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Stephen Randall Meyer
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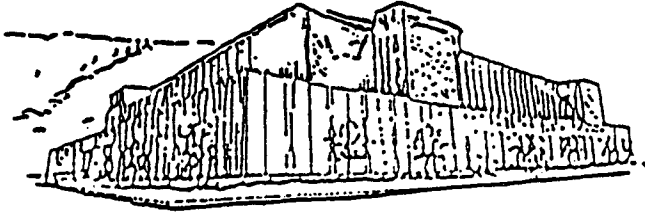
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Date

June 1, 1999

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XENOPHOBIA

by

Stephen Randall Meyer

A.B. Harvard University, 1992

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of


Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

1999

Approved by:


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The House of the Damned

THE WONDERFUL THING ABOUT XANAX is I keep finding money in the pockets of my clothes, a five in the back of my jeans, a roll of ones in my bathrobe, a ten and some coins in my coat. Of course, there are questions. Why was my coat draped over the medicine chest? How did that money end up in my robe? When I reach in the pocket I feel Kleenexes, which is normal. Then I touch the bills. My first thought is, Different paper. I pull out the whole bundle and hold it to the light, and in the middle of all the folded up tissues, and the shredded, wrinkled tissues, and the ribbons of candy foil, is money. Flat, faded green, American money. I double over, and hug myself. But now I need to figure out if some time this past week I went outside in my robe. I think about asking the guy who sits near the door if he saw me. That's another question, I should keep a list. Then there is the way I stumbled upon my coat. In the middle of the night, on my way to the sink, a faint glow from the window, over there, in the corner--an erect coat. I sneak up behind it with a pan, because I am going to beat whoever it is who has broken into my place. But it is my coat. I am happy to see it. And by now I've already found money in

my pants, and in my robe--and my shoe, though only a dollar--so right away I reach into the side pocket. And ten bucks!

I think about all the things I will buy: Pizza slices. Candy. Gloves. A new liner, for my coat. Forty-ounce beers, for my friends.

I throw the change on the floor, because by the end of the month I'll be down there on my hands and knees anyway, trying to scrape together whatever I can find.

What happened is they pulled me out of the river naked. I don't remember it. Afterwards they asked me what I remembered, and I said, Cold. When they told me I'd been found floating in the river with no clothes on I said that sounded right. They kept me in that room for days, asking me questions, squeezing me, pricking me, massaging my legs because they hurt. It was an old, dirty place, with a radiator and flaking blue paint. At night I lay awake, trying to remember, and listening to footsteps emerging, then disappearing, in the corridor.

Then I was in a place called The Seventh Floor. These two guys called Stick and Punky followed me around. They showed me the ropes. There were other names for the Floor--Ward, Bin. The Ring. Stick ran the couch in the TV room. He let me sit there. Other people who tried to do the same thing got yelled at, right in their ears. They got slapped. Punky roamed and looked at people's faces. He wore a black hat he was always pulling down over his ears, or pulling up over his ears, letting it flop onto the front of his head. There was an old guy named Sammy who slapped the walls and yelled, Boom! or, Bang!, and Punky liked to follow him around and imitate him. Boom! Bang! Punky has a talent for mimicry. Stick and Punky were my only friends. They called me Scratch. They taught me how to cover my medicine with my tongue and swallow, say Ah, then walk over to the couch and spit the pills into a baggie Stick kept in his bathrobe pocket. It was Stick who told me to tell doctors I felt anxious. When they asked me what kind of anxiety I was supposed to say, Nameless anxiety. That I couldn't breathe. That I felt

myself floating, somewhere above myself. This is what Stick taught me. It worked, boy. They couldn't write the scripts fast enough. I ask Stick what this means, nameless anxiety, and he smacks me and says, It means you don't have a name, Scratch.

Then they sent me to this place. There is a man who sits in a glass case near the door, a wide man with a gold tooth and rings on his fingers. His name is Ray. I ask Ray what kind of place this is, and he tells me it is a hotel. I ask him if I can have a room with a private shower, and a toilet. I ask him when I can expect the sheets to be changed on my bed. He slams the window shut. Last night I came downstairs and told him I was ready to check out. Should you call me a cab? I asked him. Go back to your room, he said. I went back to my room.

Stick and Punky were released at the same time. We've stayed in touch. On Thursdays we get together at the Steaks-Chops-Seafood restaurant on Second and trade meds. I always get good stuff from my doctor, Librium and Serax, Tranxene T-Tab. Valium. Percodans, for a while, when my legs were still thawing. Now Xanax. Stick drools when I show him the Xanax. You'd think I'd get something good in return, but no. Zoloft. Paxil. I am not depressed. I am not even anxious, really. I am confused. And I am being screwed. I know this. It is something I know.

When you step naked and wet out of the water, onto new ground, you should expect to be met by criminals before too long.

My name is Scratch.

There is a park across town. Thursdays I am supposed to meet Stick and Punky at the restaurant on Second. I can't keep track of the days. Well, Sunday, because things are different on Sundays, in a way I can't describe. The light is different. People on the sidewalks, in the subways move more slowly, or else too quickly. I am never wrong about Sundays. Or, at most, maybe once, out of ten times, I am wrong. The rest of the days blur together. So what I do is I go to the Steaks-Chops-Seafood place every day. I

sit and drink coffee and look at people, at things--spoon, cup, steam--and when Stick and Punky don't come I walk to the park. The people in the park are angry and sleepy. They sleep on the benches and underneath the trees, socks on their hands, newspapers tucked into their collars. They growl and squint and swat at the air, their socks barking mutely. It is like a show. Not for kids. I can see where kids would be scared. For drunks. Or people like me, who can't remember who they are, who have come into a world populated by people who steal drugs, people who hit each other, or threaten to, or merely wish to, people who sleep in parks and wear socks on their hands. I have promised myself I will never sleep in the park, even when the benches seem their warmest, their most inviting. I allow myself to sit. I watch the men in their worn-out coats, the women in sweat suits and headbands speckled with lint. They are ... my people.

The dirty Kraut down the hall calls this place the House of the Damned. He told me this the first time I met him, when I was waiting for the bathroom. I could hear the toilet flushing, near the end of its flush, that light, pure hiss that makes me think, The water is clean again. Then the dirty Kraut opened the door and looked me over for a long time and said, Welcome to the House of the Damned. Thank you, I said. I don't know what this means. A week later I come out of my room and he's standing there, in his doorway, skinny and droopy-eyed and brown as a paper bag. He wears dirty undershirts every day. He's one of these people who doesn't say anything for a long time while he's watching me. I don't say anything either. I try watching him, too, but I think he scares me. Finally he says, Are you enjoying your stay in the House of the Damned? I'm beginning to think this Kraut is bad news. This can't be where they expect to live when they come over from ... Germany. Not to mention the fact that he has only one line of dialogue. I think about how this Kraut maybe had a role once in one of those cheap scary movies where the bad guy is dirty and speaks in a foreign language. And he wasn't even the real bad guy, he was the bad guy's helper, the real bad guy was even dirtier, and so foreign that every time

he opened his mouth the whole audience turned to each other and said, What? No, the Kraut wasn't the bad guy, he was just the guy who opened the creaky door and held the candelabrum to your face and said, Welcome to the House of the Damned. I think that's what it must be, he's here, far from home, he's scared, living in a hotel which for one reason or another reminds him of a scary place he once knew, he doesn't know what else to call it, he doesn't know anything, he can remember only one line, has to repeat the same words over and over, play out his bit part...

I'm scaring myself.

They send me to an old doctor who is glad to give me medicine. He always says the same thing. What do you need this week, boy?, and, Do you want some samples? When I ask, Have they figured anything out yet?, he shakes his head and says, No. Have you? I think he'd be happier giving me his prescription pad and sending me on my way. Could I handle the responsibility? Do things work that way, ever? I don't know. I think it's up to the doctor. He gives me so many samples I have to carry them home in a grocery bag. I can't say I'm happy about it. But I suppose I am being dealt with.

I watch TV at my neighbors'. They leave their door open, just a crack, and I stand in the hall and watch their TV. The man opens the door and asks, Do you want to watch TV? I say, Yes. He lets me in, pats the couch cushion, beckons me to sit. I sit. He sits beside me. There is a talk show on. My neighbor is staring at me. His wife enters the room, brushing her hair. The man says if I agree to mind their baby I can watch their TV. I get up to leave. The woman grabs my arm. She promises it won't be long, they need to go to the store but they'll be back in an hour. She scowls as she pulls her brush through a tangle in her hair. She promises. I sit down. An hour, I say. The man nods. Yes. And she'll sleep the whole time. All you have to do is watch TV.

OK.

I watch a movie. It is a complicated one, but here goes: A good guy discovers a sinister plot against humanity. The bad guys come after him. And so the good guy goes to people he can trust for help. At first they're helping him, I think he'll make it out OK, these are good people, very helpful. But then I learn that more than a few guys are in on it. I lie down on the couch. Pretty soon about half the guys in the movie are in on it, including some of the good guy's friends. One is his roommate from college. They studied together. They had ideals. Now I understand the problem, that there's a fifty-percent chance that a given person, any person, is in on it. The good guys who are real good guys get shot. It's an ugly situation, all the people with controlled minds are committing crimes, glassy-eyed, bleating like robots, which reminds me, I haven't seen the Kraut in a couple of days now. Everyone I trusted at the beginning of the movie is disappointing me, pulling guns on the good guy, trying to strangle him with wires, and eventually I realize that everyone, but everyone, is in on it, whereas not long ago there were only a few, the evil plot seemed negotiable, the good guy could, even, have walked away and been none the wiser, he could have kept at his research and let the whole thing go and maybe two people would be dead, at most five.

I fall asleep without seeing the end. I wake to screaming. It's dark outside. The TV shows a woman in a nice suit. She is not screaming. Who is screaming? The baby is screaming. I can't find a light switch, the only light is from the TV, which is not reliable. At the moment they are showing an amphibian flopping around in a cave. The amphibian is black. It is a story about the world's only subterranean black amphibian. I follow the screams to the bedroom, I claw at the wall until the light comes on. The baby is standing in the crib, wailing. She shakes the bars and cries. I am so awake now I feel like my eyes are going to bleed. Every time I take a step toward her she screams louder. Her face is almost purple. I want to console her, but she doesn't want me. I run into the hall shouting, Hey! Hey! The Kraut stands in his doorway, shouting, Stop shouting! Stop shouting! I point at my neighbor's apartment, at the baby. The Kraut points at the

staircase, and so I point at the staircase, too, jabbing my finger in the air. I run down the steps. When I reach the ground floor I am shouting again. Hey! There's a baby! I can hear the baby's cries, but they are faint. The man behind the bullet-proof glass slides the window open and raises his fist as if to hit me. I'm almost out of breath, I have maybe one word left before I pass out, and the man, the desk attendant, the big guy, Ray, is about to hit me, his fist is cocked behind his ear, ready to drive his fat-ringed knuckles into my face, and so I say it, a whisper, *Baby*, before I fall onto my knees, let my face dip slowly until my cheek touches the cool tiles.

Among the riffraff of the park, my people, whom I've come to despise, there is an isolated bench where a little girl is sitting, holding hands with a somber woman in a blue overcoat. The girl's other arm hangs down over the edge of the bench, swinging a brown leather school bag. As badly as I'd like to sleep I am sitting, watching them. The girl watches me. I look away, at the trees, at the white sky. It seems horrid. I shove my hands deep into my pockets, poke my fingers through the holes. Stick and Punky didn't come today, and it is Thursday. I asked the man at the coffeehouse what day it was, and he said, Thursday. I am distrustful of the world, as things develop.

The little girl approaches me. She's holding a red piece of paper. When she's standing in front of me she says, You don't seem like someone who would sleep in a park.

I say, Neither do you. Besides, am I sleeping? I gesture at myself, drawing attention to my sitting position. I am not.

She sighs, stomps her feet. That's not what I mean. Your clothes, your face. They're not usual, for this park.

I am embarrassed. What do you mean? I say.

She tilts her head back, purses her lips. What do you do?

I hold up my hands, gesture at the trees.

The girl lowers her eyes. Fine, she says.

I invite her to sit on the bench, but she shakes her head, says scornfully, I promised Margie I wouldn't.

I glance at Margie, who is eyeing me like a hawk.

I say, So. What's on your mind?

I watch her mouth open into a grin. She has hardly any teeth! She hands me the piece of paper. I made this Chinese flag.

I hold the flag between cold fingers, feel the rough surface. Pasted on the corner are four crooked stars with stray pencil marks along the edges, and a moon shaped like a banana that has been squashed on one end. Also the moon has angles. I love this flag. I am ready to fold it and put it in my pocket, but then realize the girl probably worked hard to make it. I hand it back.

She says, You can keep it.

I say, That's all right. You worked so hard on it.

She rolls her eyes and thrusts the flag onto my lap. It took me five minutes.

Margie is stalking toward us now. She seizes the girl's hand, then rubs it, smiles at us. Is Tara trying to make you keep her flag?

Tara wriggles her hand free. I gave it to him.

But you need that flag for school.

I can make another one. It was a gift. You can't take back a gift. It's rude.

The woman smiles at me and raises her eyebrows. I shrug. Margie shakes Tara's shoulders, gently, and says, Well, we have to go home now. Your mother will be getting back from art class. Say good-bye.

Tara says good-bye. Margie takes her hand firmly, and they walk down the path. Tara leans away from Margie as much as she can, her arm straight, her body tilted over the grass. Margie leans in the other direction. If either of them lets go they will both topple onto the ground. I am nervous. I don't want anyone to get hurt. I suppose it's inevitable, but please, not now. I watch them walk away, slanting back and forth across the path.

In my mind, beyond the gray sky, beyond the street, behind the brick corner of the apartment building, I watch them fall.

I fold the flag and stick it into the pocket of my coat, and I lie down on the bench.

I wake in darkness, freezing. I lurch across town as fast as I can. When I get home I can't find that flag anywhere. I dig through the pockets of my coat and my pants three times. I am devastated, sadder than I've ever been, because of all losses this one seems, by far, the most irrevocable.

We arrive at the restaurant at the same time. Punky holds the door for me, and I nod briskly and walk to the nearest booth. We sit, pull off our hats, unbutton our coats, dump the vials and change from our pockets onto the table. We are like trappers on the frontier.

Stick opens a vial and pulls out a large, oblong pill. He holds it between his thumb and finger, pushes it in front of my face.

What's that?

Vicadin, baby. Believe me, you want this.

It is the nicest thing Stick's ever done for me. But already I know I'm going to get screwed. Guarded, I ask, What do you want?

I'll give you two for fourteen of your Xanax. Plus you have to buy us forties.

I am bored with Xanax, almost glad to get rid of them. But the price seems steep. I say, What kind of deal is that?

Trust me. You want this.

I am not a good negotiator. Still, I need to get something else. I say, OK, but you have to buy me pizza slices.

Stick rolls his eyes. Fine.

Slowly, I count out fourteen pills, drop them into Punky's upturned hand. Stick slides the Vicadin across the table, and I palm them and shove them in my pocket.

At the deli I buy two beers. I carry them out in paper bags. Stick is holding my pizza slices--crummy ones, from the Chinese-Cuban cafeteria next door. I should have specified. I hand the beers to Punky and Stick, grab my slices and tell them good-bye. Stick calls out, You should go home to do those, Scratch. Really. But I ignore him. I pull out the pills and swallow them as I am walking, washing them down with my pizza and my spit. I go to the park.

When I wake up it is evening. I see Tara walking away with Margie. My feet are numb. Tara is going home, and I haven't even heard her voice. How did this happen? This is bad, if she saw me sleeping. I want to shout, Look! I'm awake!, I want to get up and walk, inspect the garbage cans, harass the pigeons, something. But I don't move: the bench is warm against my cheek, Tara is already on the other side of the park, there is wind, a flutter of dirty papers, and pigeons--and Tara and Margie have already crossed the street.

It takes me a minute to realize there is an old man sitting at the end of the bench. I look him over. He is jolly. He turns to me and smiles. Seen better days, have you, my friend?

I pull myself up, shivering. I say, No.

A book protrudes from the pocket of the man's coat. He holds his hands together on his lap, looks at a tree.

