

2000

T A K E S

A FICTION IN DIVERS PARTS

BEING A POETICAL NARRATION
WITH FUGITIVE ELEMENTS OF
ALLEGORY ANECDOTE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
COMEDY DRAMA FABULATION
FANTASY HISTORY LEGEND MEMOIR
MYTH PARABLE POTBOILER ROMANCE
SAGA TRAGEDY & UNTROWABLE YARN

BY

❖ *BRADFORD KANTOR* ❖

FEATURING A BRIEF CHRONICLE
A DREAM OF SOUR MASH
OF UNCERTAIN PARENTAGE

& WITH A
COUNTERPOSING FOREWORD
BY BRUCE SAGER

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*A PREFATORY DIGRESSION AND PRE-PARENTHETICAL APOLOGY
(THE FOLLOWING SHORT TRACT RELATING,
IN AMBIGUOUS FASHION,
TO THE LONGER NARRATIVE THAT FOLLOWS)*

A DREAM OF SOUR MASH

It was hard to make out the last words of Old Snake Eyes, largely because he had a loosely fitted ball gag wrapped about his head and the sounds were muffled.

“Woo doughnuts till you sing,” I think he said. But perhaps it was just, “You don’t need to do this thing.”

It didn’t much matter. I’d built up a head of steam at that point and I was barreling down the track of our long partnership like a runaway train, slurping up ties with my one hungry headlamp, and we were about to ram into the station.

My one hungry headlamp was actually a tight red laser dot that I’d focused with some care upon the bristles between Nestor Sinn’s eyebrows. So you might say that the spot where my beam had come to rest *was* the station.

Though I surely don’t cotton to theories of predestination, there was a certain profluent Jack Daniel’s-induced logic to what each of us said and did that evening, and as I look back on it now, like a boy looking at a model train set running in his basement – and we were, in fact, in a rare south Floridian basement, illegal, dank and dim, with Ness tied to a chair just like you see in the movies, and me standing in front of him wagging my little Smith & Wesson and painting his forehead with its crimson pointer –

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well, it seems to me that we were rushing towards a moment as inevitable as the crash of two toy locomotives.

“Ness,” I said, settling on the exact midpoint between his baby blacks, “you can’t say I’ve been unjust. Come on now. I’ve been every bit as fair with you as you were with me. And you know it. After all, I gave you the rules, we drank our drinks, I rolled the dice, they came up snake eyes, and that’s that. Really, what were the odds?” I’d personally carved both of the dice I’d just rolled, and since each featured just a solitary pip – a single black dot – on every one of its six square facets, you might say I knew those odds. Ness understood me exactly.

Nestor Sinn had ten years earlier snookered me out of a thirty-two million dollar graphic arts firm that it had taken me a good quarter century to build, and he’d enjoyed every moment of the ride – three years of solid, stealthy labor on his part. You can’t say Old Snake Eyes didn’t work for my money. And when he finally pulled the trigger on his abiding masterwork, he left me, my marriage, my kids, my career to rot in the gutter.

Such is the long con.

Problem is, he didn’t kill me. And you know what they say about what doesn’t kill you. Now, a decade later, the Great Cookie had crumbled on my side of the table, and we were playing out the last chapter of our story down in his clandestine cellar. I say “clandestine” because the entrance is hidden artfully behind a bookcase – vintage Nestor – and I sincerely doubt his little secret vault shows up on any blueprints: the water table in South Florida can be very vexing to builders.

“Truth is, I don’t know how this damned revolver works, Ness, but what I do know is that there’s only one bullet in the cylinder. So when I pull the trigger, either something’s going to come out or it isn’t. Now, you gave me three years of smoke and mirrors, so I figure I get to pull the trigger three times. But I’m a

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fair-minded guy. Anyone knows that, you do.” I gave him a warm conspiratorial wink, the one I’d use to reassure a client or a child that some minor crisis was going to turn out just fine in the end.

“Here’s the scoop, then: if nothing happens after three pulls, I walk out of here. Well, come to think of it, even if something does happen, I suppose I still walk out of here.” I believe I chuckled. “I guess the only question is whether you walk, too. So, partner, let’s do this thing”

I stepped back to what I considered a respectable distance and pulled the trigger. There was a hollow click. Ness looked at me with his snake eyes wide open. My finger tightened again. Another empty tick. I waited a good long moment. A third pull. Nothing.

Ness seemed to relax, it was hard to tell.

“What the hell,” I said, and tugged the trigger again. This time there was an explosion, and a little hole appeared between Ness’s brows. He looked surprised. Judging from the splatter that sprayed the wall behind him, I believe we’d found our live round.

His head fell forward, but only an inch or two. The leather straps holding the gag were buckled to the back of the chair, and they did their job.

All that was left at that point was for me to run up to the kitchen. I found an enameled Charles and Diana silver plated demitasse spoon. The cozy royal family. It was just perfect.

I slid it into the anterior chambers and scooped out some vitreous from each eye. It was harder than it sounds. Then I took the single-pipped dice – snake eyes, guaranteed – and fixed them very properly into the jellied sockets.

So when I left him, Ness Sinn was sitting there for all the world – whatever world might find him at the bottom of a hidden stairwell, that is – staring out of two tiny black pupils, soulless dots, and not so very different from real life, as I think back on it.

Old Snake Eyes.

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

AN ISSUE OF PROVENANCE

A DREAM OF SOUR MASH, reproduced here in its entirety by permission of the copyright holder, is an ostensibly fictional submission which appeared under the nom de guerre "E. W. [Edsel Widener] Singer" in the pages of the small southern literary journal BEACON some thirty-eight months prior to the transpiration of those events recounted in chapters 198-200 of the long manuscript that follows.

Given the twenty-two months of quietude that beguiled the interval between its acceptance and actual publication, the subject story must to a certainty have been composed a minimum of five years before the hypothetical time frame of said events, feigned or no. A visit to the Arcadian campus housing the editorial offices of BEACON, an examination of their filing cabinets, an exhaustive inspection of the barely decipherable carbon copy sheets from which the type was set reveal nothing of the author's genuine identity or location.

The small check issued by BEACON as payment for the story remains uncashed and curiously unreturned, although a review of postal records reveals the putative authorial address as a whimsy and a fraud.

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FOREWORD

A capacious and romantic architect my friend Bradford K. invokes for us as he begins – or begins to conclude – the manuscript that follows; and though speaking in this instance of a fastidious man who died nearly a score of years before he was born, K. might as well have been describing his own unutterable self. *Capacious and romantic K? Yes. Fastidious K?*

No damned way.

For K. is better described as casual to the point of indifferent, a let-'em-lie-where-they-drop type and an unalloyed do-nothing on the matter of preserving his many months' writing.

I state this with some authority because I am legatee of this soi-disant document (and this simply through his desertion of these piles of pages, no few of which are sitting around me as I diddle these key tops — *Has ever bequest been so ambiguous?*), assigned to me, I must assume, to either issue or eschew, to publish or – my choice – pillage, piss on, palpitate, prostitute, perseverate or pardon; or perhaps to depute as paper for a parrot cage:

Publish or punish? That is the question.

Author's intent? Unconveyed. Of course.

So it's up to me, then . . .

. . . not merely to safeguard and defend, but, in the end, to dispense to the world what K. has abandoned.

And how shall this be done?

That too's very clearly my call. Perhaps sheet by sheet from the driver's side window whilst speeding along the Seven Mile Bridge – an option, keep in mind, that I've considered.

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Or perhaps in a less destructive manner.

Well, the very existence of this book suggests that I made up my mind at some point, that I gave in. Or out. Out, out (as you'll see). So out of respect for K. and his lust for Tradition, cap T, as well as for the tale that follows, meander as it might, I chose, finally, the latter – the less destructive – route. It wasn't all that easy a choice.

K. was never all that easy. But here, decision made, I'll give you three things to think upon:

One: There are some unlovely revelations bobbing up and down in this ocean of words, insights with sisters, a school of little truths. And some with very sharp teeth. K. has his points and he deigns (eventually) to make them. So I warn you . . . it might be a hazardous go, plowing through this commodious jumble of paper if you're accustomed to more punctilious pap.

Another thing, I think there are resemblances to real and living people in it, regardless how tempestuous his fancies, and more on that in a second.

Finally, I believe there could be literary merit in the thing, though as you can see from my own stilted stylings I might not be the best judge of these matters. Still, the man's been accused in certain circles of possessing some small virtuosity, and whatever form that might take, I think it betrays itself with enough frequency that it's just possible you'll find this *accretion* a worthy diversion.

Anyway, regarding the manuscript in hand, I am by honor compelled to repeat K's assurance (and from just this past year) that no characters in his "memoir" (he positively cackled at the word) were meant to resemble (much less ape) anyone he'd met in *real* life, nor anything that had transpired in it – his snort when snapping off that short italicized descriptor being far and away the closest thing to a philosophy I'd ever extracted from him.

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Real, indeed. How could such a wraith discourse with any credibility on the nature of reality?

But no, I could be off the mark on that: he was capable of a sort of amiable philosophical discourse from our school days, after all, and I remember some years back – it was a winter evening, I’m practically certain, already dark, and K. was oppressed by the early dark . . . anyway, I was sitting with him in his library, also quite dark, when – my eyes falling on a certain philosophy book – I asked, quite in jest, “What is *real*, K?”

And K. filled his lungs to the top with this extended breath, the while making a face like some ancient Chinese poet, pulling at the corners of his eyes and such, and he crossed his legs on an imaginary mat – when you think of K., think gifted mimic – and then he exhaled a song whose title was longer than its tail, a canto the point of which – made very prettily, as I recall, through comparisons to birds and their mindless clatter – was simply that it’s best we regard anything written or said (or even implied with the wave of a hand or the roll of an eye) as a kind of fiction, and that *real* is just one solitary version of that fiction. And no more real than the rest.

(This he did playing all fast and loose with his r’s and his l’s, like a thirteen-year-old trying to impress a pretty girl.)

And to this notion of *no more real than the rest* I would now reintroduce his contention that none of this work that follows has taken for source any person or incident extruded from real life.

Hah! I pass this claim to you, savvy reader, with a heaping ladle of salt: for I know the man, and by my lights a single few grains could never suffice to counter the tang of that assertion.

In support of his position, however – and here I must reluctantly agree with him, pain me though it does – he cites the fact that while *in reality* he and I have for some decades been the closest of comrades, nowhere in this manuscript am I even

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mentioned. (Alas, it's true: the bastard never mentions me. Though I think he makes one brief allusion.)

How, he inquires *in absentia* – and I reckon it would not damage the picture if you could vision him as I do in the posture of his asking, sober and austere, and level as any courtroom lawyer, though perhaps with the coil of a smile beginning to snake over his ocherous choppers – how, he asks, could this be a *legitimate* remembrance if I, friend to his solitary hours and housekeeper to his salmagundi, play no part in it whatever?

I wish I knew.

But here I am anyway, stumped, stymied, spruce as a goose, at loose ends and with some leftover page which I've left to you for luck – a little white space not unlike the interval between musical notes – good, bald and silent, and leave off wishing you better fortune than I in deciphering what parts of this story are so and what parts only so-so.

BRUCE SAGER
Westminster, Maryland
February, 2007

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*now
follows*

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*being the true &
unfeigned narrative
of*
BRADFORD
KANTOR

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PROLOGOS

An incident has been lost
on the great plains of memory.

It has floated off like a top hat
upon the waters of a flood.

Some years later –
perhaps one night, by the stage door
of an opera house, in a sea of top hats –
the incident is sighted, if only
for a moment.

A search team is assembled.
Curious crew.

A drunkard, a liar,
a con man, a whore;
but a scientist, as well, with his bow tie
tied poorly, and a priest,
and a happy young mute
dressed in a sack.

And, as leader, an egoist
who cannot be trusted
to tell the same story in the same way
on two successive evenings.

Thus the rescue flurries to sidewalk's end,
thence across the countryside,
searchlights tonguing the fish in the streams
and the owls in the trees,
and footsteps soft upon the grasses,
this congress of fools
spreading into the far fields
where some stones are too heavy to turn,
some bushes too thick to forage.

198 / The *next-to-next-to-last* chapter

A capacious and romantic architect called Addison Mizner fell in love in his youth with the architectures of Spain and the Central Americas. Though he knew no more about blueprints than the average man knows about women – though he was in fact untrained in the ways of his profession – he managed somehow to attract the wealthiest and most discriminating clients during the most roaring and ruinous decade of the century just past.

It was a time that saw him arc from the height of artistic and commercial success to the perigee of financial ruin, and so in this way he was an echo of his era. Still, it was love, and a glorious run; for like many men before and since, he was spellbound by the graceful proportions of his mistress and recognized nothing of her shortcomings.

Far more destructive affairs have been recorded in our histories. Mizner during that brief period was to put his signature to one after another palm-swept Florida estate, and little cottages, too, and even a church, for success led to success, Wanamaker to Vanderbilt, so that in no time he turned the lips of the land to gold, gold wherever they kissed the seas. He was a Midas careering like all of his decade towards bankruptcy and a premature death, but not before he had his way with the strand, thus stippling the southern coasts, then and thenceforth, with his influential, fine and imperious handiwork.

Introduced in my middle years to this style, I have ever since held in reverence its artful and serene productions. All the more delicious, then, that I am sitting (with only an as-yet unfired handgun and a curious pair of dice for companions) ragtop-down just beyond the solid walls bounding one such mansion.

It is a modest example of its kind.

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Modesty is a strange conceit in this neighborhood. Such grounds as tease the eye through its front gates are immaculate, groomed as a poodle. Moreover, they betray with an admirable economy its owner's most sacred ambitions.

So here we sit. The motor is humming and the wind is provoking the *Phoenix canariensis* with a humid caress. It is, to the innocent eye, an agreeable scene. But come closer.

See what there is to see:

If you were standing by the curb, for example, and were you bold enough to stare, you might remark that I'm scrawling these words in a hand at once fleeting and fair, though it's doubtful you'd notice that I'm working, as it were, upon the last three wilted sheets of what was once a very full pad; if you were a detective, or reasonably observant, you might recognize that my car is a rental; if a landscape artist, that it's blocking a wrought iron gate located along one side of this small estate. The gate enters upon an arbor most pleasantly vined and tangled.

Once breached, it will in short order lead me to Sinn. Nestor Washbourne Mellendick Sinn. Old Snake Eyes. My nemesis. My adversary.

My adversary. Ah, splendid Arthurian notion! Such an antediluvian phrase. And in this, so advanced an aeon. And on such a night, by God, and by so charming a bower! For the breeze is blowing as capriciously as the bellows of an old storyteller – I trust you've read my little poem? – and the air is citrus-breathed and mellow. Like a baby stud coming upon a bordello, I can feel my nostrils dilating against the palette of the possible.

