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TRUER FAULTS

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For the man who said I was him.

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ABSTRACT

Unless a language user's position in language is authenticated--that is, unless the "I" has a tenable sense of what it occupies—language is vitiated as a means of communication: it isn't right between the "I"s. Such is the primary dilemma of Madison Allman, who is gifted, young, talented, and who inspects verbal organisms with the attention of an entomologist in search of an insect-shaped entomologist—along the way, calling into question the idioms that inform patterns of thought, and balking at the mendacious term "voluntary" and its ilk--but who, between her longing for community and her longing to be sincere, feels unable to represent herself. To exfoliate depth, to unite mind and skin, to be "self-evident" would be ideal; as an alternative to that pipe dream, she reasons that if she can see herself in writing on the page, she has material. That much of her writing is an elaboration of her problematic relationship with the capacity of language and its tendency to mislead should come as no surprise: she recounts a childhood misadventure with made-up, self-making secret language, for instance. And the novel's dramatic material consists chiefly of Madison's insolvent efforts to make her performed self commensurate with her written self--she plans and premeditates, she writes stories and reads them over the telephone in order to "have" stories--primarily to secure the good opinion of two young men who seem to have no reservations about asserting ephemeral notions and acting out their vicissitudes.

The first to appear is adversarial Malachi Watts, who, in reminding Madison that her quiet demeanor might simply mean she's utterly vacuous, galvanizes Madison to check and elaborate on her convictions more than anyone—he even prompts her to bang out a novella, "Cracked Dishes," that takes as its subject this collision of discursive verbal free play and the world that, by turns, stimulates defensible personal development and threatens to subvert it. In "Cracked Dishes," the following tenets of Madison's linguistic disquietude play ("play," literally) major roles through the projection of her sexless ego (or protagonist) who she names, "Fac Dishes": what is evident to Fac, Fac deems self-evident (so why not let it go without saying?); Fac recoils at the thought of reproduction—physical, psychical, and artistic--but also

realizes it is hers (“hers” being an invented pronoun—one of three--that covers both genders) lot, and thus, by the end of the novella, erects somewhat of sham of a persona wholly divorced from its “true” intentions--though, ostensibly, the development of this phony persona, in being the logical conclusion of the text that accumulates underneath it, is in perfect alignment with who Fac really is; the topography of any thinking individual upon whom Fac projects herself is changing and unmappable, so anxiety over whether or how an interlocutor receives Fac cripples her. And the world shoves so much unwanted pabulum down the gullets of its people, to shut them up.

After Madison completes—indeed lives inside of--“Cracked Dishes,” she is ready to exist outside the text, ready to bear it in mind, if not bear it on her face, almost like the enervated and (at long last) well-fed, “phony” Fac. Madison is tired of writing, tired of isolation, tired of her misanthropic contentions—her truths--that keep her from “life.” With impeccable timing, Alex the magician, long since an object of Madison’s desire, enters the scene. At this point begins Madison’s spiritual declension: although she cultivates precisely the lively, clever, sexy, lexically imaginative relationship she wished for all along, the relationship also leads to a social codependence that implodes: neither constructive nor destructive criticism pass between the two of them to mark their differences; there appears to be no distinction between the performer and the audience. Madison’s performed self *is* Alex, and he is her identity. So, when Madison reads in Alex’s journal of his recent infidelity and sees that the position she occupies in his world is relatively insignificant, she reinstates the page as her screen and there finds community—perhaps not in life of her own devising (the words are still borrowed) but of her own configuring. Restrictions placed upon her “I” are, at least, more visible this way.

PART ONE

1. THE BEGINNING MUST HOLD EVERYTHING

A box of letters is always ready for moving day. My box is red and once held the boots I bought at a surf shop. Where are the letter requests? Survey the scene, as in preparation for CPR. Copied, not to make legible but to make sure the figures looked consistent, eligible, as though I were forging myself. I'd send paper wrapped in paper laced with sea oats and sand, sometimes overseas, a flying shore of me. An understood "I" is invisible. To that best friend who stole my black and white bikini. Sepia covers pots of crumbly oil paint left to clay. Shoot a role of models but never make eye contact. The letters count—they're your best shot at making a story equal a picture.

A bee sees me from an unframed oil portrait for which I was the model, but of which I was the painter, slanted against my living room wall in line with collapsed computer boxes, dictionaries, undershirts, and plates. Yearbooks are best left at one's parents' house throughout one's twenties. I was not thinking of my appearance as I brushed my hair between classes, I was dividing the sum of my classmates by their number of greetings. Those of us in clubs wore shirts with three-quarter length sleeves, name of club on the front, name of person on back. Purple block letters on cadmium yellow. My ironed hair exceeded my name but served the same purpose. I divided me first. Insanity is never learning the order. Just be yourself, someone said, just act natural. My tongue is an obstruction. Longing to say "The ME is here!" knowing the beginning must hold everything. First impressions, fossils, can't move.

The word "purple" is arresting. When letters don't rip, they R.S.V.P. into pieces. Still, precepts harden and knock on the skull. Who's there? Act I is when I come to get her before they do, standing before any mirror, for instance, uninvited. Will have to play apart if I can't remember my lines. When I was in fourth grade, Mrs. Bernstein told me to be the narrator of *Chicken Little* because I was the best reader, and I stood behind a podium except for my head, which floated above it. My baby blue headband matched my dress. Fluorescent lights accentuated my veins, but they were greener than my eyes. My skin is so thin that when I put myself on the line, I am the fish. So bad at talking. Words underground are better at aerating a garden than holding everything at once. Hand on produce, in the bright glare of the page, the logical conclusion of life story. Where is the sense in that end?

