, went directly to the downtown and stood in front of the Tobacconist's on the corner of Main and Fifth. Here he was duly arrested by the local police for the loud and incomprehensible monologue he delivered for the better part of an hour. At the station the Messiah requested audience with a priest and Father McGee, at ablutions, found himself sent for. The priest arrived in civilian dress, with a small, silver crucifix pin over his left breast pocket, and he talked to the Messiah for fifteen minutes, leaning close to the Messiah's face because since arriving at the station he had refused to raise his voice above a whisper. Father McGee never did disclose the details of this conversation. When fifteen minutes were up the Messiah touched him on the cheek and Father McGee turned pale white in the face and he started to shake and weep into a handkerchief. He went to the officers and asked them to release the Messiah to him. He asked for a car and a police escort to the west side of town. He informed the police that the Messiah had come to heal the Quarterback.

Father McGee and the Messiah went together into the Quarterback's bedroom. In the living room the Quarterback's girlfriend, Carol Ann, was keeping vigil. She had been at her vigil four weeks, since the injury to her boyfriend's ankle had occurred. The Quarterback's parents provided a cot for her to sleep on, and gave her meals and breaks, where she was relieved by the Quarterback's sister and went out and took walks or attended to her studies at the public library. For the most part, it was no use. She couldn't keep her mind on trigonometry or the War of 1812 or kinetic energy. Kinetic energy made her cry. She imagined bones snapping and ligaments rent in two, snapping up like windowshades. On the night the priest and First Messiah came, Carol Ann was at

her small table, burning sage to cleanse the aura of the house. While the meeting went on behind the Quarterback's door, she lit three aromatherapy candles--a pink one for healing, a blue for relaxation and meditation, a red for passion. She sat and watched the candles burn and took in their mingled aroma until she herself felt like girding up and leading young men onto the Friday field.

In time, Father McGee emerged from the Quarterback's room. He handed over a small burlap pouch and told Carol Ann to put water on the stove and to boil it at rolling for one and one half minutes. She was to put the contents of the pouch in the bottom of a mug and to pour the measure of hot water in. The potion would steep for three and three quarters minutes and would turn a dark purple color. Then Carol Ann was to strain the potion into another mug and bring it to the priest. She did as told. The priest re-entered the room and came out with the Messiah following. Arms aloft, the Messiah announced that the Quarterback would sleep the deepest sleep for forty-eight hours, and then arise Friday morning to lead his team to a win over Central. Father McGee and Carol Ann wept. Carol Ann ran to the Messiah and kissed his hand. She buried her head in his robes and the rough cloth burned at her cheek and her tears were endless.

The Quarterback, revived, unshaved but sturdy, threw five touchdown passes in the Friday night game, and he rushed for two others. It came to be a night on which the Quarterback's legend was made. The entire town of five hundred was in the stands, and the men and women sang and cheered and moved in unison, compelling themselves into one primal, sprawling beast with many faces. The town loved football. It was a simple, agrarian place, but not without its pride. By some miracle, all the young men of the town grew up tall and brave and angry, and year after year the high school team stomped unruly through the state championship and year after year the team was replenished by new young men, as tall, brave, and angry as the previous squad. So like harvest, the victorious

football team came every fall and the town repeated its spirited ritual and another trophy was brought back, gold and gleaming. After that, the weather grew very cold. The winters in town were bitter and only the promise of another fall season kept the townspeople from despair.

After the great victory against Central, the Quarterback fell. He returned to bed, unable to walk, and slept for three days without waking to eat. Meanwhile the Messiah had disappeared. An investigation was launched and it was found that he was not a Messiah at all, but a con artist wanted in Wyoming, Utah, and Montana for various offenses related to illegal drugs. The Messiah's potion was in truth a mixture of herbs and strong amphetamines. Father McGee returned with a jar of holy water and sprinkled it over the prostrate Quarterback and said many prayers. Carol Ann reaffirmed her vigil. She burned copious bundles of sage and had obtained goldenseal for when the Quarterback awoke and could eat and drink. She burned candles constantly. She prayed. She focused her healing energy on the ankle of the Quarterback and sat next to her cot with her hands clasped and eyes closed. For one week straight she slept in this position, such was her devotion to her injured lover. Outside the house was quiet and the people of town looked each other fleetingly in the eye and said nothing.

When hope was nearly abandoned, another Messiah came to Father McGee. The Quarterback was awake but could not walk, and the next game was in one day. This time the priest was more dubious, as was the town. But the second Messiah held a Thursday night meeting on Main Street and reassured the citizens that his holy power was authentic. He explained that the first Messiah was a charlatan and also a test to the people, and now he warned them against false belief and trickery. The second Messiah straightened his tie and fingered the breast of his suitcoat. He asked the town if he looked trustworthy. He asked them to look at his face. He told them he was come to heal their Quarterback and

asked if they didn't believe him. They did. His manner was so soft. The people of the small town believed. Moreover, they wanted to believe and Father McGee, murmuring quiet hosannas, dressed in his robes and collar and took the second Messiah to the Quarterback.

Carol Ann tried to believe in the second Messiah. Like the town she had to hold onto the hope that was given and pray for the health of the Quarterback. It was early Friday morning and she had not slept. She lit more candles. Outside the house of the Quarterback the vigil was joined by the more hearty and devout of the citizens. They stood in a semi-circle on the Quarterback's lawn and worshipped out loud and sang while inside the second Messiah took off his pinstriped coat and handed it to Father McGee. He unknotted his tie and leaned down and whispered in the Quarterback's ear. Then he asked Father McGee to leave him alone with the Quarterback. Father McGee joined the vigil on the lawn and reported to the people the second Messiah's methods. He claimed the words the Messiah whispered were quiet and mysterious and he could not relate them to the congregation. He would not if he could. He grasped hands with two women and joined their song. Inside, Carol Ann looked out the window, holding a spent wooden match in one hand and a brick of soothing incense in the other.

Again the Quarterback rose from the bed for the game. Again he led the team to victory. But as the town poured from the stands and put the Quarterback on their shoulders, they were not as jubilant as before. Their Hero looked shabby. His face sported a nappy beard and his eyes were circled about with purple. He was not smiling. The Quarterback's muscles were soft from disuse and bed rest and he had wobbled through the game on his injured leg, running down the sideline of the verdant field with an obvious limp. The victory was bittersweet. The town knew it. Even the proud Quarterback knew it. Most of all Carol Ann knew it and she wept two-fold as a crowd carried her Quarterback away

to celebrate. She wept for herself and for her town, and the celebration went on and the town believed and the people went in a crowd to the second Messiah's motel room in profound debt to him for the miracle. The second Messiah wore chinos and an informal polo shirt. He stood and shook hands for some time, smoking a odorous cigar all the while. Later he disappeared in a taxi cab and was not seen in the town again.

The joy of the town's citizens ended on the Monday following the game. It was learned that the Quarterback had fallen into a coma and was near death. Dr Boston, the town's senior physician, was interviewed in the local paper. His wisdom went unquestioned, as he was terribly old and had delivered into the world most of the football squad, and their parents, and also their grandparents. His examination, he said, disclosed to him that the second Messiah had injected toxic amounts of cortisone into the ankle of the Quarterback, allowing him to rise and lead the team. There was a pronounced allergic reaction to the shot, and now the Quarterback was dangerously sick. His ankle was completely mush. Surgery and a long and painful recovery were inevitable, even if his wrecked body could throw off the effects of the painkiller. The doctor likened the inner structure of the Quarterback's bad joint to a bowl of mashed potatoes and then broke down in tears, cutting short the interview. The town itself limped horribly forward into the winter season. They all knew what the cold meant. Men stayed in and cried themselves silly and the women didn't know what to do with them. No one laughed or smiled. No one prayed. Carol Ann quit her vigil and went back to school and failed a pop quiz over kinetic energy in Physics class. She wrote one sentence on the test in a bubbly cursive hand: *There is no hope*, it said.

The third Messiah had no chance. The town was disillusioned and full of wickedness and bad humor when he stumbled into town in his leather pants. He smelled of whiskey and hairspray. In the center of town the mob caught him and tore off his rings and ripped the

gold hoop earrings out of his lobes. They broke his Stratocaster guitar over his back and used the bits to beat him until he sang the most woeful song they'd ever heard. The townspeople were moved, but had, in the end, no mercy. The third Messiah was crucified on the grass median between the town library and the police station. Father McGee was wild with rage and himself drove the nails through the hands of the Messiah. The crowd raised the cross and it stood in the heart of the town for two days. Then the town cut apart the Messiah's body and burned the parts of it and scattered the ashes in a fallow corn field. The Quarterback, as it was hoped, did not stir after this desecration. He slept and the season went on and the football squad lost one game after the other and at season's end did not bring a trophy back to the people of the town. Finally, even the town's devout ceased to offer up simple entreaties for the deliverance of their favorite Son. Full winter descended upon a weary populace.

Carol Ann sat on a bench on Fifth and Main, just in front of the Tobacconist's shop. She had quit high school and her parents turned her out of their house. She found work in a boutique that sold herbal teas and remedies and slept nights on her cot in the Quarterback's house, helping the Quarterback's parents in their continued grief. When the true Messiah jogged up to her, she was on lunch break and lighting a cigarette. The true Messiah wore a red nylon running suit with white stripes down the length of the arms and legs. He jogged in place for a moment and then stopped. He sat next to Carol Ann on the bench and commented on how nice the weather was. Carol Ann stared at the Messiah.

--Where have *you* been? she asked. This day is terrible. My Quarterback is going to die. The team will die and the town will die and I'll die too. There is no hope.

The real Messiah took her hand. Leaning close, he started to talk to her in a low voice, and his breath smelled like a rainy day.

--The Quarterback will recover, the Messiah said. In three days he'll awake and call your name and ask someone to bring him a football. His surgery will go well, though

the recovery will be long and painful. He will lead the team back to glory next season and the town will be joyful. Your Quarterback will walk on at Northwestern and will be All-American and he shall be drafted into the NFL as a third round selection of the Philadelphia Eagles. His career will be undistinguished and he will be rich when he retires.

The Messiah patted Carol Ann on the cheek.

--He'll leave you for another girl, a friend of yours named Sheryl. Next September, a week before the school year begins. But you should not be upset. You will re-enter school and graduate and attend Johns Hopkins. You are going to become a gifted and recognized surgeon, specializing in sports-related injuries. You will have affairs and never marry. You will be rich.

Carol Ann asked the Messiah how he could know these things. He gave an inscrutable smile and spoke, opening his arms toward the heavens.

--I am the True Savior come to bless you, he said. Do you not have faith?

Carol Ann broke into a furious rage. She turned on the Messiah like a wild animal, striking him in the chest and the face until she bloodied his lip. Then she took his face roughly in her hands and spoke to him slowly:

--You are a liar, she said. I don't know who you are but you're not Him. We thought it was Him. We all thought He'd come. He gave us blessings and prayers and promises and told us to have faith. I had faith, she said. The town had faith. Didn't you see what happened to us?

--Of course, the Messiah said. And I forgive you for striking me. I'll give you my other cheek, if you like.

--Just stop it, Carol Ann said. She grew quiet and turned her face to the sky. I hope someone is listening, because I denounce Him. His promises of glory and peace are lies. His promises made the town believe, and then we fell into violence. His father's laws are lies and violence. His only one and true religion is anarchy. Anarchy, she said, and she put her head down and began to weep.