Really, what is it about this precinct? I come upon it even in my advanced years with a pilgrim's wonder and infatuation, and drive the cathedral of its streets in a kind of monastic ecstasy. I am solitary and prostrated before it. I am abashed. It tugs like a moon upon the salts of my soul.

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It occurs to me that these villas and grounds which our dear Addison Mizner inspired may in fact be considered magnets of a sort: magnets for Gatsbys, magnets for Rockefellers. The rising and the risen; and perhaps the fallen as well. (Ness Sinn, *op. cit.*, belongs to the first of these classes. Unless/Until I effect his transfer to the final.)

Part of the attraction to this place, then, is in its design, pure and simple. Pure and complex. It's easy to fall for.

May I go on for just a moment?

These estates are fitted out to instigate nothing short of covetousness, stupefaction, a soup of envy and awe – and I mean from soup to nuts, from stands of exotic fronds and intricate formal plantings right down to their customary confections of stuccoed yellow beam and orange roof tile – each individual tile fashioned, quite naturally, to undulate with a chorus of half-mooned sisters against the chronic blue that stretches over the southern parts of this state – and I was about to add “like a vast and dogged graffito,” but the sentence had already outlasted its welcome. Fashioned to undulate by day or, by night, to reflect most tenderly just that glossy and brilliantined moonlight by which I am now scribbling – rendered ingenuously, to be sure, to mirror someone's idea of fascinatin' rhythms.

Island rhythms, languorous hot undulating Latin rhythms.

So what we have here at bottom is all of this fancy reflecting and mirroring and undulating and such undertaken (just these eighty years past) hard on the tin foil sea, undertaken simply to address and impress a countryside abrim (at that time) with scion and popinjay, yes'm, but with hick and loblolly as well. Ladies and gentlemen: the Roaring Twenties. What a farrago! And it was just dress-up, reader. They were only painting their faces!

Now everything changes, I'll grant you; yet surely nothing changes. Not for real. For what I'm actually thinking – though not

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yet writing – about is something entirely different, a genuine gear-shift, if you will; and this should come as no surprise (as soon you'll understand, once you start in earnest to paddle the stream of this narrative with me). What I'm getting at is this:

Whatever fired Mizner up, I'll bet it had something to do with the wind. For as far as I can tell there's no passion, no emotion, no instinct that isn't fired or fanned by this sirocco; it's a profligate, giddy breeze that grazes these coasts; it's a character in its own right. Both nature and a force of nature.

And it alters whatever it licks: for each degree of action is emboldened and each emotion stripped to living nerve in such an atmosphere, each measurable thing asserting itself with an emphasis, I suspect, several clicks beyond the norm.

Thus we may observe fondness in these realms distending as love, love disposing itself as adoration, and so forth and so on, blah, blah, blah; and just as cop and criminal are commonly said to be twinned, so piety and sin, in these parts, twinned; and every class and species of crime is likewise cultivated, nurtured, stirred, coddled, every nasty little notion disports and grows to abnormal dimensions in this subtropical setting. What I'm telling you is that the heat just gets inside you. Blah.

Perhaps it's so. Perhaps not. But this is for sure true:

It would be quite impossible for me to be sitting outside of someone's house in siroccoless Vermont or pokerfaced North Dakota as I am sitting here in Florida this climactic evening of our little tale, sitting here with a single .38 Special hollow point bullet lodged in a laser-fitted Smith & Wesson K-frame revolver under the passenger seat, and contemplating what I am contemplating.

Which is: Whether to add murder, however warranted, to my lengthy but otherwise humdrum list of sins.

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Now Vermont and North Dakota are more sober regions, to be sure . . . but that's my point, exactly: you're quite unlikely to get drunk on the air there as here.

So forget about me. Forget about free will.

Whatever happens next, blame it on a roll of the dice and an eager pistol. Blame it on the wind.

199 / The why and wherefore of it

Let's step back. I've decided to inject the preceding (as well as this penultimate chapter) right at the start of my story. I just thought it might be friendly to give you a small taste of the here and now, to share with you the textures of this night.

All these palms. All this wind.

But before I choose whether to insinuate a round of ammunition between the thistly eyebrows of Nestor W. M. (Ness) Sinn or to roll on harmless as a schoolgirl's fart past his gates and out of his life, I want to share with you some thoughts I've set down this past year or so. Certain in expectation of this evening; certain in ignorance of it.

My final section, Take 200 (if I have, after this next hour, gained purchase to write it at all), shall be composed, I must venture, from either:

- 1) the comfy confines of my library; or
- 2) from a jail cell here in the sovereign state of Florida.

I should add that my library is located eleven hundred-ish northern miles from where I'm currently sitting – or alternatively, since space is commonly measured by time, some sixteen point five straight-through driving hours distant. Whereas I'm sure that the less congenial confinement must be much closer at hand. So who knows where I'll conclude?

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Not that I don't have a preference. You see, I'm not the sort of flower to flourish in the cinderblock shadows of prison. I am a heterosexual. I am an egoist. I am accustomed to indulging myself.

But against the very real eventuality that I shall be compelled to spend my remaining years guest of the unregenerate and amphoric Governor of this sun-drenched province (what remain of my years, I should say, until they are interrupted by the glittering needle of his executioner), I imagine that I'd create damned little writing in such a place.

So over this past year, as yet in possession of my liberty, and of my library as well, I've labored in the long gleam of my computer to gather this together: this agglomeration of facts, facts, facts, a twisting, tumbled pathway that's led us right up to the portals of this current hour. Right up to Sinn's little gate.

Facts, indeed!

They follow just as I've set them down these twelve months past, pretty much in order, and accompanied by such other notions as moseyed in for a visit and stayed on for the ride.

Why and wherefore? I promised you an answer.

So work your way to Take 200. Now, from the top:

1 / The proper launch:

An invocation to the Muse done up in short paragraph style

Deipnosophist. (You could look it up.) A skillful dinner conversationalist. A master of light chat. That's me.

Not precisely the person you were thinking to lock brains with, eh? Too vacuous-sounding? Chéri, all the world loves a vacuum (nature excepted, of course).

Still, I suspect, not exactly the person you were hoping to sit down with when you set down your tea cup next to that glorious

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ray of sunlight, not quite the person you were betting on when you settled in beside the Shih Tzu or swept off the sand from the bottoms of your feet and turned onto your belly and into this page.

But hang for a moment. You might find me a person, a personality, a persona worth knowing. And a comfort thereby.

For comfort leads to repetition, and repetition to tradition, and tradition is a comfort in and unto itself; so there we have the Great Circle of Life nuzzling our calves like a plump old cat, and would it be in poor taste at this point to suggest that sitting for a spell with an individual such as the author should, for some, seem peaceful enough? – indeed tranquil, and the conversation if it holds to form will generally creep along feeling just about right.

Personally, I believe in things that have that “right” feel. I trust them, and much as a commonsensical fishing pole must arc from the pier of logic, I believe in *doing* things right, in my own rock-solid, Jimmy Stewart-ish, James Garner-ish, would-but-my-jaw-were-square-as-Gregory-Peck’s sort of way. And that, in its lavishly hyphenated nutshell, is why I like and value traditions. They endure, you see.

Their very persistence celebrates perseverance, and last I looked perseverance was (and remains) a virtue. A *Virtue*, in fact.

Still, as with most things, I’m flexible on the matter. Quite pliable, in fact: the waffling wit and patron saint of whatever burns off with the dawn. And yet and all, there’s this majestically fixed, mawkish side to me as well. Oh yes, I’m the complex critter. Much like you.

And amply equipped, therefore, depending on which way the wind’s blowing, to mourn the acid touch of time, to sing the night’s crumbling threnody, to wail like a widow or cry like a cat; and this last most especially in the service of *lost* youth, *flown* love, *tattered* innocence, that whole boatload –

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– *Annnnnnd they're off!*, folks, the clattering iron shoes of conventional linguistic fare now making the first turn of the tenth cobblestoned paragraph beneath your fingers and instantly, insistently, invidiously boring the *fin* of the *finite* into our *ad infinitum*.

But wait . . . I feel some tinkering, some Tinkers to Evers to Chance, some Paris to London to Rome. Lordy, Lordy, I feel something coming

Could this be our invocation?

O Clio! [deep breath] *May this journey down the cobbled center of Main* [and hold it, hold it, clasp that “n” in “Main” like a roadside preacher clutching a nitwit’s nickel] *prove as surpassing a comfort to his charges* [extended theatrical pause, optional wink] *as to the poor purblind coachman awash in a sea of horseshit and italics!*

(Dear me. That sounded a bit incantatory, as prayers go these days. And quite possibly staged for a certain dramatic effect. In fact, I’m sure of it, now I read it again. Brittle and unfiltered. All in all, hardly the summons I had in mind when I started in steering this rig. But I am at leisure as I compose this, unsure at this point if I am or am not headed down to a certain southern state on a particular errand that either I must or must not undertake beneath its crepitant palms, and so in this state of sweet indecision can lavish more time, more wattage on my opening statement here and now than, I envision, I should be able to under certain as yet unspecified – and perhaps ne’er-to-transpire, for who among us can foretell? – future circumstances.)

Now where were we headed? Ah, yes. We were cantering in tandem toward the sober, faintly wanned sister of Chastity and Prudence: toward wasp-waisted fan-wagging fried-chicken-on-Sunday-afternoons Tradition Her Own Self.

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Of traditions I approve emphatically – especially those that appear as if draped in full favonian stride by Augustus Saint-Gaudens. Traditions are the plumbing upon which most of the world’s best toilets are planted. (Shall we discuss Religion?) And yes, I like capital letters, too – like ’em because they call attention to the importance of What’s Being Said.

Introductions. Explanations. Invocations. Each has a place at the table.

So let’s begin. Call me K.

“Someone must have traduced Bradford K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.”

Alright, I’m joshing a little, aping my better. But perhaps you see what I mean about tradition, how evocative it is? –

K. sat at his writer’s table in a fine linen shirt fastened loosely at the collar and began to frame the terms of his remonstrance, but hesitated at the salutation, uncertain, as at the place where three roads meet, to which of the various officials milling beneath his windows it must be addressed.

Ah, three-stroked K. Sweet traditional mark. What a fine position this otherwise undistinguished letter enjoys in the annals of literature. For *Kafka* is tradition (and how astonished, how appalled, how delighted he would be); the simple literary convention of creating interest and mystique by using a capital letter in place of a proper name is tradition; and italics? *Tradition!*

But the unbounded application of Tradition in the realm of Remembrance – certainly as gaudy and duplicitous a forum for fictions as has ever been established – can easily, I see, lead to misunderstanding. If not outright deception. So no memoir (*hah!*) may be said to be completely accurate, for always Ariel or some little sprite is tampering with the keys, perhaps the stem of memory itself. As example, I have no linen shirts.

Nor have I ever been arrested.

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What have I been? Three times groom, five times sire, then, K. begins again – the artist bends now with no little determination into the keyboard, like a cyclist angling his shoulders against the wind – cyclically moneyed, bankrupted twice, generous, pinchpenny, high, low, yes, no, sporadically natty, intermittently shabby, given to erratic shifts from third person to first, I've spent most of my adult life writing a poetry by turns either so mandarin and unconvincing that even I doze off when I read it, or so vulgar and derivative that Black Sparrow is thinking of reanimating its presses just to cast me as their marquee attraction.

The rest of my time I've spent smoking cigars and squinting into books. I might sound on occasion a trifle dandy, but I'm no fop or idler, no flâneur. Or, as my friend Jean-Paul might point out, grinning his actuarial Belgian grin, *flâneur*.

I've also lavished a good deal of attention in this lifetime on women, from my youth's glistening duo of Eve Theodore (privy Greek goddess) and Lindell McCann (ditto Irish dervish) to a bevy of beasties and beauties who've housed and whored and harassed me into adulthood. So at least there's something to poem on about, even when – absent the customary dose of melancholy with which so much of the tribe is sprinkled – I've no specific unhappiness to memorialize, yea, even when no honored guest nor tendrilish trembling student has been laid but recently to rest.

(We don't know each other so very well yet – you and I – but if you were thinking that last was a none-too-sly nod towards the likes of Wystan and Ted, then you're on your game. And onto mine.)

Now is it okay to lead off a paragraph, as I've just done again, with parentheses, especially a set interleaved with long, spear-like dashes? Is it okay to finish with that same bookendy flourish? Don't answer – that way, in your flinty, perhaps finical silence, I'll think of you as a poetry editor.

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And on that note, here's something I must tell you before we stray too far from the subject: I don't, as a rule, send out my poems (for publication, that is).

There's a ball of cork I never wanted to swallow.

It's not that I've turned my back on the academy; I have plenty of birds flitting and moons rising and suns falling and dead Greeks flying around in my work. But it's just not right for the current climate. You see, the whiff of a woman is never very far off either, lurking savory behind many of my stanzas, and even if one page is filled with all sorts of noble Yeatsian pap, give me another page or two and Bukowski will rear his carbuncular noggin. (In other words, although most people will sniff at a pudenda for a good deal longer than they'll stare at a Greek – I say this even if that Greek be Eve Theodore, now somewhere mid-fiftyish, with luck willowy and coffee-thighed still – it's just not the way to make hay with most of today's poetry magazines.)

All of which suggests not much of a market for the stuff I churn out.

And since my imperative is neither to publish nor perish, and since the mimeo revolution – much more mons-friendly than your cleanly typeset high-minded post-20th century lit mag housing its nest of erudite, jingly, nay, *tuneful* magpies – is now, sadly, several decades behind us, I really haven't much incentive to try the mails with my scrambled oeuvres. Or *oeufs*, to throw Jean-Paul one more – perhaps last – eggy bone.

Also, I'm not big on imperatives.

Damn it to Christ, just the flutter of a curtain and we're headed down a side street. Again.

And yet that invocation I promised up there in the chapter heading's on its way. I'm merely having a bit of trouble getting to it. The problem – if you haven't figured it out just yet – is that this

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is my first shot at the prose line. I'm not sure if it will end well, or end at all, or end at this next period.

One thing's for certain, though: compared to poetry, the style's edifying. Or is it better to say, simply, "instructive?" *A-ha!*, now *there's* the tussle! Do you see?

Do you see how tough this prose stuff is, once you're paying attention? – each moment a choice, each choice a word, and every word a stride forward or back or, crab-like, to the side; each step, I'm coming to understand, the chance to slide deep or deeper into a quagmire. And the flooring uncertain – a trapdoor, in fact, a whoosh through Wonderland with notions and possibilities rushing off in all directions at once. Finishing this paragraph, for example, feels very much like watching a reel of film, just ended, click-click-clicking around an untended projector.