A certain reword is deserved. When you can't decide, try rubbing the remote control and become number as you feel. Or flip a series of coins and arrange the results like a code. When I flipped out because my fossil was faulty, I screamed out the window and lost my ability to sing. Vocal rest will follow accordingly. My wish to tell you all at once is light in the sea, school of silvers swimming near the surface, a slittery froosh. Beach TV, channel 23, parents' house, dinnertime: advertisements to lure us into town. Brother's old hand-made flip-book on the floor, skateboarding guy, back and forth, half-

pike. I hate to watch, obviously. Movies are a diversion I had to tolerate in spite of directors leaving me in the dark; when I was very young I would watch movie watchers and throw my tantrums at them, to have a say. “Don’t just sit there, do something!” did something. No one wants a story about the summer a teenager rocked in a chair from “The Price Is Right” until “Mama’s Family,” and I speak on behalf of no one in particular. Nor did we like literature back then, the worship, who is the authority here.

For my part, I was committed to a condition of my own, which took as its subject a man as object. While pure description put speech in me, I was occupied. Last year it wasn’t this crowded at the Boardwalk past sundown. Now we’ll never find a parking space. At least six people have leaned close between here and the pier and said, “You know me better than anyone,” and squeezed the sweet spot on my left heel, despite the wet sand and brine. Who am I quoting vs. who I am copying. It was 2 a.m. in April, and a lifelong friend let me drive his mother’s Mercedes convertible all over the cool humid town. The Waffle House after prom was better than The Elephant Walk Restaurant before, but what was I expecting after all? “You eat like a bird.” Standardized tests for fun, something percentile, no further questions, “you always think outside the box.” What box? Where are the points on a circle? Where does the skateboarding guy’s head come to a point?

Drawing his Winstons and WWI lighter from his sports coat: “Do you mind if I smoke”; answer: “I don’t care if you burn.” Oh the conflagration. When word was made world and scared the living “I” out of me. My my, was I clever! When it failed a part, that part was mine.

2. GETTING IN LINE AT EIGHTEEN

Madison's bad manners were on the table along with two coagulated blobs of air-conditioned spaghetti, and the whole mess aged before her in mutual undigestibility. She had intercalated one of her poems like a pink slip between Malachi's skeleton fingers and asked him to read it right there at the restaurant table. Not only did the categorical firstness of the date advise against this deed, but the single votive candle between their chipped plates--albeit combined with the glint of some nearby glutton's costume jewelry—provided such insufficient technical support that Madison's clueless impropriety caused Malachi a physical discomfort inversely proportionate to the restaurant's level of illumination. Madison couldn't see it. "Read my poem," she insisted.

"Bad form. Baaaad form," he said.

Because of the sheer—indeed transparent--decisiveness of Madison's poem-thrust, she could not assuage the humiliation she now felt by assuring herself (as she normally might've), "bad form cannot be a definitive characteristic so long as the reason form looks 'bad' is that it's rolling around inconclusively like a semi-solid that hasn't set." She could not assuage her humiliation, and yet she tried.

Spaghetti was yarn now; it would've stuck to the sides of her mouth were she to eat it. Putting in food was, however, something to do. Madison didn't.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to smoke your poem." Malachi flicked his oar-shaped thumb to ignite his lighter, and read. Then he declared that the only line worth salvaging--the only direct line in the whole abstruse tangle--was "drains lead to hell from here." He kept repeating the line over and over. To stop him, Madison interjected, "Quiddity! Quiddity!" to which—since he not only took things more personally than most, but also hammered flat bilge into concave questions--he replied, "surly," and quit chanting. He smirked like a joker, for they had played prettily. Madison threw salt over her right shoulder and said, "Let us pray." A moment later, though, Madison was vermouthe dry once again and Malachi was deserted. In her head, she was finishing a list of Latinate vs. Germanic words for "reticence" when Malachi raked his forelock towards his crown and spat out a general invective about how "quiet girls disclose the nothing in them."

It was a challenge. Madison began to hum "Taps."

"I hate doing this, but for lack of a better comparison right now, here's something I wrote while absorbed in phone conversation with a friend of mine, Kelley Johansen, from the forensics team. Excellent debater and bass player; maybe you've met. At any rate, the poem. There is no intention behind it whatsoever. I called it 'Fatherland'; you may call it poop. Now you have an advantage most people I burden with this poem don't

have, and you'll be saved the stultifying turn from over-interpretation, i.e., *'the crystal polymorph at the threshold of the tubed icon must represent your frustrated need to gain entry to your father's, you know, land!'* to real, dumb truth!"

"But there was intention behind..."

"Need a light?" The tar stains on Malachi's teeth marveled more yellow than it stood to reason an eighteen year-old's could as he reveled. He reveled in the dental blight his delicate face could expose and conceal at will. Then, tipping his head so the fine strands of his ash brown pageboy hair fell in front of his bulging blue eyes, he cackled three octaves above his speaking range.

If "Fatherland" were duplicitous mockery, well, Madison stood nothing to gain from forking through refuse, and chances were she wouldn't find anything in the junk piles on the page to neutralize the contumacy she'd have to swallow in order to rummage through them. The poem's existence—or if not its existence, its use—was testament to Malachi's mendacity. But "Fatherland" did exist. So Madison followed her hunch that this particular assemblage of putative nonsense, if nothing else, probably looked far more intriguing than most, and at least that was something. The nonsense it was rivaled the sense most writing wasn't, to Madison. But she did not disclose this view. There was a temptation, of course, to frustrate Malachi's presupposition about this particular quiet girl even if it meant drawing predictable analogies between Malachi's "wingtips faltering on a spool of ardent perpetuity" and, say, his own unhappy dawdling here in a beach-rimmed military town at a community college because his draconian millionaire father out in San Francisco had withheld the funds originally allocated for an elite private school in New York where Malachi was supposed to go (along with his wardrobe of tweeds, his Knopf Classics, his Pink Floyd CDs). The story behind Malachi's falling out with his Dad involves punching, a broken rib, "you bastard," a missed high school graduation ceremony, and Malachi calling his investor a babbitt with a trophy wife who pluralizes words with an apostrophe preceding the 's.' Certainly she couldn't compete with Malachi's real mom, a History PhD from Yale, whose fondness for the rapid expanding and contracting of her son's charred lungs was commensurate with the toxicity of the smoke he blew. Her swift repartees and novelty of expression profaned Malachi's everyday life such that the world outside his and his mother's immaculate household appeared to be a continually delayed reaction to them.