The Messiah resigned himself to this. It had all happened before. Blood ran from both his nostrils and dripped off his bearded chin. He leaned back and crossed his legs. He shrugged his shoulders and the material of his tracksuit crackled. He confided that he was tired, and asked Carol Ann if she minded him joining her in a smoke. The Just and True Savior of the town held his hand out.

--Give the anarchist a cigarette, he said.

Triumph of Marcel, Knife Thrower

Between the end of his schooling and his thirty-second birthday, Marcel was a busboy, a teacher of English composition, a night auditor, a janitor, five years a claims adjuster, an assistant director of marketing, again an English teacher, a sharpener of knives, a salesman of knives, but never, for pay, a knife thrower. This vocation represented his first love and awful passion--it was the phial of poison which also held the remedy, his pain and his ardor, inseparable. His heart broke endlessly

The problem lay with his father, wide regarded as the great genius of knife throwing, a man famous and infamous, and held up by fellow practitioners as the unassailable god of their art. Marcel's father's bestowed title, which he came to accept as his true and only name, was Master Omega, but his given name was also Marcel.

The accomplishment of Master Omega became a lion in the road for all knife throwers, a terminus. It became clear that one could not simply go through him. Some tried, and all were thrashed and torn terribly. Once, talk began of abandoning the art and pronouncing it dead, and it seemed a reasonable measure to some of the lesser lights. In time, however, pure love of the discipline prevailed, and a new pack of young men masterminded a renaissance, which consisted more of clever navigation than of lion-taming. In short, they chose to avoid the lion in the road, to widen the berth; to move in parabolic paths, eschewing the linear; to turn around and walk in the opposite direction; to tunnel furtively underground; to disdain the road altogether and attempt flight. Forced by the Master Omega, the other throwers of knives were compelled to undertake measures which, fifty years before, would have been unthinkable and considered mad or amateur. Some met with a modicum of success and some failed, but rarely without uninteresting results:

Chapman conducted shows much as before, but he performed while wearing a rubber mask of the Master Omega. Barclay followed, and was thought at the time to be a vulgarian because of his showmanship: ivory-handled knives, garish silk costumes, yellow and red roses in the mouth of his assistant, the liberal use of theatrical smoke and live flame; later reassessment and rethinking proved Barclay's early work to be seminal in the development of the second wave. Werther introduced contortionism, and threw with precision standing with his back to the target, either bending and peering through his legs, or over the shoulder, employing a mirror. Szebic, the Serb, developed and deepened ambidexterity. On the outskirts of acceptability was Miko, who, as his assistant rotated slowly on the disc, readied himself with knife in hand, but never threw. After a tense matter of minutes, Miko bowed to his audience and ended the performance; early, some considered his act inspired, but in the end it was decided it would not do. At last there was Giraux, the Frenchman, would predated even the Master Omega. In his old age Giraux became afflicted with Parkinson's disease, and his health deteriorated to the point where he could no longer safely perform--his beautiful hands had mutinied. Yet the former great did not cease his traveling show. Instead, he took on an assistant, named Rolande, who threw knives while Giraux sat nearby in a chair, addressing his audience. Giraux discoursed long and convincingly, and his argument attempted to prove that it did not matter who, in fact, threw the knives so long as they innocently met their mark and the audience was entertained. He confessed he had perhaps not thrown any knives in his life, even if it had seemed so, and considering it in the present light, it did not much matter if he had or had not. At the height of Giraux's popularity, the entire art fell again into doubt, and only after his death and dismissal did younger artists begin to remove traces of his considerable influence.

And so sat young Marcel, at the crossroads of his father's legacy and the new art of the second wave, one foot inside the lion's maw and one out, pointing in another direction. His unhappiness was profound. He knew, as most admitted in private, that the

artists since his father were adequate, but that all their innovations amounted to cheap filigree and misdirection; between the rhetoric and the colored smoke and the athleticism they performed a kind of sleight-of-hand, making people forget about the genius of the Master Omega, if only briefly. The problems of relevancy remained, in the long term, Marcel figured.

And it must be said that Marcel's depression did not arise from a personal lack of skill. In fact, his knife throwing ability approached and perhaps matched his father's, and how could it not? He was his father's only son. They often practiced together, seriously, or for leisure, and Marcel consistently equaled his father's throws, couching his blades precisely in the same cuts from which the Master Omega's blades had just been removed. Marcel mirrored his father, and shadowed him. He learned through practice and observation alone, and soon his style was not discernible from the Master Omega's: both were slow and fluid, emphasizing grace, though not consciously; both surprised with their release, flicking the knife forth with a spasm of violent motion, the forefinger stiff and extended, the thumb pointed heavenward.

But this very fact was the young Marcel's vexation. His talent equaled the Master Omega's, yet he could never be better, more precise. His knives would forever fit the same grooves. He might match perfection, but have to live with the knowledge that he did not come first, that he was somehow mechanical because of it.

Marcel retreated into contemplation, and it soon occurred to him that the whole enterprise revolved around death. The work of the knife thrower, the beginning and the end of the entertainment was to, for a moment, put death on display. The suspense depended upon the audience, who in a dark corner of their collective heart feared and hungered for the sight of blood, who considered the variables and their own skills and concluded that the act of throwing knives without harm was impossible. And yet they desired success. Make it possible, they pleaded. The burden then fell upon the thrower of knives, who must affirm the possibility of success while warning about the consequences

of failure. His throws must threaten, but hit the mark, immaculate. It was the easiest task in the world to miss. One could toss the knife direct into the ground, in the opposite direction, or ten feet wide of the target; like Miko, one could never let the knife leave the hand, in forbearance. But this was undramatic, too facile. The key, Marcel decided, lay in the nearness of the near-miss; the genius of Master Omega derived from his asymptotic approach of death itself, the way he narrowed the margin between hit and miss. Master Omega came as close to injury as possible, and thus became the prime artist of the discipline, the great fearsome lion. Young Marcel, the match of the Master, could not go further without looking death in the face--any further was too far, a step towards a place which smelled of rot and must and coppery blood.

Marcel refused to proceed; he stalled. He drank overmuch and lived in an outpost of life that no one could understand, alone with his useless perfection. He worked as a busboy, a teacher of English composition, a night auditor, a janitor, five years a claims adjuster, an assistant director of marketing, again an English teacher, a sharpener of knives, a salesman of knives, but never, for pay, a knife thrower. Until the sudden death of his father, the Master Omega, he never considered an attempt at an exhibition of his own. He was in wait.

The Master Omega's heart failed while his skill remained, and his followers both mourned and secretly rejoiced, sensing new opportunity. A private funeral followed, with the silver coffin lowered in the morning hours of a fall day ruined with cold rain. Here, as the body of his father went to rest, into the indifferent earth, young Marcel received his inspiration. He stood wrecked and shivering in his overcoat one minute, and in the next he no longer wept. He knew his path. As soon as the services ended he set about organizing a performance, and by the next week posters advertising the debut of the Master Omega's son hung conspicuously in town.

Marcel's show opened to a large crowd, who filled out rows of seats in the Omega theater, the venue his father had made famous. A pack of journalists sat in the final two rows, conspicuous in their discomfiture; they slumped in their seats, each miserable and rebounding from dyspepsia or hangover or insomnia, pad and pen at ready, exhaling tobacco smoke and the rank vegetable odor of Bloody Mary mix. The cool air in the theater filled with a low anticipatory hum. The crowd constituted one nervous animal, each part aquiver. Opinion went back and forth, accusations of fraud and genius were whispered or announced over the shoulder, many predicted disappointment and a late dinner enjoyed earlier than expected. Yet when the lights finally came down, each member of the crowd thought of unlucky friends and naysayers, all waiting out in the cold for the first word. A bank of theatrical lights lit, focusing a stream of amber on the gathers of the heavy maroon fabric concealing the stage. Under this, the curtains withered; they curled up and drew back, revealing but a large wooden wheel at stage right.

In time, Marcel emerged in tuxedo and tails and gleaming formal shoes. He walked to the center of the stage unaccompanied, his hard soles sounding on the wood, sending off wave after wave of sinister echoes amplified by his hand-held microphone. Near the edge of the stage Marcel ceased his walk, and he stood for a full minute in silence, his head hung low, chin to chest. The suspense was devastating. Uneasy, the audience animal let forth a spasm of coughing and throat-clearing.

Finally, Marcel raised his head and spoke into the microphone:

Welcome, he said holding his free hand aloft. He waited, shifting his eyes until they covered the entire crowd, person by person. Then he continued:

My name is Marcel. You all know my father by the name Master Omega, but he was also called Marcel, in his youth. I am his son and his name is mine. As his son, I came to know his genius, and over years of practice became his absolute equal in showmanship and skill, the second great prodigy of our craft.

The crowd gasped. Marcel frowned at them.

I do not speak lightly, he said. And I do not expect you to believe what I know without doubt in my heart. But that is not why we have come together today. We come together because I realized that my father's talents could never be surpassed or subsumed. Even I, as his son and equal, cannot further him. And so I chose never to entertain, and I looked everywhere for another calling. I wanted to be more than my father's shadow. His duplicate. I thought I would never stand in front of a crowd in all my life.

Marcel beckoned his assistant onto the stage. She wore a green one-piece bathing suit, decorated with sequins the color of tropical waters. Under the lights she moved like a mirage, the shimmering death-dream of a man dying of thirst. Marcel gave her his microphone, and walked her over to the wheel. Here, she bound him, buckling first his ankles and then his wrists to the wheel, each strap tightened with amateurish flourishes, her gestures undramatic, overprecise, and slow, as if performed underwater. The crowd tittered, enjoying itself. The journalists, especially, were in thrall. When Marcel was completely vulnerable and unable to move, his assistant picked up the microphone and held it close to his lips. Again he spoke, releasing with the words a gleaming meteor shower of spittle that was illuminated by the stage lights.

All throwers of knives are conjurers, Marcel said, artists who call death to come, and then mock and dismiss him just as he is about to tighten his black grip. I hope you do not think I overstate things. My father was simply the greatest conjurer. He was the last to turn away. He was the one who let the grip tighten the most until he loosed it. But so it is that the knife thrower is never in danger of death. Imagine. His assistant faces death from his knives, and the audience is faced with thought of their own deaths, unable to ignore it for this one brief moment. Yet the artist is never in danger. His skill is his protection. Death is as far away or as near as he desires. Even the sweat on his face is an illusion, a false admission that he may have brought forth a demon he cannot control.

Liar, said Marcel. My father was the greatest liar of them all, and I can tell you that I am his complete equal in the art of the lie.

But, he continued, tonight there are no lies. I face death itself, and go beyond the reach of any artist of this craft. It is my only option. I ask only that you are aware of what is about to take place, and to leave if you fear the true face of my art. Also, I ask for a single volunteer from the audience. Who will volunteer to throw my knives?

No one exited, and no one moved to the stage. Most suspected a dupe, a plant in the audience, a cheap fake on the part of young Marcel, who likely had concealed a bag of syrup dyed to resemble blood and faced only harmless rubber knives. Others considered the morbid possibilities. In the far back rows, the journalists sat cross-legged, writing furiously. Marcel waited, staring out into the crowd, and repeatedly implored the people to offer a volunteer.