So let's stand fast and stick with *instructive* because it's obvious to me, right from these opening spasms of composition – or is this merely dinner conversation? – that even as you take aim at an idea in this here PROSE the target leaps like a cricket at the end of a needle, and before you know it you're spraying salvos at the bull's eye one stall over.

Needing all the help I can get, then, and a dash of focus, and in the barnacled, synoptic, wily-winged name of Tradition, cap T, I'd like – with some assistance from page 54 of *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure, and Preposterous Words* (The Citadel Press, Secaucus [ref. X. J. Kennedy's splendid poem on the place, appearing on the thirty-third page of *Nude Descending a Staircase* {whose eponymous title piece, based on the celebrated Duchamp canvas, is found, next poem to last, on page 69 of that same slender tome}, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1961], New Jersey, first paper bound printing, 1976) – to take this opportunity to summon a soupcon of significance and fire off a succinct yet solemn benison to the Muse, to wit:

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Save me from deipnosophistical fluff and let my fleet fingers fly.

2 / A global positioning system presented in clipped, no-nonsense prose

I should also let a few facts fly, just to give you a sort of compass for this book. (If I can figure out where North is. And if it turns into a book.)

Temperate reader, the GPS: you ought to know that I'm fifty-four years fifty-four days old as of this moment (very nearly New Year's Day, very nearly a Sunday, 2006), that I have imparted surname to a pantheon of importunate kids who arrived in the seventies and eighties and nineties, and that I'm considering making one or two more with my (relatively) new (relatively) blonde (I prefer the English spelling) wife; and also, that I am partnered in a headhunting firm which caters to the intelligence community and – what a caution! – does fairly well in spite of me.

There devolve upon the author, portion and parcel of the daily ins and outs of the firm, those duties given the closer. *The Closer*. But there are only so many candidates to close in any given week. Consequently I “do” a diversity of things, perform a veritable spangle of activities; yet step back, my lovely, and it's all, don't y'see, but *one*, as every facet of its many facets may be said to represent the globe whirring on above the ballroom floor – each chip of light surfing its own frequency, yet each a variorum of the somewhat larger edition tossing shadow and steam from its sloping shoulders like so much spindrift.

I am, like you, a grief of a creature, padding, paddling, straddling, plaguing, ploughing, sloughing, swooning, stuffing,

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swaddling, plodding, puffing, plugging – and who can say why? – or proffer a where? (But what happened to *no-nonsense*?)

Jeesy Peesy! What things we do to whittle the hours! All draw nigh the same steep chasm, boys and girls, rouge-hue these cherry cheekbones as we will. Or cheeky chairbones (whose globes, alack, alack, bloom, *ah*, more *canyonesque* each passing year).

So I undertake such enterprise as swirls through the abyss of time and my attention, things (and those things which attend upon things) that flurry like losing tickets up from the concourse, passing both within the constraints of business and breezily beyond; and have even on occasion some time remaining for a shard of hunt and peck.

(I can see that *clipped* is not going to be easy for me. The hell with it.)

I have only been headhunting for the last decade, however.

For most of my life I owned and was owned by a typesetting and graphics firm – some twenty-six years (a term, a sinecure, ended abruptly by a man named Sinn, Old Snake Eyes, of whom more doubtless to follow) – so I know a little something about proofreading and punctuation, and what I don't know about spelling this computer seems to.

Where I write from is nothing like Dylan's estuarial timbered tiny boat house overlooking the Towy, it's nothing like an artist's garret or the sun-flooded Laura Ashley rooms of Guilford and Coral Gables and Beverly Hills. I write from a comfortable cavern leavened with books and a few fine antiques, and nary a Welshman to be found. There are maybe eight thousand volumes looking over my shoulders. Some men like hard liquor; I like hard covers.

There are two matching dark leather smoking chairs that I bought during a bout of P.G. Wodehouse, the closest I'll ever get

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to a men's club. There is also a desk the top of which moves up and down at the touch of a button. Some excellent paintings and framed broadsides. Piles of paper, of course. Pens and matches and tissues and a stapler and a paper punch and some stereo speakers and a calculator and a little lonely wire which I plug into my cell phone whenever it runs low on juice. There are drawers to file papers and files where I have drawn up plans (on paper) for more drawers. There are rare tobacco tins and a scurrilous collection of what they call Black Americana. Some original pictures from Nazi Germany, all black and white, and collected for much the same reason as the Black Americana. There are pictures of my family and tchotchkes from here and there and everywhere. And a ridiculously expensive burgundy chair that holds me like a lover, that bends to every caprice of my body. There are also two monitors burning brightly if unromantically directly in front of me.

Were you here I would surely offer you a fine cigar that we might close the doors to this hideaway and enjoy as one the comforts of this well-stocked humidor to my right – a box which I empty at an alarming rate.

At least my wife is alarmed.

Natalie is younger than my first child and older than my second, half my age plus a year, too youthful and mysteriously in love to understand what a soiled old muck I am, but I figure that time and circumstance will whisper the hard truth to her one of these days. She's kind of a blonde, Raymond Chandler would say the kind of blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained glass window. (Rifle in haste, repine at leisure.)

And just a few more words about her husband:

I hardly drink alcohol and won't do pharmaceuticals (anymore) and I've never seen a blackjack table that I couldn't push past. Business and writing are gamble enough. I've always cherished baseball, but the numbers are grown putrescent with

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steroids, infested, and so I have given it up, with regret, like a mistress gone too far to fat. I am an expert on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. I am bored by languages and semiotics and overwhelmed by the hard sciences. I am terrible at geography.

Alright then, there was a taste of expository writing without too much gristle. Old K'll get the hang of this yet, with a little help from his muse.

Call her M.

It is New Year's Day 2006 now, and there is some expensive smoke swirling and the keys are humming a bit and I am as curious as I hope you might be to see if there's still a little fire left at the tips of my fingers.

3 / 90.417%

Actually, there's a 90.417 percent chance that a flame's burning, if not at the tips of my fingers, at least somewhere in this body. Or to put it another way, of all white males born into this country in the year 1951, a solid nine/tenths of us are still ticking at the start of 2006. No thanks to Robert McNamara.

My comrades in survival as I type these words include Robin Williams, Luke Skywalker (well, Mark Hamill), Steven Seagal, Rush Limbaugh, Al Franken, Goose Gossage – whose fastball, I assure you, no longer clocks at 100 mph – and Jesse “The Body” Ventura.

Dale Earnhardt, by the way, is the most famous of us to have checked out. More to come.

What – or, more properly, who – puts me in this actuarial frame of mind is none other than the mysterious Jean-Paul, to whom I've made, thus far, a pair of peripheral and frenchified references. European by birth, and graced with a haunting accent

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that injures him neither in his business affairs, nor – from what I’ve noted of my wife’s and daughter’s reactions to him – in his relations with others of their gender, Jean-Paul was presented to us late this past year by a great and trusted friend.

A fortuitous introduction.

Currently working for a prominent (read heavily-hyphenated) financial services firm, early thirties, tall and polite and precise, J-P’s evolved over the past month into our family’s de facto financial advisor. And his guidance has had a provocative, if unlikely, effect on my writing.

You see, from our conversations and spreadsheeted plottings, it’s become obvious to me that I’ve few shekels to spare – not on that group of commanding cast-iron statues of the Four Seasons “inspired by the brilliant classical forms of Ancient Greece and Rome” offered, at present, on the website of the legendary M. S. Rau of Royal Street, New Orleans (and, at \$248,500 the set, who could refrain?) – no, nor even upon a burnished pair of bronzed blackamoor candelabras available for the comparatively modest sum of \$5,850 (and on layaway, at that) from Canonbury Antiques of Number One Church Street, London, NW8.

This working with Jean-Paul – this protracted consideration of wills and retirement plans and insurance strategies, this attention to the artist’s “estate” – has had the marvelous consequence of focusing my friable powers of concentration on the majestic themes of love and death. Grand stuff.

It’s even reached the stage where his arithmetic is morphing into a kind of divine poetry, like water into vino, and I am beginning to take a long if slightly intoxicated view of my years; and this is (more than anything) what’s put the match to my toes . . . and fingers.

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For the *artiste* within feels the hotfoot of responsibility withal, and rebels at his sober twin, that abstemious practitioner of business obliged to make plans and pay bills and speak courteously to the assortment of persons a businessman must commonly deal with. And so this left-handed angel mocks and tortures and demeans that solid citizen his brother, demanding time and energy to craft his pack of mostly-truths (though where I shall depart from reality, 'twill be most often, I assure you, because of the rose- and sieve-like nature of memory, not because I'm trying to bolster any imagined standing in heaven or earth, nor certainly to cushion any historical *faux pas* – for there are far too many of those, at this point, to attempt any fudging).

Given all of this, then – the decades shuffling by in their slippers, perhaps a trifle grubby under the low gas flame of recollection – you might with some certainty divine a wellspring for my efforts.

And because thirty-five years of poetry are wrinkling on my shelves, bushels secure, kimonos unlifted, you might likewise consider such evidence as adduced in the courtroom of these pages a peremptory explanation of my impulse to bare, if not unburden, myself: for I'm thinking, don't you know, that when I'm written out, I could well entrust this packet to some agent or other – and, in fact, I have in mind one particular fool, eager and earnest and good, even as I doodle away.

So if these words find their way one day to you, sweet page turner, this bottled, mottled message having negotiated the treacherous Straits of Publication, I offer up this promise: you may believe what you read here.

Well, more or less.

I equivocate only because while on the one hand I'm given neither to wholesale nor salon fabrications – there's no need to concoct overmuch in setting down a narrative so flooded with

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affections and betrayals, with deaths and entrances (thank you, dear shade) – yet, still and always, gentle friend, you must remember to whom falls that transient task, the scribbling of history.

To one who doesn't want to look half-bad.

4 / Pulling the wool

Black women often think I look good.

I didn't understand it back when I was younger. Sitting by myself at a party, the golden Barbies, the towering ice goddesses, looked right over the top of my head.

Not the black girls, though.

“Hey baby.”

“Hi. What's up?”

“Nothing. I like your beard. I don't think you'd look so old if you got rid of that beard. What are you hiding back there?”

“Oh, I grew it so that I'd look a little less like my picture in the post office.”

“Bullshit, baby, bullshit. Are you a lawyer or a professor?”

“I'm a doctor, darlin'. And frankly, I'm a little worried about you. Have you been examined lately?”

“Not lately, baby. Do you want to give me a check-up?”
Lavish nictitation.

She couldn't have been more than 23, 24, maybe eight years younger than I was. (This was the early Eighties.) Five-six, approaching my height, and perhaps 110 pounds naked. Or 111 dressed. She was showing five feet of leg and an unlikely soft sprinkling of down on her arms and her breasts jutted like ant hills. No, rounder.

Cue balls.

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“I think I’ve spotted some things that need to be examined. Let’s get out of here, you sweet slough of flesh.” Those last five words rendered in the fashion of the actor William Shatner – the young Bill Shatner – the intervals floating like islands of sugar between the words, lids hooded in my best Warren Beatty squint, my Meet-Miss-Bonnie-Parker squint, complete, substanceless fool that I was. Am.

Her name was Sherreis, she told me, but everyone called her Sherry, “just like the wine.” I said fine, fine, and then I hustled her into the night. The moon was monstrous and gray and it filled half the sky.

Before we were three feet from the door I had my hand on a globy right cheek. It churned like an animal under her tulle and felt as hard as a softball. And not much bigger. Cue balls, softballs, the girl was a marvel of sphere upon sphere. But I had known girls like Sherreis before. I reckoned her mother’s cheeks could well be basketballs by now.

“I work at Johns Hopkins, downtown,” she said. “I’m a nursing assistant. Are you really a doctor?”

“I run a graphic arts business,” I told her truthfully, and when I relinquished her cante and opened the door to the black and gold-flecked Jaguar she gushed, “Business must be good!”

“It’s okay,” I said. “It’s okay. But what I really do is write poems.”

“Oh, a poet! I *knew* you were an artist! Can I be in one of your poems?”

“You already are, darlin’ . . . what I need to see now is how it ends.”

“Show me where you live and I’ll show you how it ends.”

Once I got behind the wheel she started to rummage in her little purse and pulled out a joint. “Do you get high, baby?”

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“Nothin’ against it, but I want everything working perfectly this evening. I’ve got no problem if you want to light up, though. In fact, I kinda like the smell. Just roll down your window in case we get stopped. I don’t need to get this car impounded.”

“No problem, baby. I don’t want anything to mess up the way you work.” She toked for a minute or two, sucking the smoke in deeply and holding it, holding it. The cabin filled with that sweet unambiguous aroma. It was a small roach, though, quickly beat. The next thing I knew her hand was in my lap and fiddling with my zipper.

“Sherry, something tells me this isn’t your first time. And here I was thinking you were a virgin.”

“I can be a virgin for you, baby, I can be a virgin. Is this your first time with a black girl?”

“Is this your first time with a joint?”

She laughed, then, and at the stoplight I looked at her closely, and her skin was smooth as the top of a crème caramel. I told her that, and she told me I have pretty eyes, pretty as a girl’s. Then she fished out my prong and ducked down and I steered the streets of Baltimore under the gray and monstrous moon with my left hand on the wheel and my right on the strong young animal cord of her neck.

I rolled up 83, off by the City Jail, then up Guilford, crossed Calvert and St. Paul somewhere in the twenties, and finally wheeled onto the broad expanse of Charles Street, no cars but mine and my dick deep in the pink throat of a girl so black she was purple.

There was a parking space in front of a nondescript apartment building facing the lower Hopkins campus.

“Time out, Sherry. We’re here. I have to park this rig.”

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She pulled herself up without saying a word, then, and I managed to park the car in my space and the pestle in my drawers all in the same motion.

Practice.

We were stopped in front of a building set back from the street and catacombed, as I knew from experience, with cadaverous, discreet apartments. Not that I lived there back then. Or ever. In the Eighties I lived in a suburb of Baltimore called Mount Washington, in a house with a front door that looked like the back door of the White House – or so I imagined.

It was located about two blocks from the home of a well-known baseball agent. The agent was a very friendly-looking and gracious man, an attorney named Ron Shapiro (rhymes with Cairo), and he represented the interests of the great Oriole shortstop Cal Ripken. Ron was without wrinkles, a clean brow. Always smiling. Plenty of money. Plenty to smile about. He used to let me work out in the full-sized batting cage he'd rigged in his back yard. You could see that Ron had been a jock before he'd traded his cleats for Ferragamos.

Sometimes I would show up after work, in the early evening, and the guy would say sure, go ahead – that broad and honest smile – and then I'd line ball after ball into the netting, waiting patiently for the pitching machine to rev up its next offering and adjusting my stance and regretting after each pitch what had happened between me and the Johns Hopkins freshman baseball team some fifteen years before.