I want him to leave, but he seems intent on meeting me. I sigh, and say, What's your story?

My story? Hmmm. The age-old question. Let's see, my story... He strokes his chin. Well, if I had to tell my story here's how I would begin. It is 1953: My grandmother's rhubarb pie is cooling on the windowsill of the kitchen. Or this. The summer of my tenth year: We are cowboys, chasing ponies up the hill.

What the hell are you talking about?

I'm telling you my story. Can you hear the colon? It is simple, but effective, no? A way of ordering? A means of evoking? Try it. Everyone has a story to tell. How old are you? Thirty? OK. Try this. Finish this sentence: It is 1974:

I can't.

Sure you can.

I can't. I don't remember 1974.

OK. It is 1981:

I shake my head.

The man rubs his face. He says, Try this. It is 1997:

Is it 1997?

He closes his eyes. Yes.

I think hard. I say, It is 1997:... But I don't know what to say next. I've received no new information. Am I expected to make something up? Do I say, It is 1997: My feet are cold? Then what? How do I go on? I'm not even sure I've ever eaten pie. I remember pies, and ponies, but not as parts of my life. All I can think is that I am cold, that this park, this weather is my story. I try it again. It is 1997:... I turn to the man and say, Why are you bothering me?

The man puts his hand on my leg. He is jolly again, but in a sad way. I'm not trying to bother you. I'm trying to help you. Telling our stories can help us heal, help us order our lives.

I don't have a story.

Sure you do. You need to learn how to dig deeper.

I see the book in the man's pocket and grab it. I ask, What's this story?

The man reaches for the book. I pull it away. He smiles with clenched teeth.

Those aren't stories, he says. They're poems. OK, now. Give it back.

I open it to the first page and read:

Long-tailed ponies go nosing the pine-lands,
Ponies of Parisians shooting on the hill.

I say, This reminds me of your story.

He gets up and waddles toward me, arm outstretched. C'mon, give it back.

I turn the page and read aloud. Piece the world together, boys, but not with your hands. I think about this. Well, I say. I close the book, searching for the title, but the letters are worn away.

The man lunges, seizes the book. We tug. The old man is turning red, breathing heavy. Give ... me ... back ... my ... library ... book! he gasps.

I let go, and he staggers back. Fine, I say. He hugs the book to his chest and turns on the path. Muttering, he walks to the edge of the park.

When I am back in the hotel I sit on my bed. I think, OK, I'll try this. I'm going to tell my story. I rub my head, make circular motions along my temples, close my eyes, open my mouth, say, It is 1997:

The parents of the child have come back. It has been weeks. The city came and took the child away a long time ago. From my bed, under the sheet, I hear the parents unlock their door. It takes a few minutes--a scratch at the lock, keys falling on the floor, a groan, a slow creak of limbs. I hear the Kraut say, They took away your child. I don't hear anything else for about a minute. A door shuts, then another door shuts. I stay in my room. I expected to hear voices: the woman crying, the man murmuring, It's all right, or, Damn this life. More than anything I want to hear the baby's screams again. This makes me feel bad. I am crying. There is nothing I can do. So many mysteries in this house, and no one tries to explain. People disappear, and we live with the loss.

Cold in this park; cold. I wake to find Tara pulling on my sleeve. Here, she says, and hands me two dollars. Take this. I take the money. Even though I hate myself the second I touch it I take the two dollars and shove it in my back pocket. Margie is behind her, yanking on her arm. I am too tired to speak. I told you not to give that man your

money, Margie says. Tara lurches back, becomes a blur. I am too tired to thank her, or to apologize for my need.

I open my door. The Kraut is standing there, waiting for me. He says, This is truly... I slam the door, press my shoulder against it as hard as I can, wishing to break his nose. He knocks three more times, then goes away. I walk to the window, look at the window across from mine. It is covered by plywood. If I leaned out over the sill I could touch it. But I am afraid to. I go to my bed and sit down and I say, Piece the world together... I wonder what the reconstructed world would look like. Would there be ponies? Would it rain gold? I am trying to find the pieces. Out there, in the cold, there are all those people. They seem so unbelievable, to me, so irrelevant, so nasty and so guttural, so silent, so, so silent, so forgetful, so brave, sometimes, on occasion, rarely, here and there, good...

I wish I could keep sleeping. I wish I didn't have to wake up.

When I find Stick and Punky at the restaurant I sit down in the booth and say, I don't have anything.

Stick raises his eyebrows. You don't.

I shake my head firmly.

Stick exhales, looks away. Then he turns to me and says, Well, you know what this means, right?

No.

Let me remind you: Last time we agreed that the next time you came back with nothing you would suck my cock.

I tell him I don't recall that conversation, but Stick merely nods and says, We did, we did. We agreed. Punk?

Punky nods.

And then Punky is kneeling on the bench behind me, holding my arms tight. With a violent sweep of his arm Stick pushes the coffee cups and the spoons and the napkins off the table. I hear the clatter of spoons on the linoleum. A cup shatters, another one bounces across the floor. Coffee pours down into my lap. I scream. I convulse, shaking my arms, my shoulders, but Punky is strong, and I cannot budge. Stick climbs onto the table. His fly is undone. He kneels in front of me with his cock aimed at my mouth. At first I am going to yell, Get that disgusting cock away from me!, but it is better to keep my mouth shut. I try so hard to twist my face to one side that I feel as if it will end up on the back of my head, and I will be looking at Punky, who will be leering.

Stick is slapping his cock against my nose when the guy who owns the restaurant storms over, screaming, Get the fuck out of my restaurant, you filthy fucking pervert asshole shits! I'm calling the cops! Punky's grip loosens, Stick's cock is back in his pants. We are running for the door. The man chases us out, shouting, I never want to see you in here again! Never!

We run two blocks. On the corner of Second and Tenth Stick slows down. He is laughing too hard to run. He stops, leans forward, hands on his knees. Punky stops next to him, breathing heavily, head tilted upward, looking at the white sky. It has begun to snow. Punky sticks out his tongue. I stand near the curb, a good ten feet away, watching them carefully. My crotch is cold.

Between breaths Stick points at me and says, Next Thursday. Bring some Xanax.

Punky is confused. Wait, he says. Where are we going to meet?

Stick gestures West. At the Steaks place on Third. Got that, Scratch?

They are laughing again, tears streaming down their cold cheeks. And I know that next week they will be waiting for me. And then I understand the problem. There is always another Steaks-Chops-Seafood place down the street, always another quack willing to write prescriptions. There are always more degradations, an infinite number of abuses. There is never an end of the line.

I go to the park. I haven't seen the doctor in two weeks. I take only pizza slices now, and coffee, no Xanax, no Valium, no Vicadin. I can hardly sleep anymore, and I am almost glad. I sleep in flashes, opening my eyes every few minutes to register a new sound, or changes in light. Things have never seemed so clear, not in my whole life. Sometimes, in the darkness, I will open my door, lean my bare shoulder against the frame. There is a red light near the Kraut's room. He is never awake at this hour, Thank God. Standing in the hall, alone, staring at the red glow, trying to penetrate the silence, I think, This is a reason to fight it, this is my reason to stay awake, for the silence: the lovely, pregnant nothing of a rooming house in the middle of the night.

I never thought it could be so cold. The girl is not here. I stand near a garbage can, watching the men huddled against tree trunks, trembling on benches. The steam of their breath obscures their faces. The whole park is obscured by steam. A lone man in an overcoat stamps his feet on the cement. He stoops, and his coat is large, made of coarse tweed. He looks like a discarded armchair. Everyone keeps perfectly still. The air is clear, the grass is unlit. Everything is clean. I see a plastic cup on the ground, and I pick it up and drop it into the trash.

I have a long wait ahead of me. It is too cold for the girl to visit the park. I sit and watch her bench. I am wide awake. I've had two dollars in my back pocket for almost a week. I will not spend it. It is for Tara. I will keep it in my back pocket until I see her again. This is the first thing I need to do, even if I have to wait until spring.

A man sits on Tara's bench. He begins pulling at his shirts, shirt after shirt up against his chest. I count them, one two three, until the end. At the end I say, Five shirts! I can't believe it. The man has exposed a round, pale belly. He rubs at it. I have never paid any mind to what this crowd does, but that is the past, now, and so I get up and walk over to him. He is picking at a scar on his stomach. I ask, What are you doing?

He looks up meekly. I have an itch, he says.

I shake my head and tell him not to do that in public. Go behind a tree.

He is indignant, but unsure. Lowering his eyes he mutters, This is my park as much as it is yours.

I know he can't defend himself, so I grab his sleeve and pull him up. I push the man, gently, and say, It's rude. Go. Over there.

The man glares at me with red-rimmed eyes, but quickly looks back at the ground. What gives you the right? he asks, whimpering.

What gives me the right? I shout. I grasp the lapels of his sport coat and shake him. This is my territory, now, I know it. Everything is new, so much opportunity, so much promise, in spite of all these signs of decay and so little to want. The man is whining, so I shake him again, give him a firm shove. Dejected, he staggers toward the tree. As I watch him go I feel something like pride. It is 1997, and I am kicking some ass. It's enough. As far as I'm concerned there is no House of the Damned, there is no dirty Kraut, no story guy, no mean Ray, with their poor attitudes, their plagiarized lives. There is a bed for me and not much else. I know this. I know there is a child, too, I suppose there must always be a child--an orphaned baby, a small girl--it is one of those things that people wake up in their beds knowing after warm, contented sleep. The stomach scar man is trying to come back, he's looking around like he's not up to anything, but he's definitely making his way toward the bench. I raise my fist, and he retreats. I sit and keep watch. I want to rule the world. I am a perfect candidate. When I see Tara again I will ask her to make me another flag. She would do that for me, she did it once before, it only took her five minutes. It doesn't even have to be Chinese. It could be a brand new flag, the flag of me. Three banana-shaped moons instead of one. Twenty stars. The man is approaching the bench for the third time, I am about to climb down and let him have it when he lifts his hands away from his body and cries, I promise not to pick my belly! Gravely, I nod my assent. He sits. It is the girl's bench, and I know she won't be back until spring, but still I will come here every day, I will watch the people who turn to lower themselves, coldly,

coldly, onto the rock hard green slats, I will watch them and love them at the same time, I will watch them, and I will admonish them, and I will love them, all.

Xenophobia

FROM THIS WINDOW, if I press my head against the wall, if I turn my eyes sideways until they start to throb, I can see Switzerland: the softly sculpted V of the tree line, the wildflowers and long grasses, the magpies chattering in branches, the imitation chalet on the crest of the next hill. I can believe I'm in Switzerland, and not here. I am unimpressed by my imagination these days-- of all places to escape, Switzerland, it isn't exactly at the top of the list, there are better places, there is Paris, there is equatorial Africa--but I'm doing the best I can with the available materials. Of course, I have to make excuses for the cows; the cows are conspicuously absent. Yet this is easy enough. They are resting in the shade behind the chalet. On less sunny days they go to explore the creek over the next rise. As long as my downstairs neighbor in the shiny jogging suit isn't trotting down the hill, clutching his herbs, as long as the cub scouts aren't beating on the screen door of the chalet with their sticks (rumor has it some gun nut lives there, and I wonder, what is my obligation to the cub scouts?), as long as there are no deer loitering in the pasture across from me, I'm OK. As long as I don't turn away from the wall and stand directly in front of the window, see the hippie clothes hanging on the line beneath me, the bright plastic toy

rider mowers with scuffed fenders scattered over the brown lawn I share with fifty other tenants, then I am OK.

One day I am not OK. One day I press my head against the wall and I am not happy. Switzerland seems too tidy, too efficient, suddenly, Switzerland has funiculars and railroads and taxes, it has neutrality--and the thought of this, as I feel myself transported once again into the Alps, leaves me cold. I am wary of my association with Switzerland. And, slowly, a deep resentment of the Swiss and their culture takes root inside me.

By the end of the month I am living in the center of town, in the center of the valley with everyone and everything else, and I am truly, irrevocably, here. The city buses stop a block from my house, women in Tibetan hats pedal their bicycles over the sidewalk. Maple leaves fall. There are no deer outside my window.

Past Life

When I was nineteen my girlfriend and I had a kid. This was in Boston, when I was a student. I moved out of the dorm and went to stay with Eileen in her parents' house. We lived in her bedroom. The double bed was narrow. The view outside, of telephone wires and tree branches, and in the background a solid field of brick--the view that once seemed so exciting those afternoons in high school when I would lie sleepy and think, this is Eileen Shay's bedroom, she was a little girl here, once, sleeping--the intersecting lines of cable and wood came to represent the new demarcations of my life, the coordinates of some malignant formula, the fixity of a recurrence. Eileen's parents slept down the hall, behind an old varnished door. Matthew slept in our closet.

I thought we were content. Then one day Eileen started talking about how none of this was really my responsibility. We're not married, she said. It's all my responsibility if you decide to leave. I didn't know where this was coming from. I wasn't leaving. I said I'd marry her, if she wanted. She rolled her eyes and said, What, is that supposed to make me feel better?

I left. I dropped out of school, and moved out here. I haven't seen Eileen since. The first couple of years she sent me pictures of Matthew, whether out of sympathy or spite I couldn't tell. It didn't matter, because I was glad to have them. I taped the photos onto my refrigerator in chronological order. I watched him grow older: Matthew at six months, Matthew at eight months, Matthew at one, Matthew at two. His face was a confirmation: whatever I might or might not have in this world, I knew I had a son.

It was late spring when Eileen's father called. There's been an accident, was all I heard him say. I slouched against the kitchen wall and looked out the window, at the evening air. I remember wishing for it not to get dark. Are you there? Mr. Shay said. Yes, I said. We didn't speak for several minutes. The kitchen light came on in the house across the alley. A thin woman in a flowered dress ran water in the sink. I told Eileen's father I wanted to talk to Eileen. He said, You're not talking to Eileen. In a clogged voice he added, He fell. He just... fell.

I didn't leave the apartment for two weeks. I wandered from room to room with a quilt draped over my shoulders, pressing my hands against the walls and muttering, Peace. The toilet broke. The stove broke. I hung blankets over the windows. One morning I put on my clothes and climbed down the stairs. I stepped out into the parking lot, shielded my eyes. It was warm, the sun was bright, and it was snowing. The advertisement on the roof of a taxi showed a smiling man in a cowboy hat. To the right of his face a caption read, Paradise is Open for Business! I fell on my hands and knees, in front of a crowd of people standing outside the church, and sobbed. I knew nobody.

For a while I received pictures of Matthew every year around his birthday--Matthew at two, Matthew at two, Matthew at two--every year for three or four years, until eventually they stopped coming, and I stopped hearing from Eileen for good.

Special Education

I take notes for a Special Ed student with withered hands. Bonnie is a sweet woman, decent looking, considering. She holds her hands twisted together in front of her when she walks, as if searching for someone to untie her. Her immutable grin--a neurological disorder, a symptom of her condition--gives her a shy, doltish look, and she seems, on the surface, to be a pleasant person. But I am no longer fooled by her appearance. Once I asked her--because I was curious--if she felt trapped living here. Look at me, Bonnie, I said. I'm a ruined man. Doesn't it get to you, being stuck in this valley?

Bonnie shrugged, and smiled even wider. Not at all, she said. By the way, could you help me? I can't seem to find my gun, and I was supposed to blow my head off three years ago.

God, I'm sorry. But seriously--don't you think about leaving?

Oh, I will. One day I'll ride that Greyhound straight to New York. I'll jump out into the middle of the street and scream, Here I am, big city! Look out now! She waved her arms in the air and chased me around her apartment. Moving behind the sofa I asked, Bonnie, is this somehow related to your condition?

I'll give you a condition, she said. I lunged for the front door and ran into the street.

Bonnie lives in my old neighborhood. Sunday nights I go to her house. She gives me tea, and I decipher my notes. This can take some time, depending on the quality of my previous week. When I finish I will walk past my old apartment to see what the new tenant is doing. He is never home. I still have a key, so sometimes I go up and sit in a stuffed rocking chair, in the dark. I look out the window, at the tall grasses stirring in the moonlight. I have made a pact with myself never to turn on the lights inside my old apartment, out of respect for the new tenant's privacy, and out of fear of the new tenant.