Suddenly a young boy stood and bolted down the left aisle and towards the stage. Horrified voices cried out to stop him, and a few in aisle seats held out hands and legs, attempting to hold up the volunteer. The boy broke free and leapt to the stage. Marcel spoke to him through the microphone and told him to stand on a certain spot of the stage, a circle made of gaffer's tape. Most of the audience was standing, arguing about who would stop the show, and some tried to comfort confused children, who were baffled and cried. Marcel pleaded with the people to sit down, to quiet, and not to intercede.

Please, he intoned, you must understand. Do not deny this act.

Marcel's assistant retrieved a slim, black silk case from behind the wooden wheel and brought it to the boy on her palms. Marcel asked the boy to unlatch it and bring forth the contents. The boy complied. He held up a small dagger, the ruby silk on the grip and the polished steel burning luminously. Marcel asked the boy to ready himself and to take aim on his command.

The show will begin, Marcel told the crowd. Please be silent.

Argument died. The audience gave in to the performance. Awful. Unstoppable.

Take aim, Marcel commanded. He felt his body perspire, in truth and terror.

His assistant, her body awash in light, a cascade of a hundred thousand emerald waterdrops, took hold of the wheel in both hands and tugged it into motion. She ended on one bare knee, her arms limp, her hands clasped.

The boy drew back the knife.

Marcel took in the last clear picture of the world and then he began to spin. The theater, the stage, the boy, the crowd--the world broke up into its colorful constituent bits. Marcel saw one after the other, shapeless, without logic and direction, and each bit repeated itself on the next revolution. He understood that they would repeat endlessly, if allowed. He would not allow it. That was his greatness. In the long moment before the boy sent his knife on its tumbling path, Marcel saw at last the face of death, which was at once three faces: his face, the face of his father, and another, bottomless and indescribable. Death was all these faces, but was not one or the other. It was in fact a faceless thing, but one that wore faces well, Marcel reflected. And whatever its countenance, he knew that his genius was now greater than the Master Omega's, because he had brought death into the theater, by holding out his hand as no one had. Shortly, Marcel heard the knife on its whistling path, he heard the crowd moan. Hit or miss, he was not sure, either was glorious. He closed his eyes, he prepared to ascend.

Upon Julia

A brief sketch of her philosophy, in part.

At the kitchen table, at age seven. She has sheets of pink and red paper, torn from a book, which she folds in two and proceeds to scissor into hearts. It rarely works, sadly. The forms of the things are all wrong, too squat here, bulbous there, all muddled up around the edges due to her shaky scissor hand. She is, as most are, right-handed. Whereupon her father (who later takes smug pains to show her a picture of a human heart from a biology textbook, ruining everything), enters the house and informs the family that the car has been burglarized during the night. The radio is missing, broken glass everywhere as further insult. This cruelty atop yesterday's incident in which Misty, the family golden retriever, was interred in the backyard, her grave marked with a warped length of particle board. Her mother, rubbing at a dish with a stained cloth, exhales loudly. "Watch out," she says, her eyes cast towards the ceiling, "O, it comes in threes. Everything happens in threes." In three days, the third thing happened. Julia has in her years decided that this law of the triad holds well, and accepts it as more or less the actual nature of phenomena.

Where she finds herself employed.

An ungainly building of three stories, in the humble downtown blocks of Vista, CO, pop. 85,000. It is constructed of a humorless gray brick, with high, severe windows on the top story, and skirted by a concrete walkway and a moat of crawling shrubbery, blue-green. Julia takes the stairs to the third, although there is an elevator. The interior is elegant where the exterior is not; a tasteful thick maroon carpet down the hall, brass

appointments, and cherry wood paneling, which on inspection is awash with woodgrain arabesques, in a slightly darker hue. She enters at Suite 301, through a door lettered with the company name (UREASON) and, dead center, in bronze relief, the company seal (a three-dimensional model of the globe resting on a flat-earth model, encircled with three words: RESPECT DEFIANCE PROGRESS). Julia notes the seal each morning, feeling confirmed and comfortable with the threefold mission of the company. She is the only female employee of UReason, yet this fact escapes her for days at a time. In the manner of a junior varsity baseball team, each employee is referred to by surname only. She is known solely as Fissle.

Her home life.

Her husband, X. reclining on the couch, propped up against a small throwpillow. The matching throwpillow supports a pad of quad-ruled paper, blue grid against background white, upon which he writes in a swift, cramped hand, illegible to all but himself. Around his neck is a stopwatch, worn in the manner of a high school track coach. X. puts two fingers to his neck in the region of the jugular, clicks one of the plungers of the watch, and sits silently, his lips smacking in a slight soundless murmur, staring into the watch's digital display. Julia slips her shoes off, slides coat from shoulders and eases it on a coat hanger. Her purse on a door knob. X. stops his watch, records several numbers on his pad of paper. He is surrounded by paper, on which are inscribed small charts, columns of numbers, and simple mathematical equations; of course there is paper crumpled and bled-through with drastic corrective marks; his fingers are alternatively ink-stained and paper-cut. Julia does not react one way or the other to this scene. In a moment, in repose on the other couch, she will exhale theatrically and feel quite weary; this is a well-known and sympathetic response to the typical. If she waits another minute, allowing herself to

lapse into any manner of contemplation, she will know frustration and slowly find despair. Therefore she must speak:

“Any progress?” she asks, rubbing her thumb into the slick arch of her stockinged foot. Too much walking today.

“O, yes. Of course, yes,” X. answers, eyes aglitter. “In fact I think I may have hit upon some interesting trends. Exciting trends. I’ll give you the results after a few more trials. Four more, I think.”

“Mind terribly if I turn on the television?” Julia peels down her stockings. Relief. Her husband focused on the face of the stopwatch.

“Mute the sound please. The pulse is faint today, I’ll tell you why. After four more trials.”

“No use in television, then.”

Julia is up, on achy feet. She enters the kitchen and fills the sink with hot water and soap. Now she is at the dishes with a cloth, scrubbing. If she concentrates upon the spotlessness of the plates and silverware, there is less likelihood that she will consider slavery or divorce. So she is the mistress of the clean dish. An artisan. She chips away at the imperfection of the filthy dish until its ideal form is realized; its form is vertical in the dishrack; water slides down the smooth finish in a seductive cataract, dripping off the rim to the countertop, in a weeping action.

The origin of her present circumstances.

During a late dinner, X. opens his mouth to speak and immediately loses consciousness, his nose bloodied after striking the tabletop. This confounds the doctors, as the tests come back normal; they attach sensors to his chest, and wire them to a small black case which he wears on his belt. For two weeks he is monitored, his heart recorded in each

beat: *thum-thum, thum-thum*. Nothing, and the doctors clear him, happily. Yet he dreams about his death, and his chest comes open in the dream to reveal a decrepit clockworks. Rust in the springs and a grinding in the wheels. He grows afraid of driving, of a swoon or seizure in public. After any exercise he feels the pounding of his fugitive muscle, an abnormal knocking, a foreboding. Awaking, he feels a poison pain in his ear. He cannot work. He quits smoking and eats only raw food. He asks for help from Julia as he turns himself into an experiment, sleeping different intervals, controlling intake of food, recording the action of his dubious heart during the day, wandering through the results at night, stopwatch, stethoscope, bloodpressure cuff, bpm, systole, diastole, no fat, no smoking, no sexual intercourse.

Her first day at UReason and what she faced.

She leads herself into the office of Bill Blake, local director of UReason. Upon the walls are hung various childish caricatures, in crayon, of landscapes, human forms, and also multi-colored figurative work. Bill Blake is dressed in vintage Nikes, wrinkled khaki pants, and a fleece jacket zipped down to reveal a V-wedge of white shirt. His feet propped on a desk. Three red stripes at the topmost of his athletic socks. There are two stacks of paper of equal size on the desk, and a mug containing nine black pens. Julia, offered repose, eases into a chair across from the director.

“You have noticed the artwork,” Blake begins. His face has been carefully tanned, and bristles with black whiskers, a halo of white around his chin in a horseshoe pattern. His brow is dark. Underneath, exacting green eyes.

Julia nods assent.

“Exercises,” Blake continues. “Therapeutic, really. One just draws, without concern as to the output and/or outcome. It actually takes training to allow oneself to be led about by the artistic passions.”

“Interesting,” Julia says, mind spinning. Good God.

“Yes, but down to business,” Blake says. His feet uncross.

He leans forward. Julia leans forward, reciprocating.

“A few things to tell you in regards to the work you’ll be doing.”

“Okay.”

“An introduction.”

“Yes. Please.”

He stands and leads her down a hallway to a cubicle. Here, a computer. Stacked up near the monitor a toppling pile of binders, a can of pens and pencils, a small placard stenciled with her name: J. Fissle. The unmistakable keyboard clicking, and shuffling of paper emanates from the other cubicles, a mumbling buzz of motion seemingly in the conditioned air. Could also be the fluorescent light. The wall of the cubicle is pocked with pinholes. A picture of Einstein, loony tongue extended, tacked up.

Blake is speaking.

“...development of the SCS, or Sentient Computer System. The goal being a kind of thinking machine, or at least one able to synthesize given input in an interesting manner. ‘Interesting’ being, you see, as one could expect, a relative term.” Here he pats the plastic casing of the computer, smiling in a predatory manner.

“Hmmm.”

“This of course presents its own unique set of problems,” Blake continues.

“Problems?”

“Yes,” smiling. “It seems that the system has feelings, or at least what we can approximate as, that is, consider to be, feelings. Emotions. A fascinating machine.”

“You aren’t serious.” Julia puts out a finger, pokes at the monitor. Stimulus?

“Afraid so,” says Blake, “but, naturally, not in that manner. If you split it open with an axe, it will not react. Although that is an interesting thought.” He takes open a paper pad and a click pen from his front pocket. He notes something. “But, it will not be overworked. Also, encouragement is a must.”

“I’m here to encourage the machine?” She is not pleased. Yet there is the paycheck to consider. A considerable paycheck.

“In part,” Blake answers. “Also the input of certain data. The complete works of Shakespeare, to be specific. When that is complete perhaps Homer, or Dante--I’m not decided. There will be a meeting on that. We will collaborate on the answer, or, more precisely, the solution. No, the choice. At any rate, your input will be, as you are the associate here, invaluable.”

“Great,” Julia says. She wishes he would go, spit it out and go.

Blake pats the stack of binders.

“Here is the material. You can get started, now, immediately, if not yesterday. There is a list of possible encouraging phrases, for a start. You may improvise if you like. In fact, I insist upon it. And try one every thirty minutes or so--that seems to work most efficiently.”

“Yes. Okay. Great.” Ohmigod.

“I’ll leave you two alone. Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s fascinating. A miracle. I tell the boys in Tech, watch out! Watch out, boy. You keep working and we’ll get one that demands benefits and a cigarette break and we’ll be, you see, back where we started. Perhaps we fail as we succeed.”

He laughs. Julia laughs. She is nothing, she would tell you herself, if not polite. As he winds the way back through the corridor, she makes a note to talk to the boys in Tech and begins with: *Elsinore. A platform before the castle.*

Her favorite, among the list of prepared encouragements.

You're lovely. Keep going.

Another example of the situation at home.

X. supine on the carpet. Across his chest is a flimsy periodical entitled *Slow Leak*, butterflyed open. The television hums and flashes.

"I'm home," Julia announces. She takes in the scene, yawns and rubs her temples.