And all because I'd met Elizabeth. But call her Bitsy; everyone does.

It was at a Hopkins soiree where Zeppelin and Hendrix were pounding through the halls like triceratops – a college mixer, for the uninitiated, being the interminable glimpse of an afterlife spent in purgatory. That was sometime right around Valentine's

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Day, 1970. Bitsy was bright and retiring and had a beautifully cambered belly upon which, I thought, the gods must breakfast.

On the night of March 4, my freshman advisor Don Duker lent us his apartment, which offered as centerpiece the king-sized bed that he shared with his slender-hipped Simone; and over the next ten weeks or so, even though she was hidden away much of the time behind the soaring walls of a Catholic women's college, Bitsy and I managed to make love just about 250 times.

That, coincidentally, was also my batting average (.257 – bunch of opposite field singles, three doubles and one lucky triple) when I quit the Johns Hopkins freshman baseball team in early May. The whiff of lass asserting itself over the smell of the grass. No, that's a rationalization, and a bad little poem: truth is, was, I had simply grown weary of my baseball mediocrity.

I also blamed quitting on the fact that I had too much schoolwork. Another crock. I wasn't studying anyway, just showing up on Tuesday afternoons in Gilman 123 to take Budd Kandleburrow's poetry writing class, a gut course if ever a gut there was. Easy work, easy grade.

BK, I might add, was the first homosexual I'd ever recognized as such (and this at a time when Liberace and Paul Lynde were all over the tube), and because he could sense that I was, in my youthful insipience, uncomfortable with him, with it, he picked on me in class with no little subtlety, as if I were the scab on a dowager's forearm. And he even graced me for my year's efforts with a C, *a C!*, likely the lowest grade awarded anyone in a soft-bellied writing seminar since the marshy State of Maryland was founded in 1634 under the genial auspices of Cecil Calvert, second Lord Baltimore.

Thus my mark on Johns Hopkins.

As I said, I wasn't studying anyway, and I'd pushed my meager talents on the ball field about as far as they were going to

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carry me. So between tilling Bitsy's garden every chance I got and dealing with guys twice my weight churning into me while I was (or, as likely, was not) turning the double play, it really wasn't much of a contest. Not that I didn't like baseball; not at all. I just liked Bitsy that spring of 1970 a whole lot more. In fact, I liked her so much that in due course we married.

My first wife.

That was a long time ago. Today Bitsy and baseball cohabit in quite a different chamber of my heart.

But now I was parked far from Mount Washington, in front of a building filled with quiet rooms. I got out and Sherry waited for me to come around to open her door. I like that in the woman, the wisdom to wait for the man.

As if I haven't digressed quite enough, allow me to tell you why we were standing in front of this particular building. On the morning of my thirty-first birthday, just a year before, my wife had given me an envelope that held a numbered apartment key – 503 – and a card marked 4:00 p.m.

The only other writing was an address – the address of these apartments. There were also three tickets tucked into the envelope, tickets for an 8:00 p.m. performance at the Morris Mechanic Theatre.

When I showed up that evening and turned my birthday present in the lock, Bitsy and Kayla (our nanny, whom I would presently marry; second wife; more later) were standing just inside the door of a studio apartment eating hors d'oeuvres from Tio Pepe's. They were wearing nothing but whipped cream.

I didn't even know that Tio Pepe delivered.

The Jaguar's handle was heavy in my hand and Sherreis was light and the door closed with its stolid, expensive thud and we disappeared into the courtyard and rose up through the night air towards the heavens and 503.

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5 / Pit stop

If I had access to John Barth – and I do, actually, but I'd never bother him with this – or Victor Hugo, or that perfect Mozart of scribblers, Kafka, or the fastidious Nabokov, or Flannery O'Connor or Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald or the wordslinger Henry James – to none of whom I have access at all, and thankee – if I could have a word with old escorial Kurt Vonnegut or the divine Gabriel José de la Concordia García Márquez, perhaps the estimable D. M. Thomas or the words-linger Marcel Proust, fair Alexandre Dumas, foul Charles Dickens, the funnyman Wodehouse or the worldslayer Mark Twain, or maybe even just Garrison Keillor, tall and repenting and true, at this point I'd ask, *For Pete's sake, where do we go from here?*

Do I explain to you in effervescing detail what happened when Sherry and K. crossed the unholy threshold of that apartment high over Charles Street, high over the lights and intermittent noise of the street? Or do I canter coyly into a Hollywood fade-out and allow you to rough out the adumbrations of your choosing? (All animals acting roughly the same, late or soon, beyond the padlocked timbers of the barn.)

I am not disposed to appear too graphic in this, but let me rekiss and retell:

Nothing happened, to answer the question.

Nothing beyond The Ordinary.

What was ordinary for me back then was to court like a count, suck like the sea, and mount (after much in the way of pitch and moan) in the loopy lists of love, to plunge and whap like a barque upon the Ionian Sea – appearing, like its eponym, as one who would be killed (or, at least, would kill) by friendly fire – yet to see nothing, *nothing* of what was in that room, to discover again and then again only that woman was not Woman, that the salt and

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sluice of this or that one's rebarbative sweat was no more than a flashing body flashing beneath a body.

And so, failing myself and my inamorata, I would laugh at myself, at us, at the absurdity of the wallpaper, at the notion of some curious God gazing down on my rising and plunging stern, and I would coalesce with soured, dick-locked blood, and the women of those days would ask me how it was that I could last so long. What could I tell them that would not send them raging from our sugared sheets?

I was two-and-thirty years. I had my face and my eyes and my ass and my arms and I had a good business and I had eighteen (I was a collector; *of course* I counted them) women with whom I could couple at the drop a dime.

Some worked for me, in fact, typesetters, graphic artists, accounting clerks, so not even so slender a sum was required.

I drove a classic car and I had three perfect small children and a wife who would come if you just whistled on her clit, a wife with full lips and a fine face and delicate long fingers, this Bitsy who loved me, and on a standard Sunday I would roll up the crescent drive around the back of our home after an afternoon of softball and sacrilege and times like these I would look at the soft sky and whisper *God, I know it can't always be this good, how long are you going to let this last?*

They say that God doesn't have time to listen.

Please. Please.

Other than the fact that He doesn't exist,

Don't Kid Yourself!

**6 / “As a gift to the troops,
I am displaying my left breast on this biscuit tin. . . .”**

It was an early April afternoon in Mount Washington, the earth was still warming, it was light jacket weather, glassine if not glorious. Marvin Gaye had been murdered by his father not ten days before and people were still talking about it. (A bad month for the arts; Ansel Adams and Count Basie would die over the next couple of weeks.) The Baltimore Orioles had just dropped the first four games of the season in what would prove a futile defense of their World Series victory the prior October. *Time* magazine engaged the pressing issue of “Sex in the 80’s” that very week by proclaiming from every newsstand that “The Revolution is Over.” I guess Bitsy took them seriously.

There was a nest of cop cars as I pulled up to my house. I was thinking burglary or fire; yet there were no lights flashing, no ambulances, it was an eerie scene and I was ghastly calm as I made my way down the walk.

“Are you Mr. Kantor?” inquired the leader, a man no smaller than a buffalo. I thought immediately of my three children.

“I am, officer. Is everything alright? Is anybody hurt?”

“No sir, nothing like that. But I must ask you to step inside with me to retrieve your clothing and personal effects, and then you’ll have to leave the premises.”

“And why would I do that, officer?” (*This is my house, you oaf!*)

“Because I have a *pendente lite* order here, Mr. Kantor, and it states that you must vacate the premises until your case is heard by the court.”

“I don’t have any ‘case’ that I know of. Anyway, what’s a *pendente lite* order?”

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“It’s a document issued by a judge. [*Forward step.*] It’s my job to enforce it.”

“May I read it, sir?” I asked, wishing that I had taken my father’s advice about enrolling in a Latin class back while I was in school and still had time for such things.

“Of course, at your leisure,” said the cop, no oaf, relaxing, passing the papers down to me. “I’ve got my whole shift to go.” [*Step backward.*] Suddenly he looked like a man who had a steaming cup of coffee and a half-pack of Marlboros and the Sunday sports section open in front of him. And then he said it didn’t seem like there was going to be any trouble and he told all the others cops save one small one to leave, that he had things under control. The militia decamped. Then there were just the three of us and a cheerless songbird repeating stupidly four or five notes against the sky from somewhere behind me.

At which point the fleet of flashing cars wound through our solemn little street while every neighbor I knew and every neighbor I did not know stood discreetly behind his or her living room curtains and took in every moment of our little drama. That armada of cars. Had the police thought that I was perhaps leading an armed regiment back to my house that afternoon?

I barely came up to the buffalo’s shield.

So I sat on a step outside of what looked (to me, back then) like the back door of the White House and I read the order and it said, in effect, that on account of domestic violence that I had to leave my house.

Now, let me tell you something right off. I know that I haven’t exactly impressed you, so far, as a very nice man, not with all the philandering and such, even notwithstanding my inaugural Jimmy Stewart / James Garner blarney, much if not all of which I hope to justify before this monumental missive’s stuffed into its bottle. So if you have a negative impression of me at the moment,

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then I congratulate you; I agree with you; for you have a good, truthful notion of who I was back then: not a very nice man.

However, you should also know that I am simply not the domestic violence type.

I have never lifted my hand to a woman and, outside of the karate dojo, only thrice in my adult life have I struck a man – once in 1972 when a fellow student approached me in the wake of an Anais Nin reading . . . (“Age does not protect you from love. But love, to some extent, protects you from age.” More in due time about this memorable visit to the Hopkins campus, where K. pens – or pins – a small – some would say petite, and certainly delectable – 69 year old literary footnote right before your very eyes.) . . . and tried to relieve me of my high school letter jacket, claiming in pop-eyed delusion that it was his; once – after protracted but fruitless discussion – to encourage a drunk to surrender my daughter’s Michael Jackson concert seat into which he had poured his outsized bottom; and one other time.

That last when, in the act of pinching my business of twenty-six years (the aforementioned typesetting and prepress shop), Ness Sinn – whom I had known till that moment only as my junior partner (for I was unaware of his well-documented status as an artist of the long con, though the authorities were soon enough to set me straight on that account) – laid his hands in anger upon my son. It was a strange night, that, and, as I’ve promised, I’ll write more about it (as well as Ms. Nin) as the pages saunter by, a night of broken locks and stolen invoices and what I see now as a risible creeping in the hallways. I do remember observing Ness grabbing Jason from behind, and then – after a moment that I simply cannot recall – recollect seeing Ness crumpled against a wall about twelve feet away. According to Jason, the shitball’s feet never touched the ground for all his maiden flight.

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And there you have the honest catalog of my adult violence, domestic or other. No Bitsy on that list.

Anyway, things had grown very bad between Bitsy and an inflated young K. over those first months of 1984, and that farrago of bad feelings, stirred and brewed and properly marinated, led to this particular April afternoon, the afternoon of the buffalo (it was the ninth, a Monday, I believe), and if you wanted to trace it back I guess the string would lead to a conversation we'd had some eight years earlier while, not long married, we were sitting in a theater one night in Towson watching the newly released *Logan's Run*.

I was 25. I had slept with perhaps eight or ten women in my life. Now I was staring at some writhing extra's ten foot breasts swinging across the screen. I felt as though a chunk of my life had been hacked away while I was napping; I couldn't believe that, much as I loved Bitsy, I would never sleep with another woman again. So right about the part where Michael York and Jenny Agutter slip out the secret door that leads from the orgy room to the hidden areas of the city, I did likewise, and whispered to my wife what I was thinking. And her response laid out a blueprint for the rest of our married life.

She whispered back, "You know, I've never said that you couldn't sleep with other women. I know you love me. I'm not jealous. I just have two rules: Don't sleep with any friends of mine. And don't ever bring home anything to make me itch."

I was too young a husband and unripe a man to understand why she would say this, what she meant in the saying, and what must eventually happen to our marriage if I indulged at face value those privileges thus granted her foolish spouse.

Fairly easy rules, I thought. And that set the pattern.

But I made up one more rule for myself, and I kept it for a time: *What Bitsy doesn't know won't hurt her*. For I saw no sense in burdening her with my peregrinations.

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So, what with my bedding, ah *so* predictably, and right at the crack of the starter's pistol, any agreeable woman with two lungs' breath (making vocation thereby of what, at worst, should have been a gentle diversion); and what with my gaudily figured disclosure to Bitsy in the back seat of a sultry New Orleans taxicab some years later of all that had transpired since her benevolent authorization – starting with the instance (hard on the *Logan's Run* conversation in which I'd been unmoored, given my leave and fare thee well) of Jayne DeMario's slipping a Fuck Me note into my palm, and my smiling at Jayne and taking occasion that very evening to cast in murmurous clay what had, till then, been ventured only in half-masted thought; and what with my fanning from this juncture in a fog of puerile hubris through SooZie and Jannet and Kayla and Jan and Jean, and the ineffable Maggie Michaels, with whom I was more than a quantum in love, and who was, I suspect, more than a quantum in love with me, through Deborah and Debbie and Debby and several armsful of others, including Christine of the Extraordinary Kiss; and what with Bitsy in due and proper course exacting her revenge (*For what?*, I'd beg; how thick I was!) by lying with two men who would normally have had trouble getting laid in a Shanghai whorehouse, these being my two closest, finest friends of that era (thank you, Barry Shyne, thank you, Ludwig Wolpoff) – we had, Bitsy and I, somehow excruciatingly devolved to this moment in time where the buffalo was now pointing to my house as though it were a boat getting ready to cast off and suggesting that I do what must be done before anchor was pulled and river run.

Somewhere in the vague recesses I'd already sniffed what was brewing, of course. Ignore it though I did, we'd come to the tipping point. And for those among you who are men and long-married and occasionally given to speculation on what might happen if you were to push the Trouble & Strife a bit too far, well,

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let me tell you, it was all about me and what I did (and did and did; I had become a lightning rod for certain kinds of women) up to a point; but once over that waterfall it was Bitsy, The Whole Bitsy and Nothing But The Bitsy. Which was like bathing in napalm.

For once Bitsy took it into her head that she'd had enough, Luddy and Barry were just the beginning.

Life around the house in early 1984 became its own version of comic book hell. What I knew was that she'd taken a lover and emptied him, most mornings, on the couch in my library, before I got up. What I didn't know was that she'd gotten herself a lawyer, as well; and emptied the bankbook, and made up a story for the House of Ruth, a refuge for battered women – more about this, too, presently – and somehow this girl who wound me up and took me down and swived me raw in the spring of 1970 wound up in front of a judge in the spring of 1984, all unbeknownst to me, and hence *pendente lite*.