"...cupboard up a morning's tete-a-tete and let the mail wait, or me." End of poem. Eh, Madison thought, what could she possibly unshelve for Malachi that he hadn't conscientiously slobbered over and put away? If textual surgery would confirm Madison's servile position in the economy of crystal polymorphs, she'd be better to bank on the unconfirmability of her nothing behind the nothing said. And as far as social entitlements go, it was evident that Malachi had mustered enough narcissism to romanticize his relationship with his father and market himself the tortured poet for every young lady who showed signs of interest in torture--otherwise Madison wouldn't have brought with her to this restaurant the resources to weigh the story of Fatherland against the poem, "Fatherland." Then it occurred to her that her form was no worse than Malachi's, and she became incensed.

An emphatic crossing of bony legs was happening under Malachi's side of the table. Friction of loose denim on loose denim. Shift of posture. The words "Le Mythe de Sisyphe" on his T-shirt became partially obscured by the lapels of his tweed jacket in

such a way that the cartoon image on the shirt--Camus rolling a heavy rock uphill—had (from the caption) the words, “he de Sis” to stand on, and nothing else. He blew a few O-rings over his head. Halos. “Do something vulgar,” he suggested.

“Um...sometimes I sprout a whisker out of the left side of my chin. I will pluck it for you if you like. For Valentine’s Day.”

“I said ‘vulgar,’ not ‘disgusting’.”

Madison’s rear began to sweat, and all she could seize out of the slippery conditions that permeated her from her central nervous system outward was an image formed earlier that day of Malachi invading the college mall as mechanically as one of those mannequin robots from the video for “Rockit,” hoisting his umbrella up in the air like a rifle, pressing its mahogany handle to his forehead, wedging the umbrella’s elongated steel tip between two bricks, and exclaiming, “I am a live wire!” The butter-complexioned acquaintance of Madison’s who had been posed stolid opposite her so she could sketch his face sans eye-creases made reference to “that weird guy” but not the weird guy’s weird shirt’s weird reference.

One must forge ahead.

The giant purple rings of sliced onion in the salad between Malachi and Madison commanded her attention now. She fished an onion from its swamp of Italian dressing and croutons with her knife, drew it to her mouth, and licked its circumference with a single revolution of her pointed tongue. Vulgar. Her actions earned further leg-crossing. Malachi drew a deep breath and yelled “check!” but it was all histrionics.

Days of minutes seemed to pass in the smells and din of the place. Finally Malachi said, “So, tell me a story,” but Madison did not know where to begin.

“About what?” she wanted to know.

“Oh, your grandmother.”

Madison could not think of a good story about her grandmother and she wasn’t about to make it up.

Two days after the date went up in smoke, Madison bought an umbrella like Malachi’s and stabbed the ground with it when she walked.

3. O-R, GOES GREAT WITH IMAGINATION

There was a circle, a square, and a triangle on the classroom wall beside the green blackboard—each labeled, each a poster board cut-out, outlined with a fat, fumey, black magic marker. Each figure wore a facial expression: surprise (the mouth of the triangle formed an “O” and its eyebrows were raised), giddiness (the square was squinting and baring a 20-tooth grin), and bashfulness (the circle smiled sweetly and presumably fluttered its long eyelashes) as if to ingratiate the preschool children by saying, *Get to know us!*—thus making learning a social event.

But what was a social event?

I argued with my preschool teacher, Ms. Neese about the names of these shapes. It was not that Ms. Neese—who was rather dull—made herself a target for a four year-old’s adversity; we had a good relationship: she accepted the Oreos I gave her from my lunchbox, as I had accepted her intervention when I cut Valentine hearts out of folded paper for the first time. Ms. Neese’s hair, just to offer one of an array of examples, was a good, straight thing—I admired it. However! The circle, the square, and the triangle were all the same, and she promoted their spurious distinction. It was just a trick that they had different names. So I challenged her.

“*What* shouldn’t have different names?” she asked.

“The shapes!” *Don’t you get it?*

“Which shapes?”

Her question revealed her intent to fool me—she was recoiling in the rafters. *The triangle, the square, and the circle: those shapes.* “Why do you call them by their shape-names instead of just saying they’re lines?” And how can you stand to stop with their shape-names when the portrayal of surprise, giddiness, and bashfulness upstage brute outlines considerably? A preschooler can not begin to describe such problems in naming. Who is the authority here.

“Because they are only made of lines.” Authority here.

And so on and so forth, on a foggy day in February.

Then one day, lunchtime came again to our classroom’s school-cafeteria style table—the kind that folds into a mechanical wall-side grotesque comparable to a gymnasium’s basketball nets flush against the ceiling in deference to a homecoming assembly—where my classmates, all part of the non-Madison faction (by default), would assemble themselves as though they had prearranged their positions. I trusted there was an order to their clustering; I took their smiles as evidence. No one said a word about interpretational discrepancies or our very own anomalous wall of shapes which seemed to announce these discrepancies. Of course! There is no need to mention what is understood.

So I tried to figure out how everyone knew what to say. I tried to figure out their reasons for saying at all. Why? Did I want to tell them what their own reasons were, or what? As if they didn't already know their reasons! Stupid, Madison. Get with the program.

Laughter seemed to occur without provocation, and it asserted nothing except joviality. A way to blend in. I opted for a subtle, close-lipped “hmm-hmm-hmm-hmm!” with my thin Capri-Sun straw puncturing my smile, as opposed to a more vociferous “ha-ha-ha-ha!” But my timing was bad: just as I chuckled and drew attention to myself, Melissa—a priss, a thumb-sucker, a total infant—spilled her apple juice all over the place. The propinquity of my laughter and her accident were very suspect, I admit. She started crying and shouted, “it’s not funny!”--but how could I explain my impertinent gesture? I didn’t even try.