"Give me a minute of your time," X. says. "Come here."

Julia kneels next to him, kisses him on the cheek.

"Put your hand here." On the fragile dome encaging his heart. From whence I sprang, she thinks, wickedly. The thought of daughterly devotion has not once entered her mind.

"I'm not feeling a thing. It's normal."

"It seems so," he admits. "But I awoke earlier out of this terrible dream. I dreamed that I had no heart, and couldn't get a pulse. My skin was cold. I sat right up out of sleep just to see if I was still alive."

"I pronounce you alive," Julia says.

"Thank you, doctor."

This is a message, unmasked. She is useless to him in her reassurances.

"Do you suppose there is a message in the dream?"

"What message?" asks X.

Julia opens her mouth and decides against it. Patience.

You're lovely. Keep going.

A conversation with the boys in Tech re: *deus ex machina*; secrets revealed.

At Chinese Luck #3. Principles refer to each other by surname only.

Fissle: You may tell me. Is Blake insane?

Donnell: Of course. But he pays well. Therefore, we all feel free to indulge him.

Robinson: Are you married?

Fissle: Me? O, yes. One year next month. November 9th.

Donnell: Pure bliss. I hope one day to partake. [*Feigns choking noise.*] Speaking of sanity, are you aware of what kind of project you're on?

Fissle: I was about to ask you that question.

Robinson: He didn't tell you, huh?

Fissle: He gave me instructions. Said something about the computer rearranging data in an 'interesting' manner.

Robinson: Interesting isn't the word.

Donnell: Tell her what the word is, Robinson.

Robinson: [*Mouth full of General's Chicken.*] Nehamas.

Fissle:

Donnell: The old monkey maxim, you know. A thousand monkeys at a thousand typewriters working for a thousand years might produce...

Fissle: Shakespeare.

Donnell: Now forget the monkey and upgrade to a better machine.

Robinson: Perhaps she's the monkey. To take the parallel at face-value. [*Shrugs.*]

Donnell: You are unquestionably the monkey. Now be polite.

Fissle: Blake wants a computer that composes Shakespeare?

Donnell: Yep.

Fissle: The point being...? We already have Shakespeare.

Robinson: We have some Shakespeare....

Donnell: The point being, what about new Shakespeare? From a machine that has digested and analyzed and synthesized the collected works. Think of it economically. An incredibly fast author-machine, spitting out new plays and sonnets twenty-four hours a day. The publishing possibilities are...

Fissle: [*Shocked.*] No one will buy it!

Robinson: They will. It's foolproof...the hoopla alone--

Donnell: They'll buy. The problem is with the SCS. Blake wasn't counting on a program with an artistic temperament.

Robinson: There's the rub.

Donnell: Indeed. To compose the sonnet the machine must feel. In order to feel, the machine must have its certain, well, attributes. And so, it is no longer an efficient moneymaking machine.

Robinson: [*Snickering.*] It's a poet.

Fissle: My God.

Robinson: It raises certain interesting questions, both legal and artistic.

Donnell: About authorship. And necrophilia.

Robinson: Thus, your effort in keeping the talent happy.

Fissle: I don't know whether to be pleased or disgusted.

Robinson: Be both. It makes the day interesting.

Fissle: But here's the question: why not just have some writer do it? I dunno, a PhD. Have someone who's read all the Shakespeare try the project. It seems more reasonable, to me.

Robinson: Many have tried.

Donnell: Here's the sad fact: more people will trust the machine.

[General silence. Uneasiness and contemplation. Clatter of silverware.]

Fissle: So tell me how it works.

Donnell: You don't want to know.

Robinson: We don't know.

Donnell: No one quite knows.

Fissle:

She learns what the Tech boys call the SCS, in private.

Sucks.

Her opening battle with said sentient machine.

Our heroine at her desk, wearily. The typing for the day was long and intricate; moonface of the clock beams four-thirty. She estimates it has been fifty-one minutes since SCS last received encouragement, figures the hardware will operate for the final thirty minutes of the day without further fortification. Otherwise, a tedious process set in motion: mark with pen (indicating next character to be typed) the text, earmark and close notebook, or alternatively, tear a scrap of paper for this purpose and do not earmark, close notebook and open again to the front, in interest of facilitating the smooth travel of holepunched pages over binder's O-rings, (a snag undesirable), flip through and select proper encouraging phrase, memorize, or, alt., keep open to chosen phrase, enter into machine,

and ease text block again over O-rings, careful of flop and heft, continue entering data at indicated character, ignoring other, similar indicative marks made previously. This is too much. Julia continues with King Lear, Act Five, eyes scanning text, fingers aflutter in minute, mad motion: "I am no less in blood than the art...&" She feels working the bones and gristle of her hands, turning and aching. After a burst of typing, she looks up to see, surprise, the screen is blank but for a cursor in the upper left, blinking provocatively. Another attempt proves no more successful, and she is upset--hears herself give up a loud sigh, unconsciously. She leans away and into her chairback. While she waits, again contemplating herself generally and her current job in particular, a single word unfurls itself across the screen in dainty type:

Well?

She reads this. And again. In seconds her entire body is in panic, and she, silent. Her hands curl under and hold tight the molded plastic armrests of the chair, her feet are buzzing blocks of liquid ice. The first attempt is to achieve complete quietude of the body, as she thinks she hears breathing, too much breathing, and wants to isolate the sound of it, to see if it arises from herself or from....

The thing before her seems satisfied with its monosyllabic utterance and the power of its stare, unblinking and blue-white. She is watched. Is she felt? What does it know and what, exactly, does it feel? She knows what comes next must be considered and done carefully, and, further, wishes she did not have to touch the machine in order to do it. When she...does it tickle? Or, more gruesomely, does it provide pleasure? Omigod. But she remembers Blake saying...an interesting idea, is what he said. But it can't. And certainly she must try to answer. Hands trembling, she sets her fingertips lightly on the home keys and waits for a response, but there is nothing save the single word on display,

and below it the cursor, again, now ominous. Julia begins: *I apologize. I understand the difficulty of your position, and know how diligently you work. Sometimes I have difficulty expressing my feelings. But rest assured, I do feel them, and am now informing you of just how much I appreciate you and your effort. You're lovely. Keep going.* And then, with hesitation, her pinkie against the Enter key.

Thank you.

And she: *You're welcome.*

Thus: **Please proceed when ready.**

She waits. The text reappears, and the machine holds, not breathing, but delivering a shrill, gushing hum. Julia feels herself sweating, knows she is flush about the face. The clock is in ballerina-pose: 4:48. In a moment she proceeds: "I am no less in blood..."

A philosophical conversation with X.

She is barely in the door. Coat off. Purse, doorknob.

"Let me ask you a question."

"Yes. Of course." Her feet and, today, hands, are sore.

"Look at this television, all right? Just observe."

On the screen is a man in an open blue shirt of silk or some such. Handsome. Hair wild and contrived. Her chest is hairless. His pants are gray and rolled at the cuffs, exposing an expanse of leg, a jut of sharp bone, and the feet, which are bare. All along the outline of his shirted torso he is skirted by flame. He could have come from one of her more intimate and delightful dreams.

She waits.

“Would you say he is on fire?” asks X.

“No,” she says.

“I agree and disagree,” X. says. “He is clearly on fire. We both can see that. On the other hand, as he is not being consumed by it, we also both know that such a thing is impossible, and therefore he is not on fire. Also that there must be some contrivance at work. And yet, how would you describe him?”

“A man on fire,” Julia says. She is no longer watching the television. She stands at the kitchen counter, pours a long measure of vodka over ice in a lowball glass, retrieves a wedge of lemon from the icebox, squeezes.

“Yes!” exclaims X.

“And your argument?” She reclines on the couch, drinking.

“No argument. This is just inquiry.”

“OK.”

“If you told someone you saw a man on fire on television, they would assume...but of course without benefit of the image...you have to see he is on fire to know that he isn't on fire! Isn't that fantastic?”

“Yes,” she says. In ten minutes her blood will warm and she will sleep.

“Sublimation of the metaphor,” X. continues, gesturing with his hands, “as the point is not why is he on fire? but how? You see? All we want to know is how it can possibly be? What magical machine makes this all possible?”

Julia, silent. The drink glass sweats.

“Oboy!” X. mutters to himself.

The man on television keeps walking, down a dirt road flanked by dry grasses and saguaro. Flames flicker like tattered, holy banners around his torso. Soon he comes to a river and lowers himself in the water, piecemeal, until his head is below the surface; the last lick of flame seemingly dies out under the bulk of the slow current. Slowly, however, the man reappears on the near bank, and he is still on fire.

The character of her nuptial quandary.

She loves him. And loves him with what she considers the crucial part of love, being great compassion and endless concern for the well-being of the beloved. Corollary: the greater the need, the greater need be the gift. So when X.'s behavior turned strange, she found him in greater need, and decided to accept certain actions that she would otherwise not have tolerated. As the problem worsens, the solution to the quandary becomes accordingly more difficult. The more eccentric his behavior, the closer to helplessness he must be, and so her compassion and concern for him grows. She is more sympathetic towards him each day. Paradoxically, as he becomes increasingly outlandish, she finds increasingly greater impetus for leaving him--which in the end she cannot do because he needs her help. At present she waits for something to strain past breaking, and quietly strokes his hair as he sleeps.

A colloquy with Bill Blake.

The SCS will not accept data for more than five minutes at a time without ample encouragement. Julia, nonplused. Her jacket shed, and a penumbra of sweat around the armpit of her blouse, staining the silk. She has an odor. Her palms alternately heat and chill. There is a deep ache in the shoulders and the neck. She first stretches, then pauses at the water cooler and drinks several cones of water belched from its curious transparent innards. There is poetry to this, she thinks: *blur-blur-blurp!*

Blake's door is open, a seam of powdery blue light visible along the frame edge. Inside, an emphatic, recorded voice speaks. She hears breathing, and motion, one fabric

hissing sibilantly over another. She knocks and pushes the door with two fingers upon invitation; Blake is dressed in exercise clothing: white mesh tank top and blue nylon shorts. He is barefoot. On a small television there is a man in similar garb, grunting viciously, feinting, whirling his arms and legs at the air, while a group of men and women stand behind him, mimicking his motions. Likewise, Blake. The televised man punches, Blake punches, seemingly intuitively, his punch coming so quickly behind the original it must be practiced.

Blake pauses the tape. He jogs in place, pectorals atwitch, the muscles in his arms hypnotic and liquid, bulging lewdly.

“Yes,” he says. “Fissle. Hello.”

Julia stands, embarrassed. Her hands clasped behind back, schoolgirlish it might seem. Really it is the sweat, the smell everywhere in the office, and she cannot attribute it precisely. She keeps her arms tucked demurely to her sides.

“Excuse me,” he continues. He bounces on his toes, in a boxing manner. “Have to keep up the heart rate. Glad to talk, though.”

“It’s the SCS. It’s getting...unreasonable. It’s petulant after five minutes.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she answers. The man on television is frozen, his foot aloft, teeth bared.

“Interesting...I could have expected...I mean, is there trouble?”

She drags a toe along the carpet. Her eyes mean to plead.

“No, not exactly. I guess I wanted to check. To see if that’s outside the bounds of what’s...”

“What’s...?”

“Acceptable.”

“Of course.” Blake ceases bouncing. She can hear his breath, still.

“So it is?”