Well, there was no contending with the buffalo, and when I told him that I'd never laid so much as an aggressive finger on my wife, he assured me that he believed me, that he was good at sizing up a man right from the get because of all his time on the job, that he heard sad stories every week and saw sadder, and that he knew how filthy it can get when a marriage hits the rocks . . . his had, in fact, he confided . . . but still I must fetch my toothbrush and underpants and leave; and he even let me go into the house and upstairs unescorted – apparently a violation of the S.O.P., but I guess I didn't look very dangerous to him, and he had some class, which is more than I can say for Barry and Luddy.

Thus it was that I entered my home for what I supposed might be the last time and I passed the books and the artwork and the rooms filled to their brims with the antiques I'd been buying up in New York at the Sotheby's Victorian International auctions as well as on Howard Street in Baltimore; I strode by the bible black

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Steinway grand and the colossal television and the gloomy dark furniture left by my grandparents and a passel of beautifully lithographed tobacco and cocoa and biscuit tins, and I walked over the thirty-eight dollar per yard white carpeting past the vintage this and the priceless that and the double-sized closet that housed both my coin collection and my cigars and right on up the stairs, and nobody was in the house but me and there was no luggage to be found but a red hard-sided suitcase that looked like something out of Buster Keaton, and it was into this comical cold satchel that I stuffed whatever I could find, and the catch was broken so it would not lock but the clock was ticking and I pictured the face of the buffalo in the frame of my bedroom door (*my* bedroom door) and I could not bear it and I came down the stairs, then, and across the carpet and through the foyer and I did not look back.

And so in that manner I left through what I fancied resembled the back door of the White House, with the buffalo closing up after me; and if those two officers of the law bothered to glance down the path at my receding figure, what they saw was a fairly small, compact man in a suit thoroughly creased after a day's work clamping both his hands upon a single self-conscious suitcase as though he were trying to keep life itself from spilling over its red sides and then I was in my car and then I was gone.

I was gone not in a Jaguar, either, but in a busted down ratty red-as-the-suitcase delivery car with a very disobliging stick shift, a last legs Toyota that I had borrowed from my business while the Jag was in the shop – it lived in the shop – and I had no idea where I was headed. My children were floating in my head, that's all I knew. It was just a few days before Deborah's third birthday, and I suppose that, in much the manner of a mortally wounded man going on and on from inside his smoldering wreck about being late for work, I kept worrying about where we were going to hold that birthday party.

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Jason and Sarah and Deborah were spinning in a maelstrom of coins and paintings and collectible biscuit tins, my favorite being an edition that featured Queen Elizabeth II, a tin distributed to the English troops; but I had turned her fine and generous gesture into a kind of X-rated movie as I drove along in my lunacy, and in this movie Elizabeth the Second was disporting herself just like history's (flawed) version of Catherine the Great, right there in the biscuit tin of my mind, all of her gymnastics transpiring under a hail of Indian head and large cents, of buffalo nickels and twenty dollar gold pieces, of cards, books, photos and cloisonné and my old love letters and ancient report cards – all of the items I had left behind.

I had a pair of shoes and three suits and one shirt and two ties and a couple of sets of underwear and my toothbrush and my razor but no blades and a handful of cigars and all of my poems to date jammed into a ratty little red suitcase in a ratty little red car with not much of a second gear.

I wound up calling my friend Danny Kipperstein, a saint then as now among men, who persuaded me that it wasn't very wise to spend what money I had on a hotel room, and so that night I visited with him in his apartment and we ate like kings and I tried cocaine for the first time and heard about what a crass termagant was Danny's ex-wife, and I watched his salt water fish swim in their bubbly tank while Danny was telling me all about divorce; and after Danny went to bed the fish were still swimming with great vigor, more vigor than I had, so eventually I tucked my tired body between the sheets on his living room couch and – in large measure because I was alone, Kayla being too scared to join me that night, though she ventured over to DK's the next and we hardly ever slept apart, then, for the thirteen years that followed – I thought about my kids for a while, and then I toted up the various women I knew.

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I sorted them by hair color, by eye color, by height, by weight, by wit, by technique, by race, by face, by length of leg, by fullness of lip and breadth of buttock; I thought about Maggie Michaels and I thought about Kayla, both of whom had penetrated my heart, and I thought about Bitsy, who *was* my heart, still, and about 503, and I thought about my grandparents who had lived together in a gentle loving and loathing for perhaps fifty years and then I thought about the woman I'd had just two nights before, a woman who insisted on pulling my cock out of her bottom and gargling on it till it gushed like a fire hose down her throat, and I came up with her name, finally, and then I masturbated and did not wake till nearly noon of the next day.

And when I awakened Danny was gone and so I looked at the fish for a while and I stared out the window at my ratty red car and then I jacked off again.

7 / The artist's lightning rod advanced in the name of progress

The first time I jacked off was in my grandfather's shower. I did it by accident.

I was thinking about a girl in my fifth-grade class, Eve Theodore, and about the way her skirt bobbed over her coffee-colored knees when she walked home with me after the school bus dropped us off every afternoon. I was intensely curious about how far the brown color crawled up her legs, her thighs. And as I was thinking about her skin I was soaping my scrawny cock, and it leapt like a fawn at my fingers, and the water was good and hot and my cock was soapy and slick, and somehow I could see the rise of white panty against the horizon of good brown thigh, and the cock grew hot in my hands and I stroked and squeezed and whipped it while Eve's eyes and thighs danced across the shower

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tiles and then the penis took on a life of its own, it was electric, it was a thick eel thrashing in my palm, I was just this little boy attached to this bucking cock, and then I flashed into orgasm and thought that I had broken myself wide open.

Once I realized that I wasn't going to rupture or die in that shower, I started to soap myself again, and thought some more about Eve Theodore.

Later, looking to understand the phenomenon, I thumbed through *Peyton Place* and whatever glitzy novels presented themselves on my grandmother's shelves, and so deduced – right under the eyes of my unsuspecting elders – that I had caught something called “the clap.” How else explain that foudroyant discharge from my pizzle?

The concept did nothing to offset another that I'd picked up from my father, who, some months before (and doubtless at the urging of my mother) had explained to me over his shoulder as he was driving me to school one morning that babies come from the man putting his penis into the woman's vagina. Since I had a sister seven years my junior, I was very up on what a vagina was, and when he asked me if I got it, I told him I got it.

After all, I knew what a penis did, and what a vagina did. Same thing. They peed.

What I could not understand was where the urine went after the man peed in the woman's vagina. And I didn't want to ask. Did it trickle in golden splendor down the woman's thighs? Did she have a clandestine receptacle hiding deep in her belly?

Every time I peed, after that, I stood at the toilet and imagined I was fucking a woman. I didn't see what the big deal was. I'd waggle my pelvis back and forth languidly and watch the pee hit the water and melt away. Baby, baby, I'd made another baby. I felt almost paternal by the time I got to the sink to rinse my hands.

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In 1962 there was nothing even resembling a sex education class offered at Samuel Gompers Elementary School, clean and spare as a country churchyard. But that was 1962. Within a decade it would be covered with illuminating spirals of graffiti on its little outskirts of Philadelphia. A different world. A different time.

8 / See you next year *or* Why I now feel compelled to vote the Democratic ticket

“See you next year!” Like all school children, this is what we told each other as we left for winter break, knowing that in a couple of weeks things would resume their prosaic order and that we would reconvene in the same dull rooms for the same dull lessons with bleak January sitting on the blacktopped yard outside our windows.

How lulling this sense of continuity. How little it prepared us for the real break that came after sixth grade when, the following fall, we found ourselves in junior high school. Real school. A different world, a different time.

I was sitting in a music class in November of 1963. Seventh grade. Dr. Derwood A. Emlen’s cavernous studio. He was, to use a word that I could not have summoned at that time, patrician. He parted his hair in the middle and always wore a fine ancient suit (he must have owned a closet full) whilst conducting his classes on behalf and in front of the inmates of Bala-Cynwyd Junior High School. Dr. Emlen sported a pocket watch and chain that pulled tightly across his decorous soft belly and he wore the style of spectacles that was popular in this country in the 1930’s. He possessed great dignity, the sort that I would come later to associate with the terms “old money” and “WASP.” He looked somewhat like the actor who played Mr. Wilson in the black and

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white *Dennis the Menace* television series. (I'm talking the original Joseph Kearns Mr. Wilson, of course, not the replacement Gale Gordon version.) He was somewhat intimidating, all in all; and Dr. Derwood A. Emlen, I should add, was also the most sadistic sonofabitch that I had met in all my young life.

It wasn't that, year after year – and to classes that were 80% Jewish! – he insisted on teaching mostly Christmas carols (a useful canon, by the way; like Elliott Gould in the old *Saturday Night Live* skit, I am, albeit a Jew, the one person in the room who can reel off the full five stanzas of “Good King Wenceslas”), for offering up this sacred catalog was just a genteel bit of anti-Semitism, and fairly clever and comic to boot.

The sadism was something else entirely: Dr. Emlen, you see, had formulated an inspired series of cascading and telescoping methodologies for torturing his brood.

Initially, the *maître* would divide his perhaps 120 charges into roughly equal groups of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. This he accomplished by having each of us (individually, and in most cases quite painfully) sing the “Star Spangled Banner” to his piano accompaniment in front of the unforgiving assemblage – and mind you, this was no elective; there was no choice involved here: each seventh grader (tender twelve, tremulous thirteen) at Bala-Cynwyd was required under the good doctor's tutelage to enter the Coliseum and take his or her place smack in the center of the arena.

Then, over a palpitating few weeks, having divined our true ranges, he sorted us accordingly (Mengele: “You to the left; you to the right.”), and thus we sat for the remainder of the year, four roiling groups of children.

Taxonomy achieved, Dr. Emlen, every so often, would introduce from behind his massive piano a new four-part song, ostensibly a lesson to be learned, in reality a Rubicon to be

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reckoned. The sopranos and the basses had it easy enough; they got the melodies, lucent and familiar to everyone.

The harmonies, impossible to grasp for the many tin-eared among us, fell to the altos and the tenors.

I had just turned twelve: a beardless tenor.

So there sat Dr. Emlen behind his piano, hair parted in the middle, fine old noggin bobbing like a buoy, a sea of terrified children reflected in his eyeglasses, and he would play those unfringeable harmonies but a couple of times, and our voices, group by group, would trudge dutifully behind, spitballs flying and notes passing and the larger boys tormenting the smaller and the girls eyeing the larger boys from across the room and the larger boys eyeing the prettier girls, and the smaller boys eyeing them too, helplessly, and then Dr. Emlen would cease his playing and look out over the whole of his flock with a colorless eye and then his gaze would drop to his treacherous notebook.

After a few moments he would call out the names. It seemed a random summons. A single soprano, an alto, a tenor, a bass. Those abject chosen would rise, then, subpoenaed to Judgment Day, rise and shuffle to the front of the room to stand baleful and unarmored as Dr. Emlen resumed play; the select four, as a group, following the piano submissively and pitifully, a little band in a great storm, each doing his or her best with the song.

At which point Dr. Emlen would materialize like a great arachnid from behind his piano, his bludgeon, and request the group harmonize yet again, *a cappella this time!* – had even the Iroquois, exquisite torturers, ever devised such as this? – and he'd pace behind his children, would Dr. Emlen, and bend his ear close to each in turn, listening from that position, his breath soiling their necks; and sometimes he would stand behind a singularly untalented adolescent for a very long time.

And then the *coup de grâce*. His genius. His joy.

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For at this point, Herr Doktor would require each student sing his or her part *individually* in front of the class, 120 sanguinary seventh graders, sing *unaccompanied* by colleague or instrument, naked as Eve, as Adam; and if a foul note ensued, Dr. Goliath would stop the offending child and stride to his piano and play the proper note over and over and then his prey would sing the felonious phrase again and again, *piano, response, piano, response*, and as long as it took, it took, terrible runs of unreachable notes raining down, the hapless victim denuded of all dignity standing on Normandy beach without so much as a slingshot, and the music would pour like poison from the piano and then Dr. Emlen would gaze sternly upon the youngster and exhort a nightingale in return, and – in the face of failure – force his quarry to start again, right from the beginning, and so it went, the impossibility of scaling this wall of meaningless notes balanced for the victim against the sharp spires of his or her grinning mates, their heartless smiles serving as spikes upon which the wounded were pitched again and again, and if I told you that children threw up in the hallways before his classes and hid in the bathrooms and feigned illness (or were overtaken with genuine illness) on the days of his class I would not be lying to you.

I mentioned that it was late November. It was just after lunch. Dr. Emlen was calling out names for a song that I could not learn, never, not in a thousand thousand years, not even with the finest vocal coach humming the harmony into my ears for decades on end. You can own a dog, a good dog, a smart dog; but that dog, I assure you, will never learn to sculpt.

Or sing.

We were down to a few names. Most all of the tenors had been called, but not K. Upon the brink. Disaster. I was praying for something to happen, to save me. Anything.

Then a voice came over the loudspeaker system.

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Not the regular old lady nicotine-juicy voice we all despised in common each morning, but a radio transmission voice; for the secretary in the front office had taken her radio and put it right up against the mike, and so we listened to this live, scratchy announcement, breaking news – there were unconfirmed reports that someone had shot at the president’s limousine in Dallas.

They didn’t have anything further, and I sat in the foxhole of my seat, and the music resumed, and then I prayed that the president might be hit and that bullet save me from having to sing.

The class went on. Another tenor bit the dust. I was running out of cushion. Then the speaker crackled again.

The president *had* been hit. No further news.

Thank God, I thought, I’m saved. And then an unscheduled bell rang and the class ended abruptly.

When we poured into the halls they were crowded with children. Everyone was out of class early at that unexpected bell, but almost no one knew why. Chaos.

It turned out that the actual announcement had made it over the P.A. system into only two rooms: seventh grade music, ninth grade home economics. So here were these two unrelated groups, in the face of all their classmates, claiming that the president had been shot, and everyone was laughing at us when the speakers sputtered again and Mr. Lymer, the vice principal, came on requesting that we report immediately to the auditorium for an emergency assembly.

“Told you so!”

And because the principal was in the hospital, it was poor stoop-shouldered Mr. Lymer who stood before us on the stage that day and said that it was his sad duty to inform us that John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the thirty-fifth president of the United States, had been shot and killed at 12:30 p.m. Central Standard Time in Dallas, Texas.

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And I felt hot criminal guilt then and there that Friday afternoon as I slouched in my auditorium seat and knew, just *knew*, that it was my fervent wishing that had felled our president.

I was an assassin.