Past Life

Our sister city is Leysin, Switzerland. At the time the relationship was established I was working for a woman named Maggie at the Chamber of Commerce. The sister city project was Maggie's idea, and it eventually ruined her. I bet if you stopped someone in the street today and asked them what our sister city is, they'd probably punch you, but back then it meant a lot to the people who worked for the Chamber of Commerce. You'd think they had tracked down an actual sister when they announced that Leysin would be our new sister city. People in the office cried. I don't know if anyone in Leysin cried. Judging from the pictures I've seen of Leysin--bright green meadows, cows with bells hanging from their necks, sleek trains, clean streets--I'd say there's no reason to expect the Swiss to come visiting soon. And if they did the first thing I'd expect to hear when they stepped off the plane would be, This is not what it looked like in the photographs.

There were a lot of details to attend to: setting up exchange programs, enlisting third graders to draw maps, determining a lingua franca. Leysin had already selected a town representative, a local philosopher named Benjamin. Maggie was supposed to write back to him, but I think she felt intimidated by Benjamin's first letter--in part because he said philosophical things, mainly, I think, because he referred to himself as Benjamin--and so she begged me to take her place. Write poetic things about our town, she said over my shoulder, as I stared at the blank sheet in the typewriter. Finally I wrote that I had great respect for the Swiss philosopher Kierkegaard. Benjamin quickly wrote back to say that Kierkegaard was Danish, not Swiss. While he was on the subject he asked me at which of the four stages of the sickness unto death I would place myself. I wasn't sure, but I figured the second sounded reasonable enough, and told him so. He replied that he was at the third, and fully expected to reach the fourth within the next eighteen months. I didn't care, really, it seemed that locating oneself further along the road to the sickness unto death couldn't have been all it was cracked up to be. But there was something in his letter that got to me--the certainty of it, or the way he underlined I, as in, *I* am in the third stage--and

so when I responded I clarified my position, said I was on my second run through anyway, but could sympathize with what he was experiencing, knew it was rough, and I wished him the best.

I didn't hear from him for a long time.

Xenophobia

In the Intro to Special Needs lecture hall students yawn, play with the zippers on their jackets, pluck at the spokes on their wheelchairs. Bonnie sits beside me, staring at her hands. I believe she is sleeping. This class is what the physically challenged call a gut. After the first week Bonnie told me I could stop taking notes in this one. I spend the first half hour of the class going over my notes from Women in Literature, checking for potential handwriting issues while the note-taking experience is still fresh. The second half hour I prepare a new page in the Women in Law notebook, writing in the date, and perhaps, Women in Law. I look at all the students in the room and try to feel fortunate, somehow, although usually what I feel is envy. I can't think of half as many people in the world with whom I've shared a common concern, let alone the last time we all got together.

In September Bonnie gave me fifteen dollars to buy notebooks and pens. I can't remember what I spent the money on--lunch, probably. The day before school started I stole some pens from the public library. On my way home I met a man sitting outside the bank. On a green blanket spread out beside him he had arranged mittens, bicycle parts, and used school supplies. I bought four notebooks for a dollar. One of them had a spider's web painted in white-out across the cover, and two had Betsy Freegart's name on them. Otherwise they were in good shape.

Opening the Women in Law notebook now, however--the one with the spider's web, which I've been chipping away with my thumbnail--I am a little disconcerted to find that the next blank page is, in fact, not blank. The next page is covered with a dense, erratic scrawl in red ink. I glance at Bonnie, who is snoring. At the top of the sheet I can

make out, in bold letters, *The Most Dangerous Toy: A Manual*. But beneath it I can decipher nothing. It looks almost as if the previous student wrote sentences on top of sentences, letters superimposed on other letters to create new, extravagant, indecipherable letters. I have no idea what this particular project may have been. In the middle of the page I think I can make out one line, or part of a line. I read the words aloud: Nature is a nightmare.

Bonnie's head jerks up, and she blinks. People have begun to stir. I hear the zip of backpack zippers, the thump and squeak of wheelchair brakes unclamping. At the end of every few classes the students seek each other out, in the aisles, behind the long tables, and they embrace--men smack each other in the back with their hooks, the people who can walk limp to those in wheel chairs and bend forward into their laps. Today is such a day. A woman with short gray hair grasps Bonnie's hands to her chest like a bouquet. They press their foreheads together, rock their bodies back and forth. I leave the lecture hall, and wait for Bonnie in the corridor, because I am a sworn enemy of the friendly hug.

Past Life

I imagine that people--if I had any contact with people, if my life were an open book--people might be saying about now: Wait a minute. You are hero in Switzerland. You rescued the drowning calf from the river. The Swiss *love* you. This is a misunderstanding. In fact, when last month my Swiss correspondent sent me a photo clipped out of *Le Matin*, of a man standing by the banks of a river, hugging a calf, I was not immediately struck by any resemblance. The photo has, to be fair, a pleasing composition. Man and calf are drenched. The man grins, a farmer in a big hat slaps him on the back, the calf's tongue is sticking out. The mountain in the background is not fat like the ones here but dramatic, jagged and sharply pointed and covered with snow and streaks of black rock. My first thought is, Now that's a mountain. In the border of the photo my Swiss correspondent has written, My American friend? I look at the hero more

closely. Yes, there are similarities in the outlines of our jaws, yes, one might say of us both that when we smile, we smile big. In truth the resemblance is only vague. But then I turn to the second piece of paper, sturdier, cleaner. It is a photo of a youthful looking man in a military uniform. The caption identifies him as Joachim von Ribbentrop--Nazi Foreign Minister, 1938-1945. The photo has been exacted from a book. The incisions of the exacto knife are not smooth, they wiggle a bit, shaggy strands of paper line the borders. But that's not important. What troubles me is that while the hero of Leysin bears only an obscure resemblance to me, his resemblance to von Ribbentrop is striking. And I can't quite explain the tiny yet intricate sensation of guilt that has bloomed inside of me at this moment.

Past Life

When Maggie became completely obsessed with the sister city campaign she had me running around doing all sorts of non-job-related tasks. This included, on occasion, watching after her little girl Lila. Lila was two.

We spent most of our time at books. She pointed at pictures, and I told her what everything was: dog, bird, moon. Sometimes she'd point at a blank area of the page. Page, I'd say, but with a curious lack of conviction. Sometimes, if I tried to move her finger back to the bird, she would lift her hand and gesture at the ceiling. Finally one day I asked her, Do you think we could concentrate a little, here?--a little harshly, I think, because Lila began to wail. So I let go of her hand, and again she pointed up, tilting her head back and cooing. I stared at the water stain on the ceiling and took a deep breath. Bird, I said.

When it got a little warmer I started taking Lila for drives in the afternoons. After lunch I'd pack her seat into my truck and we'd head out of town, and I would go thirty or forty miles down the state highway. I gradually learned how to time it perfectly: as we entered the countryside Lila would nod off; then at the proper time I'd do my U-turn, one

smooth loop in the middle of nowhere, and we'd cross back into the city limits just as Lila was starting to wake again.

One day I spotted an emu ranch off the side of the road. I pulled over onto the shoulder, and Lila opened her eyes. We sat for a minute in the truck, not making a sound. Lila gaped at the surrounding hills. The emus stood behind their fence, grazing. Their long necks swayed. It occurred to me that this was significant. I got Lila out of the car and hauled her down the hill. The snow was deep, and encrusted with a layer of ice. I had to raise my knees above my hips as I walked. I didn't know why, exactly, I wanted Lila to see the emus. I knew I couldn't tell her, Those are emus; couldn't explain, Well, they're birds, but they can't fly; couldn't compare them to ostriches; couldn't say, Don't ask me what they're doing here behind a fence; couldn't throw up my hands and shout, No, I don't know where the hell they're from, go look it up somewhere--I couldn't share anything of what I was going through, could only hold Lila in front of the fence and make her look, in the hope that something might be exchanged, on some level, that something might, I don't know, transmit, so that twenty, thirty years along Lila might recall the strangeness of this day, those rare, somber birds standing in a cow pasture, so that even as she stares at the desolate geography and thinks, this makes no sense, this is not what I had in mind, it is even a little bit terrible, she might remember this moment, and say: But I can live with it.

In the end I don't know what Lila got out of the experience. Mainly she wanted to get down and walk on the snow. But something transmitted itself to me, that afternoon. The necks of the emus were slender, and elegant. Their feathers blew upward in the wind, so that they looked like collars on expensive coats. A distant, hollow sound, like a primitive drum, rose from their breasts. They paced before us, heads swerving, and I felt a stirring, a longing, for something I had missed along the way--maybe when I was living with Eileen, trying to imagine a happiness; or much later, huddled in mortifying isolation

next to my window, watching the snow come down: a cold beauty passing from the world.

Lila screamed and thrashed all the way back to the truck. At the edge of the field I set her down on the snow. Go ahead, I told her. Walk. But she didn't break through. The going was difficult--the surface of the snow was slick, the craters of my footprints made Lila nervous. But slowly, with great care, she started back down the hill, toward the emus--thinking it over before each step, pointing her finger, not at the birds, but at some obscure region of sky.

I watched her for five minutes--squatting to poke her finger through the ice, peering into a hole, turning toward me to comment. Finally I trudged out and grabbed her and carried her back to the truck. I drove fast. She complained bitterly for the next thirty miles. Approaching town, watching the fog seep into the valley, encloaking us, grinding my teeth every time Lila whimpered, I asked, Who do I think I am? What reassurance do I think I can offer anybody?

The phone was ringing when we stepped in the door. It was Maggie. She would more than likely be at the office all night--the ethnicity parade was in less than a week. Would I stay over with Lila until the next day? I agreed without hesitation. I felt grateful for the extra time, as if a few more hours would somehow make a difference. Maggie's voice betrayed her apprehension. She didn't really know me at all. In asking me to stay with her daughter overnight she had at long last submitted her unconditional surrender--to the town, to the Chamber of Commerce, to sister cities all over the world, to the Swiss. I didn't understand the gravity of this defeat at the time. I only wanted to make Lila laugh before bed. If the real extent of Maggie's distress was apparent, my own nameless panic prevented me from seeing it.

But the crux of the story is this: at four in the morning I heard Lila ranting in her crib. I could see the outline of her face leaning over the rail, not quite whispering, although her syllables were hushed and rapid, and seemed to carry a certain urgency. My first

thought was, Good God, I've driven Lila insane. As I tried to calm her down I wondered if she was trying to say, enough is enough, no more obstacles, no more outings. But I don't think that was it. Of course, I can't say this for sure, but her voice seemed to convey concern. And as she continued babbling, even after I gently shushed her and begged her to go back to sleep, I felt as if she were telling me to be patient.

This was years ago. It's hard to believe how many years ago. About a month after Lila and I stopped to see the emus Maggie sort of had a nervous breakdown, and had to take a permanent leave of absence. She and Lila moved to the eastern part of the state to be with family. I kept up my correspondence with the Swiss.

Xenophobia

Lately I have begun a lot of my pronouncements with the phrase, I'm usually a tolerant person, *but...* I am aware of how this sounds. I don't suppose people find it acceptable. I don't suppose they'd be willing to consider it a mitigating factor if I mentioned that more often than not the two words that follow are, The Swiss. But it is a mitigating factor for me, because of my recent issues.

Ressentiment

I'm usually a tolerant person, but the Swiss are such bastards sometimes. In his recent letter Benjamin describes the soldiers who protect the pope: The Swiss Guard. As the name suggests, the position is open only to Swiss citizens. It seems the foremost prerequisite is that one must know Italian--or, *pledge* to learn Italian. Five hundred years ago the Swiss rallied to the defense of a corrupt papacy, and now their honor is currency. Never mind that they almost blew it, back in the early eighties. I'm sure the reason the pope was so quick to absolve the man who tried to kill him involved a fair amount of coercion on the part of the Swiss banks. The Guard remains the toast of Rome. And don't even get me started about the uniforms. I'd say your outfits look queer, but you'd

probably take that as a compliment. I'd say you're all clowns, and that you couldn't fight your way out of the Dairy Queen, but you'd probably hunt me down, wherever I was, with your superior technology, and all your discipline. You'd go through all that trouble, even if I was in the most miserable, inhospitable, obscure place on earth, a place you'd have no reason to come to in a thousand years, you'd chase after me anyway, you contentious goons, you'd find me and beat me into next week.

Xenophobia

Bonnie asks me how come I've never taken her to see the emus. I don't quite know how to answer her. Do I say, Because it's not my job? Do I say, Well, when I went to see the emus it was a long time ago, I'm not even sure there are still emus to be seen?

I say neither. I change the subject back to me getting paid, and tell her I have to go. Bonnie pays me gladly enough, but after she hands me the money and I start to leave I can hear her sigh. She is lonely tonight, and bored. I hesitate at the front door--pretending to check for my keys, so Bonnie might not recognize it as hesitation. I too am lonely and bored. I know what people think, in these cold climates, in these circumstances. But I have the sense to know that if there is an avenue straight to hell, it is right here, in Bonnie's house. As miserable as we both are, how could we possibly comfort each other?

I walk home. Beneath the window of my old place I observe two guys urinating in the bushes. Hey, hippies, I yell. Why do you always have to piss in the bushes? What do you have against toilets?

The men shake themselves and zip up. They are young guys, twenty maybe, with smooth, red faces. One wears a green hat. Sorry man, he says. We're lost.

Where are you heading?

Eugene. He digs into his pocket and pulls out a mass of papers and colored string. This dude gave us a ride into town, and like, where's the freeway?

I give them directions to the interstate, but it only confuses them. The lights are off in my old apartment, so I say, Listen, do you want to hang out at my place for a bit? It's right up here. You could piss some more, if you want. Do you need to crap or anything?

The men talk it over. I can see them nodding. The guy in the green hat says, Yeah, OK.

We go up to the apartment. The second I turn on the light I realize I've made a mistake. I had no idea what this new tenant was like. I am not sure what to make of the strange flags and the guns on the wall, or the row of photographs above the imitation fireplace which I, not so long ago, used as a hamper. The caption under the picture on the far left reads, Daniel Shays--Patriot. My guests aren't sure what to make of the decor. They are silent. One of them is peering into the muzzle of a shotgun. The other lifts a flag, warily, as if expecting to find somebody behind it.

I feel I have no choice but to sit by the window and fold my hands in my lap. I say, The bathroom is down the hall.

The man in the green hat leaves the room. His friend sits on the floor, marveling at the walls. He points and says, What's that flag?

I pause. That's my nation's flag.

He shakes his head. No. Our nation's flag is different.

I didn't say our nation. I said my nation.

Your nation.

I hold up my hands and say, I just don't want any trouble.

He taps his finger against his chin, then smiles. I get it, he says. Dude, you're xenophobic.

The green-hatted man reemerges, holding a steel trap. Dude, what was this thing doing in your toilet?

His friend stands and says, Hey, did you know this dude is xenophobic?

The man's eyes widen. Oh, man. I'm sorry, but--later.

After they're gone I turn out the light. I sit and think about how scared I am now to be sitting in my old apartment, how this fear mounts with every minute that passes. And yet I am reluctant to leave. What could happen to me? I ask aloud, searching for reassurance from the walls. The digital clock on the stereo hits 9:15, and there is a series of clicks, followed by a whirring sound, followed by an alarmingly loud acoustic guitar. The vocals come in, and I recognize the singer as Johnny Cash, the song, a moment later, as Jackson. After I've settled down a bit, and am convinced that I will not have a heart attack, I listen to the song, and wonder, fearfully, what other booby traps might spring in this room, and think, hopelessly, it seems, of leaving, of going to Jackson.

Ode to Melancholy

I stopped drinking five years ago. Specifically, I stopped drinking when the Town & Country Lounge--that place on Third with the marquee--wished me a happy birthday in fat, luminous letters in front of the entire city. What was worse was my birthday that year fell during a dead time for the Town and Country Lounge, and my name stayed on the sign for over a month. I even lost several letters by the end, and driving by I started saying, along with everyone else, That poor bastard. Eventually I forgot I was referring to myself.

I stopped drinking, more or less. My one remaining concession to booze is this: whenever a new bar opens in town, I go to it every night for a month. Why a month, I don't know. Really, a new bar is merely an excuse to try out drinking again, see if anything has changed, see if drinking can, after all, live up to its promise.