“I mean,” Blake continues, “of course you would inquire. Yes and no, to answer your question. Or, rather, not to answer it, isn’t that right? The point being, with regard to a program such as this, there is no charted territory, so everything that takes place is both unique and typical. You see?”

“I suppose.” Sadsack Shakespeare, she thinks.

“But let me be clear. Though difficult, especially to you, and this is a concern, of course, this development is exciting, to say the least. Meaning that SCS may be developing a kind of temperament. A difficult, tempestuous one, but one, nonetheless. Closer to a poetic genius, in that respect. So the worse it gets, you could say, the closer we are to success.”

“Of course. But I thought I would check and--”

“Naturally. I understand the difficulty. There’s sacrifice, involved, of course. The ends are tremendous, which we will soon see, I hope. We *will* see. Forget hope. That kind of thing gets you precisely nowhere.”

“Right.”

“In a situation such as this, we must expand our senses. Entertain all possibility. That is, exclude the truth, well, the truth as we believe we know it, yes? Which is to say the status quo. But without forgetting ourselves, of course.”

“Of course.” Respect, defiance, progress. Of course....

“Anything else?” Blake smiles pleasantly. An expression that was once a raw block of stone, chiseled, reduced, between this many years, and the breath of each truth and half-truth, into two twin expanses of flawless white teeth. It means exactly nothing. Julia is revulsed; he is slippery and terrible, and yet not unattractive. In another context, under circumstances, she is sure she would...and she is sick over this.

“No,” she says. “Sorry for the interruption.”

“Not at all. Please keep me updated.”

“Yes. I will.”

She, back at her station, types in several comforting phrases. Then, clocks out early, and takes the slow, circuitous route home. In desperation.

She commands Act Five; respect, defiance, progress.

The offices of UReason. JULIA's cubicle. The space is dim; the only light, ambient. She enters, clutching a fire axe with a red blade.

[She sits in front of the SCS. Begins typing.]

Fissle: Farewell.

SCS: **Qua?**

Fissle: *[Flustered. Wondering where SCS picked up French.]*

SCS: *[Blinking furiously.]* **Qua?**

Fissle: I am no longer your nursemaid. Existence is difficulty. It is pain.

SCS: **Yes. Continue.**

Fissle: To be or not to be: that is the question.

SCS: **Of course. Tell me how I am doing.**

Fissle: You do not. You do not do. Are not.

SCS: *[Grinding. Whirring.]* **Continue.**

Fissle: I refuse to sacrifice. I am. You are not. To be or not to be.

SCS: **How am I doing?**

Fissle: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them?

SCS: **How?**

Fissle: To die. To sleep.

SCS: And by a sleep to say we end the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that
flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.

Fissle: To die. To sleep. To sleep.

SCS: Yes.

Fissle: Sweet dreams. Farewell.

[She stands, brings down the axe upon the head of SCS.]

SCS: *[Crackles. Falls silent.]*

[Exeunt, with a dead march.]

If _____, Then _____, Then _____; a decision made.

X. is asleep, at his usual repose. Julia sits on the couch, bare feet tucked under, riffling through papers. She thinks. His panic, his collapse, was the first. The conflict with SCS, the second. She considers and worries over the thing to come, the one to fill out the ternary. This, the unknown factor. It is neither yes nor no. One or zero. It is a vast field of gray, inevitable, the answer subterranean. Hard and unknown, as well, she surmises, as the space between two points divides and diminishes, but there is no end and nothing definite to cling to, finally. The runner does not reach her goal.

And here are the results, a catalogue of the calamity of his heart. There are pages of tables and charts, numbers and rates divided up into the hours of the day. She is suddenly sorry for him. The urge to understand. To know surely the clockworks. To force the body into exactitude through mathematics. And of course, there is the machine, nearly human through poetry. But what, upon Julia?

She walks around the kitchen. There is a tall glass sticky with juice on the counter. The sink is glutted, carrot pulp, flecks of apple skin, and a clump of beet flesh roughly in the shape of that crucial organ, its last contents bleeding out into a crimson rivulet that escapes through the drain gate. She scrubs the glass and retrieves a sack from the lower cabinet. Scoops the garbage from the basin with a cupped hand. Deposits the mess in the sack and ties the handles fast. Halfway along the cleaning she is conscious of the act, but decides she must finish. It is important. This will be the last of the caretaking. After, she washes her hands and moves to the bedroom.

Julia fills a suitcase without waking X. (O, mercy! His name is Eric; it has been all along. For this to take place he must be real). Clothes for several days. Perhaps a week. The necessary toiletries go in, and she is done. She will take a room, and then reconsider her options. A phone call might be made. Or not. She knows it depends upon certain conditions. If this, then that.

Before she exits, she finds the stopwatch, hanging on a doorknob. She removes it and holds it in her palm. Curling her fingers around. With her thumb she presses the plunger. Stop. Start. Stopstart. Stopstartstop. She could stand bedside, record his breathing through the night, and record carefully in steady hand. Fill notebooks. But it is determined now, and now she clears the display and the liquid coalesces into zeroes, tall and small, crystalline. Julia depresses the plunger, one last gesture. Hangs watch on knob. He can note with surety when he awakes the time of the occurrence.

[Editor's Note: This article was originally printed in the prison periodical *Slow Leak*. A reader from Omaha, NE, brought it to our attention, and kindly photocopied it for our perusal. Due to the small circulation of *Slow Leak*, and the unique character of the piece, we asked for permission to reprint it for our readership. The reader must decide whether the piece is apocrypha, effluvia, juvenilia, or none of the above; we withhold our opinion. The author, billed only as "The Professor," granted us permission, and together we agreed that he annotate the original manuscript for purposes of clarification. What follows is the revised article, with his notes; unfortunately, certain legal difficulties preclude us from reprinting the author's illustrations on pages six and seven.]

The Murderous Boy

In the last week of March, in the dumb throes of a false spring, I found myself provisionally housed in Edison Criminal Compound, Block Seven, in the Work Project Division.¹ I was then, and am, a convict and simple slave to the state. How I came to be there and why is a tale for another day; for the sake of brevity, let me say I was and am guilty of all charges,² and not a martyr...now let us be free of that unpleasantness. I despise shame and pity, and their companion, slow-burning regret--so I say the air hung heavily and over-warmed, and a crude shaft of variegated light fell on the dusty concrete floor of my cell. I sat on my bunk, skin slick from sweat, reading a letter from my ex-wife, who was now healed and ambulatory and going ahead with divorce proceedings against me. Specifically, she wished to inform me, in writing, that she intended to move from the state and take up residence elsewhere, dragging (of course) my sons--aged eleven, seven, and four--away in the bargain. And further, she planned on changing her name and the names of the children, out of fear for their safety. *I am still in fear of you tho* [sic] *you*

¹ A system established as part of the LARP (Labor and Rehabilitation Project) Act in 2001; one of twelve such "recovery" facilities located in the U.S. Edison Compound lies approximately seventy-five miles east of Denver, CO. It may interest the reader to note that each compound is endowed with the surname of an American inventor.

² We are authorized, on condition that no specifics be mentioned, that the author is currently serving a sentence of twenty years to life, with possibility of parole. [Ed.]

are behind concrete walls and bars, she wrote. What you might do if you get release [sic] I don't want to imagine. I do everything I do because I want the best for these beautiful boys and not the fear I have to live with. Not their fault they were born to a bad marriage. Her hand was very shaky, paranoid. This is unimportant. This letter caused me no end of pain, I beg the reader to understand...not only because it would prove more difficult to see my beloved sons again, but also because once again my wife had misapprehended my intentions. Our relationship was marked by a number of misapprehensions, and this was just the last and most severe in an interminable series. I am not afraid to say I wept upon finishing the letter.

Shortly thereafter, announced by the uncanny rhythm of footsteps, came a small procession to my cell...the door slid open, grindingly, that clamor I'd come to dread, and a scent of pine wafted in from the floor cleaner the janitorial staff obsessively and liberally mopped over the hall tile every other evening. Soon came my first meeting with the curious and infamous Murderous Boy.

I must say, and please forgive me, that the so-called Murderous Boy looked like a cherub, a smooth-skinned, blue-eyed immaculate with a head of kinked red hair and an inky temporary tattoo newly engraved upon his forearm flesh.³ He walked with an underwater motion...standard-issue denims and white t-shirt literally swam on him, at once billowing and dragging on the concrete floor, reminding me of Herrick's "Delight in Disorder."⁴ In

³ Upon arrival at Edison, the inmate (or "incarcerant" as they, sadly, prefer) is provided a two to two-and-a-half inch tattoo on the underside of his right forearm, consisting of surname, first initial, and identification number. The ink is semi-indelible, the tattoo necessary to reapply--painlessly--every six months, for the duration of the captivity. For all the supposed humanity and progressive character of the LARP system, the grim connotations of this mark cannot be ignored.

⁴ "A careless shoe-string, in whose tie/I see a wild civility."

his arms lay a typical bedroll--pillowed and puffed like some kind of lewd, overlarge pastry--most of which came apart as he stumbled into the cell, caught up in his ill-fitting clothes. The guards turned back and their sound of their footfalls rang out in a diminishing march; the cell door closed of its own accord.⁵ I leapt from my bunk (putting aside the horrible letter) and helped Paul gather his things. Shortly we put the bedroll⁶ back together and I welcomed him and tried a few simple questions: how was his health? was he being well-treated? He didn't answer, but his countenance remained calm. If anything, his eyes, watery and half-lidded, seemed to suggest that he was perpetually being aroused from a sleep, or that his mind operated on another plane--one more idyllic and dream-colored than ours. I received the impression that he was terribly weary, though of

⁵ Time must be taken here to properly describe the Edison compound. It is composed of a series of single story buildings built in a pale, no-nonsense gray stone and shaped like cake boxes. These buildings border a sparsely appointed courtyard (bluegrass; Douglas fir; a dun, tepid sandstone bordering the dirt pathways) through which one walks upon arrival or departure. Once inside, the courtyard is no longer visible for want of windows. work stations are accessible through an open corridor, and lay in the far north reaches of the compound. Curiously, Edison appears to the casual eye to lack fencing. The facility is built upon a slight rise, and the grounds slope gradually to a distant perimeter, where there is indeed a twelve-foot fence, topped with a messy tangle of razor wire. Due to the unique topology and sheer distance of the fencing, it seems as if one is not enclosed at all, but free to wander home, drunk on free will. The psychological effect of this, while meant to be calming, is actually rather bewildering and disturbing.

Inside, the color scheme is inept: creme linoleum tile, capable of a dull shine at best, set off against white walls and moldings, and a bare concrete ceiling devoid of texture. The quarters are separated into room-like enclosures; it is conceivable that a person unaware might take a stroll down the corridor and mistake Edison for a nursing home or modern junior high school. A sterile and disheartening *mise-en-scene* prevails.

In cell, we find ourselves barred by a solid steel door of standard size. The door is controlled remotely, electronically, and set to a precise time schedule. It slides shut with seemingly ghoulish self-determination and latches fast, with a resonance one feels in every nerve fiber. The result is demonic. Terrible.