Then I went back to my homeroom, but it was empty save for its young mistress, Mrs. Donnelly. My English teacher. She was broken down and crying frantically at her desk with her head upon her arms and red hair streaming everywhere.

I went to her and stood by her side and asked what we should do.

She said nothing. But then she rose and came to me.

And she put her arms around me and she laid her head on my shoulder as though we were dancing; I was five foot one and she not as tall as I, just tears and a flowing red haired weightless inviolable waltz in my arms.

She would not let go, she was heaving one moment, powerless the next, emptied and slack as a handful of rags.

I held her in dreamy silence minute after minute (centuries), just Mrs. D. and me, the murderer, flush with guilt and grief, and this other me, too, terrifically heated.

This was a full-grown woman – sacrosanct, a teacher! – moving against my chest, soft tumble of leg and knee and her fingertips touching my back. Poem:

Time

“It’s time,” called Mrs. Donnelly
lightly, and on her well-shaped nylons
began her rounds, touring the desks
collecting her precious papers, it was
1963, it was the seventh grade, late
November, I was, what, twelve?

Each day’s a drill at twelve,

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each day bores down the pores
to deliver another hair.

“It’s time, it’s time,” Mrs. Donnelly’s stern
lithe body cried, and how was I to know
that morning that later that afternoon
this same untouchable body
would be pressed against mine
in the human need to touch, the two of us
alone somehow in the homeroom
of the dismissed class
of the dismissed school

and her waist is very thin
and the points of her breasts
are digging into my chest, she is weeping
and time has spun her onto its shoulders
and I hold her the way I think a man
would hold her, it’s the beef of a man to cry on
that she needs, some human thing to hold,
and I feel grief,
and guilt, but they’re mixed
with the touching of this teacher, the heat
of her parts, the fury of skin,
her light weight upon me

and to this day
I think on that day,
that boom, that lick at the hot bone of time,
that echo
that ran in the valleys of the cities,

that echo
that drove Mrs. Donnelly into the arms
of her slender beardless student

and after that day we lived
in a different time.

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As I look upon it many years after its writing, I suspect that I was more than a little influenced by Bukowski (“it’s the beef of a man to cry on that she needs,” and ah, that *melancholy* ending clicking into place like a key in a lock).

Some time later, in fact, I wrote a number of Bukowski imitations – forgeries, to be quite candid. On purpose. I was offered several thousand dollars for one, which I will tell you about directly.

But first I want to tell you one last thing about Dr. Derwood A. Emlen:

When I was in my late twenties, I was sitting with some friends one afternoon – it was a Saturday, I believe – and we were discussing the most dreadful things that ever happened to us, our most mortifying moments. And when it was my turn, I talked about Dr. Emlen and his class and I could feel the heat in my cheeks even so many years after. And I said, “You know, it wasn’t right then, it isn’t right now,” and I picked up the phone book and I found his listing and I called him right there, in front of my friends. And when he picked up the phone I knew that voice, I knew that I had him; and I introduced myself and asked if I could tell him a thing or two from the perspective of a decade and a half, and he said alright; and then very calmly and with the most elegant and lawyerly diction I could summon I explained to him the feelings of humiliation and degradation that he had ground so inexorably into the minds and guts of Lord knows how many fragile seventh graders; and I told him that as bad as I was in his class that it meant nothing, because I’d gone on to sing Freddy Eynsford-Hill in *My Fair Lady* my senior year of high school, so really I mustn’t have been so dreadful after all, but that his class was dreadful, appalling, worse, and the hardest thing about “On The Street Where You Live” wasn’t that D lurking its octave above middle C, it was

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thinking about myself in front of those seventh graders again, in front of Debbie McCann, Lindell's sister, and seeing the girls turning to themselves and smiling, and the boys smirking; and that whenever I saw a Nazi portrayed in a movie, it was his face, Dr. Derwood A. Emlen's, that I saw on the Nazi, that whenever I read about a torturer, it was his methodology that I imagined the torturer employed. And then I told this old man that I wished him death.

And to his credit Dr. Emlen, who must have been quite frail and very retired when I placed that phone call, sat there in what I can only believe was a musty chair in a musty room in a small, musty house, and he listened and he took the pounding like a man and he did not rebut me and he had nothing to say when I was finished, though I could hear him breathing. He was on the line but the line was empty.

Then I said goodbye and I hung up the phone, and I was empty, too, and so was every one of my friends.

9 / I, Henry *or* Never trust the experts

eBay was hot for all of 2003 with the manuscripts of Henry Charles Bukowski – Hank, pit-faced bull of the L.A. poetry scene for more years than God meant to give him, darling crazy snarling lyrical Pan after whom ran (and run) some of the most talentless acolytes ever to waste ink and paper. Or keystroke and pixel.

A shame, really, because Bukowski – especially the Buk of the late sixties – was a poet better by half than almost anyone publishing back then, and if you doubt it, well, try the “Jane” poems that are sprinkled like fine seasoning over the first portion of *The Days Run Away Like Wild Horses Over The Hills* (Black Sparrow Press, now, dammit, a cog in the Establishment wheel, Los Angeles, California, 1969) and that should humble you a bit;

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too bad that, like Hugo, like Dumas, the universities seem pretty much not to have discovered Bukowski just yet, nor, certainly, to have admitted him, and the syllabus is the weaker for it – all of which he would say suits him just fine.

Well, he'd say that if he were still breathing.

But of course if you read him long enough then you know that's a sack of crap.

Just like Howard Stern does, Buk dissimulated; he craved approval if not outright affection, the imprimatur of success, the coat of arms, certification, documentation, an official from the Tower descending with laurel and scepter and a kiss for each cheek as the crowd roars and women and children swoon at his feet, the world fainting away in the swale of the fame of Bukowski.

That's my take.

So anyway, Hank was hot on eBay, and that was a break for me because I had purchased just the year before a raft of his poems and even some letters in signed manuscript from Scott Harrison's Abandoned Planet bookshop in San Francisco, and I had framed the pages and clothed my walls with them; but then the market became too tempting to resist, and so I began to sell off my holdings, and my walls were naked of poetry, and I realized perhaps sixteen grand when I was finished with the great striptease.

And the biggest buyer that year – a dealer in paintings, no less – had a belly he could not fill, a monkey he could not scotch, and when he asked me for more (and I had no more, save one I'd decided to keep for myself), I used my typesetting and graphics skills to create a poem that I then dangled in front of him – and a pretty decent forged signature, at that.

But, of course, Buk hadn't written the poem.

I had.

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It was a narrative about the time Bukowski traveled solitary and moneyless to New Orleans in the mid-Sixties and drank and smoked and wrote in a little room and produced many of the poems that appeared in *Crucifix in a Deathhand*, this being the second book he knocked out for the extraordinarily gifted letterpress printer Jon Webb (the little ex-convict referred to in my small opus, which I shall produce in a moment).

Webb, as much as anyone, especially with the magnificent first of those books, helped put Bukowski on the map. (And Buk, of course, just shat on him. So it goes, so it goes.)

As for my hoax, I've copied it below.

What you see on the page down there looks physically a good deal like the "original" I created, set up in much the format I employed for my fraud: the forgery's margins, however, (perforce differing from those of the publication you hold in your hands) had been carefully duplicated from the legitimate manuscripts, the ones that I'd xeroxed so meticulously before I sold them.

I used 12 point Helvetica Regular letterspaced à la Buk, with a characteristically uncapitalized "st." making its abbreviated appearance in the address line, the leading (or what is now often referred to as "line spacing" – a term which provides no small measure of diversion to old typesetters) set at 12 points, the title indented precisely five space bars as was the poet's wont in his later years, all details typographically pure per the originals.

The finished product was laser printed on a chalky white twenty pound unwatermarked stock (for in his last years the old guy was working comfortably on an Apple computer hooked up to a printer, and so my forgery was fashioned likewise, and dated a believable 5-21-91 – the purported day of composition, per Bukowski's custom, appearing after his signature).

Using the laser printer made it all quite uncomplicated, such device being hardly the infamous rat-a-tat Royal typewriter of

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Hank's middle years that produced on the page so pile driven and tactile an effect that even a blind man could read it. Here:

Charles Bukowski
1148 W. Santa Cruz st.
San Pedro, CA 90731

why jazz musicians always get the girl

once I spent several mad months
by the mouth
of the Mississippi
where the weeks rolled over
me like
water
while I poured page after page
into the face
of insect and drink.

the female was not to be found.
the pages grew
without the daily terrors.

they ran up like ferns
not checked by drought or
dryness, up through the clouds, pages
green as monkey shit.

so on
and on I cranked it, while the words
sorted their threads in
my fat landlady's back room.

meanwhile
the Mississippi rolled
up its filthy banks
and backed off into the sea

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biding its time
and across town
a little jazz

and across the sea
and the desert
and across the years
the boys were blowing
a little crazy jazz.

Jericho was mute
it was weak and it fell
to all that splendor

and then, back here,
was me.

even if I was no drummer,
I had my rhythms –
I slept and drank
and farted banana leaves
womanless breathing
my own immortal
breath

and blew
down into my machine
like a good printer breathing life
into the wheel
of his ancient press,
and the heat ran down
from the rafters,
mosquitoes
the size of my balls
flew
the walls

and still

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I would crank

while poem after poem
dropped into the dead
belly of the night
like nickels.

I would feed them some smoke
and wash them
down with a good red and
they'd lie there
cross-eyed with pus and blood
in the cold white of the morning.

then after a while
a little x-con who was much better
to me than I ever was
to him
fed them to his starving press.
I was a journalist
pouring right off the page
into the
jaw
of the ages.

all night, night after night
just the smoke and the crank,
the bottle and the word

while in another
part of town
some men (doing better than I)
were draining a bit
of their souls
out
of their golden horns.

there was much expensive smoke

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wrapping itself
around the night
out there,
and ice
jiggling and swirling
itself
to a thin death
in all that heat

wet and then heat
seeping from the walls
settling over those tables
covered with
the good liquor
the good women
common to that quarter

where the blue notes flamed
black as tuxedos

and I can't tell
you a thing
about Jericho
or Jericho's walls

but baby
from what I
remember

those spaghetti
straps
sure did come
a tumbling
down.

Other than the fact that you're looking at ten point type up there, that's pretty f'ing close to what I created. The creature ran to several pages and was, as I've said, forensically correct in each of

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its parts – it felt, as art dealers will proclaim when validating works brought to them for purposes of authentication, “right.”

Oh, my Buk was right alright.

Review old Henry’s manuscripts from that late period, you’ll swear it’s real down to the rusty (easily faked: tea) staple holes. Now the writing’s a bit rhythmical for Buk, I’ll grant you; but if you’re a collector queer for Bukowski, it just sounds like music to your ears.

Harder than the writing, however, much harder than the typography, was perfecting the signature and the numerals for the date. The felt tip pen must be held at a certain angle, I learned, and pressure applied as Bukowski applied it when he signed, and though he created many variations of his “C” and his “B” and his “h” and his “l” and his throwaway “s,” even the dashes between the numerals – all reflective of his moods – it is easy enough to tell a true Buk from a false; tricky stuff, indeed, to forge, but I was driven by a kind of madness, and so I learned to roll that signature quickly and confidently across the bottom of a poem, and at just the right angle. I gained more insight into the man by studying his hand than I ever got from reading his critics.

Now I ought to point out that doing a piece that’s slated to be printed on the laser is relatively easy compared to the Holy Grail of Buk forgeries, which would be knocking out a carbon “original” on a period Royal typewriter. Bukowski, as he became more successful, grew less itinerant, more stable; and so, in place of the peripatetic machines that drifted into and out of his life when he was creating his great wailing work of the Sixties, the Seventies found him a settled man who’d settled on a single typewriter, an impressive, hefty machine that he handled like a jackhammer. Most of the pieces you find on the market dated 1971 – 1984 or thereabouts came from that one typer.

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This makes it impractical at best to produce a faultless forgery from that period, impossible at worst, because even though you might – for the sake of argument, that is – locate the world’s most sophisticated collector and remarketer of old typewriters (perhaps you’d find him just outside of St. Louis, Missouri), he’ll point out to you, after studying copies of legitimate Buk poems, that the characteristics of the machine in question are unique to that machine, so at best he could only provide you a kissin’ cousin. The same model typewriter, the very one that came out of the Royal factory one serial number before or after Buk’s, will not, today, produce a product that could fool an aficionado. Buk’s typer, like his face, bore the scar of his years, and the fidgety baseline of his lower case letters and the soft deterioration of his uppers could only be duplicated if you spent tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars on the effort (that according to an FBI documents man I talked with, his conclusion reinforcing the one I had already drawn). Fingerprints, fingerprints. Period paper you might find, if you haunted twenty letterpress printers and came up with an old unopened carton of 8½ x 11. Hell, you might even discover something like that in my downstairs closet. But the typer itself, in all its inky and clunky glory? Good luck, brother.

Of course, at core, there’s still the issue of the poem, and issue it is: it’s easy enough to parrot a poet who’d been imitating himself for a decade or so (Buk of the later Eighties and Nineties); but Bukowski of the Seventies? Harder. Much harder.

Not that I ever considered it.

Anyway, later Buk is the easy ticket, and so it was upon that period that my efforts finally settled, like ashes over the hamlet of Oświęcim.

When I had the words where I wanted them, I dropped a fine, imposing “Charles Bukowski” on the piece, as well as that plausible date, and then I scanned it and faxed it to this

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connoisseur, this authority, this power in the marketplace, and he promptly called to proclaim that I had one of the great unpublished Bukowski gems and offered me two, then three, then four thousand dollars for it, U.S.

And he was heartbroken when I told him no, that I could not part with it.

But after all, scamp I am, crook I am not. (I know; and my wife wears a cloth coat and my dog Checkers eats nothing but table scraps.) Truly, though, he wanted to buy it, desperately; the poem had gotten under his skin, and my refusals more so, and he bid it up finally to forty-five hundred in the face of my intransigence, and hounded me for some months.

Eventually he ran out of dollars and the market slowed, and what else can I do with such a bastard creation at this late hour but produce it for you as a curiosity and a moral instruction?

And there, my dears, is a damnably good reason why you should never trust the experts.

10 / The author discovers that he cares about your opinion

It strikes me that I have presented a sincerely bad poem and a sincerely insincere poem, but, even after all this talk of poets and poems, nary a decent iamb of my making.

There are a few, you know.

My brain, big and naughty and bad, whispers to me "*But only a few.*"

So I will impose upon you once more.

It's a poem that I wrote about poetry; that seems to be a good and noble subject, and I have observed that many poets, when they have nothing else to say, resort to this sneaky technique of goosing the Muse and shoveling the results over an

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unsuspecting public. But the poetry-reading public (all poets) deserves, I assure you, precisely what it gets.