So now that the White Horseshoe Saloon has moved to a new building across the street, I am back on the circuit. And as I sit here for the eighteenth consecutive night I am bothered by the contents of a letter. In it my Swiss antagonist tells me that in Switzerland it is illegal to flush the toilet after ten o'clock at night. It is implied that this is the cornerstone of a superior civilization. But he does not stop there. He states that in Leysin it is also illegal to say Bonjour after five PM. After five PM one says, Bonsoir. He tells me it is

obvious I could not handle the rigors of Swiss society. He paints a picture of me--sitting in a bar, frustrated by a letter. He claims that I am easy to grasp, that I am, after all, an open book.

Ode to Joy

I.

I walk on residential blocks, past cottages, alleys where pallets and paint cans and dishracks are heaped together, dishracks loaded with cracked plates and dusty Mason jars. I can go to the park, and from there I can see the whole sky, and mountains. I can feel myself surrounded by mountains. When I get away from the houses and trees, step into a field, a parking lot, the middle of a wide street, I can see that everywhere, on all sides--and here there are more sides to me than I ever thought possible--encircling us for miles are vast rings of mountains.

I go over to the curb and I vomit.

Nature is a nightmare. People, with their delusions, their lives, come spilling over the divide and collect in the valley. This is the last leg of the broken-hearted circuit--Denver, Moab, Casper, etc., etc.--the terminus. Rent is high, there is a notable lack of so many things, of possibility, and yet there are all these *things*. I once took an inventory. A partial list: Cars without wheels, school buses painted blue, benches dropping their splinters into scenic overlooks, cows, emus, Kawasaki motorcycle engines in pieces on driveways, cowboys, hippies. Things get trapped in the valleys, they settle and take root. They collect.

II.

From this window, if I push my cheek against the damp glass, if I wipe away the fog of my breath with my fingers, I can see Bonnie chasing dogs out of her yard. She punches at the air with her mittens and runs screaming like a banshee across the frost-crisp grass. The dogs wheel in front of her, tearing circles around the lawn, playing. The empty

thumbs of Bonnie's mittens flutter in the air, in grotesque pantomime of the dog ears flapping just beyond her reach.

It is not a picture I'd have chosen to see, had I been given the choice, this cold morning.

Bonnie wants me to take her to see the emus. She tells me I need to get out of town. I assure her this is the last thing I need. She asks again: So, are you going to take me to see the emus? And I say, Goddamn it, OK, if you'll just shut up about it.

An hour later I am sitting in the car by the side of the road. My door is open, the engine is running, static bursts out of the speakers in loud, crackling surges. The gravel beneath my feet is wet. Bonnie makes her way down the icy hill, sliding a few feet, stopping, wiggling her hips. The emus stare. I am holding a brochure of golf resorts in Western Canada. The brochure is almost ten years old. I picked it up at a cafe outside of town when I first drove out here. The theme of the Western Canadian golf resorts is distinctly alpine. The clubhouses look like chalets. There are flower gardens, meadows, gondolas whirring beneath blue skies. The caddies wear lederhosen. On the tan, smiling faces of the people sitting in the bistro, as they raise their steins and admire each other's teeth, the love of Europe is immediately recognizable. It is unmistakable.

Bonnie, I call out. But Bonnie is rapt, as are the emus. The air has become thick with love. I grab whatever will fit on top of the brochure--road maps and Mallomar wrappers and notes scribbled to myself, years ago, on parking ticket envelopes, notes too painful for me to read; I scoop up ketchup packets and popsicle sticks, a broken ice-scraper, a bootlace, a Debbie Gibson trading card--and I toss it all into the ditch.

Bonnie, I shout. Bonnie scampers up the hill, ebullient. She lifts her hands in front of her, index fingers intertwined, and points at the saloon at the top of the hill. How about one for the road? she asks.

I shrug. Are you buying?

She is. We go into the bar and order whiskey. Bonnie leans into the counter. By using the little finger of each hand and tilting the glass precariously upward she manages to drink her shot. We order another. She strikes up a conversation with a local cowboy, and I look at myself in the mirror. I listen to the cowboy tell Bonnie she has a pretty smile. I roll my eyes. Bonnie thanks him in a slurred, husky voice, then spins on her stool, crying, Whee! I have never seen her drunk, it is a little frightening. She calls the cowboy sweet, touches his arm clumsily. She still manages to find some joy in it. Why?

Because Bonnie is doomed to smile at the world. It is her fate.

I leave Bonnie with the cowboy and go to piss. The bathroom is unheated, and the light is broken. I read the words, Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin in blue marker on the wall above the urinal. Perfect, I think. I go to the window, a small square near the ceiling, and I look out at the sky. I am thinking of my son. It's strange, how I never think about him, except on these occasions when for whatever reason he comes into my mind. I wonder if I have become the man I would have educated Matthew to become. I know I would endure the past years all over again, if I could only see a picture of what he would look like now. Terrible, these lapses, time striding forth again, remorseless, encompassing. Somewhere, over the mountains, in the eastern plains, are Lila and Maggie. Lila. How old is she now? What is she like? All I want is for someone to tell me she's still out there—tramping through snow, pointing at birds, pointing at the sky and the clouds and at everything that is indeterminate and cold, laughing her head off at the inarticulate world.

If somebody told me that the author of *Genesis* --the evil genius who first conceived of a fall of man--was inspired by an afternoon watching a two-year-old kid, I would believe it. Take anything, your heart says, it's all yours. Only do not go near that open window, or you will die.

When I get back to the bar Bonnie is standing at the jukebox. Johnny Cash comes on, and my heart races. The cowboy looks me up and down and sips his drink. I sit at my stool, rotate my glass. So, I say. How about those emus?

The man slowly closes his eyes. I wish they'd just go back wherever the hell they came from.

Bonnie orders another drink. I tell her I'll be outside.

I skid down the hill. As I approach the corral the emus start to run away. I shout, Hey! Guys!, and they stop, and turn toward me. I feel as if I am addressing the UN General Assembly. I tell them I am here to justify my position, vis a vis Switzerland. I ask: Why should the Swiss get all the advantages? Do we feel comfortable, necessarily, leaving matters in their hands? The emus are silent, but they are gathering, I can see new faces bringing up the rear. I tell them that if the Swiss will not forfeit their beauty, their competence, then I will be forced to react. If they will not make concessions--and here I become rather vague, but that's OK, the emus are with me, I can hear the drumming rise in their throats--if they will not acknowledge my doctrine then a certain amount of terrorism will ensue. More and more cows will topple spontaneously in the middle of the night. Tram cables will snap, and tourists will begin dropping into ravines. I am losing control, I don't want any of it, what I want, more than anything, is peace. A thunderous murmur rises from the road: a rancher has emerged from out of the dark, sodden hills in his truck. He is backing the trailer up to the gate. He is lowering the ramp. In the adjoining pasture a black heifer raises its head, mouth filled with straw, and stoically watches. I go on, loudly, haltingly. The rancher pauses to stare at me, no longer than a second, then swings open the gate, and the emus throng against the fence, clamoring and throbbing, kicking with expectation.

The Granite State

MY BROTHER'S WIFE--or ex-wife, I should say--is trying to get into the house. Her name is Janet. This is the third time this week. Today she is stomping on my toes, which is something new, anyway. She wants ten minutes, tops, to look around the house for anything that might be hers, things she may have forgotten. Last month my brother Joe read me the rules about staying at his place. He numbered them:

- 1) Don't crank up the a/c when it's hot
- 2) Don't crank up the heat when it's cold
- 3) Don't dig around in the garage
- 4) Don't let Janet in the house
- 5) Forward all bills promptly

When I left him at the airport he reiterated that Janet can never, under any circumstances, be let inside. I feel for Janet, honestly--she cut her hand on the screen door when she tried to lunge past me, and she is short--but what is compassion in the face of the law?

My brother and I have worked out an arrangement. I am house-sitting for him here, and he is living in my apartment in New York. My life in New York ended in March, when I was let go from the agency. Downsizing. Incompetence. It doesn't matter. The

day I lost my job I walked into the Cactus Club, slapped a twenty on the bar and ordered four Chivas Regals. I said, "This is the end of the line."

The bartender poured out four glasses and nodded. "Don't I know it."

I toasted him as I lifted each drink. "From this day forward, I will never pay another bill."

In the middle of the month the landlord started slipping notes under my door. One morning I caught sight of the building super as I was on my way out. "Hey," he yelled. I ran back up the stairs. Sometimes I slept until four in the afternoon. Sometimes I sat in coffee shops with a notepad and wrote. I wrote: "Criminal activity aside, a man needs only a couple of months to ruin his life." I thought about this statement for a long time. I revised it: "A man can ruin his life in an instant. I am ruining my life with a series of poorly-conceived decisions. It should take two to three months." Thursday afternoons I went to an arcade in Chinatown to play tic-tac-toe against a caged chicken. I won! Best of seven. The first time we played I promptly went down two-nothing. I revised my strategy. I dove recklessly into each move, slapping the buttons, shouting, Ha!, and, Chick-enmmm! The chicken clucked, danced around, pecked at its board--and invariably faltered. I began to understand how easy it was to lose. When it was all over I tapped the glass and said, "Don't let it get you down, brother." But the chicken was already in the corner, slamming its beak into a pile of corn meal.

By June I was living off of bananas. Then one morning I heard Joe's voice in the stairwell. Joe! I didn't know what to do. I had made such progress, and yet here was a resolution, knocking. I crept down the hall, pressed my face against the door. But what about my freedom? I asked myself. What about the chicken?

Joe shook the doorknob and said, "Goddammit, Charlie, I can hear you breathing."

When I opened the door my brother told me I looked like shit. Things were going to change, he said. He had practically aced the New York bar exam, and was going to start practicing in Manhattan. He told me this in the taxi, on our way to the Realtor's office. He

introduced himself to my landlord. After five minutes of apologies--with some pretty deft maneuvering around the issue of Fault--Joe wrote a check not only for three months of back rent but for six months in advance, redrafted the lease, and took over my apartment.

When we stepped back onto the sidewalk my brother held up his arms and looked around him. "I'm starting a new life, Charlie. A new life."

"What about Janet?"

"Ah, yes. I need to talk to you about her..."

Over lunch at Steak Frites Joe presented me with a contract. "Just so there are no misunderstandings later," he said, unscrewing his pen. I skimmed the first page. I would live in his house. He would take care of the bills, give me use of his car, and pay me an allowance for one year. After I signed I resumed eating, ravenously. Joe leaned back in his chair, tracing curving lines of grease on his plate with his fork. "We both know Janet is crazy," he said. "She might be a pain in the ass about this." I nodded. I wanted to laugh, but my jaws were too tired. Of course Janet was crazy. Anyone could see it. I realized it the moment I met her, that time I flew out to Seattle to meet this "remarkable girl" who'd made Joe reevaluate his life's ambitions. "Like no one else I've ever met," he'd told me on the phone. Which was true; when I walked off the plane and saw Joe with his arm around this woman wearing a wrinkled batik dress, her hair matted, blue and green stones on all her fingers, my first thought was, She's a witch. Joe had graduated summa from Harvard, had done law review at the Law School, and all his life his girlfriends had corresponded to his own image--well-dressed, well-scrubbed, sharp-tongued. Joe's girlfriends, like himself, had always belonged to the highest percentiles. When Janet embraced me, whispering, "Nice to meet you, dear brother" into my neck, I glanced at Joe over her head with a raised eyebrow. His face bore signs of stupefaction I had never seen in him. Anyone could see it; why couldn't he? He was giving up New York, the big money, the Life, for a pedestrian existence in southern New Hampshire--this was the plan,

to live quietly in the suburbs and have a lot of children--all for a woman he'd known for two weeks. I thought, He's lost his mind.

That afternoon at lunch, however, it was clear the spell was broken. "She'll be a pain in the ass," he said. "Watch yourself--she has this seductive quality, as I'm sure you already realize." I nodded again, rolling my eyes. As I ate Joe turned his eyes away from me with disgust. "Charlie, will you breathe, for Christ's sake?"

Janet is leaving. When she is in her car with her seatbelt fastened I go out into the driveway. She rolls down her window and says, "I know it's not your fault, Charlie. After all, it's not really your place." She puts the car in reverse and adds, "You asshole."

I watch her drive away. There is more at stake here, so much more that people aren't telling me. I step onto the threshold of the house, let the screen door slap me in the back. It is morning, and still cool outside. The house, with its superior insulation and stale darkness, is stifling. I set the air-conditioning on "HI" and go down to the basement. I pick up a book. In a short time I am able to forget the morning. The lamplight casts a yellow circle onto my legs, grazing the top corners of the large volume on my lap. The bottom curve of the circle cuts across my forearms. It could be the middle of the night. There is more to it, and I am bored. Next time I'll let Janet inside.

Our city has been rated number four in a nation-wide poll. People are excited. In an effort to do my part I drive out to the parking lots of different malls in the early evening, at the tail end of rush hour, and watch visitors. In an ideal world I would speak to them, maybe ask how they are liking the new prosperity. What do you think about a town slogan? I'd ask. Sure, They'd reply. How about, Prosperity: Now! We would all nod and shake hands. In an ideal world. In this world I am more likely to hear the words, Get out of our way, weasel. So I keep my mouth shut. Still, I get out there. I shower and put on a nice shirt, even if my plan is simply to lean against the car outside the Market Basket, as if I'm waiting to meet someone. If a young woman takes an interest in me, so much the

better. I am the first to admit that my civic-minded impulses are motivated exclusively by self-interest. I suppose I am not really doing my part at all. But I am getting out of the house.

Twenty-five years ago there were no malls, no mammoth supermarkets or electronics warehouses, no restaurants cluttering the valley between the highway and the river. Route 3 had only two lanes, and was surrounded by forests and the occasional tall, granite cliffs bulwarking the hills. If there was a civilization up here it was invisible, built up along the unmarked routes beyond the trees. Our father knew of a package store near a lake, where he'd take us on Saturday mornings when he wanted to stock up on cheap beer, potato chips, toilet paper. I remember sawdust on the floor, and barefoot kids shooting a basketball across the muddy back lot with a high-powered hose. My brother followed my father down every aisle, pointing out bargains. "This Royal Feast is a steal," he'd say, or, "Have you considered a tub of jerky for the sitting room?" Eventually my father would tell him to go look out the window. When, in Joe's opinion, we had shopped long enough he'd go to the front and lean against the counter, humming, glancing from time to time at his watch, the very image of a busy man. Usually he wore the blue uniform with clip-on tie issued to us by the Catholic School, even though it was the weekend. I was younger, and am not sure why, or when, he became this way. I do remember a big deal being made over a report he wrote, about totalitarianism, and for some reason I associate this with these forays into the country. His thesis was that Marxism and Fascism, though ideologically opposed, were in practical terms more or less identical. He was in second grade. His classmates were no doubt still mouthing, agonizingly, the words from their readers, and I had yet to go to school. I didn't understand the significance of my brother's reputation, or appearance. Now, though, when I recall the image of the well-dressed boy pulling his watch out of his pocket (it was a wristwatch, a Timex, but my brother had removed the bands and fastened the timepiece to a gold chain), I see a delicate and unsure portent of what this countryside eventually became.

They built the big mall on top of a swamp. They cut down the trees, they exploded the granite, reshaped the rock, the highway. They sculpted terraces into the contours of the coarse hills, levels of shopping villages, parks, districts, squares, named not for any particular specialization of services but for vague images that might typically be associated with New England--Lamplighter, Stony Brook, Appleton--images intended to evoke colonial quaintness. I believe the Hanging Gardens of Babylon were not quite so meticulously realized.

What happens to Route 3 north of the city is not clear to me. It seems to undergo a series of dissections and subsumptions in Manchester, where it is hacked up and dispersed along what Rand McNally recognizes as the major North-South highways of central New Hampshire. The furthest point at which I've been able to locate it, with fair confidence, is Canaan. Anything north of that is a mystery, bleak and untraveled. I don't suppose there's much retail as you get up near Canada; and for all my ambivalence toward the discount clubs and strip malls here in town, the prospect of their lack--unspoiled, simple--is frightening to me now.