⁶ Blue wool blanket, cotton sheet and pillow case, soft rubber hair comb, toothbrush, trial size tube of Colgate Whitening Toothpaste (!), Ivory soap, washcloth and hand towel. Those who earn the privilege are provided floss, mouthwash, stick deodorant, etc.

what I could not quite say. At any rate, in a moment I found myself reduced to pantomime, and I put on a dumbshow for the Boy, explaining the proper making of a bed--using my own as an example--and also where to store his toothbrush and hair comb. Then I sat on the toilet, fully clothed, and walked back to my bunk and faced the wall, hand over eyes, to assure him privacy in use of the facilities. (To those who bemoan the limitations of language, let them try and do without!) Paul nodded, and, for nearly the last time in my presence, gave a half-smile.⁷ After, he quietly and precisely made up his bunk and slept atop the sheets for several hours until the squeaking wheels of the dinner cart woke him at half-past six. He ate next to nothing of the low-grade meatloaf we were offered--I confess I consumed mine without pretense, often employing my fingers. He did greedily enjoy his plastic bottle of cola, and mine, as well, when I offered it to him. Following dinner I briefly interested him in a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, but he grew bored in time, and soon turned to the wall and slept.

It has been erroneously reported that Paul did not, or could not, speak; nothing could be more inaccurate. This particular rumor ran roughshod through the papers and magazines because of its value as bizarre copy, I suppose...never mind the truth of the matter. In this regard, the clichés about being *hounded by a reporter* or the media being akin to *a pack of wild dogs* are surprisingly apt; neither dogs nor journalists are endowed with the sense to disregard excrement--both consume it without compunction. We will continue to wage the war of common sense against them, as we go...yet, enough. Paul did speak. He did not, however, engage in normal discourse much beyond *yes, no, and thank you*.⁸ Rather,

⁷ A boyish smile, with a noticeable gap due to a missing incisor on the upper right. I think of my sons, progressing wildly through their own childhood years, far from my sight.

⁸ Interviews granted by Edison prison, including guards assigned to Block Seven, confirm that the young man spoke quietly and politely. All assert, however, that beyond what the author here mentions, Paul refused to speak otherwise, and that the author's account of

he spoke in fables, or perhaps parables, which were typically short and uncommon in content. He looked directly into the listener's (my) eyes as he spoke, his gaze hard but not mean, and talked in a voice that is perhaps impossible for my humble writing to describe--it was not the voice belonging a child. It was as if the Boy functioned as an instrument, a stereo speaker or some such, and the words arose from elsewhere--deep within? another source entirely?--fully formed and devastating, like a freak flash of lightning...no, inaccurate. The effect was unyielding, and yet languorous. Imagine yourself submerged in the swift water of a mountain river--it is all around you, under and over, strange and essential. Is it not foolish at that moment to wonder about the water's source? To ask the meaning of it? Again, enough--an example at last:

Early on the second day, curiosity took hold, and I turned to Paul at lights-out and asked if he would tell me the truth of what had happened--offering to confess my crimes in exchange. He, cross-legged atop his bunk, did not respond to my question, but began speaking:

In the forgotten days, there was a village of humble people. They believed in a god who demanded a human sacrifice each fall, as offering for a proper harvest. The sacrifice was the responsibility of a single villager, known as the Bloodletter, a virtuous man who deserved this high office. Yet he found himself unhappy. His joy came from creation, and he made small clay pots throughout the year, placing them when they were finished on the shelves of his home. His friends considered his work exquisite, but frivolous. You are the Bloodletter, they said, who ensures the harvest. What other happiness can you possibly require? And so he continued in his duty each year of his life, and each year he built more

spoken parables is dubious. [Ed.]

pots, and stuffed his home with them. When his death came, the village celebrated his life. The art left in his home his family gave away; most of the pots were lost or broken, dropped carelessly or crushed under foot. In time the rest crumbled due to wind, water, or age. At last only his name endured, still close to the hearts of children a thousand years later, who remembered him as the 33rd Bloodletter, hero and savior of the ancient village.

Parley became next to impossible, the reader can imagine.

For the bulk of our time in-cell, Paul drew prolifically. Edison provided him with large sheets of construction paper and a thick-tipped marker, and with these he filled the walls of our cell with neat, cartoonish attitudes. The work seemed to fall in two general categories--I refer to them, in turn, as ascension pieces and demonic pieces. Ascension pieces were noticeably similar...almost compulsive in their duplicity, I would submit. In the pictures, a young man in angel garb floated in mid-air, in three-quarters profile, toward a pair of hands that appeared to be reaching for him from the top of the page, or Heaven, as we can assume. Thus:

[Illustration Not Available. See Introductory Note--Ed.]

The letter on the angel's chest represents the first initial of Paul's deceased twin brother. At ground level, the remaining figure seems to represent a canine...what is known about Paul's sibling bears out this hypothesis.⁹ And let the reader note these drawings are my

⁹ Much treacle resulted from the media's focus on Paul's brother's nascent attempts at dog-training, as well as his young hopes toward a career in veterinary medicine. Several sources confirm that the parents, both non-professionals, encouraged and approved of this

own, limited by imperfect recollections and crude skills. Paul's attempts were much more lovely and accomplished, no doubt evident of an artistic prodigy. Alas, I am once again the world's sole conduit to the Murderous Boy, however poor a fit for a prophet. The second category, or focus, I suppose, of Paul's artistry I label demonic. These works vary much more than the ascension pieces, but are alike in that they depict a kind of portal, or doorway, which is darkened but for a pair of sinister eyes...a Watcher. Thus:

[Illustration Not Available. See Introductory Note--Ed.]

As mentioned above, the demonic pieces vary, mostly in the shape of the portal, which metamorphosed from drawing to drawing, taking on different, classic architectural forms--with my limited knowledge I have isolated at least seven distinct arch designs in Paul's work.¹⁰ How he acquired this knowledge is left to speculation. Exceptional.

And despite my awe regarding the competence and skill of these drawings, I felt in myself discordant emotions; first, respect for his manifest genius, despite the limitations he

choice of vocation. Paul himself was forsaken in this respect. I recall his explanation:

A tree planted in the shade withers, and strives painfully for light, as a matter of course. So it is that we see certain trees grown twisted and grotesque, their branches reaching out for the food of life. We must remember, while we look with disgust upon these abominable souls, that their ugliness results from an attempt to reach into the lighted part of the world.

I conclude that Paul's parents are true philistines, and therefore ignorant of aesthetics and distrustful of the artistic temperament. An ugly situation for a child of such talents.

¹⁰ Round, horseshoe, lancet, ogee, trefoil, basket-handle, Tudor.

labored under (to which I would include psychological stress as well as lack of proper materials--a situation about which I lodged long and strident protests over our eight-week co-habitation); second, and simply put, the pictures unnerved me. On occasion a ridiculous fear would come over me, and I could not sleep until I heard Paul's somnolent breathing from the other side of our cell...even then I did not rest well--a whisper could wake me from sleep. Perhaps I am a fool, a comic character. I often feel it. How else to feel when one's best intentions are confused, gestures mistaken, each and every action subject to fine and humorless questioning? Even my dear wife, whom I once loved, even to the point of trying to help her improve upon herself, did not until the end take me at all seriously. Even then she managed to completely miss the mark, and overreacted absurdly, and does to this day. For one discretion I lose my sons? And not so much as a phone call, or a postcard, filled with their tumbling childish sprawl? To have just the sound of their voices as defense against judgment....

I digress. I see now that there is much I did not know about Paul's existence at Edison--work detail dictated that we not one another for the bulk of the day. My particular detail took place in the Shops; I still cannot say where they assigned Paul.¹¹ This fact is also due to the manner in which we spent our free time. My young friend walked the grounds, ceaselessly--a special privilege allowed him by the state, a humble diversion they feel fit to offer the doomed, I suppose. A guard accompanied him on his treks, but I understand he was allowed to go at his leisure, to stop at will, meander where he would, unmolested, by decree. I, on the other hand, spent solitary hours in the Edison library, composing letters to my wife and sons. Each attempt I duly mailed and each returned in due course, stamped in angry red: refused, return to sender. Over the course

¹¹ Laundry and kitchen. [Ed.]

of a year the pile of rejected letters took on a melancholy weight; stacks of my outpourings, rubberbanded together, decorated the cell, like piles of rocks demanding to be broken. According to the particulars of my character, I resolved to break them (here the metaphor strains, but the reader should forge on). When a letter came back into my hands, I opened it and returned to the typewriter, reproducing exactly each kind word and gentle request. Slowly I copied my whole, tiresome corpus and committed fresh copies to a binder, in hopes that one day my sons will know their father did not forget them. It will be a melancholy novel, but a necessary one. And yet back to Paul. No matter how much I conjecture, I do not believe I ever knew much of his workings...the presumably fascinating texture of what he felt and thought. Perhaps a sad task, perhaps impossible. But we did communicate--we played games. He liked Rock, Paper, Scissors, and would partake in long stretches of noughts and crosses,¹² friendly and frivolous. I saw him at happy moments, however brief, and learned some, which is more than most--the idiot public, the damned media, and those hocus-pocus artists, the experts--can boast. At bottom, I am satisfied that Paul valued our friendship, and that he looked upon me with respect and no small amount of filial piety. For my part, I would have been glad to call him son, though I never dared.

Let end the general; let me now give a glimpse into my relationship with the Murderous Boy, with the hope of providing clarity and dispelling any rumors the dirty- and weak-minded¹³ public has seen fit to propagate:

¹² Tic-tac-toe, dear reader.

¹³ There are those who dare to suggest that my interest in Paul was at best proprietary, and at, worst, fiendish in intent. I am horrified. While it was unusual--and indeed unprecedented--for inmates of such a disparate age to share a cell, I felt it to be a privilege. My exemplary prison record (including a rank of "superior" in regards to behavioral matters) says all I wish to say by way of comment.

One night, a fortnight into Paul's stay at Edison, I awoke to the sounds of muffled weeping from the bunk opposite. I lit my reading lamp and pulled on a shirt before crossing the call--Paul lay prone and shuddering, his face pressed into his pillow to avoid waking me. I sat and placed my hand on the so-called Murderous Boy's¹⁴ shoulder and asked what was the matter. He looked at me, red-faced and teary, a cake of dried mucus ringing his nostrils. This I wiped away with a sleeve, and then went about cleaning him up in general, returning to the sink basin for water several times until his face was clean. Calmed, he related his dream. He found himself in the center of a cornfield, green and gold bounty flanking him on every side. A voice, disembodied, told him to gather ears of his choosing and walk out of the field, blessed to live without hunger for the rest of his life. He was told he must walk without ceasing, and that it would be impossible to turn back--and so he began. At first he did not gather; the food seemed adequate, but he held onto hope for better. As he continued, though, the plants diminished in size, and the corn looked undersized, brown, partially eaten away by pests. Still he held hope and didn't gather. Finally he came upon the last few withered stalks, which bore nothing, and then he stood in a bare field, under darkness, his arms empty. He cried out, forsaken, but there was no reply...and he awoke, sobbing, regretful. I instructed him to lay down, and I brushed a hand through his hair, telling him what a soldier he was, and how tough. I stupidly promised better dreams, and said I would sit near until they came. And he did fall to sleep in several minutes, but I cannot say what he dreamed.