And yes, it occurs to me that if ever I push this manuscript out into the scarfaced world, and some wretched crapulous publisher decides to take a flyer on it, this will have then proved a sneaky (but effective) way to press a poem or two upon the unsuspecting reader.

As Buk would say, What of it?

I knocked this manuscript off my desk

and the pages went flying.
Now my whole study is carpeted in metaphor
and the upstairs reeks of metonymy
and mythopoeia, meter,
madrigals, measures –
my wife's
pissed.

I keep trying to gather the pages
to re-order them
but it's like trying to stuff mercury
back into a thermometer.
And I'm getting a permanent stoop
from ducking under the furniture
looking to scoop up the stuff.

Also, I'm having some trouble
getting any work done, any new work,
because the tropes are running like trout
in the shower

and for every closed couplet perched
at the top of the stairs, there's
a polyphonic bit of prose
stashed in a back bedroom, enjambling
the locks, whining to get out,

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and if I'm attempting to compose, say,
an Alexandrine line to be coyly deployed
at the foot of Parnassus, or to develop
some admirable conceit,
it quickly becomes a contest
between the old sounds
and the new –

pentameter must gallop like a horse
across the ceiling, disturbing the spiders,
and synecdoche keeps popping up
waving either a great banner
with a little photograph of itself
stitched to the bottom
or a small flag with a huge self-portrait
hanging from it by a thread.

It's all a bit much for me.

Just down the second floor hall
another device pads like a mad dog, swinging its head
slobbering left to right, right to left, slobbering
swaggering chiastic beast, nipping
at the tender personifications,
the strutting apostrophes,
a rhythm here, a rune there,

the dactyls soaring above the scene like prehistoric birds,
the trochees tiptoeing around it on two right feet

while tiny rhymes scurry under the baseboards
with their long tails trailing, leaving you wondering –
was that cutie a feminine
with its whiff of Coco Mademoiselle,
was that thug a masculine
with its look of go to hell? –

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and the worst part, of course,
is dealing with the similes, not a one of which
will accept things for the way they are
but like politicians
walk about quite openly
explaining how they're really like this
or really like that.

Now even though it's sort of a poet's poem, I like it.

I like it because there's an idea lurking in there and I think that by the end of the poem it manages to at least get its fingers squarely planted on the window sill of the world, and I can envision that after I'm gone it might even pull itself up to safety.

I could well sprinkle a few more poems here and there throughout these pages. In fact, here's one, a short one, not a poet's poem, for those of you not poets:

Clark Gable's Undershirt

*Gable, in what was then considered a racy scene
with Claudette Colbert, took his shirt off to reveal
a bare chest. America gasped: Where is his undershirt?*
FRANK WOOTEN

In some deep drawer Clark's undershirt lay
clean and unused.

Perhaps it cried it a river.
Perhaps it dreamed of the moment
it would be beaten on the rocks of the Ganges.
Perhaps it simmered in first love
and diddled its toes in the river
it remembered running
through Clark's chest
one beat at a time.

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A little whiff of Clark
it was.

The memory of his torso,
but spineless.
Lonely as a moth.

I like that one.

So do my readers – that immense imaginary panel of critics, reviewers and censors whining and bickering in mind's ear as I write and re-write; and many of the more corporeal ones (of the dozen or so people who've had access to my poetry) like it too. Though it's tough to win a consensus.

Anyway, you gotta love the part where the river runs one beat at a time through Gable's chest.

OK, there. Off my chest and onto yours.

Take Ten, over and out.

11 / 20th century *practiciens* and other *clochards*

In the presence of TV's Alex Trebek, a lighted board and the names Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats, Cummings, Frost, Stevens and Eliot (I cannot bear to add Pound or Carlos Williams to this assemblage, so poky their work), most contestants can identify the craft they practiced – practiced, if not in any comparable fashion, at least in common.

But once you scurry past this catalog of prominent poets born into the 19th century, it becomes a little harder for most folks to follow your palaver, if it be poetry you're pushing.

And thus this list of perps – of somewhat more recent vintage:

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- *Grandpappy*: Wystan Hugh Auden. The master. One of three names you're guaranteed to recognize – Dylan and Sylvia being the other two. All things to all people, and all poets. Bedrock talent, crafted of limestone.
- *Wittiest*: Stephen Dunn. William Matthews.
- *Wittier still*: Richard Howard.
- *Most intelligent*: Wouldn't it be great to get Howard and Auden into a steel cage match?
- *Most defensible obscure references*: Same two.
- *Least defensible*: Ezra, anyone? (No poet born in the 20th century comes close. However, if I knew what the hell John Ashbery was going on about, I might be pressed to mention him right about here.)
- *Coolest*: Edward Field. A real sweetheart, and he looks a little like Paul Newman into the bargain. (Honorable mention: Ed Sanders. But boy, how do you leave out Bill Matthews?)
- *Quirkiest sensibility*: Russell Edson. I can see him sitting off in a corner with Charles Simic and Frank O'Hara. (Excellent corner.)
- *Most lyrical*: Sometimes Theodore Roethke. Sometimes not. Lucky for him, Cummings was born in 1894. Roethke, by the way, would win hands down in a category called "Looks most like a cross between the aging James Dickey and a pre-operative Alfred Hitchcock."
- *Funniest*: Billy Collins. Great talent.
- *Most piercing*: Billy, again. But Sharon Olds can get up a head of steam.

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- *Most sensual:* Olds. The woman can write; damned good-looking, too. And occasionally the early Louise Glück, another very great artist. Also very good-looking when she was young.
- *Least sensual:* Later Glück. Hasn't crapped in fifteen years.
- *Guiltiest pleasure:* Charles Bukowski. Not very good-looking.
- *Most guiltless pleasure:* Ted Kooser. (The Buck Henry Look.) You'd bet on Bukowski, by the way, if the two ever duked it out.
- *Gayest:* You mean gayer than Auden and Howard? (Well, there's always Field. And O'Hara. And Baltimore's David Bergman, an exquisite lyrical poet. And someone you've never heard of, Joel Zizik, tragic and fine. And yes, John Giorno. So far out there that Judy Garland once asked him for *his* autograph.)
- *Most indispensable poem:* "For the Union Dead," Robert Lowell.
- *Every bit as great, or greater:* "Japan," Billy Collins. "Loves," Stephen Dunn.
- *Most elegant:* Richard Wilbur (who used to look like Charlton Heston, back when Heston looked like Heston).
- *Most ridiculously gifted:* James Dickey.
- *Most prodigally gifted, perhaps ever, any century:* Mary Oliver. "Who, me? Oh, look now . . . a plush owl in that white pine . . ."
- *And how do you leave out?:* Dylan Thomas. Sylvia Plath.

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- *Hottest, in many ways:* Sylvia.
- *Bitchiest:* Well, maybe the Sylvia of “Daddy.” But have you ever run into John Irwin? I don’t mean the droll, vaguely charming “John Bricuth” version; I mean the Mr. Hyde version.
- *Least-recognized recognized poet:* Donald Hall. Robert Hass. Too many to name, unfortunately.
- *Would have made this list (in several honored categories) if he’d bothered to write poetry:* Barth. Vargas Llosa. Márquez. And there’s this guy, Nabokov
- *Best bunch for a dinner party (discounting that certain are décédé):*
 - Girls: Plath, Sexton, Olds, Glück. And the gifted Clarinda Harriss.
 - Boys: Matthews, Collins, Howard, Field. Probably O’Hara.
 - Host: Chester Kallman, to keep Wylan in check. And dressed.
 - Crashers: Buk, Dickey, Thomas. Dunn. Likely Sanders, I dunno.
- *Worst speaking voice:* Two 19th century fellas overshadow everyone else. Have you ever heard a tape of Yeats reading his stuff? Not that Eliot is ever going to do voice-overs for the phone company – rest easy, James Earl Jones.
- *Worst painter:* Buk, by a mile.
- *Best painter:* Cummings was fine; but wrong century for this list.
- *Most completely impermeable:* Wallace Stevens (an impermeability that carries across the years). But

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the fat old bastard sure could write. About what, I wish I knew.

- *Honorable mention, impermeable*: John Ashbery.
- *Most opaque*: Ashbery, again; stepson of Pound.
- *Scariest*: Tom Disch's arms.
- *Most overrated*: Hats off to Ashbery, who clears the field; but with a nod to James Merrill, by all accounts a very nice man. Sorry.
- *Somewhat overrated*: Poor Rita Dove. And then there's Anne Sexton, of course. Robert Duncan. Kenneth Rexroth. And a gaggle of others. Many poets, as Buk said, not much poetry. This list goes on and on.
- *Just missed the overrated cut, and sometimes even quite good*: Ted Hughes. W. S. Merwin. And Seamus Heaney, who is a terrific critic.
- *Greatest critic*: The Randall Jarrell Award is presented to Helen Vendler. But don't ignore Heaney, Disch, Fred Chappell.
- *Most improved editorial staff*: Of this century? Easy! *Poetry* (Chicago).

Well, I guess that fairly toasts my chances, should I ever mail off my poems.

By the way, you know what *really* cheeses me off?

When you say Elvis, and someone says Costello. When you say Dylan, and someone says Bob.

12 / Doing Europe

When I was eighteen, summer of 1970, I ponied up a couple of hundred bucks, as did Steve Bartlett, my freshman roommate, and not more than seventy-two hours after the school year ended we took to the friendly skies for our Grand Tour.

I refer to Steve as my freshman roomie, yet actually he carried that designation for the second semester only. Gould Harrison Kitchens Blair was my original roommate.

Gould (pronounced “Ghoul”) beat me on Opening Day by just minutes to Gildersleeve 208 (winning thereby the better of the two bunks in that small room), hailed from Alabama, spoke with an amiable (yet enormously eloquent) southern drawl, tallied 768 or thereabouts on his French Achievement exam (the highest score, he informed me, in all of his home state the year he tested), declared upon our initial meeting majestic career intentions (to become an attorney back in Alabama, then a local politician, then, perhaps, a national – ambitions far more defined than my amorphous own), and scratched himself (audibly and incessantly) throughout the long fall nights of that year.

Gould seemed alright. He was, during initiation week, considerate and athletic enough to position both of our trashcans simultaneously fore and aft my expulsive body that evening I first partook of alcohol – I’d chugged two bottle inches or so of Johnnie Walker Red, earning myself as consequence a berth in the Johns Hopkins infirmary for several days thereafter. (Thirty-six odd years after that terrible night a cloudy sensation lingers still, a remembrance of Gould’s suspending me like a dreadful defecating puppy deflating over those two cans.) I was, therefore, during our first weeks of association, sufficiently grateful and indebted to him to overlook various peculiarities of his nature.

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I recall, for example, voicing some opinion across the darkness one night, subject unremembered. Whatever I said, it must have displeased Gould. I could sense his disapproval when an alarm clock shattered against the cinderblocks just inches from my scalp. Gould was lean and muscular and intense, and I let his response pass without further comment.

The relationship splintered, however, over a different issue.

A student I'd met in my Philosophy of Religion course stopped by one afternoon to share some notes with me, the visit lasting, perhaps, a quarter hour. Moments after he left the room, the door swung theatrically back open; and there, legs apart, arms crossed, looking for all the world like a Jolly White Giant stood Gould, nose in the air, sucking in deep, exaggerated breaths. I just stared at him. Then a glint came into his eyes. He began to dart around the tiny room like a panther, nostrils dilated, sniffing.

"I smell . . . *Niiiiigger!*" he exclaimed, and dashed to his bed and snuffled. "He sat here, didn't he?" And then to his chair – ". . . and *here* . . ." – and then to the edge of his desk – ". . . and he leaned *right up* against here! Oh yes, yes . . . I smell Nigger!" A splendid southern accent. Shining eyes, fervent and fanatical. I could picture him in the courtroom. It was a splendid performance.

I shook my head and left for supper. When I returned, much later that evening, Gould was nowhere to be found. But there was a jug of Mr. Clean sitting prominently in the middle of the floor.

The next day Gould moved into a new room, a single, and Steve, who'd been having roommate problems of his own, moved down to 208 not long after.

Now here's something fascinating: While I was setting down the particulars of this little tale (2/2/06, four in the morning), I decided to Google "Gould Harrison Kitchens Blair." Nothing. I ran every version I could think of, and I crossed the term and its

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variations with Johns Hopkins, Alabama, whatever I could come up with.

Sadly – perhaps it was the lateness of the hour, perhaps just a general ineptitude – I wasn’t able to make a definitive ID, even though the name is fairly rare. Finally, however, I did uncover the following truly riveting report:

In 1988, a Talladega County [Alabama] jury convicted Judy Haney of capital murder and sentenced her to death for hiring someone to kill her allegedly abusive husband in 1984.

At her original trial, Haney’s court-appointed lawyer, Gould Blair, “was so drunk during the trial . . . that he was held in contempt and sent to jail,” according to a 1995 report by the Death Penalty Information Center, an anti-capital punishment group.

Blair maintained Haney got good representation. “I would affirm to anybody the fact that I had a bad day in court does not in these circumstances mean this woman was other than more than adequately represented,” he said.

On appeal, Haney argued Blair had not adequately represented her. Blair “had a severe drinking problem at the time of the trial” and “appeared intoxicated in court during the trial on other occasions,” the filing said.

Talladega Circuit Court Judge Jerry Fielding reduced Haney’s sentence to life without parole in 1997.

Now you’ve got to give counsel credit where it’s due: that’s one damned clever stratagem for saving your guilty-as-hell client’s ass. Plus, all that choice and lawyerly talk, intelligent and well-crafted . . . why, for a moment I was quite sure that I’d flushed out our quarry.

But then I remembered that *my* Gould was very bright and quick to take instruction, and I can only imagine that from such a closely observed session of unrestricted purging as I’d subjected

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him to, Gould Harrison Kitchens Blair would have derived a lifetime's tutorial on the evils of alcohol.

And besides, I would hate to think that Gould has been "other than more than adequately represented" in these pages. So just forget that snippet. I reckon it must be some completely *other* Gould Blair, Alabama attorney, that Google has photographed so exquisitely. And in so few words.

But go ahead, have some fun. Google Gould yourself.

13 / Doing Europe (I got sidetracked; let's try again)

When I was eighteen, summer of 1970, I ponied up a couple of hundred bucks, as did Steve Bartlett, my freshman roommate, and not more than seventy-two hours after the school year ended we took to the friendly skies for our Grand Tour.

We were happy enough to get away from our residence hall. Because even though Johns Hopkins has a reputation for selecting sterling individuals of unimpeachable character, something had clearly gone wrong up on the second floor of Gildersleeve.

I had a good indication of this when Bitsy and I began to spend overnights there, once we'd worn out Don Duker's king-sized welcome.