So I was the girl with the detachable laugh.

Eventually, I befriended a funny boy named Carl and some girl whose name I can’t remember but who referred to the sand in the sandbox as “orangeroo,” since that’s what it really was.

4. THE PLAYPEN

When Madison's community college friends asked her why she was spending her time with the evil Malachi Watts, she said, "One good thing about Malachi is that he lets people finish their sentences." And so her community of college friends dwindled precipitously as she tried to enter a more complicated or at least more novel community--one Malachi simultaneously exalted and snubbed. The simultaneity of his competing inclinations made Malachi both magnetic and repulsive, and the gamut of inclinations vying for dominance in his fragile-looking head meant he could be circumscribed as an intolerant liberal progressive misogynistic miserly crude effeminate refined mordacious snob. Madison, having been reared in a home where the Harvard Classics were merely decorative, was exhilarated that Malachi could be so at one with his dualities (she didn't quite have his number).

The inhabitants of Fort Walton Beach were, through little fault of their own, prostrate to and ruined by the town's inferiority to Malachi's San Francisco, yet, since San Francisco—a nice place for kvetching about rednecks--was irremediably corrupted by Malachi's father, Malachi's recreational activities during his visits there shared a single objective: to get himself kicked out of California as quickly as possible so he could bitch about it in Florida. Just this past Christmas, for instance, he had sabotaged the family's holiday brag letter with the inclusion of a brag letter- and family-stultifying paragraph; he had broken through a landfill barricade in his father's Lexus using the 35-mph-in-reverse method of penetration and called it sodomy; he had refused to refer to his two year-old half brother using any appellation other than the pronoun "it."

The disadvantages of Northwest Florida are best delineated without tremendous detail: the area had one orchestra, one ballet company, one mall, one dollar theater, and a string of "nice" theaters owned by one man who disregarded everything that happened at Sundance and Cannes. Malachi didn't count the beach. Situated among the nasty tattoo parlors, antique showrooms, and gaudy flip-flop shops on Beachfront Strip, however, was a single greasy spoon Malachi actually seemed to like: Bo and Aaron's, extant since 1951 and refurbished only once since then. Witnessing for the first time upon entry the swordfish that hung on the wood-paneled walls, Madison's conjecture was that Malachi approved of this atrocity only because chain smokers abounded inside. The truth was less flattering: the patronage of Bo and Aaron's made it trendy and Malachi was a follower. Musicians armed with black leather bracelets sat in booths with school bus-style vinyl seats and inhaled the smoke and fry of late-night; drama students recited their soliloquies, put on airs, hugged. The bathrooms were coffins. Everyone wanted to go to hell.

In any case, Bo and Aaron's was the inaugural scene of Madison's accidental delight in Malachi's company—accidental, seemingly autogenetic enjoyment, wholly

independent of Malachi's interpretation of the night, which, as he described it, led him about as far away from delight as a formal exegesis of the fundamental components in humor. "Oh, that's just hyperbole," Madison said. He was not amused.

They met for a meeting, not a date; a smiley guy named Jason from the forensics team had joined them; the point of the meeting was to begin collaboratively writing a play Malachi and Jason had conceived the previous week. "After Jason and I talked about writing this play, I realized he's far more intelligent than I originally estimated," Malachi had told her, as though there were nothing nearer to Jason—or anyone--than intelligence. But the premise of the play (female Psychologist handling a schizophrenic boy learns more about herself than she learns about boy) seemed so ridiculously simple to Madison that she concluded she must be missing something. Little argument could be made that the frenzy of choleric handwriting surrounding the play's theme in Malachi's three-ring binder amounted to anything more in its aggregate than the theme as plainly stated. But because Madison was missing something, she did nothing to hasten the play's development during the three hours of discursive tableside banter and gesticulations that filled in for it. This was involvement. Madison was carried along, swept away, swirled in the air like secondhand smoke.

Had Madison the foggiest understanding of characterization, she might've impugned Malachi about his inconsistent regard for Psychology rather than just sit at the table in a state of exhilaration. The first time Malachi had talked to her, in fact, she mentioned her aspirations of becoming a shrink and he immediately pigeonholed the entire profession a bunch of subversive individuals guilty of pigeonholing people. The implicit condescension between doctor and patient made Malachi irate. Within moments, Madison had sympathized with his position enough to filter it with her own logic and had said to him, "Stock sets of abnormalities don't take into account personality's wondrous continuum, it's true"; she had taken stock of the ethical impasse; she had decided once and forevermore that she couldn't bear to feign solidarity with professionals who put notches in the continuum that made her foggy.

"Who do you think YOU are?" he replied.

There was no telling.

The implicit condescension made Malachi irate.

The irate Malachi made Madison's armpits cry, so she stuffed them with Kleenex. It was vulgar. Disgusting. The plastic phone grew slick in her exasperation and slipped from her shoulder-ear phone clamp. Tissues dropped from their armpit cubbies when she picked up the phone. She felt like she might pee her pants, although she had no urge to pee. She felt like Malachi wanted to fill her with uncontrollable pee.

Her armpits were stuffed thus the day after the problematically delightful meeting of the idle triumvirate of playwrights, when the phone rang. It was Malachi, calling to announce that his friends did not like her.

"Jason, you mean?"

"Jason likes everyone so he doesn't count. I mean, your posture suggests a certain superciliousness to the congeries in the college mall whenever you breeze through, acknowledging maybe one or two people—not my friends, mind you, but the likes of David and that Tara girl who always talks about church, both of whom you probably spend time with only because they let you feel superior to them; whatever enthusiasm you have towards engaging my friends in discussion, you're still stifling it, so

I'd say that yes, they do know you and your proclivities quite as intimately as the next person."