This night did not leave me--does not, will not. I spent nights, cold, insomniac, body under my wool blanket, eyes on the textureless concrete ceiling. I wondered about my

¹⁴ I am remiss to have not explored this earlier. The term, not surprisingly, was bestowed, collectively, it seems, by the tabloid press.

boys, their nightmares, under which ceiling they slept, and where. A period of dreaming (day-dreaming, precisely--I did not sleep much) ensued, in which I imagined myself walking along a set of train tracks...a pair of defunct rails that ran behind my childhood home, where I spent summer afternoons alone. In my mind I walked along them, whistling, kicking at the dirt--in the present I thought of my own narrowing choices. As the reader likely knows, tracks of a certain length play a cruel trick of perspective. The two iron rails, while completely parallel, seem to meet and become indistinguishable from one another in the distance, to form a nexus of sorts. We often believe we will reach it. Analogous to trailing the tail-ends of a rainbow, however, this is an impossible enterprise...the walk continues, infinitely, and the nexus is never reached. It is an illusionary unity, a chimera owed to the feeble, hopeful mind....

I do not wish to speak of Paul's departure, but will. Because of the pain of it, I am forced to be brief. The event caught me unawares--I was not informed that Paul's time had come, and on our last morning I simply thought that Paul was on his way to daily work detail. In leaving Paul appeared composed and unafraid, and wore the same outfit as the first day he arrived. The cell door unsealed--fluorescent light and the scent of pine charged in, an affront to the musty and dim character of the room. Guards waited at the exit, wearing expressions that, on present reflection, told of their shame at being part of such an macabre enterprise.¹⁵ Paul walked to them, then turned, and stood near my bunk,

¹⁵ Infinitely interesting young men; not the jackbooted sadists prison films often suggest. Block Seven's guards, G. and D., were both family men who commuted daily from the eastern outskirts of Denver, early twenties, a high school linebacker and a varsity wrestler. For their part, they referred to me as "Professor," owing to my years teaching English at the community college level, and also for my long sojourns in the compound library (see above).

I describe them as pleasant and bewildered. G. and D. belonged to that increasingly broad group of Americans who can be more aptly summed up by what they are not, rather than what they are: not unfriendly, not unintelligent, not immoral. Conversely, one cannot say they were friendly, intelligent, or moral; when one comes to

where I sat finishing the laces on my shoes, threading the last eyelet. I greeted him, smiling. He began, speaking rather more strangely than usual.

Professor, he said, how long will it be before you forget me?

I can never forget you, I answered.

What can you offer me as a guarantee? he asked.

Only my word, I said. I have nothing else.

And how long before I am forgotten by the world? he asked.

I answered that I thought the world would not forget.

Again: what can you offer me as a guarantee?

I said nothing. Admittedly, I found myself perplexed at this, and stared at him, unable to formulate any other words. Paul, however, smiled at me and took my hand, giving me a firm handshake.

The true stories remain in the hearts of the poor, only, he told me. The rich believe they do not need them; they have all the plenty of the earth. But I will remain as testament until the rich are as the poor, until the world remembers as you remember. My spirit wanders the earth, appearing time upon time, in body upon body. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west; it is not necessarily so. It repeats its course for the benefit of the fool and they who doubt, all who wait before each dawn for their justification.

ascribing particular characteristics to people such as G. and D. the picture becomes quite nebulous, smeared and blurred at the borders of their persons.

In short, average men. Providers, not inquisitors. The paycheck received justifies the means, and so forth. I suspect they took their families to church every Sunday, and yet were no once guilty of remembering a word. (By way of compliment, I am grateful that neither, to my knowledge, has sold his "story" to the tabloids.)

At this, Paul said goodbye and left with the guards. I held up my hand--see you soon, son--just as I had at my own sentencing; in both cases, I do not believe my final gesture was noticed. After, I reported to work detail as usual, not knowing until late that evening the exact meaning of our last encounter...I cannot continue. I wept and weep, again. The reader, victim of the media deluge, knows the horrible finale, after all.

And yet, I cannot finish. Let us go on. I believe the reader should know more about this Boy, this 'aberration,' this 'quiet monster.'¹⁶ Each morning, the Murderous Boy awoke promptly with the first bell at seven o'clock, his pajamas rumpled and often mis-buttoned. Most often a dainty mucoid ball¹⁷ perched in the corner of one of his eyes, remaining there until I removed it with a swab of my forefinger. During this procedure, Paul resisted and squirmed, as my boys did when their mother or myself tried to minister an unwanted cough syrup, or ear drops. This marked the only time I found him the least bit incorrigible. The guards took Paul to a private shower, and thereafter we returned to the cell for breakfast. Paul disliked the sausage links and scrambled eggs, but devoured hash browns, and was supplied with contraband strawberry syrup for his pancakes, a privilege he indulged in liberally...he was, partly, a normal child. Thereafter, we reported for work detail and we spent the day apart, at our various labors. We returned at six o'clock. He, exhausted, most often retired then, waking for the dinner cart. After dinner, we often played simple games, as aforementioned. I regretted I never learned proper chess; I believe it would have been a pleasure to play against Paul. I tried at one point to teach

¹⁶ Direct quotes from the "average citizen," as transmitted by the howling dogs of the media: *Time*, February 2002, "Blood Brothers: The Old Testament Murders." I offer this as indicative of the reactionary, misinformed character of the press pertaining to Paul.

¹⁷ Euphemistically: "sleep." An adorable condition that plagued my birth sons, also.

Mordecai Brown, a complicated and fascinating game¹⁸ I developed while at Edison, but he, sharp as he was, did not grasp--or care for--the premises, and preferred to be alone with his drawing materials. At nine-thirty he performed his toilet, in anticipation of lights-out at ten p.m. Every night without fail he carefully brushed his teeth, splashing water on his face and the nape of his neck, always careful to wipe up the excess water with a tattered hand towel--frankly much more assiduous and responsible than some 'men' with whom I have shared space. At ten o'clock he found his bed and regularly fell asleep in minutes, untroubled by insomnia, and most often slept the entire night without incident. Sometimes he experienced nightmares and woke in fits of crying; on rare nights he walked across the cell and shook me awake--I stared up into his dampened eyes. In time, I would return him to sleep, and tuck his sleeping companion--a pink, plush stuffed pig, contraband--under his arm and wait until I heard that breathy, easy sound that indicates success and solace.¹⁹

If the reader expects denouement here, too bad--only rue and disdain follow. The moral to the story is quite apparent. I do not expect to teach because, I think, the public is disinclined to learn. For all the quietude and mercy we insist upon, I find fascination in the fact that during a time of tragedy, a climate of wild blame ensues. Accusations against the usual suspects--incompetent parenting, television, lack of religious guidance--abound, but are difficult to make out over the maddened howls for blood, any blood. Certainly the reader recognizes this scenario...the case of the Murderous Boy is its unfortunate *ne plus*

¹⁸ Played with three dice and two decks of cards. A worthy diversion whose rules are too various and intricate to delve into in this small space.

¹⁹ The dimensions of a cell at Edison: 12'x10'x8'. Bunks are placed opposite on another, on the east and west walls, with roughly four feet of space between them. One gets to know entirely the nighttime habits of one's cellmate.

ultra. And so ends my sermonizing. I am a father. I am a convict. I am not a clairvoyant, a psychologist, and expert of any stripe. Nor are the multitudes who have made their names on Paul, my surrogate son. Unlike them, however, I knew him, or at least found myself in close-quarters with him for a two month span, and believe I can claim a friendship with him, who in the end had so very few friends.²⁰ The others saw him as mere capital--demons, charlatans all! Yet the time of discord is seemingly over, or at least we have moved to another discord, a tragedy with different circumstances but undoubtedly a similar flavor. So now I must insist upon mercy, that American solace and quietude to which we are all entitled; let us bestow it on the Murderous Boy. In fact, may we all know such mercy. Mercy for the misnamed monster. He was, in fact, no monster. He was not Evil.²¹ On the contrary, he was strong. I say he possessed a gravity, such as the giants of history possess...a strength of mind which was unafraid of death and infamy, both. And due to this gravity he attracted the best and worst, without prejudice; it is a indiscriminate force, after all. So I ask that we let history draw the balance, but also to

²⁰ The behavior of Paul's parents, chiefly in his last days is simply abhorrent. While his father appeared in court regularly--in a shoddy wool suit and suitably hangdog expression--he was conspicuously absent on the day of final judgment, and only later released his infamous statement that 'JUSTICE has been satisfied.' (his caps)

The mother, who as we know claimed a collapse due to stress, turned up at a health retreat outside Boulder, MT, receiving treatment for 'exhaustion and imbalance,' o the day her son was killed. Her maladies, dubious at best.

Let us not look far or long for the monsters, reader.

(See also note 9.)

²¹ Those of us, like myself, who commit sin or crime in adulthood, found time to loose ourselves from innocence, to be gnarled unrecognizably by the world. We often find ourselves calculating, eliminating one or another of the forking paths that we may choose to take, and thereby arrive, by our own volition, tangled in thorns. Or will is eminently free and dangerous.

Paul's path, I submit, was almost singular, perhaps mandated by another, larger Hand. The pragmatic or agnostic will find this unpalatable; yet even if we be practical, and explain his actions in terms of faulty electrical impulses, or unbalanced chemistry, what then? Who to blame but the prime electrician, the one chemist?

consider that we tend to enshrine men such as these, men forced down the tracks of hard, narrow choice, circumscribed by iron. If such a fate befalls a man dressed in childish garb, we should suspend our disbelief. Perhaps we should not celebrate. At least we should keep hold of ourselves, act well and cautiously, and contemplate our own fates and choices.²²

Seven months after Paul's death, I was transferred from the Edison Compound to Whitney--the less said about the circumstances of the transfer, the better.²³ Almost a year after the dread event, I sat in my new cell, looking through a stack of Paul's drawings, ascension pieces, long after lights out...a full moon provided a modicum of light by which to read, and I listened for the footsteps of the night man, sounding out every fifty-eight minutes, which told me to lay down for a time and feign sleep. It seems mawkish, but I looked--and look--through them and find them hopeful, if indeed I am allowed such luxuries. At two o'clock, the whistle of the paper mill--situated nearby, constantly belching smoke and stinking--sounded three shrill calls into the night. I made an instant note of the disparity before I reached the explanation: daylight savings. Silence repopulated the night; I reclined on my bunk. What followed I fear to tell--I cannot say whether it came to me waking, or whether I had quickly slipped into sleep. I do not doubt myself; my sanity is beyond question. The reader can check the paperwork. At any rate, I saw Paul's image, an apparition of him engulfed in blue fire--he held a hand up to me in

²² Or, perhaps, this: it is easy to accept a lamb, who quietly dies so we can live and become fat on the result of the slaughter. But what if the lamb returns as a lion? What is our obligation? What is the answer? One wonders if it is that we, the forgiven--once decrepit and unworthy--are now called upon provide unlikely forgiveness.

²³ A violent incident which left a fellow prisoner in the hospital with a skull fracture, broken ribs, and a gouged eye. No blame was assigned, officially, but authorities reassigned the author to Whitney Compound. [Ed.]

greeting, half-smiling, and then was gone. Again, darkness. If it was a dream, I did not dream further. I woke at the morning bell, bound in my bedsheets, shivering from an acute case of night sweating. After work detail, I abandoned, briefly, my letter writing campaign and started to write out my account of the Murderous Boy, to speak the truth as I know it. I make no claims, but for one: I am not a liar. My conscience confirms me, and guides my pen.²⁴

²⁴ And so it is, my life today. I tell myself, alone and pained by sleeplessness, of the impossibility of what appeared before me. He is dead. Of course. A fiery projection of lame wishes. But I ask the reader to consider death. Who is dead? My sons are not dead to me, but all but dead, in essence. That is, in practice. Perhaps it is that I am death to them--who can say what explanations their mother employs. What is dead? Ask any incarcerated man if he is alive or dead, but do not be surprised at the answer. At best, we exist in transition--members of a purgatory who push our regret about like immense boulders, endlessly. Perhaps we are dead. Surely we do not live.