One evening in March she and I were pooled in exhausted sleep. (Steve, I now realize, must have dreaded those overnight visits – the only ones, at that point, going on in the dorm – since a sense of gallantry drove him to seek alternative shelter, and where I never knew.)

There we lay, then, in the dish of our beautiful youth, quite spent, when abruptly, *Wham!*, the door shuddered as though it had been smacked by a Zamboni. A solid wooden door, several inches

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thick, a heavy slab of a door; but trembling, suddenly, under repeated assaults. *Wham! Wham! Wham!* Had Gould procured a sledge hammer?

No, it wasn't my ex-roommate. There was an entire crowd in the hall, judging from the voices that filtered under the door . . . perhaps half a dozen of Hopkins's best, presumably my neighbors. All single guys. Guys without women. Cold guys on a cold night in a cold city huddling outside my door.

Wham! "Hey Kantor, share your whore! Give us a piece!"

Wham! Wham! It was a baseball bat they'd dug up, the fat part was being used as a battering ram.

Wham! Wham! Wham! "C'mon, man, we're horny, too. We know you're in there. We can smell that pussy all the way out here!"

Wham!

There was no telephone in the room. We lay still and silent in each other's arms. Bitsy had put her head on my chest, and after a few minutes she started to cry a little. Not so much out of fear – just from the stupidity of the thing. There was nothing to do but hope that the door held, to wait them out.

Wham! "Hey, motherfucker, she's just a piece of meat. Let us have some, you little pimp!"

I began to make out individual voices then. Maxie Mars, from across the hall, pimply, brilliant Max. An excellent writer. Warren, All-State in soccer once, lately All-World in ganja, who'd managed somehow to leach from his dope-smoked lair into the general excitement. And Big Tim, boozy, as always, fiery, lanky, pissed. Tim looked more than a little like the popular movie depictions of the Frankenstein Monster. But Tim had the Monster by a mile; Frankenstein, after all, hadn't graduated from Norfolk Academy (founded 1728), Norfolk, Virginia.

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Karl, Justin, Justin's sullen roommate. Others, perhaps from other floors. A dirty half-dozen and more.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

Once they realized that we weren't going to answer – *What would they have done, anyway, if that door had swung wide and we'd invited them into our naked darkness, this grubby crew of preppies?* – and once they realized that they weren't going to butt their way in, most of the group drifted off; but the last few, their agitation deepened, attacked once more, escalating their blows, now in a true frenzy. It went on for a long time, then, this assault in and upon the woman-starved halls of Gildersleeve. (The following autumn, by the by, Johns Hopkins admitted its first co-eds, just a tiny trickle, and Bitsy was among them.)

The next morning we got to examine the night's work firsthand: obscenities not written but *carved* into the wood; dents a quarter inch deep from the bat – savage moons and half-moons, dozens of them, stippling the face of the door and the frame; shaving cream residue everywhere. Shit smeared in wild grief across the cinderblocks.

Frozen Hopkins was a tough place to be a single man in March of 1970.

Two months later, magically, everything had changed, it was springtime and it was hot, school was nearly over, everyone had taken a girl or a girlfriend, and the smell of sex permeated the halls as surely as *In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida* and Janis and the reek of cannabis everywhere. Reefer madness: the half-open doors lining the second floor of Gildersleeve revealed nothing but black light posters and an occasional down-to-her-underwear, alcohol-sodden strumpet who'd ferried over from Notre Dame or Goucher – even a wayward waitress or two, these older than the college girls, of course, and wiser, divine divas in the hallways and on the stairs and standing in front of our bathroom mirrors with their

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sometimes-wrinkled bellies and red lips and long curling streams of cigarette smoke. Because they were older they seemed exotic and mysterious to us. We envied the guys who were bedding them. We got to know these women intimately, if not well, for there were no separate facilities for the fair sex in all of Gildersleeve.

And if those final debauched weeks did not entirely wipe clean our memories of the feral evening but two months past, at least we knew that the general depravity that was now draped like mosquito netting over the dorm guaranteed we'd be singled out no more for special treatment.

One night, though, there was a banging upon the door once again.

I opened it to Big Tim. Redder-nosed than usual. Lanky and loose. Grinning. And drunk as hell. His eyes were inhuman.

"Kantor, you got some love oil, some Vaseline, anything?" I don't believe he'd wasted ten words on me the entire year, save the night of the baseball bat.

"I don't think so, Tim." (Bitsy was a reliable fountain.) "Maybe I can dig some up. What's your hurry?"

"Come see, man!" And he pulled me robotically along the hall and through his door where a slender boy lay face down on the bed, completely passed out. His wondrous ass was shining in the moonlight. His rumpled jeans were lying on the floor.

"C'mon, man, I gotta fuck him. He just stumbled in here a coupla minutes ago drunk as a skunk and I got him naked without even waking him up. Ah, fuck the rubber, what the hell. Look at that ass! Just like a girl's." I did. I took a long look. It was perfect, the way perfect can exist only on an eighteen-year-old.

The boy's thighs were slightly parted. It was like blood on the wet air, and Tim was in a frenzy. He had his cock out, and he was going to force his way in dry. I couldn't stop him.

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“Wait, man, wait just a second, Warren’s got everything,” and like the amanuensis to a pornographer I ran two doors down the hall and into a blur of pot smoke and Warren had a little vial, of course, and then I ran back to Tim, who now had his pants off – flabby loose flanks – and I handed him the stuff.

And he looked down upon me from his great height of six feet and three inches but he could not see me, his black eyes rose cold and forbidding beyond the horizon of his cheeks – eyes repelling light, obdurate and implacable: the eye of the moth, all surface, the intelligence which may perish upon a fingerprint, and drawn only to the light of the boy’s thighs, in shadow, now, in shade; the eye of the shark, all depth, the round marble of the sculptor fettled by the chisel stroke, and no surface to the sculpture itself, void, absorptive; no clemency to Tim’s eyes, no acknowledgement, no barter, just the intractable aleatories of space, click click, *snake eyes*, say the stars, *snake eyes* – I saw them that night, I’d see them again – these were the rheumy eyes of the victor, discrete and detached, and the boy moaned and said, “Are you gonna fuck me or what?” and his voice dissolved like the mists of the first dawn, and there was silence and its interstices, and God knows what, and I got the hell out of there.

14 / Aside

There are many characters weaving in and out of these chapters.

Some are horrid and unformed little cowards, some empty, some brutish, and, like most characters (fictional or no), the greater part not so very trustworthy. This is the way of the world, and we make our beds, and it is up to us to remake them as the seasons

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roll, and thus who we were may or mayn't reflect who we become. Still, there must be judgments, even if temporal.

And so it is not incompatible with the abstract and impartial calculus of justice – I am not speaking of human justice here, but the desolate impartiality of nature – that one red-nosed specimen – I will not say which – went on to become one of the first student trustees in the history of the Johns Hopkins University, and proceeded from there to serve the great state of Montana as one of the youngest members ever elected to the United States House of Representatives, becoming, in the 1984 primary, a candidate for United States Senator from Montana, later still Attorney General of the state named from the Spanish for mountain (*montaña*), thence to serve as a delegate to the Republican National Convention from Montana, and was in due course (and rather recently) elected mayor of a prosperous small town in Montana.

I wonder if that boy ever voted for him.

15 / Doing Europe (for real, this time)

When I was eighteen, summer of 1970, I ponied up a couple of hundred bucks, as did Steve Bartlett, my freshman roommate, and not more than seventy-two hours after the school year ended we could be seen taking to the friendly skies for our Grand Tour.

I traveled light. Frommer, Fielding; a Speedo – yes, laugh, I am – a couple of dress shirts, a three-piece suit (dark and inexplicable); little or no underwear. The shoes I was wearing. Some allergy pills. A small camera. Two missing assignments from the school year, papers I'd promised a pair of esteemed professors I'd mail them over the summer. (They're still waiting.)

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We bought our tickets from a guy we'd never met. He had posted flyers all over the campus offering inexpensive round-trip tickets to the continent, and we sent off our money and then waited and waited, visiting our depressing mailboxes in the Hopkins post office several times a day. Week after week. No tickets. We had no way to contact the guy. Then, *mirabile dictu!*, the tickets arrived. Nick of time, all that.

And just *comme ça* God was in his rocker and once again all was right with the world.

Crawl through traffic. Crying mothers. Brow-furrowed fathers. Clandestine twenty-dollar bills. Tears. Tears. Goodbye, goodbye. The walkway to the airplane, walkway to hell.

Hours over the Atlantic. Pukers. Whiners. Stinks and stench. Bags of gasses. Snorts and snorers. Louds and stupid.

Sleep impossible. Nowhere to store contact lenses (the hard old-style ones). It was hell.

And then, Heathrow.

TAKES 16 THROUGH 199 – SORRY. BLAME LIFE. BUT HERE'S THE CONCLUSION TO THE BOOK:

200 / Nessun dorma

“Whatever happens next,” I wrote, “blame it on a roll of the dice and an eager pistol. Blame it on the wind.”

I pulled the car around to the front of the estate, not too far from the main gate, rolled down my windows, killed the lights, killed the engine and sat for a moment in the shadows. A clicking of palms and some wind blowing in from the stars.

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I reached down for the Smith & Wesson, retrieved it from beneath the passenger seat and toyed with the latch; the assembly swung clear of the frame. My single cartridge sat like a shark's head deep in the cylinder. I slid it out, jiggled its smooth heft in my palm, cupped it like a rosary, then held it to my lips and delivered a good luck kiss. Got back a faint metallic peck, and my mouth filled with saliva – respite from the desiccation of my throat.

Then I repositioned the bullet carefully in its chamber and gave the cylinder a good spin, pushed it back into the frame and enjoyed the satisfying click of the pin spring latching into place. We were ready to go. I thought of Natalie and Augie, doubtless asleep by now back in Maryland.

My reverie was interrupted by the sound of voices near the front gate.

I looked up to see no less than Ness Sinn, Sinn in the flesh, finally, *finally!*, and apparently in the closing stages of an argument with a young man. Old Snake Eyes himself, and standing not thirty feet from my car – Old Snake Eyes in Bermuda shorts, black socks and dress shoes. He was shirtless. His capacious belly glowed in the moonlight like a flour sack.

His companion was wearing a tank top, tight jeans, sandals. I couldn't tune in precisely to what they were saying, but a word here, a word there, their ungoverned tones carried clear in the night air. It wasn't pretty. A police cruiser turned the corner, slowed for a look at the two men, slowed a little more, then suddenly hit its siren, picked up speed and was gone.

A moment later the young man was waving his right arm in Ness's face again, he was making a point of some kind, then (it seemed like slow motion) his open hand cuffed the older man's head and Ness staggered and dropped to one knee. The assailant paused for an instant, then kicked my dear friend in the chest with his heel, hard, and Ness blew back like a bowling pin.

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The young man bent down directly and pulled something from the heap on the ground, stood back up, examined whatever it was he held in his hands, turned, walked swiftly through the gate and vanished into an old Volvo – I believe it was a Volvo – parked halfway up the block. He hadn't seen me.

The Volvo pulled off with an irritated rattle and disappeared. So there it was. If I were one to believe in signs, this was a damned good one. I couldn't ignore the fact that I'd been sent the perfect fall guy – a gift, an offering tossed from the careless heavens. Dropped right at my feet.

Ness, meanwhile, lay on his back with his black dress shoes wagging in the air. Ness, Ness, fragile as a beetle. Tubby black beetle. After a while he struggled to his feet – a sort of slapstick, spastic performance – and approached the sidewalk with absurd, near abstemious caution, like a nun peering down the neck of a beer bottle. He stared for a little while after the Volvo, long gone, then turned uncertainly, almost aimlessly, back towards the path. Back towards the bright open rectangle of his front door, some forty yards distant.

I slid out into the night then, soft as shade, the pistol a compass in my fingers, and followed at a prudent remove.

Ness was shuffling unsteadily, stooped like a gooseneck lamp. He stopped, teetered, veered, vomited into the bushes. I stood motionless in the savory dark of a wilting banana plant and waited patiently while he retched the very light out of himself.

He recovered finally and lurched up the steps and dragged his body into the house. The door stood gaping behind him.

I held back for maybe an entire minute, but maybe it was less. Just my heartbeat as time piece. Ness Sinn had disappeared into the brilliance of his foyer. All I had to do was follow him.

Injured prey. Open door.

It seemed a little too easy.

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I crept up the steps, revolver to my chest, eased swiftly across the porch, flattened my back against the house, inched sidewise slowly, deliberately, gently, and then, weapon extended, swung squarely into the welcoming mouth of the mansion.

My skin froze.

There was a familiar old man with a gun settled directly in front of me. His face was a portrait of perfect menace.

He was peering from a massive nineteenth century gilt mirror, the door frame and the deep night layered behind him, gaze locked with mine. Breathless.

I broke the stalemate. I smiled – perhaps my first smile in forty-eight hours – relaxed, exhaled ten years of stale air, drew a slow comfortable bead and with all the tenderness in this world fired directly between his eyes.

An empty click.

I pulled the trigger once again.

This time a brutal shock ran up my arms.

A reflective shattering.

The foyer darkened with breakage and filled like a pond with broken shards. Little splinters of mirror gave up bits of moon and star wherever you looked.

A poet might say that the floor glittered majestic with fractions of the night – but he'd be a very bad poet.

Just like me, a bad poet.

But a decent shot.

I turned and walked without ceremony back down the path towards my rented car. The wind had stopped dead and the palms were topped by a massive moon. I was in no particular hurry.

Old Snake Eyes, I reckoned, was shuddering somewhere in a closet. Maybe even his basement.

I eased onto the empty road, lit a cigar.

Headed north.

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For X, from B

This document was composed in the deliria of evenings.

Dinner pecked at, obligations concluded, many nights I'd slip into my labyrinth and begin to fiddle at the keyboard – ten, midnight, two – polishing within the screen's penumbra whatever I'd written last; but then, sometimes, on a good night, I'd get to scratch at another chapter itching (inching) its way out.

You have seen me sitting here scratching, X.

My cigar smoke swirls up and off the blades of the ceiling fan and when you venture in I start up wide-eyed, as if from a séance. *Mr. Blavatsky, you presume.* This is because composition is an agreeable task, and I have enjoyed the work thoroughly. The composition, that is.

Editing's another matter. Writing's accomplished at pretty much the speed of typing. Revision's labor eternal.

Eternal also my unrevised, unabridged admiration of your serenity, X., sweet pregnant X., whose couch I have neglected too many of these nights. How can I thank you for the umbrella you have cast over the entrance to this cave?

I adore you as that lover for whose gentle indulgence no simple words of gratitude could ever suffice. I adore you as that person. I adore you, X.