"You refer to your retinue when you say 'friends'?"

"My retinue! Oh, rummy. I was wondering what to call them and now you've come along so I can wonder about the more exigent matter of whether or not my diction is polished or tarnished. Polished or tarnished? Polished or tarnished? Polish want a tarnish? Okay! Tough room. So, I was just sitting here reading Nietzsche, and—"

When someone begins a sentence with the words, "So, I was just sitting here reading Nietzsche, and..." it's unwise to just sit there. Madison slouched on her bed and said, "Hello-o, you have a guest speaker today on the My Lack Guy show, and she brings with her a bouquet of impatiens, scattering seed like this is poppy cake and the impatiens' seeds are McCormack prepackaged poppy seeds for you, raining down, and by cake I mean cock."

"It just slipped out, didn't it. I wasn't done, dear." He cleared his throat dramatically. "And you don't get to name my show." More throat clearing. "Today on Sodom-Gomorrah America, we're talking about a host of etiquette problems with the Good Miss Sara Martin (you're on)! Now, Good Miss Sara Martin, you've been accused of speaking in perfect harmony with dunghill plodders of the vast college canyon—Master David and Mistress Tara, which isn't entirely discreditable but isn't 'better than nothing' as we might hope—while pridefully disdaining the scintillating society of a certain, how do we say...retinue. What do you have to say for yourself?"

The ambush continued as every hole in Madison's education grew so inflamed that she was more impervious than usual to the holes in Malachi. Her last defense was one her whole orderly family might've admired had they heard it: "I don't see how you rationalize your friends' 'collective membrane' of fear of approaching me due to the way I carry myself. I mean, why isn't it *their* problem?! I told you the reason why my posture is so straight. Singing. I sing. Employ diaphragm. And even if I lacked vocal justification, well, at least I won't have back problems. At least I'm not Ichabod Crane."

"Ichabod Crane. Bravo, bravo you detective of resemblances. With this one you've—em—convinced me you have the capacity to set sail from your little island and join us. You could have compared me to a vulture, but that would've been too familiar. The correctness of your correctness is unassailably unassailable." Malachi dropped the phone.

Madison was as sure she had nothing important to tell Malachi as she was sure she had to tell him something important. For a good thirty seconds, no spoonerism stirred her to challenge what she knew she knew.

After a time, he picked up the receiver.

"You should know that I've been flirting again," he said.

"Okaaaay. Thanks for telling me." In the past year, Malachi had written his friend Trudy 112 florid and lugubrious sonnets exalting her Grecian nose, goddess lips, and robust frame, etc., but apparently Trudy had taste: pre-Raphaelite hips and Beaker-like mouths haven't been art in ages. In any event, as pre-existing condition to their dating contract, Helena did not bother Madison one iota. Madison was emotionally committed to a pre-existing condition of her own, which took a friend of hers named Alex as its subject, and mistook the man as its object. Malachi knew enough about Alex—namely, that he lived seven states away--to know that he was practically as

threatening to Malachi as Helena was to Madison, whose source of distress at the moment—aside from the fact that she was dying to be resourceful enough to parley with Malachi and couldn't unless she leached on his resources--was the possibility she'd never again have an opportunity to collaborate in something someone valuable valued, i.e., the silly play.

“You sound unconcerned, so I'll continue. You see, there's this auburn-haired girl I often see in the college mall who is very attractive—“

Madison pushed her shoulders down and forward as far as they'd go. Live and learn, she thought, live and learn. It hurt. “Oh, um...I think I know who you're talking about. Liberal application of charcoal-gray eyeliner. Pale face. Slightly Goth.”

He stalled in his next few vowels and echoed himself: “Yes, that's the one, that's the one. At any rate, she's been eyeing me quite a bit. Literally looking me dead in the eye, which suggests a mysterious intrepid quality, since—“ and here he resurrected his cackle, “sorry, sorry...hahahah! Homer is...OH MY GOD!—this is the best Simpsons ever. It's a complete parody of *Clockwork Orange*. My apologies. Oh, you were saying something.”

“No, but I was wondering...um, the play?”

“Jason and I wrote about two pages after you left and then talked about his upcoming audition for an acting school in Central Florida. And we got rid of the schizophrenic. Now it's just the Psychologist. And I'm the writer.”

5. WHERE ARE THE LETTER REQUESTS?

A sheet of paper stands on its own if you fold it. If I fold, does it mean I am bent out of shape? If I am the sheet of paper, accordianly, am I my biggest fan? Is it possible for a shape not to wriggle under my pencil if I am its drawer. With drawing, you know the circle is an orange orange and that its basket is dry. Dry as draw. Add mineral spirits and pigments, and eventually it works out that you have a hand in making the fruit a half-moon on top of the basket now sitting in front of the fan to dry. And that is how what you get back is still life.

Thus it is imperative to recall the letters.

A question about letter requests suggests motility at the end: the question mark itself is a sage who interjects and then coils up in the rafters, withholds his breath, always patronizingly rhetorical. The whole search a propagation of myself by my own hand. I can't expect you to work for me—that's backwards, explained through backstory, fossils. Used to recopy those I wrote and forge ahead, a flying circus of me, assent to the division of seas beneath my big top trapeze. Someone has me folded in a letter box and won't let me talk. Someone has me aerating dank soil from my place on the page and is using my unraveled alveoli like a brush. Yet look what I am doing.

I am the best impersonator between us. When I make an appearance, look out for you.