Yet I am troubled by the abundance of things here. There are no shortages. In New York there were days when I wandered in and out of supermarkets, traveling blocks out of my way, simply to find a carton of milk. Ice was always hard to get, pretty much impossible in the summer. One weekend I threw a small party. Saturday evening I walked up and down Eighth Avenue, from Fourteenth Street to Twenty-Third and back again. A bodega on every corner--but no ice. In desperation I went to the cantina around the corner from my building. I asked the dishwasher if he would give me some ice from the kitchen. He shrugged, and began scooping ice from the sink into a garbage bag. I hauled it home and put it in the bathtub. Later, after we'd started drinking, one of my friends turned to me and said, "This bourbon tastes salty." I responded that it was, in fact, the ice. Several hours later somebody remarked that the difference between salty bourbon and salty ice was

negligible. Someone else replied that salty bourbon made him feel lonely. At which point I can vaguely remember rounding up my friends and shoving them, one by one, out of my apartment, screaming, "Oh, it's all just loneliness, can't you see it? Can't anybody see it?"

My brother's kitchen has a massive Westinghouse refrigerator with a separate freezer compartment door and an automatic ice-maker. The ice cubes are of a uniform size and shape, and possess an exquisite smoothness, a transparency like blown glass. I buy bourbon by the case from the state liquor store down the road, tax-free and at subsidized prices.

The Market Basket has everything I could possibly need. I avoid going inside, and do most of my shopping at a convenience store down the road. I miss the hunting, the daily struggle. The convenience store runs out of things all the time. There are days when entire aisles are emptied out, solitary cans of green beans and turkey chili, forlorn and expired, the only items on the shelves. I make do. There is defeat in the eyes of the employees. I try to show my allegiance. The woman at the front counter often takes private moments between sales to yawn or mutter obscenities. To get on her side requires similar rudeness and lack of respect. These are subtle qualities, around here. I have yet to figure them out, and even the process of *trying* to understand seems like a step in the wrong direction. But they can see I am nobody, and that makes me OK. We are the last unit of the resistance, banded together against the encroaching affluence.

Last week I found some boxes in the garage. My brother's old things, kept for God knows what purpose: a twenty volume Children's Encyclopedia of American Law, a pair of gnarled, hardened soccer cleats flecked with dried mud, an earthenware beer stein from the Hofbrauer Haus, the inside of which smells like pencils. I went picking through the boxes with the vague intention of finding some obscure, unsentimental possessions to use in redecorating my corner in the basement. I wanted things that did not remind me of my brother. But it is all crap. For a long time it seemed hopeless. I found some of my old

toys--a water rifle, limbs of superheroes yanked from their sockets, a construction helmet, a plastic cowboy with a nail through his back, an epoxy-encrusted Messerschmidt Me-109 --all tainted, now, because Joe had seen fit to keep them. They evoked no happy memories. Growing up Joe had been relentless in his mission to destroy everything I owned; and these objects, which had survived by his decree, were monuments to his victory.

Finally I discovered a box sitting by itself on the workbench, filled with things I'd never seen before. I carried it downstairs. I kept a couple of books (Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, and *The Insult Dictionary--How to be Abusive in Five Languages* [Wolfe Publishing, UK, 1966]), a six-inch model of the Eiffel Tower, a swath of attractive blue cloth still slightly damp with motor oil, a squash racket, and an old transistor radio. The radio is useful when I want to listen to something in the basement. I've placed it on the small shelf beside my chair. I have no idea where my brother got this thing, but I am glad to have it. I've even come to appreciate the poor sound quality. It is like listening to news from a foreign country.

And so I sit in this corner, listening to the radio, reading dull books, and drinking, closing my eyes every time I sip, imagining the chime of different ice cubes. I rest my glass on the blue cloth, which I've folded into quarters. The Eiffel Tower bristles in the lamplight. Late at night, when I'm tired of reading, I pick up the squash racket and swing it, to the left, to the right, sometimes bouncing it against my head, passing my slow hours until the old, familiar, comfortable malaise surmounts the newer, more terrifying one, and I am overcome by a sleepiness that feels like nostalgia. I climb the stairs in the dark and find the bed. In the middle of the night the Westinghouse completes its cycle. The avalanche of ice startles me awake, marking another day.

Janet wakes me up at 9:30. I invite her in for coffee.

She walks into the kitchen. "So. Have you heard from your brother?"

We drink coffee and listen to the lawn mowers. It's Thursday. I say, "Janet, you can take as much time as you'd like. I trust you."

I step onto the front porch. The Birnam Wood Landscaping Crew is hard at work, riding the mowers, pulling on hoses, resodding scorched patches of grass. I rarely get to see anyone around here. Yes, people sometimes stand in their driveways, sometimes they walk to the mailboxes, or the pool. But we've never spoken a word to each other, not one simple hello. I suppose I understand why. A complete picture of another person's habits would likely make his life seem inconsequential to the point of tragedy. But a rough sketch like this, our important aspects concealed, triggers a peculiar instinct, something that says, steer away. And so we all steer away.

I guess I must not care what Janet does to the house, because I've walked all the way to the main road. Across from Birnam Wood lies another community, Ruhr Valley Estates. While the houses of Birnam Wood are white the houses of Ruhr Valley are off-white. Standing here by the street I can't help but sense a hostility between the two communities. Clearly the developers had in mind some sort of balance, but what they couldn't have foreseen is the underlying mistrust. This seems like a significant conceptual flaw. When I look at Ruhr Valley I feel an inexplicable lust to destroy it. I imagine something large-scale, something like *The Siege of Ostende*, mortar fire arcing with parabolic precision from the vicinity of my brother's house to some equivalent encampment across the street. And me, joyous, standing in the middle of the road, marveling at the curved lines, listening to the little girls screaming, Oh, my God!, and, Medic! But the picture doesn't last, there is nobody there, and I am left with the hollow, persistent thud of cannonballs plunging into soft grass.

Walking back I pass Janet in her car. She waves and speeds off. When I get back to the house I find a note on the kitchen table, which reads: "I found some medicine in the cabinet that was mine. That's it. If I come back again, it will be with ulterior motives. This is a joke. You can keep the radio. Janet."

I've discovered the big mall. I step out of my car, regard the buxom mothers carrying bags, the teenage girls slouching in their oversized windbreakers, and I whisper, "Jackpot."

At the entrance a security guard is locking up. He sees me and pushes open one of the doors, holds it patiently.

I look at the masses of people heading toward us. I ask, "Is the mall closed?"

"The mall closes at six on Sundays," he tells me.

"Do I have to leave?"

"You can stay, but there's really no point. All the stores are closed."

"How long can I stay?"

"Well, now is the time that customers should think about leaving. If you're thinking about staying, then you should come back tomorrow morning at nine."

"I'm not sure what I want to do."

The security guard points at a bench near the food court. "You can sit and think about it for few minutes, if you'd like."

I sit on the bench, not sure what to think about. Girls at the Potato Stand are mopping the floor, wiping the counter. A rotund boy approaches, drinking a milk shake, and one of the girls, after shooting a quick glance behind her, slides him a basket of french fries. The boy makes a joke and walks away, chewing. The other girl smiles and says, "He's got you wrapped around his finger."

Next to Macy's I see a door that reads "No Access." I sneak over to it. When I open the door I find a hallway lined with the rear doors of several shops. There is writing all over the plasterboard panels of the store walls, numbers and long, curving arrows in black crayon. Opposite are high walls of water-stained cinder blocks. Above me pipes and thick ducts run alongside a line of low-wattage light bulbs, the reflections of which shine dimly, like the markings of some electric animal, in a series of puddles on the floor.

The door opens behind me. Another security guard approaches and asks if I am an employee of the mall. I tell him I am not. He informs me politely that customers aren't allowed in the back corridors. "This is a hazardous area."

"It doesn't seem hazardous to me."

"Well, it is." He gestures down the hall. "You could slip in one of those puddles. See these fissures?" He points to a crack in one of the cinder blocks. "That's building stress. A few weeks ago, in one of the back stairways, one of these blocks exploded. Pieces of concrete went flying as far as twenty feet across the top of the ceiling at the Photomat."

I whistle appreciatively. "So what if I'd been back there and a chunk of cinder block had hit me in the head?"

"Technically, we wouldn't have been liable." He pulls a booklet out of his back pocket and thumbs through it. He stops, guides his finger down to the middle of the page, nods, and slaps the book shut. "We would, however, have called the paramedics, and probably sent a letter expressing our sincere condolences over your painful and disfiguring accident."

He leads me back to the bench where I'd been sitting, gestures for me to sit. I sit, a little uneasily. Janet walks past. When she sees me she stops, pulls down her sunglasses. "Charlie. What are you doing here?"

"I'm resting," I say.

She gestures at the doors. "Come on. I'll buy you a drink."

The last thing I want is to start hanging out with Janet. I'm not sure what to tell her. I say, "No, thanks. I'm already drunk."

She leans over, inspects my eyes. "Hmmm," she says. "How long have you been drinking?"

I think about it. "Since I was about fifteen, I guess."

"I mean today."

“Oh, well... Who can say, really?” I cross my eyes, but she is not convinced. I throw myself onto the floor and begin twitching. I watch the feet of people walking past. Janet sighs and grabs my sleeve. “OK, OK. Just get up, for God’s sake.”

When I am back on the bench brushing dust off my shirt Janet smiles at me and says, “Well, I’ll let you rest. But you have to promise to have a drink with me soon.”

“Fine.”

I wait several minutes, then walk outside. The shoppers are gone, now, and my brother’s car is one of three remaining in this lot. Two employees in translucent visors walk toward a blue Plymouth. The night at closing time has become very still. The two continue a conversation by the car, their words inaudible, while the huge complex of the mall, also soundless, looks over them, investing into the movements of their lips the spirit of something, something that is not incidental, or meaningless, but large, like itself. Something invisible has charged the cooling air, something like those twin ghosts of insurance and liability that lurk indoors. “I’m going to go home,” I say, aloud, as if to break a spell. I go home.

I am getting ready to head over to the parking lot of the video store when Janet pulls into the driveway. She rolls down her window. I lean against my brother’s car, arms folded, and she says, “What do you do, anyway?”

Janet has been thoroughly transformed since she first came out here, no doubt through my brother’s influence. Gone are the hair ribbons, the winsomeness, the smells. What has emerged in their place are what I take to be the traits of a model citizen, for this town: acquisitive, aggressive, pissed-off. I have tried to come up with one word to describe the new Janet. In the beginning, after our first few run-ins, I thought it might be “Heat.” But Heat isn’t quite it. As I watch her now--twisting the knob of the radio, peering up into the rear-view mirror and rubbing away the skin on her lower lip, first with

her sunglasses perched on the end of her nose, then up against her hairline, then off altogether, resting in her lap--the word I've wanted comes to mind: Kinetic.

She smiles warmly. "How about going out for a drink?"

"A drink? I'm sorry, I have plans."

"Oh yeah? Doing what?"

"I'm meeting someone. An old high school friend."

She nods. "Good. Good for you." She puts her car in reverse. "Some other time, then."

I leave right away. On the main road I look in the mirror and see Janet's car behind me. She follows me onto the highway, heading south. I should have expected as much after inviting her into the house. In truth I hardly know Janet. Maybe she's all right, after all. My brother's disgust with her must be a good sign. How Joe ended up marrying her is still a mystery. At the time I applauded the decision, probably because it is the only stupid thing my brother has ever done. I remember raising my glass repeatedly during the wedding and loudly declaring, "It is a love... for the ages!" Finally my brother led me outside, gave me the keys to our Aunt Theresa's rental car, and told me to run out and get more beer. I got lost, ended up somewhere outside Seattle, in a bar at the end of a pier. I don't recall much from that afternoon, only that I liked it, out there by the water, that strange climate, the people so quiet and polite, buying me drinks. I think I asked the bartender about the back room he had for rent. By the time I found the wedding again the lights in the reception hall were turned up, and the waiters were sweeping the floors. A pretty blonde girl was collecting glasses from the tables, singing "Communication Breakdown" quietly to herself. She saw me and offered to get me something to drink, at which point I remembered there had been a fully-stocked bar the whole time.

Janet wants to know what I do. It is unsavory, but also exhilarating, because it occurs to me that maybe my brother feared for much more than his stuff. "Kinetic." I say the word. Janet is not really my type, because I tend to go for slow, lazy women. But

here, living in Birnam Wood with a fixed income and no schedule to speak of, I find her exotic, and her qualities enchant me the way harem girls must have enchanted the French in the nineteenth century.

Janet follows me onto Exit Five, and we head downtown. There is no getting rid of her. My original plan will have to wait. The only thing left for me is to find a bar and hope she doesn't follow me inside.

I go to the Tavern, over in the French Hills. I get a beer and sit by the window. Janet hasn't moved. I drink a second beer, then a third, before she backs out onto Canal Street and drives away. I am still not confident about leaving, so I order a fourth beer, a fifth, a sixth. The change in plans seems OK to me now. My fantasy, that somehow I am being observed, has come to life, though not in the way I would have hoped. Still, it is something.

I am sitting in the basement, reading about the petty despots of Tuscany. I find nothing more inspiring, these days, than the grandiose and irrational acts of inferior men. Pandolfo Petrucci of Siena took counsel from an astrologer and somehow eluded the wrath of Cesare Borgia, enjoying a vigorous, healthy life in a period rife with bloodshed. "His pastime in the summer months was to roll blocks of stone from the top of Monte Amiata, without caring what or whom they hit." I nod, not without envy. Pandolfo Petrucci didn't let ineptitude keep him down. Could I become such a man?

While I read I listen to a Catholic talk show. The host is a Jesuit priest named Father William. Callers "confess" their problems to Father William, and he tells them all, without exception, that acknowledgment and repentance are the only answers. The current caller has fallen on hard times. He's lost his job, his car, his self-confidence. His wife wants to leave him. To make matters worse he has recently been stricken with illicit longings. "I've begun to lust after my neighbor's wife," he says. "I can't get her out of my mind."

“My son, you must resist these desires.”

“I know, I know. But I’m going nuts here, Father. See, she wants it, too. I’m telling you, I’ve never been tempted like this. It isn’t natural.”

“My son, the Church...”

“*It ain’t human!*”

I thumb through *The Insult Dictionary*. It is organized according to situation--In the Railway Station, At the Sports Ground--with each remark in English followed by the equivalent in German, French, Italian, and Spanish: "I asked for a porter, not a pygmy. Keep that dirty coat on your own knees. Just because you run this hotel doesn't mean you are Lord Muck." I feel as if I am speaking English as a second language. I can't imagine when or where these could possibly come in handy. A strange world, I imagine, perhaps a friendly one. I wonder if it is the idiom of that place I found myself touching, with inchoate, awkward caresses, those weeks before my brother descended on the city to pluck me out.

At midnight the phone rings. Maybe it is Janet. I run up the stairs, pick up the phone. It is my brother. He is calling to let me know that he has come to like my apartment very much, and has already talked to the landlord about buying it. “He’s giving it serious thought,” he says.

“Don’t,” I say. “I want it back.”

My brother laughs. “What do you mean, you want it back?”

“I want it back. When I get my shit together and repay you all the money, I want my old apartment.”

“Read the contract, Charlie.”

I pull the contract off the refrigerator. “Page five, line twenty-seven,” my brother tells me. I find the line and read: “Joe may, at any time, exercise the option to purchase Charlie’s New York City apartment outright.”

He goes on to say that he will probably be selling this house sometime over the next year. "You're welcome to stay for as long as it's mine. But I thought I should tell you in advance."

I tell him I can't speak right now. I go back downstairs, seething. "Just because you are my older brother you think you are Lord Muck," I say, a little loudly. I sit in my chair. The man is still talking. "See, Father, the thing is, I live next door to my *brother*." I grab the squash racket and flip the radio to FM. The combative strains of Mahler hiss at me through the speaker.

Janet comes to the house and asks if I'd like to get that drink. I tell her I need to be somewhere at 6:00. She says she will come with me. I don't know where I want to go, but I say, "We should get going."

We drive through the shopping district. On the hill leading down to the mall I pull over and turn on the hazards. I walk to the front of the car and watch the parking lots. People are streaming out of the entrance ways. Some gather off to the side to take account of their bundles. Others move in packs away from the building, racing each other, shouting. I raise my arms above my head and shake my fists.