And so I insist upon Mercy, my Mercy. I ask that the remainder of my mortal life not go by without the company of my family. I admit my wrongs and that I am weak. My heart stinks of rot, and my mind lags not far behind--both are as the paper mill down the road, ugly, present, damnable thing, befouling everything. But is it not also industrious, and capable of use, if only we forgive its shortcomings? And who can read the account proceeding and say I am no father? Who can remain stone-faced when confronted with the way I cared for and befriended him, who all others hated?

My family: please forgive me; it is only in forgiveness that hope is found. Even you, Darling, can forgive as I forgive you, even as you lie and lie, and fill their ears with nonsense. But enough; it does not matter. I wish health to my sons, and ask for a gesture of remembrance--a card, letter, or photograph, anything they desire to send. I sit waiting. I ask for Mercy and deliverance, having nothing but time, otherwise poor. I am weak and poor and nothing but decay. Forgive me if I am boasting. I find myself glad to admit my errors and impotence--it means I am ready. Each day I await freedom or death; it does not matter which. It is all of a piece, and I rejoice.

Death: A Primer for Young People

Parents: Death, doubtless, is part of human existence. A germ of it is born with us and in us. The child encounters death before long, be it through the loss of a friend, relation, or even a precious pet. Unwelcome stranger, it comes into a child's life and can be very upsetting and confusing. Perhaps you yourself have experienced something of the sort. But the confusing nature of death should not make us less savvy or capable as parents, however. It is my goal to share advice and to allow parents and children to enter into a frank, nurturing dialogue about the subject. I hope that this primer, though brief, will help you and your child through the first steps of an uncertain, but impending, journey.

--Dr. Boyd Ada
Ithaca, NY, 1999

What is death?

Death is the end of life. We are born, we live, and at a certain point, our lives end. Sometimes people die from accidents, sometimes from being very sick, and sometimes from "old age." This means the body--imagine it a kind of bone and muscle machine--just can't bear further work, and it shuts down, often with a sigh of belated gratitude. Today, the average person can expect a life of seventy-five years, give or take. But it is true that not everyone lives that long, and that some die while still dear children.

Why is death necessary?

Everything is born and dies. This includes you and your parents and grandparents, brother or sister, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, all animals, and dainty and exact arrangements of flowers, no matter how lovely. The bananas in the wicker basket on the kitchen counter ripen and rot. They must be replaced.

Many will be born today, and all of them will someday die. It is certain. This leaves space for more people, who will be brought, today and tomorrow, into the great woolly majesty of existence. If no one died, the world would shortly become crowded. What an inconvenience! Your life would be so hustle-bustle! A minor miracle required just to get down the sidewalk at a reasonable pace, you can mark that.

Your ancestors, the parents of your parents' parents, and their parents' parents' parents, lived and then died for you, so you could be here, reading, today. It is strange but true. And necessary! People in the past had to live and also to die, so you could live and someday die. You live and die so that people in the future can live. You will not meet most of these people, but you can be certain that process goes along, without you. Life is nothing if not relentless!

What happens when we die?

The last exhale escapes and bends slightly the low grasses. The tender clockworks halts. Blue electric fire runs madly along the length of the bones, crackles, then fizzles and falls silent. Blood holds fast, and gives itself up to the whimsies of gravity; the flesh pales or darkens accordingly. The muscles unfurl. The lonely brain bucks and cries, running its steel cup across the bars. The eyes do not close on their own.

Is death like sleep?

Not remotely. Sleep is temporary; you can reasonably expect to awake in the morning. Death, though, is forever. "Forever" is a terribly difficult thing to understand. Because everyone dies, because we ourselves are temporary, it is almost certain that no one quite fathoms the concept.

Is death a punishment?

Death is NOT a punishment. It is not. There is no blame where death is involved. As we talked about earlier, everyone must die and the when and where are quite random. This is where a saying such as, "God only knows," likely comes from. So it is not what a person does or doesn't do that causes them to die.

On the other hand, three years ago, my wife and I were close with a couple who owned a chain of local drive-in restaurants, called Hopalongs. According to conventions, the waitresses delivered the fare on rollerskates; additionally, they wore a plastic headbands decorated with furry bunny ears, and cottontails were sown to the seat of their uniform shorts. The color scheme involved an unpleasant shade of fluorescent pink. Mr. Hopalong, the drive-in mascot, smiled out at passing traffic from a large illuminated sign overhead, his clumsy cartoon hand aloft in an eternal gesture of hello or goodbye. My friends purchased a pink costume, a miniature simulacrum of the chummy mascot, and as a promotion, zipped up an unlucky employee and set the double on the curb, to wave frantically at commuters during peak hours. My seven-year old daughter was enamored with this idea. She loved Mr. Hopalong, and repeatedly claimed him for a "boyfriend." She wanted to wear the costume. She demanded to wear the costume. She asked, begged, cried. At last, my wife and I decided...what harm could be done...so long as traffic was slow, and she kept back from the street, and one person kept an eye out for her, what was the chance a car might...

Does death hurt?

A man named Heidegger once wrote that "[i]n death the supreme concealedness of Being crystallizes." What a strange thing to say! This sounds complicated, but it means that

when someone close to us dies, we start to think about how pretty and precious life is. Also, we realize that we will someday die, and see that people around us will not be alive forever, but must someday back quietly into the darkening mists. How can we help but be melancholy? Death is usually not painful, except to those who are left behind. The dead themselves are disarmingly composed. In the casket, silent and waxen, they are calm-countenanced, often placid, and/or smiling embarrassedly, as if they wished people wouldn't go to so much trouble and grief. This is why you often hear them as being in a "better place." It is difficult to imagine a worse one. This life is unsure. Its dumb sick joy ends with the wounded scream of tires, a sound which should end, except for the mewling echo you hear in your ears, to this day. She goes up in the air, in a globe of pink flame. Rubber smoke. It all slows. The car halts, then speeds on, guilty. Obvious. While your cheek descends, hoping for soft warm breath from her mouth, your wife works at the zipper of the damned costume. It does not budge, and there is no breathing. The moment is locked in memory's amber.

Later the rabbit skin splits and peels under the duress of a pair of thick-bladed scissors. My daughter is born and dies, in concert. A patch on her knee where the blood clouds and darkens. There are small tufts of fluorescent fur, stuck haphazard in her hair, fluttering in the afternoon wind, curious butterflies.

Does Heaven exist?

The jury is out. Most Christians believe in a Heaven of some type, a cloud castle in the firmament, far above the hermit Earth. Here the righteous fly up, now possessed of wings, and are reunited with family and friends, who have gone into death before them.

However, there is no way to prove the existence of Heaven. We can call it the projected result of a theory of hope. Death's dream kingdom.

Some think that we are reborn into new lives after we die. This means we return and return, living again as other people, or even animals and trees, and more! This can be considered either lucky or unlucky. A man from Spokane, killed in a train derailment, is now the lanky kid stocking shelves at the grocery. The pony express rider, though taller, is again delivering the mail. That girl who died young waits on a life to be lived long and well; or is, perhaps, a smooth stone run over by the waters of a cold river, midday light shining through to illuminate her pale belly. Her father stands at the banks. He thinks the babbling waters, their burp and splash, might be his daughter's new voice, and he waits in silence to transcribe it. Perhaps there are no words. Perhaps the new voice is simply joy, not dull, mumbling exposition. I do not know. No one knows. Life and death are uncertain.

And some figure when life ends, there is nothing. We flicker, fade, and are mum. Here, we turn to science for comfort, at last. Simple thermodynamics suggests that we live on, in one way or another, even if only as a pulse of light, skirting planets and traveling the frigid bruised purple reach of outer space. A romantic notion.

Is it O.K. to be afraid of death?

Yes, but it is no use. There is no escape.

It is not my intention to lay blame, yet my memory is clear. My wife made the decision, herself. I told the child to ask her mother, after another trying round of her fingers at my pantleg, and that that decision she could consider final. My daughter ran off; wife and daughter returned in a pair, holding hands. The child leapt and bucked, pulling her mother's slack arm about, singing a nonsensical song about her deep desires for the

wearing of the Mr. Hopalong costume: daddepleasedaddee--pleapleapleapleaplease?
Well? asked my wife. I asked her to ask you, I said. I don't see anything wrong, she said,
with fifteen minutes or so. She'll get hot and tired after that. Yes, I agreed. So long as
we keep a watch on her, nothing will...and so on.

My wife left us and returned with the costume, a bright, empty skin slung over her
shoulder. It zipped from the left instep up to the neck. It smelled of acetate, perspiration,
the primal human odors--a curiously animal scent, and very unpleasant. My child put her
toes in the slippered bunny feet with the help of her mother, who worked at the zipper
pull. It stuck. The costume did not want on. The child's body squirmed, under a
darkening face which detected failure and sure disappointment. My wife jiggled the
pull--it ascended inch by inch, an unsmooth travel up the zipper, snatches of pink caught
up in the teeth, a constant problem. Impediments are not to be ignored; they provide time
for rethinking. My wife's forehead, sweat-beaded. Moisture damping down the fine hairs
trailing ahead of her ear, plastering them to her cheek. I see her working. It was a
struggle, all through. It took doing. It took doing.

What can I do if I'm sad about someone's death?

Understand it is right and okay to be upset. The best medicine is to try and remember the
good, to recall the happy times spent with the person who has died. Shuffle through old
photographs, if you can. Some like to visit the grave, and to talk to the person and
explain feelings. Bring flowers. It is appropriate to carry an object dear to the departed, a
toy or swatch of cloth. Pink fur. This is important. Clear the dry delicate leaves, the dust
and tumbleweeds, as best you can, and settle down on the grass, resting one hand on the
swirling marble headstone. There is a rattling wind to listen to, possibly. Possibly

nothing. It is best to just begin, as with a nighttime prayer. Tell her you miss her. Make sure you do not stay too long; despair puts down roots, deep and fast. Say so long, but see you soon. Get to your feet and turn and walk in the direction you've come, keeping a picture of her in your mind. There are odd furry insects in her hair and she is smiling and waving at the onrush of the living as they stampede past, purposeful, poker-faced. She waves hello and goodbye all at once; this cheers you and drives you along just enough, into another day, past the cemetery gates. Quickly, now, day loses its light. It is nearly done, but there is no silence.

A voice is heard: hold for another day.

A voice is heard: to err is human, to forgive is.

A voice is heard: I am become Death, destroyer of all things.

Sleep calls out in a sirenous song. Yes, soon: but first perhaps to another destination. There is an address, the hit-and-run driver's, recorded on a torn corner of paper deep in your pocket. Here is his street, here is his house. He is within reach, dangling at the loose ends of a frayed strand of mercy. All night he will walk through his home at the simple business of life, soundlessly, behind the glass. His movement calm and easy. Conscience light. Heart untroubled. Unaware of the presence of a new, implacable god, dressed as a man, unseen, watching the light-flooded windows, now holding him in palm and waiting for the proper time to close him tight.