6. IN WHICH I AM MOSTLY THE FISH

From the moist, buzzing lunch hour during the spring when Malachi, seated on top of a rotting picnic table, stopped chewing his thumbnail momentarily and called out across the campus' mole cricket-ravaged clearing between the free-standing quads of classrooms, "I wrote a screenplay about you, Madison!" and Madison just kept her mind and her skinny legs directed towards her awful Physics lab, its barbed wire formulas, its wordless trajectories and its torque-full bicycle wheels, until the following year when Malachi called—on the phone, this time--out of the midnight blue ("on a lark," as he said), Madison delved deep enough into her mother's fusty Harvard Classics to know that she might as well have stopped with *Famous Prefaces* for all the pleasure the rest of the lot afforded her. Because these books afforded her no pleasure, her dedication to reading them did. So she ordered more than twenty novels and story collections from the equally decorative Everyman's Library line with her Borders employee discount and kept herself on a strict reading schedule of 100 pages before breakfast each morning despite, for instance, abominable translations that drove the phrase "somehow strangely" unremittingly into Dostoyevski's world and seemed either to eradicate strangeness through doing so or merely draw attention to the lack of strangeness already there, and despite the superabundance of exclamation marks in the Nineteenth Century British novel which aggravated her like so many upside down 'i's, and despite the deceptive, implied right side up-ness of the capital 'I's and all the god damned lord and lady 'I's who always knew perfectly well what they were doing and all the gods of the damned stories of lords and ladies who knew exactly what was important and what wasn't and all the teachers everywhere who knew perfectly well what this or that god was doing and that it was importance itself trickled down to him or her, the teacher, the appointed and anointed comma man or comma woman. Then, one day at work, Madison loosened her restrictive apron and concealed herself in a corner near a grove of fiction 'B's and tarried over "Dante and the Lobster" long enough to savor what she found: Mr. Beckett knew what cheese meant. Some tradition made him mention God and old maids, too—hell, the story was dross beyond the first eight pages—but in the end, it was Dante's stinky misadventures with Gorgonzola that Madison turned over and over in her head. She returned the book to its shelf, though, feeling almost embarrassed. She was on the clock! Neither to coworker nor to patron did she show signs of having gone down and known this story any better than them.

The rest of the summer and into the fall, Madison's thoughts continued to center on catching up with Malachi. It was an obsession that quickened her. Her whole life broke up into schedules and mended the instant she passed from task to task, tying off each task with a big red bow as she skated ahead.

Friendship was something she did not schedule. Madison transferred to a legitimate University in the fall and measured her success according to how far behind the friends who followed her fell. Let them perish, thought she. They brought her no closer to Malachi.

There was Advanced Anatomy, which appeased her need for a reminder that most knowledge was brute naming; there were Philosophy courses, which appeased her need for a reminder that brute naming didn't teach anyone much of anything; there was Modern Poetry, where she saw both sides exchange their Sunday clothes for Saturday clothes, sometimes with civility and sometimes not. Madison had no trouble retaining line after line because the poets—particularly the obscure, unemotional, road-to-Merrill ones—seemed to speak Madison's mind, which was constantly forgetting to speak itself.

A dictionary sat like a pigeon on her desk; its wings closed over the word "apodictic."

During visits home, Madison taught her mother's new Pomeranian to talk. All it took was a broccoli floret or a shred of salmon, and the furry Miss Priss, who looked like a cross between a squirrel and a fox and had tufts beneath her ears much like crimped 1980s hair, would repeat any human utterance that her guttural canine throat could physically manage. "Girl," "L'Oreal," "art," and "barf" were words Madison frequently suggested her dog say. The Pom was eager to please and constantly looked for new opportunities to please. She danced and put on shows with her stuffed toys; she posed in a manner that unequivocally invited hugs.

But the dog would grow bored after running out of ideas, at which point she'd hop up on a couch, dig her paws frenetically at the coarse material as if to affirm and demonstrate the couch wasn't her natural place, roll over on her back so that the white belly fur shot up haggard in all directions, and she'd sleep, her eyes only half shut, her mouth ajar like a smiling shark.

Sometimes Madison tried to speak her mind better than the poets. Her success in doing so led her to construct a vest out of stapled-together rejection letters of white and mint green from *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*—all the 'P' journals seemed to run together—which she wore with no bra underneath whenever she felt daring during this time of intense study. It was the most delicate vest in all the world and it made rejection both fashionable and disposable. She would wear it and—rather than just think *about* Malachi—she'd become the about-ness her thoughts of him had accumulated. Ordinarily, it was as though he wrote all her papers for her, took all her tests for her, and vigorously challenged for her every principle that tried to bean bag itself in her mind (she could not have made straight 'A's without him); dressed in her vest, her manner itself was refashioned gesture for gesture to dictate from her body to all who observed what a challenge her principles now were.

She would wad her abundant hair into a topknot which required no bobby pins, put on a derby or a bowler, her brother's gray band pants from the seventh grade which rested just below her iliac crests, go out on her balcony and light a cigar. The cigar was sort of like a sacred candle in the church of her, but it tasted like gamey garbage. Rather than smoke it, then, she would practice holding it coolly between her middle and ring fingers in such a way that it appeared she had no regard for it whatsoever, which wasn't true at all: how could she have no regard for something so fat, hard, and stinky? The thing to do was whistle, for if there was one thing a person couldn't do while whistling, it

was smoke a cigar, and when Malachi wanted to blow someone off, he often whistled, too.

Whistling, it just so happens, has a particular edge over singing, and that difference is its entirely genderless sound. Madison whistled “Ziggy Stardust” from her balcony with her audience of dumb frat boys below. The boys had grills and beers to speak for them but they catcalled from their balconies anyway. One yelled, “I love your body!” and Madison thought, “probably so.”

Malachi hated frat boys. What would he yell back at them? Invariably, whatever Madison came up with threatened to spoil itself by sounding contrived, and by the time she had relaxed her premeditated diction satisfactorily and felt ready to answer them, the frat boys would already have returned to their big screen TVs, football talk, and hairiness, leaving her exploited under her paper top and quite alone.

“Well hung and snow white tan!” she sang out. No one heard. Then she went inside and slammed the French door so hard that the blinds kicked upward a foot or so.

Eventually the vest felt like the sham it was, and Madison tore it off, feeling she could succeed better without it. Staples flew everywhere and blended with the carpet so she could not find them.