Janet is leaning against the car, sipping from a flask. She says, "Should I not even bother to ask?"

She hands me the flask, and I drink. I regard the parking lot, hands on my hips, and say, "It's beautiful."

Janet watches the scene sternly. She asks, "Why did your brother leave me, Charlie?"

I shrug and say, "I don't think it's you. It's this town. He couldn't handle it. The way it's changed, the malls, the kids..." I can't go on.

Janet shakes her head. "Does he think this is where I wanted to end up? He's the fucker who brought me here in the first place. I never asked for this. I don't deserve this."

We watch the line of cars winding toward the highway. I say, "One day, at closing time, I'm going to roll Joe's car down this hill."

Janet takes a long drink. She coughs, wipes her mouth, takes a deep breath. That sounds fun," she murmurs. "That sounds really nice..."

I am burning my bridges left and right. Last week I was standing outside the video store when a woman pulled up in a sky blue Camarro. I whistled and said, "That's a pisser car." She gave me a hostile look before going inside. Thirty seconds later the manager of the store strode up to me and said, "Hey, pal, you got a problem?"

I shrugged. "Just standing here."

"Well, go stand somewhere else. If I see you here again I'll kick your ass up and down the street."

Two days ago the managers of Market Basket approached me at my car and asked if I would come up to their offices. For some reason I thought they were going to offer me a position. When we were all seated a friendly woman turned to me and said, "We'd like you to consider not coming here anymore."

"Is there a problem?"

"We've received complaints."

"Could you be more specific?"

The man to her left opened a folder. He began reading aloud. He read for forty-five minutes. It seemed many customers had come to know me only as "Smiling Man." I asked the woman when I could return, and she whispered, "Between you and me, the Giant Shaw's is really a much better supermarket..."

The convenience store is the only place I'm still welcome. Last night I went to pick up some aspirin. Two teenagers stood near the entrance. I went to the counter and asked the lady for the 200 milligram Bayer tablets and a pack of gum. She punched some numbers into the register. "That's five-fifty."

"Five-fifty? How much is the aspirin?"

"Four sixty-five."

"Eighty-five cents for gum? Since when?"

"Gum has always been eighty-five cents."

"No, it hasn't. In fact, the price of gum here seems to change all the time. Last time it was fifty cents. The time before it was forty-five, before that sixty... but never eighty-five cents."

"OK, I'm lying to you." She picked up the aspirin and put it back on the shelf. Then she called me a pain in the ass.

"Oh? Pain in the ass? OK, well, flea powder is cheap, you know."

The boys laughed, and the woman cracked a smile. "What, are you a comedian?"

"Just because you are a convenience store clerk," I stammered, "you think you are Lord Muck."

They all howled. One of the boys elbowed the other and said, "You gotta admit, that's good."

Chuckling, the woman reached behind her and took the aspirin off the shelf. She handed it to me and said, "Here, take it. Now scram, Dice Man."

Speeding home I passed The Granite State Rifle Association Headquarters. "The Granite State," I said. "I am living in the Granite State."

I haven't been sleeping. The past three nights I've left the house late, after midnight, and gone to the mall. I sit at the edge of the parking lot, watching workers haul ladders and heavy tubs of mortar into the building, their forms grainy in the orange floodlights, their movements stiff and cumbersome. From time to time a truck backs up to the door. Air brakes shriek, the engine chokes up exhaust. There are shouts. At these moments it is like a scene from a frontier, a border check in a foreign place, where there is a brief congestion of disparate elements before it all finally funnels through the gates.

The man who covets his brother's wife is on the air again. His conversations with Father William have become a series unto themselves. Father William is a determined man; he refuses to let a single sheep go. The man sounds tired tonight. "You know what else bothers me, father? Those goddamn pizza coupons they keep sending us in the mail."

"My son, the FCC says..."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. Shit. Whoops. Sorry. Fuck."

Tonight I will try to get inside the mall. I go to the garage to get a tool belt. All I can find are a level and a tape measure. I put on some old sneakers, jeans, a flannel jacket. I stand in front of the mirror. "How's it going, chief," I say. My accent seems clipped, unnatural. I decide to keep my words to a minimum. "Yo," I mutter. I salute myself with the level.

It is nearly three in the morning. The traffic lights flash red and yellow, the gas stations are incandescent beneath the trees. At the mall the doors of the service court are propped open. Men load boxes onto handcarts, and I walk past them with a quick nod. Inside it is dim, and the store windows reflect my image. I hear a distant whirring of drills, the thud of a sledgehammer. As I walk the noise becomes louder. I step into the back hallway, hear the omnipresent echo of trickling water. I leave, walk quickly to the center of the mall. The floors are immaculate.

A security guard sits at the customer service desk. He sees me and nods.

"How's it going?" I say.

"Pretty good," he says. He yawns and stretches. "Slow night."

I hear the sounds of a police scanner from beneath the desk. "Anything exciting?"

"Nah."

We listen to the scanner for a long time. They're searching for a short man in a fatigue jacket who tossed a brick through a liquor store window. A possible juvenile tried to hold up a Mobil station with a knife, then ran when the clerk pulled out a big stick. They've apprehended a man who was slapping his wife outside the Pizza Hut. A violently

ill patron of the Newbridge Cafe has charged that a foreigner sitting next to him at the bar slipped poison into his drink. The suspect was last seen driving north on 3A in a black and gray Bronco...

The security guard says, "This town needs a murder."

"Pardon me?"

"Nothing really awful, mind you. Just something for the front page. A little action."

I ask him if he thinks his position might be a bit off the mark in someone who wants a job protecting people.

He nods sadly. "I know it all too well. I interviewed with another mall before I got this job. The guy asks me, 'What is the most effective means by which we can ensure our customers have a safe and pleasant shopping experience?' I say, 'By going out and cracking heads.' Definitely the wrong answer."

He continues. "I thought security would be a logical first step. But more often than not, it's the last. We have ex-cops on our staff, older guys. You think: Why would these guys come to work here? Rumors go around. One guy supposedly relandscaped his entire yard while he was collecting worker's comp for a back injury. Another one ran over a suspect in his cruiser. The average store employee at the mall doesn't think we're the best people for the job, and that rubs off on you when you work here a while."

The man gives me an odd look. "Don't you need to get back to work?"

I gesture vaguely in the direction I came. "They have it under control."

They found the man in the fatigue jacket passed out in the bushes behind the liquor store. The hold-up kid is still at large. They've questioned the owner of the Bronco, but have found no reasons to make an arrest at this time.

The security guard looks at his watch and says, "Well, I have to start an outside round. You can come ride with me in the cruiser, if you want."

Outside the sun is already pressing through the trees along the river, and a sharp edge of light touches the far end of the parking lot. Workers are packing up their equipment, trucks rumble up to the highway. We drive, not saying anything. The heat pouring through the dashboard vent sears my eyes.

In the T lot we come across an overturned shopping cart. The security guard slams the car into park, and we get out. The cart lies on its side. Its back gate is turned inside out, so that it protrudes from the opening on the top. Seagulls cluster around it, their wings tucked up against their bodies. A plastic sign on the front reads "Service Merchandise," a store two malls north of here.

The gulls disperse when we approach. The security guard takes out his radio. "SP, 14 to G2. I have a 10-47 in T."

"Who are you calling?"

He snaps the radio back onto his belt. "I have no fucking idea." He pushes at the cart with his toe and says, "It's a mystery to me, how these things end up here."

I look at it closely. The presence of this shopping cart does seem mysterious. The birds re-gather, somberly, tentatively, as if ready to pick it apart. All around us, in the expanding brightness, the air is becoming warmer. A fog rises up out of flat, slow eddies in the river, and the morning has become the type of morning I remember from a long time ago, before the malls were built. I look at the barren parking lot, and it is as if several distinct phenomena have suddenly drifted together into a single moment. The structure of the mall lies dormant, steam from its pipes mingling with the fog. In this frame of mind I don't think of the destruction of forests, the gross mining of rock; instead the building stands as a monument to the nature it has displaced. There is no discordance. The signs, which still burn feebly in the dawn, do not clash with the day, but are like sunlight filtered through colored glass.

The security guard rights the cart and pushes it to the edge of the lot. The picture vanishes, and I feel uneasy. I ask him to take me to my car.

When I get out he laughs. "Didn't get much done tonight, did you?"

But he's not even expecting an answer. The automatic window glides closed, and he drives away.

When I am on the highway I look down into the valley. The entire retail district is concealed by fog. It is beautiful. At the pay phone outside Dunkin' Donuts I look up Janet's number and call her. I am saying things to her, but I'm making no sense. "Charlie, hold on," Janet says. "Come over." She gives me the address, and I get back in the car and drive downtown.

Janet lives in the French Hills. The staircase going up to her place is on the side of the building. As I run up the stairs I pass a man curled up in a ball on the second floor landing. He is wearing a puffy vest and open-fingered gloves. I tiptoe past him. Children's stickers, of bears and cakes with faces on them, filthy and dried up, are scattered on the steps.

Janet greets me at the top of the stairs. "Come inside," she says.

When we are in her apartment I close the door and push Janet against it. "Just tell me this was it, all along," I whisper, but she doesn't answer.

I take her hand and lead her into the bedroom. I am exhausted, and Janet anticipates this; she is already pushing me onto the bed. She pulls off my pants. She lets her powder blue robe fall onto the floor, and she is naked. She climbs on top of me.

After a minute Janet stops bucking and says, "This is kind of weird."

I nod, and close my eyes.

"No, not the way you think." She pushes forward and moans softly. "Your brother is paying me to do this."

I open my eyes. "What are you talking about?"

Without letting me slide out of her she leans over to the bedside table drawer, pulls it open, and holds up a stack of papers. She thumbs through it and pushes it toward my face. "Read this."

I can't. I brush it aside, and she tosses it onto the rug. "There's money involved," she says.

"Why?" I say. "I mean, I thought he wanted me to keep you away."

"No. He told you that's what he wanted so you would do the opposite. Your brother thinks that everything you've ever done has been a deliberate attempt to inconvenience him."

"But what did he hope to achieve?"

Janet runs her fingers through her hair, laughs weakly. "He just wants an excuse to write you off." She begins moving again. "We can split the money, Charlie," she gasps. "We can get out of here."

Nothing matters to me now. The memory of that other word, Heat, comes to my mind. Janet is heat, not just the physical heat that is swallowing me up but a radiant heat that spreads across my body, dissolving the terror of the early morning, melting away the cold slab that has hardened my head and neck and chest for as long as I can remember. I lie back as if empty, a discarded vessel, and all the conflicting passions that are responsible for this moment--my brother's machinations, Janet's vengeance, my own formless lust--pour into me, cleanse me...

We sleep. At eight-fifteen Janet lifts her head and says she has to go to work. While she dresses I pick up her robe and put it on. I step onto the staircase and wait for her. Below, on the street, drunks with steaming breath wave and whistle at me, blow kisses.

Janet touches my arm. "I'll give you time to think about this," she says. "Feel free to hang out as long as you want." She trots down the stairs. When she is gone I realize I have no idea what Janet does.

Janet's neighbor is a hooker. I sit in the kitchen some nights, when Janet has gone to bed, and listen. "Are you the developer?" a woman's voice asks. "I'm the inspector," a

man answers. "It seems you've ignored all the regulations." I hear a short burst of zipper, and the woman coos, "A man in your position must know his way around all these silly regulations..." Sometimes the hooker takes the night off, and when Janet falls asleep I slip out of the apartment and drive home. After midnight the road leading to Birnam Wood is deserted. Driving it on a windy night, the trees roaring, leaves flecked with a lamp glow that looks like moonlight, I become penitent, because these places--Birnam Wood, Ruhr Valley--are not, after all, mere spurious concepts put forth by Realtors, but aptly-named stages of a development that goes far back, even before the boom. In colonial times the British named this area Naragansett IV. Already they were thinking in terms of phases, of suburbs. And yet the fog still presses itself onto the lawns at night, the telephone poles twist and creak in the harvest moon ... one can't help but think, on nights like these, that the community is a holy place, and I wonder if this might be why people are reluctant to tread on it, why they close their car doors so quietly in the dark.

One day Janet and I summon the courage to roll my brother's car into the mall parking lot. She meets me after work, and we drive to the top of the hill. When we get there we lose our nerve. "There are too many people," Janet says. We go to the Tavern. At two in the morning we drive back and park along the edge of the hill. We get out of our cars. I tell Janet we should do her car. "My brother's car is nicer. We could actually get something if we sold it." Janet is drunk, and doesn't protest too much. I slip her car in neutral and push. It rolls past the lip of overgrown weeds. The front tires drop abruptly, and I push harder, until finally the car starts rolling, slowly, over the dried grass, coming to a halt midway down the hill.

We wait several minutes. Janet says, "Do you think you could get it out?" I stumble down the hill. The car starts on the first try, and glides easily onto the asphalt.

I know Janet gets more satisfaction from disobeying my brother than she would from taking his money; and I, for my part, am glad to know that he despises me. Joe has

begun calling more frequently, with complaints: he's receiving the bills after the payment dates, I'm keeping the thermostat too high. When he can't reach me at home he gets me at Janet's, and although he is all business he waits, sometimes, before ending the conversation, perhaps hoping I might show a little gratitude, for once, tell him I'm happy, or thank him for letting me get my life in order. I never will. The house will go on the market in March, and he can't make me leave until it's gone. It's in the contract.

On the transistor radio I hear the same stories of immorality, of salvation. My brother's car radio doesn't work for shit, and so when I drive I am on my own. I am left to guess what will happen. I imagine it will start with a snowstorm: a bitter northeast wind will hit in the middle of the night, scraping out rings of salt on the roads, invading the transformers of signs that will flicker, shine for several seconds, go out. That night I will drive to Janet's apartment and tell her to get her things together, because we are going West. I will be sure to make a stop at the house to get a few things--the radio, the Eiffel Tower must stay, they belong here--and to turn the thermostat up to ninety degrees...

I picture the future: an unheated one-bedroom in Oakland, near the bay, with a kitchen drawer filled with loose change. Old men sit at a table on the street corner, staring at a backgammon board. When I walk past them they grumble, "Hola, Senor Muck," in worn, slurred syllables. With arthritis fingers they struggle to pick up the dice. But I am getting ahead of myself: one morning Janet wakes up with a massive hang over in Sheridan, Wyoming. She is alone. The recognition of an absence is instantaneous. She gets out of bed, shoves her clothes and book and baggie-wrapped toothbrush into her suitcase. She wonders how I managed to set her on the trajectory of my personal descent, jump out of the way, and watch her go. I would like to say that Janet opened up a world for me, but in the end she was only a test of my resolve, of my ability to make hard decisions: a mere second in the hundred-year war against my brother. It is still early, there are many, many years left. Nobody in their right mind willingly fails for real. I can picture her now, as she asks at the motel office about the city bus terminal, takes some time to

think about whether or not she has enough money to go anywhere she wants, knowing, then, she should have done a better job hiding the five grand, knowing she must make a decision, whether to go forward, into oblivion, or turn back in defeat. Maybe she will push forward, buck the odds. She may collapse sobbing onto the saggy motel mattress in the middle of Wyoming and heap curses on our name. But I will live long enough to build an encampment of my own, barbed wire, anti-personnel mines, the whole lot, and the faraway island of Manhattan permanently fixed in my scope. I will make it.

Bobby Valentin's Newsletter

I AM PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE that I am walking without crutches again. These are dark times. It is thanks only to your support that I have endured this with a minimum of pain. Granted, it's hard to tell what the minimum is here. I might have a whole different concept of "minimum" right now had support been forthcoming from all parties. Cindy Speyer, for instance. It is not commonly known that, the night after my accident, Cindy Speyer came to me in the corner of Joe Thompson's living room (where I was icing my heel) and told me she needed to speak to me in private. She helped me across the room and dragged me into Joe's closet. No one was looking. We lay down beneath the hanging clothes. She undressed. I suggested she hang her clothes up on hangers. I was joking. She did it anyway. Without a word she undid my fly.