Early in the evenings, the plastic phone in the icy windowsill beside Madison’s bed would often ring and Madison would stare at it until it stopped. If she was in the midst of her number one self-directed extracurricular independent student activity, of which the chief project was to chronicle all her past encounters with Alex the magician, there was zero chance she’d submit to the complications or simplifications of some unidentified caller. However, the thought that someone was in hot pursuit of her made her writing all the more sassy and single minded, all the more hard to get. Usually, though, she just figured the call was from a telemarketer who wanted to discuss a mortgage that didn’t exist.

The blue-green band of word processor screen glowed in front of her smooth little fingers like an aquarium in the coughing and contagious night after night.

By late fall, Madison was sick of pretending she was the wise Malachi Watts who not only knew what to yell at frat boys, but who also saw the parameters of sequential events as though each were a piece of Scotch tape rather than a roll of it. But in order to record history as it really happened--history as it pertained to Madison and Alex—she had to pretend she was Malachi. Story after story, truth after truth, Madison was a sham. And she watched as every repartee in the history of her easily sharpened to its original skewer shape on her glowing screen.

If someone asked her for a story now, she’d be ready. None of that silly forgetting and none of that abulia about beginnings would come between her and the celebrity she wanted.

One remark of Malachi’s in particular pushed Madison towards the completion of her project: he had said, “My opinion of you will always be subject to revision.” What this remark meant for his parameters of sequential events was hard to say, but it disrupted Madison’s sense of security like nothing else, and with each story Madison recorded, she moved closer and closer to a vision of herself impervious to change.

Then one night when Madison was visiting her parents and feeling relatively complete in the spacious Ethan Allen-furnished rooms where the dog was doing her shark

bit, the phone in Madison's former bedroom rang and she dashed down the hall to get it, without hesitation.

Malachi said hello, etcetera, and then, "In truth, I called you on a lark because I've done almost nothing for a month, and I thought, 'Maybe Madison has calmed down. Maybe *I* have calmed down.'"

Calming had not occurred on the vertical axis, and though at first it disconcerted Madison that Malachi would deem a deterioration of energy beneficial to their welfare, she quickly realized that this discrepancy might be an index into the constructive nature of her energy as contrasted with the destructive nature of his. If so, she had made her own damned 'A's. She wanted to ask how life at New College had been, but she figured he would see her question as a gauge for comparison and her self-interest as an ineluctable flaw in the gauge. The best way to enable a lively chat was to answer him like a real chum. "Nope. When you are uioP I am giddy—qwerty, even, for balance. It is up to you. Like a flag, rappling."

Just as a deep tissue massage within sixty minutes of an intense game of Laser Tag is to the lactic acid buildup within staunch haunches, so was Malachi's voice to the folds of "his" criticism that for months had made Madison's imagination throb. Malachi recounted briefly the past seven months during which he had been dating someone he dubbed "The Void," poor thing, and since their break-up, she had called him every day, poor thing. "I'm so bored, Madison. I miss your sharp tongue and brainfucking. While I was dating The Void, I'd frequently wonder--if, say, I was reading something she'd never grasp--'What would *Madison* think about this?'"

Madison knew it was unlike Malachi to flatter people unless he didn't mean it, and yet her face and neck flushed to that nectarine hue of sunburn particular to kids ages thirteen and under—a hue that looks as consistent as a blush compact fresh out of its packaging. Then she wiggled her naked toes under the bottom drawer to her maple chest and yanked the thing in and out. "I am pickled tink and overtransposed and stubbing my portmanteau!"

Silence.

"So tell me a story," he said.

Madison unwound her vertebrae, grabbed the Alex file with a flourish, disbelieved (just long enough to grow a sly smile) the concinnity foresight had brought to her life, and told Malachi to get comfortable:

I was a senior in high school, and my friend Haley had been planning this Halloween party for over a month. Somehow, with less than \$30, she bought artificial cobwebs, fake creepy-crawlies, black lights, dry ice, spooky sound-effects, streamers, taffy and Tootsie Rolls wrapped in orange and black wax paper; she printed invitations; she gouged sheets to suspend from the ceiling. As I saw it, she effectively precluded any of her guests from thinking the party was missing something. The big treat, she told everyone, was that she and her boyfriend had talked a magician—someone her boyfriend knew from work--into performing for us at the party. For free! Normally, she said, he charged around \$200 an hour. Oh, barf, I thought, I wonder if he makes balloon animals.

The day of the party, my friend David talked me into going to the party in spite of my repeated sighs of I-don't-have-a-costume-so-screw-it.

“Don’t wear anything,” he suggested. “I’m just kidding. How about a librarian, they wear, you know, pencils. Or you could just dress weird.”

A costume of the everyday: what a great idea. I donned a black-and-white striped boatneck bodysuit, my brother’s old Calvin Kleins, and to tie things together at the waist, I enlisted one of Dad’s plaid flannel shirts. These were the incipient days of grunge. I mixed it up with motorcycle mules and vampy makeup, which, since my face was ghastly white already, only required me to shade-in with black kohl those places where signs of circulation would normally appear. The vintage black velvet choker I fastened around my neck suspended a burnished gold pendant approximating the shape of a plus. Descending from the cord, however, it resembled a resupinate crucifix. Definitely a conversation piece. It gave me the opportunity to say, “resupinate crucifix.” But I wasn’t sacrilegious. Maybe I could phrase it as a question, (“Resupinate crucifix?”). As a plus, conversation would follow.

There was mingling at this party, which I didn’t do. I crossed the floor to David, whose red, Brillo-pad hair halted my party anxiety. He was ensconced in a beanbag and received me like a coke-addict, with relief in high expectations that were being met. I sat at a right angle to him, which gave him my profile.

“You have come, my darling.” He rotated his wrist and flourished his freckled, bony hand. Since he was sitting, the insufficient length of his Dad’s military uniform exposed his calves in a fittingly goofy David sort-of-way.