Afterwards she promised to come over to my place and massage my legs. She never showed. I waited for days. A week later I called Cindy's house. Her roommate told me that Cindy had moved to another city. That very night I saw Cindy at Rat Bar, drinking shots of Wild Turkey with Sarah Johnson, my ex. I know they saw me--how can you miss a man on crutches?--but you wouldn't have thought so by the way they were

trying so hard *not* to see me. I ask: why is it such a big deal to come to me, to ease my pain?

You will recall that I first sustained the injury to my heel when I fell--or jumped--or was pushed--off Joe Thompson's porch at a party on June 17. There are many stories. Some have sworn it was the porch itself that caused me to fall--that it was listing with the weight of all the people standing on the south end of it. A rotting support beam, an odd impulse, a malignant elbow? At the time, Cindy Speyer had enough compassion to come over and comfort me, and for a few moments that sufficed. I regret that with the passing of time these affections were somehow lost.

Opening

I am living in the Western United States, shacked up with a woman who until recently had never slept with someone from the East. Our horizons have been mutually broadened. We like to get shitty every night of the week: whiskey and coke, bourbon and coke, bourbon...

At bars I attract transients who've already tried talking to everyone else. One evening I met a man who'd fallen out of the back of a semi earlier in the day. There was a gob of dried blood stuck to his cheek, and his thumb was severed. "Yeah, I just got out of a coma. I didn't go to the hospital or nothing, because, well, first I was blacked out, and I wasn't going anywhere, and then when I woke up I figured, all right, I'll go over to Claim Jumper's. I guess I haven't thought about what the long-term effects of this decision will be."

My new girl came up behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist. She licked my ear. I studied the blood on the man's face, which resembled sealing wax, and listened to his story. My girl stuck her hands in the back of my jeans. I swatted them away. She slipped off to play pinball.

The man said, "I'm only drinking hot chocolate tonight, on account of my coma. The hot chocolate is free. Hey, did you check out that ass?" He pointed at my new girl's ass. She was playing pinball. She rotated her shoulders and thrust her pelvis into the machine. I stared at the blood on the man's face more intently. "I met a girl here one night, she works over at the motel. I went to see her at work the next day, but they said she wasn't there, even though her car was parked out front. I said, well her car's parked out front. When's she coming back? They said she wasn't there. I can't understand people sometimes." The man pulled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed me his watch. "See this watch? It's a Seiko, a real good watch. I found it out in the back of that semi. Not bad, huh?"

Later my new girl and I made it in the bathroom of the Claim Jumper's Casino, on the steps of the courthouse, along the river, sixteen times from one end of the bridge to the other, on top of some scaffolding up against the old hotel downtown. Half the time I didn't bother to pull down my pants. Neither of us got off. When we tried to climb down from the scaffolding my new girl's hand slipped on the metal cross piping, and she became scared. I wedged my feet in the cracks between the wooden planks and lowered her to the ground. When we got back to my place we didn't want to do it anymore. Disappointed, we sank into bed. My new girl lay a heavy thigh across my legs and burrowed her head into my armpit. When I woke up at five-thirty she was on the other side of the bed, curled up, facing the wall. I tapped her on the shoulder, and she rolled back to me.

Quarterly Report

An update on Bobby Valentin's efforts to retrieve his possessions:

**A Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt, appropriated by Lisa Boudreau: I was at the esplanade, watching the Labor Day fireworks, and I ran into Lisa in the parking lot of Burbeck's, near the port-o-sans. She was wearing my Plymouth State varsity sweatshirt. "Hello, Bobby," she said.

Hello Bobby? I told her, hey, nice sweatshirt.

She looked down. "Thanks," she said. "Uh, is this yours? I can't remember."

I asked her how many other guys she dated went to Plymouth State. She rolled her eyes and said, "I guess you want it back. Look, I'll bring it by next week."

Yeah, I said. I'm sure you'll come by. I'll be seeing that sweatshirt again real soon.

"Well, what the hell? It's cold, I don't have a jacket. I'm not even wearing anything underneath, Bobby. I can't give it back right now. OK?"

She had a point. But I knew that if I didn't get it then I'd never see it again. That night I was wearing a Monet in the 90's sweatshirt. It was white, with a smear of green and blue lily-pad in the middle. It was from the exhibition that came to the MFA a couple of years ago. I got it from Cindy Speyer, who I think got it as a present from an old boyfriend. I liked the sweatshirt I was wearing, but my Plymouth State shirt had sentimental value to me, and I wanted it back.

I pulled off the Monet in the 90's sweatshirt and said, Here, you can borrow this one and bring it back to me tomorrow. I want that sweatshirt back now, please.

Lisa held the sleeve of the Monet sweatshirt with two fingers. You'd think I'd just handed her a dead pigeon. "God, you're a fucking freak." She looked around. "Where am I supposed to do this?"

Lisa, I count sixteen portable toilets here. Pick one.

She made a face. "Great," she said. She walked into an empty stall.

It was a cold night. I stood in the dusty parking lot in my undershirt, shivering. A few seconds later this skinny guy in a grease-stained Aamco repair shirt came out of the john. He had a stringy mustache. He came over to where I was standing and began looking around, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. He caught my eye. "Yo, what's up?" he said, nodding his head.

I nodded back. Cool shirt, I said. He nodded again.

Lisa came out wearing the Monet sweatshirt. She threw my sweatshirt at me, and I put it on. I smelled perfume as I pulled it over my face. The skinny guy said, "What the hell is this?"

"Nothing," Lisa said. "I'll explain later." To me she said, "I'll bring this by next week." She looked down at her chest. "Hmm. It's a pretty cool sweatshirt."

That was a few weeks ago. I don't think I'll see the Monet sweatshirt again. It's too bad, because it had a certain amount of value to me, too.

**That Al Green record I can never remember the name of: I started dating Sarah Johnson two winters ago. We got to know each other at an after-hours party I was having at my place. We were always throwing parties after the bars closed. It was January, a couple of weeks after New Year's, and we were carrying on as if it was all still a holiday--drinking on Thursday nights, beer and omelets on Sundays while we watched the playoffs. We did that every year, trying to prolong the party, making it maybe as far as the Superbowl, maybe into the early weeks of the first Sunday NBA broadcasts, before we started calling in sick on Mondays, sometimes Mondays and Tuesdays. Sometimes people lost their jobs, and left town. It was a fun time of year, a time of transition.

I would have never become interested in Sarah had she not taken my stereo hostage. It was three in the morning. She started putting on albums I didn't know I owned: Johnny Mathis, The Troggs, Curtis Mayfield, songs from Fiddler on the Roof. Every time she put on something new someone would shout, What is this crap? Finally people turned to me, the host, for satisfaction. I went to talk to Sarah, who was swaying in front of the turntable. People are getting restless, I said. I think we should play something different.

"You don't like the music?" she asked, snapping her fingers.

Well, I think it's fine.

"OK. It's your house, isn't it?"

I sat down again. We listened to Barry White, Edith Piaf, the Star Wars soundtrack, John Williams conducting the Electric Moog Orchestra. People grumbled. Where did these records come from? I asked myself.

I sat and watched my friends leave--one at a time, in groups of three and four. By four-thirty Sarah and I were the only ones left. She had found the Al Green record, and was playing the third song over and over:

Let me be the one you come running tooooooo
IIII've never been uh-untrue

She continued to dance, and I sat and watched her. The sun started to come up. She danced while I made coffee and toast. When I handed her a mug and plate she stopped dancing and said, "Oh, thanks. Hey, can we eat out on the porch?"

It's twenty degrees outside.

"Oh, yeah. It's OK, I'll sit here." She sat on the floor by the stereo and began eating. She ate the toast, and drank three cups of coffee. I drank coffee, but I didn't eat anything. I watched her eat just as I had watched her dance, with no thought toward my other guests.

In early spring Sarah and I had a fight. She took Al Green off the turntable, opened the front door, and flung the record across the street. I watched it sail over the telephone wires and skip off the roof of my neighbor's house. It knifed into some bushes. Sarah left. I searched for about an hour, but couldn't find it. A few days later I went to look again. I found it nestled in the shrub branches beneath my neighbor's bathroom window. I pulled up my sleeve. As I was extracting the record from the bushes the window opened. My neighbor's head appeared above me. "Yeah," he said. "I've been wondering how the hell that got there. Who is it?"

Al Green.

He nodded. "Great stuff. Think it will still play?"

I didn't find out until the next weekend, when Sarah and I made up. She started coming over to my place again, playing the records that may or may not have been mine. Al Green with his philosophy of love was, as usual, a popular choice.

**The ceramic picture frame Sarah gave me last Christmas, which I really liked, even if I did say, What the fuck is this? when I unwrapped it--the one she took back last August: Sarah came to my apartment to break up with me on a Saturday. A hot day, the type of hot that drove the people on my block into their basements. They'd hide down there with their radios and pitchers of Kool-Aid and watch for the legs that scurried by the windows above their heads. I liked to lounge in the laundry piled in front of the water heater. The water heater was cylindrical, and white, with pipes elbowing out of the top in all directions. The previous tenant had painted NASA lengthwise along the cylinder in red enamel. I reclined in the soiled clothes, breathed their mustiness, and looked through the basement window. The legs always appeared from out of nowhere. I never heard the footsteps. It was impossible to focus on the scene outside for very long because practically nothing happened. My eyes strayed to other things: the insulation peeling off the ducts; forgotten objects that had never belonged to me, the rubber clown with tooth marks in it, a child's squeeze toy-turned-dog's chew toy, gathering dust beneath the workbench; parabolas of moisture along the top edge of the concrete. When someone did walk past I caught it out of the corner of my eye, only looked up in time to see the window empty once again, to retain only an imagined memory of the legs, male or female, I didn't know.

I happened to be looking out the window when Sarah walked by. Her thin calves and the hem of her green sun dress cut across the telephone pole and mail box whose shapes I'd been admiring. I was lucky I saw her. From the basement I would not have heard her knock. I ran up the stairs and opened the front door before she had finished climbing the steps. She hadn't come with anything to say. We sat in the front room for a few minutes. She slouched on the hassock with her head in her left hand, while she shook her right hand up and down, intending to make some point, but all she could say was, "I

don't understand." I urged her toward comprehension with my own hands, touching my chest and making sweeping gestures in her direction, had I invented sign language I would have created such a gesture, it would have meant, What is it? And I was repeating, I don't understand either, I don't understand. What is it? I asked.

Finally she said, "You have no depth of feeling." I didn't understand. Is that the problem? I asked. She didn't answer. I became quite tired then. I watched as she shook her head and got up to go. I switched from a sitting position to a reclining position on the couch. Sarah saw the picture of us in the ceramic frame, resting on a wooden apple crate. Sarah's mother had taken the picture on the day of someone's christening--Sarah's niece, I think. We had gone to the christening hung over. Somehow the mere fact we'd made it--feeling so crappy, and yet still getting out of bed and showering and dressing up and going to talk to Sarah's relatives--thrilled us. Sarah was wearing a black and white checkered retro-style dress. I was wearing a striped sportcoat I'd once found draped over a garbage can in town. In the photo our heads were pressed together, and we were standing in front of a fountain. We'd been pretending to butt heads, like goats. When we first got the picture back from Osco I said, It's very retro. It could have been taken thirty years ago. This is good, because it means it will also be difficult to place our love in a particular historical context.

She took the photograph, with the frame. Months later, as I was preparing to leave for good, I found the frame in my mailbox. The picture was in it. At one time it had been torn in half, then taped back together. It was fairly well doctored, only a thin line visible between us.

****My watch, which I hadn't noticed I'd lost until I got it back: Cindy Speyer returned my watch a few weeks after Joe Thompson's party. We stood in my front door for a few minutes trying not to say anything dumb. In the end we agreed it had been a mistake.**

Six months later, when he was moving out, Joe found Cindy's Monet in the 90's sweatshirt gathering dust in the back of his closet. He asked me if I wanted it. I said, Sure, why not?

Today, Tomorrow, and Beyond

I've taken to calling my new girlfriend Cat Brain. Many subjects interest her. Whenever I tell her something new--informative things, mainly: the best whiskey is at least twelve years old, glowworms glow in order to attract prey--she replies, "That's interesting." Once I was telling her about Sherman's march in Georgia, about how his soldiers dismantled the railroad and bent the rails around tree trunks. It was demoralizing for the confederates to go back to their plantations and find iron bows tied onto the trees. She told me she thought this was interesting. I asked her, Why do you think it's interesting? She thought a minute, then said, "Because it's historical. It's a historical look at our nation." My new girl placed second in the state beauty pageant last year. This means she does not give talks at the public schools, does not ride in her own car at the homecoming parade, does not appear in television ads for literacy campaigns. Bartenders never suggest maybe she's had more to drink than a state pageant winner with a reputation to uphold should. These days my new girl is maybe drinking more than anyone should. She curls up to me in the late afternoons and becomes sullen, and for a few brief moments in my life I keep my mouth shut. She's taking it step by step, picking up the pieces, trying to look forward.

O Green Garden of Plants

So I found another girl. She was young, and perfect, a rebellious and beautiful young woman who wore suede boots and clung to the wrong crowd until I wrenched her away from it. Failing first with charm, then with reason, I finally seduced her with my

tremendous self-pity. She agreed to be mine, with some reservations, which she communicated to me in the form of a typed list:

No Intimate Secrets
No Bright Ideas
No Lessons
No Memories
No Impractical Arrangements
No Gonorrhea
No Hobbies
No Bare Feet

As we lay in bed one night I said, I once lived an ocean apart from you.

"Is this an intimate secret or an impractical arrangement?"

It's a lesson.

She sighed. "So what are you saying?"

I mean I lived far away. In Paris.

"Paris. What do people do there?"

Well, I mostly hung out in a place called Le Jardin des Plantes.

"Ah, yes. French. What does that mean?"

It means, Garden of Plants.

"Hmm. Seems redundant."

Redundant? I said. Yes, I suppose it is. Hey, did you know that Emerson had a revelation in the Jardin des Plantes? His first wife had just died, and...

"Oh, no you don't," she said, cutting me off with a karate chop to the pillow.

"Hey. Did you know this is the Garden of Plants State? There isn't a real Garden of Plants, per se, but we've recreated a pretty good one. It's surrounded by wet glass walls. I won the Miss Garden of Plants State pageant last year. I'm the current title holder. Actually, I'm the unofficial title holder. We hold a separate contest at Claim Jumper's--an underground state pageant--when the real state pageant is going on. They give an award each year to 'The Woman Who Is Most Able To Drive Any Given Man Insane With Her Apparent Indifference To Everything He Does.' Have you heard of it?"

It seems familiar, somehow, I said. I moved my hand down her back. So have I told you I'm trying to achieve a new depth of feeling, just for you?

She looked at the ceiling and shrugged.

I asked her to tell me about the pageant.

"It's an underground thing. If you know about it, you must be pretty hip. Hey. Do you want to go?"

Where?

"To the Garden of Plants."

She took me downtown to the Municipal Garden of Plants, a vast atrium crawling with African violets, hyacinths, zucchini squashes. "Be careful not to lose your way," the attendant said with a sinister chuckle. It was steamy and damp. The tang of Miracle Grow stung my sinuses. I lost my way twice. I lost the new girl. I needed a drink badly. My cheeks were twitching, my limbs trembling. I had to wrap my hands around the stalk of a rubber tree plant to keep from collapsing onto the cement. The rubber tree wiggled like a fire hose as I convulsed uncontrollably. I counted the cracks in the buckling concrete floor, trying to still myself. I let go and staggered under the dripping verdure until I came back to the attendant, who stood at the glass gate, chuckling. I punched him in the face. In the parking lot I found the new girl asleep behind the wheel of her car. I pulled her out and left her dozing on the asphalt and I got into the car and drove, I drove until I reached the dirty streets of a new place, drove until I crashed into a phone booth and knew I had reached the city. The city.

This, I believe, qualifies as something that was lost, a possession I will never retrieve, leaving it beyond classification, with neither genus nor species to go on.

Our Goals

From time to time it's important, I think, to talk a little bit about what the purpose is here. I am Bobby Valentin. I've sunk so low I no longer enjoy the simple things--spotting

a pretty girl at the record store, or going out to the bars and checking out the girls with the nice hair and the necklaces, smelling their smells, the powdered skin, the blue eyes, the legs, the...

Erratum

I would like to say that, yes, I was humping the New Cat Girl when Cat Brain stormed into my apartment looking for her things. Bobby Valentin, I feel, somehow, should live up to the accusation. But I was alone, and almost asleep. "I've heard from many sources that you've been fucking every pageant winner in town!" Cat Brain screamed at me, as she scooped clothes, both hers and mine, from the floor.

I sat up against the wall. Many sources, I said. That's interesting.

"Oh really," she said bitterly. "Why do you think it's interesting?"

Look, I said. This isn't entirely about pageants, is it?

"You fucker, Bobby Valentin!" she said, winding up and thumping me hard in the throat with my belt buckle, before she stole the belt, and my shoes, and a shirt. She stormed back out.

It is with a crippled voice I wish to say a few things about Bobby Valentin. I can't carry on about this man I do not know. I can only expand the search.

We are Bobby Valentin. It should be understood, however, that in assuming one role we do not rule out the possibility that we are somebody else.

Restatement of Our Goals

But now it occurs to me that it should be made clear that this is not, after all, Bobby Valentin's Newsletter. For the sake of economy I should decide on a new focus. Perhaps something closer to the point. Something like

Sarah Johnson's Newsletter

A Letter From Our New CEO

I'm probably not the best person to ask. I haven't seen Bobby in months. I know he's living out West somewhere, but the few things I've heard about him, I've heard second-hand. He recently got into some trouble, from what I understand. I guess he was seeing Miss Something-or-other for a while; they got into a fight, he threw her down on the ground in some parking lot and broke her collarbone. I don't know whatever came of all that, whether it's settled or not. Some locals witnessed the whole thing. I heard they roughed him up pretty bad. Maybe being beaten up is the least of his worries right now. As I say, I'm not the best person to talk to. Joe Thompson hears from Bobby from time to time, he's probably got all the facts.

But if you are just looking for anything, I suppose I could start from the beginning.

Bobby and I met at a party at Joe Thompson's apartment. I'd never really liked Joe, but I didn't know many people when I first moved to New York, and it felt nice to go out with a crowd sometimes, to be asked. Late that night, after the party had started to die, Bobby introduced himself and asked if I wanted to do some coke. It wasn't often that a handsome man offered to share drugs with me, so I said sure. We went into the bathroom and snorted three lines each. Bobby told me he sometimes pretended he was inhaling powdered glass, just to freak himself out. It freaked me out.

By the time we went back into the living room everyone was gone. Joe was sitting with his head thrown back over the top edge of the couch, passed out cold. He hadn't even loosened his tie. Bobby took me to his place in a taxi. We cut up the rest of his coke on a framed photograph of Grace Kelly and stayed up until ten in the morning. Bobby told me he was a Buddhist saint who had come back to earth to alleviate our suffering. I nodded at everything he said. He said, "What you need to transcend, Sarah, is this fixation on cause and effect. Things happen independently of other things, and things happen as a result of everything. These concepts are one in the same. The idea that certain causes produce

certain predictable effects is the root of all suffering." He banged me hard that morning, driving the headboard into the wall so fast that the bed table vibrated. I watched as two drinking glasses crept across the table top and shattered onto the floor. Objects in the room seemed to hop up and down all around us--milk crates filled with books, plants, the dresser, the dresser jumping up from the ground, a stick of deodorant, an alarm clock bouncing on top of the dresser. Everything, it seemed, was cause and effect. I thought I heard the walls singing. It went on for two hours, and I didn't come, and I bled--but still, I never wanted it to end. When finally Bobby rolled off of me, gasping, everything stopped moving, the singing hushed, everything was still and quiet and dead.

Bobby and I went for long walks throughout the city. He pointed out things I'd never have thought twice about on my own. There was the night all the homeless people in Chelsea were wearing homburgs. There was the bathroom in Cafe Jones, where someone had written the thirty-nine steps toward the construction of a noiseless engine across an entire wall. I sometimes imagined that Bobby created these phenomena, that he was rebuilding the city in his own image. "The trees," he told me once, during a Sunday stroll in the park, "are like women. No, one tree is not like one woman, but like many women, like all women. The large branches tremble in the wind to caress me, and from each branch extend an infinite number of smaller branches, with different movements, different touches..." I picked up a rock to throw at the back of Bobby's head, but as he moved onto different subjects--the buxom pond, the garish, succubustian sky lap-dancing above us--my frustration receded. I let the stone fall from my hand onto the path and put my arm through his.

In the spring I took Bobby to meet my family in Bronxville. He talked to our dogs, he washed the dishes, he told us he loved children and Christmas. Earlier in the week he had told me that holidays reminded him of *The Mikado*, which he hated, and that children kicked him in the shins whenever he talked to them, but I kept quiet. He told cute, happy jokes to my mother and wry, cynical jokes to my father. He was a hit. By summer I tried

to get him to come up every weekend. When we stayed in the city on weekends he almost always ended up with Joe and Joe's friends. They'd go up to Amsterdam and 110th to buy drugs from some guy who dealt out of a phone booth. Some mornings Bobby got so sick I thought he was going to die. His vomit was gummy and blue, his face was gray. He sat on the couch with a wastebasket between his legs and struggled to breathe. "I can't swallow," he said. I rubbed his back and told him it was OK. I swore to myself that I would quit my job and go someplace new with him, start over, if it would only get him away from this life. I wasn't disapproving. I don't know why I would disapprove, but Bobby sometimes said that anyone else would have given him a hard time. I wasn't disapproving, or disappointed, or angry, only sad.

Bobby went to Europe in the winter. I was standing by the taxi in my undershirt, freezing, and I was crying. Bobby held my shoulders and said, "Everything's going to be OK, young champion. There will only be an ocean between us." When he got into the car I turned and walked to my building, lines of tear water hardening on my face. I couldn't look back.

Postscript of A Young Champion

I don't know. I've heard that prolonged drug use will sometimes cause people to lose their ability to identify and define certain situations. Chronology becomes meaningless, the identities of other people become confused, or misplaced. Environments from certain phases of their lives are transposed onto others. To compensate for this loss of structure the mind creates a different order, one so complex that the minutest details are accounted for. Bobby would probably call this "Inner Evolution," the perfection of his Buddhist philosophy, but I don't know, the Buddhists I've met all seem to have some kind of a grip.

Bobby went to Paris in January, and stopped writing me in February. I felt myself become older each day. When I heard he'd come back to America I didn't know what to

think. I figured I'd just wait for him to call me when he wanted to. The last time I'd seen him was out on the street that winter night, the night he called me a young champion and I walked away thinking it was the saddest thing I had ever heard.

Tough Shit, but for Whom?

We are receptive to all suggestions, ideas, comments, pronouncements, theories, innuendo, delusions or hoopla relevant to these pages. We do regret that we are no longer accepting anything by way of advice or criticism from one Sarah Johnson, for reasons known well enough to her and to ourselves. Sarah made her position quite clear when she tossed a potato masher hand grenade through the front window of our downtown offices one evening last April.¹ The office space--along with an IBM selectrix and a ceramic picture frame--was obliterated. We cannot condone this response. In fact, it is the opinion of this newsletter that reactions such as this one, which stray dangerously close to something like "social upheaval," are abhorrent and disturbing. It may be the luxury of the intellectual classes to admire the principles or the underlying passion behind such revolutionary tactics, but the editors of this newsletter do not share that luxury.

I'm sure Sarah would be placated if only we printed stories about kittens.² I've no doubt she'd be pleased if we spun a cheerful yarn about butterflies.³ But this is not our purpose. It is not even something that adheres to the accepted guidelines of a written newsletter. Our main obligation is to convey periodical reports of the status of many facets of our organization--business matters, as well as social activities designed to mitigate the stress of the work environment on our employees, like softball games, face-painting, intramural sessions of the old slap and tickle--in a dependable and punctual manner (with obvious allowances made for the time it takes to receive all the pieces back from the

¹Actually, a jar of La Victoria jalapeno peppers, with the Barsamian's price sticker still on it. And it was Bobby Valentin's porch window--back when he was living on Jensen, which is not downtown but on the south side, near the depot.

²Rabid kittens

³Poisonous butterflies

contributing staff, who are an unruly and incestuous bunch, always needing to collaborate on the simplest articles, always bitching about deadlines). The newsletter is designed to inform a specific sector of the work force about matters that are important to them. These are our goals.

A Letter From the County Lock-up

Dear Baby,

I have lost track of the time. There is no such thing as day, as opposed to night, inside the joint. There is only permanent dimness, the shadows of the bars across my face and across the mattress, shadows that do not shift, and a light down the hall that is never turned off. Is there a guard sitting there, reading? Are there men playing cards? Perhaps I am not in jail, but in the basement of a mobster's house, being held for some fuck-up I can't remember. A crime against the mob, no doubt: I spat on Jimmy "Spats" O'Reilly's shiny new spats, while we were standing on the corner of Washington and Mass Ave; maybe I gazed too intently into the eyes of Li Ping's girl at Wally's Jazz Club last night. Does the mob have its own jails? Its own Mob Justice? I have no idea why I'm in here.

I regret the loss of intimacy more than anything. Try as I might, I cannot escape the loneliness of this place. I have devised methods of alleviating the pain, of finding that release I feel when...

But perhaps this is not the time to be delicate.

I jerk off constantly, as much as I can get away with before the other inmates threaten to kill me. When I masturbate I think of you, so I suppose you could say I am thinking of you constantly, too. You hold the highest place in my thoughts right now. I hope you consider it an honor. My first hour here I masturbated three times. I thought of what you did for me that night I fractured my heel, when we sprawled out on the floor of Joe Thompson's closet (I even put my boots underneath my lower back, trying to recapture the moment). I imagined you dancing the way you always used to dance late at night after

we'd fucked--wearing my T-shirt, naked from the waist down, your blonde bush swaying like the pendulum of a clock to that Al Green record I'll probably never hear again. As I loved myself the bedsprings sang along like crickets; in the corridor the other men shouted and cheered. (The first two times; the third time they ranted and raved, and banged their drinking cups against the bars.) In the end it wasn't enough, I could find no release. I went for heightened simulation. I tried many things. I tore a slit in my mattress and tried to fuck it, but in the end I only hurt myself--the padding is mined with stray, uninsulated metal springs. I tried to get something on with the sink/toilet. True, it is cold, and made of tin. I was drawn to its shape more than anything. The space between the spigot and the rim of the bowl is almost tight enough for my personal needs, and by wrapping a sock around the spigot I made it perfect, really. But ultimately it was difficult to find a comfortable squat from which to start humping away. Half-standing, half-kneeling? No. Late last night, in desperation, I bartered away my copy of Archie Digest and my last Heath Bar to the man in the adjoining cell, in exchange for a pair of nail clippers. I spent half the night digging, prying apart the craggy mortar and cement in the rear wall, chiseling and smoothing out a hole that I might be able to stick my penis into. Entry was difficult--it is fairly low-grade cement, difficult to shape into a pussy--so I took my other sock and wore it like a condom, which worked, for a while, until I tried for more penetration and ended up pushing myself off the wall and landing on the ground, nearly breaking my ass. Exhausted, I fell into a fitful sleep, and dreamed about myself, naked, running in circles in an effort to lay hold of my own behind and bugger it soundly. The whole time I was anxious I had run out of socks. I awoke sweating and distressed, unsatisfied even in sleep.

In the morning you post bail. There are no things that need to be returned to me. I am wearing the shirt I wore when I was booked, wrinkled now, unbuttoned at the cuffs. I walk through a door into a long corridor, and I walk down the corridor and go through another door, and I am outside. It is morning, and gray, and yet to the east there are

orange and deep blue strips of cloud suspended above the smokestacks. Perhaps it is smoke. In my dress shoes I walk out across the gravel lot in the chill morning alone, and I am released.

A Letter From Europe

And so I tried to live in Europe, and I squandered my savings, lost twenty pounds, developed a scalp condition, got addicted to smack, kicked the smack habit, got addicted to Benzedrine, quit popping Bennies on an hourly basis, quit popping Bennies on a daily basis, wrecked the car of a woman who for a brief time thought I was decent, drank pastis at the Algerian bar, pointed my finger at the Algerians and called them all "Cunts," ate a box of French crayons, shit in Technicolor, got the shit kicked out of me, ever-darkening degrees of red pouring out of my ears, lost my voice, stopped talking, stopped writing letters to my friends, stopped writing letters to my mother, yelled at my mother when I regained my voice, although she was five-thousand miles away, yelled at Sarah Johnson or New Cat Girl or whoever it was who came to stand over me as I squatted in the Jardin des Plantes trying to look up the ladies' dresses, I think it was Sarah, I had invited her, believing she might come...

A Letter From Our Old CEO

In the evenings I sat outside a school near the Gare St. Lazare and watched the adolescent girls going home. There was a waist-high stone wall across the street, and I sat up on the edge, my back pressed against the iron bars of a fence. The girls gathered out front in their dark capes, bags held innocently in front of their groins. It was a dark street, even by day, so that by the time school got out the girls would be nearly lost in the shadows, and I would see only a vague outline of their clothing. But it was in the dark their faces were most vivid: the pallor of their cheeks, the soft blue lines along the jaws

merging into black. It was a ghost world, and each night I drifted through it, waiting for the air to get colder.

In Paris I didn't do much to attract attention. I had a balcony that looked out onto a courtyard. In the mornings I dropped chunks of white cheese down to the alley cats. Afternoons I walked through the Jardin des Plantes, reaching out to touch the bark of the trees, nodding to the panther, the ibis, the Manucode, regarding the timeless pageant and trying to retrieve, from within myself, those strange sympathies that moved Emerson to say, "I will be a naturalist." I considered that these animals were the descendants of those same animals that brought Emerson clarity in his grief. I felt joy. I perceived an affinity among things. Later I read that all the animals in the Jardin des Plantes were eaten by the communards during the siege of 1871, while the bourgeoisie bombarded the city, and the public offices burned.

When the alley cats stopped coming around I panicked. I started drinking in the mornings. I hung out at an Algerian bar in the Twelfth, where I met some men who set me up with good dope. They called it La Copaine Blanche. There are several months I cannot remember very well. I walked endlessly. A box of crayons fell out of a young girl's book bag, and I picked it up and ate each one of them. The crayons in France are thick and chewy like Tootsie Rolls, and contain lead. I wandered back to the Twelfth and vomited onto the floor of the Algerian bar. They swore at me, hands grabbed hold of my shirt and tossed me stumbling across the room. I sat up against the wall near the bathroom and pointed at each of them in turn and called them all Cunts. They beat me senseless. They smashed my head against a glass table top and left me out on the curb. Later the patron brought gauze bandages and wrapped my head. I think it's time you consider finding a new place to hang out, he told me, brushing bits of broken glass out of my hair. He led me to the end of the street and helped me sit on the curb. My scalp itched terribly. I scratched at it, the blood caking up under my fingernails. A man stopped and looked at me. He knelt and began picking through my hair like a monkey. He asked if I needed a place to stay,

and I got up and began walking, I walked along the river to the Jardin des Plantes and passed out curled around a tree.

Some say the ocean is the cradle of life--our primordial womb. Others stare at the slate-blue arc of the abyss and ponder the long swim. I would admit that yes, I do think about the long swim, and sometimes I will step into the sea. The icy salt burns my feet--I've had rashes on my ankles since I was twelve. I have never gone in deep. Some people have. On the other hand I have never understood this cradle of life jazz. I did not walk out of the sea to step into this life.

And so there is a prison behind bars, where I have never been, and there is the prison of this life, where you insist I've never been. Of course I returned to Paris. I always will. Perhaps the welcome of Paris will one day wear thin, but Paris is not the point anyway, Paris has never been the point, there are other places--Asia, Africa--where I can get away from this one place, this West or North or Slum, this one place that follows me wherever I go, like the striding shadow that won't leave the corner of my eye...

In the Spring you come to see me. You find me crouched in the Jardin des Plantes scratching at the bloody bandage wrapped around my head. I do not recognize you at first, I am too busy peeking up the ladies' dresses. You reproach me. You tell me to come home. I raise my eyes. The panther coughs up ibis feathers as he paces in his cage.