“You have sat, Lieutenant Colonel Redbug. I have seen you sitting, being red, for some time now.”

“How long?”

My eyes were on two college-aged girls dressed as belly dancers. “Sometime now, and then no more.” When I looked at him again, he was still doing that thing with his hand. It was like he was trying to conjure. “What’s with your wrist, man?” I asked.

“I was meditating on the...uh, succor you bestow.” He shoved my arm to fortify it with warm touching, and by extension, his. Then, without warning, he threw his head back like Madonna on the cover of *True Blue*. “Hey, look at my Adam’s apple. Isn’t it weird?”

The merry-making was already growing old.

“Wait! Where you goin’, skinny?”

“I have to go to the bathroom. Therefore a reason.”

It was easy to walk like a mannequin. Years of vocal training had made my diaphragm incapable of letting down my posture. Even when I slept, my back was straight and my shoulders squared.

Trouble with sentences I thought. Trouble with light conversation. Parol. I pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and wrote something like, “light fingers tapping into lines for hanging linen...” (it was going nowhere), “line dry, string between teeth, taut learning, illuminated sheets.” Ugh. I was trying to find a way back to my mind, so

I could mingle in such a way that I wouldn't become commingled, lost. What was the solution? I knew I was dependent upon David and people like him for whatever sense of my personality I had—I would behave according to his expectations.

The aftermath of a Kleenex lint storm covered the lining of my purse. What about lint. When is lent, anyway? Haley was always fasting at lent. Is it proper to say “lent” or “lended”? Stupid for not committing details to memory. For the rest of the night, I would have to protect myself by saying, “I asked him to lend me his jacket, and he did” instead of, “he lent/lended me his jacket.” But when would I ever ask for someone's jacket? And what jacket? I was not cold. Well, not cold enough to ask for someone's jacket. Okay then. I looked at my skin in the mirror. The black gunk on my lips was melting. All I had in my purse was Max Factor lipstick in rosewood, so I stacked it on top. Smile now. Yeah, now I looked like someone I wished I looked like. Now I could leave my reflection.

As I exited the toilet room, strains of a girlfriend rang out like a clarinet, “Hey, Mad One,” and asked why I took so long. I told her I had pee—not the infinitive, for it was a matter of possession, and in fact I still *did* have pee.

Alex the magician was about to appear.

Haley bounded through the foyer, opened the front door, and shrieked, “Alex! I'm so glad you could come!” etcetera. Hugging ensued. You can imagine how the tactile interaction there before me in Haley's foyer triggered an immediate foaming frenzy of delight in the possibility that this Alex, decked in black from the dye in his hair to the tips of his boots might—within the next few hours—hug the innocent Madison, who would then replay the move until it became ravaged with innuendo and shameless digressions down Alex's pants.

The streamers and balloons with their necks against the ceiling all took a step back as Alex shut the door swiftly and October rushed in with him. His skin could have been bloodless, for all its blanched consistency, except for the cherry popsicle hue of his lips. He was voluble and he gesticulated like he was his own puppeteer. And what a show it was. My friend and I tried to distill from his slouched posture and the sway of his gaunt hips, from his refined speech, from the fastidious way he kept flicking his hair back and adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses, and from the way he kept rubbing his lower lip between his thumb and middle finger when he wasn't smiling or laughing (as if to stimulate blood flow in time for the next flash of his enviable teeth), what he might do for us. He knew how to stimulate bloodflow. He did amazing things with his hands and small objects. What started as an astonishing display of composed ebullience quickly deteriorated to something lascivious. I was afraid he might hear us. My butt was sweating for no reason. To calm my endocrine system, I told myself he was on speed. Would I take his speed to keep up with him? No. Yes.

There was a space during which no one at the party talked. No one mentioned how things were going, or as a preliminary matter, if they were going at all. Alex the magician rose and those who weren't magicians planted themselves on the carpet and faced him. His knees were so pointy through his jeans that they could've been toes; I reassured myself that on account of his thinness, other girls in the room might not be thinking of how they'd like to bend this guy over their knees and spank him.

"Okay, I need two volunteers...you," he pointed at one of the genies. Her belly-button was really real. Alex scanned the room and stopped when he had looked everyone else in the face. "And you," he said, as in *me*.

So these were the first words. *Anjou*, pear extraordinaire. A young man in a Network Video shirt with tennis ball-boobs purveyed a child-size, stenciled, country-style rocking chair from the corner of the room. That must be for me, I thought, and prepared to force myself into the shape of it.

"No, don't sit." He turned towards the genie and said, "I want both of you to take this string very tightly."

What happened next left everyone utterly nonplussed. Alex cut the string with a pair of safety scissors—Haley offered him a cigar box full of them, every pair an Easter-egg color—and looped the genie's half of the string through the scissors' thumbhole. Then he tied both ends of my string to the ends of hers, producing an infinity with knots. Back and forth went the scissors as he strung them along. Finally, he slipped the scissors through one of the knots and simultaneously mended the escape. Magic! For my part, I was far more intrigued when he untied the remaining knot and began jumping rope with the string.

After his forty-minute performance—the majority of which I was compelled to view from behind him at butt-level, conveniently situated as I was—he knelt at my feet and said, "Now I want to do something just for you."

Me: "Is there a string attached?"

Alex did not crack a smile. His attention was turgid, a tightrope, which meant I was not the spectator. I don't remember what he did next; he probably disappeared.

People in costumes dispersed onto the back porch, following Haley, to blindly beat up a piñata. What suspense.

"I can't sit pretty--this seat isn't exactly commodious." My morphemes were gathering momentousness, while my sememes remained stationary since birth. "It looks like we are a party of two." I did not want to look eager to remain stationary.

"Yeah, they've left us together alone in favor of paper mache." An audible inhale punctuated his self-awareness; he was like a Robin Redbreast all puffed up and looking down at his plumage.

"Exit stage left behind, yes?"

“Oh, right this way.” And he made haste, not waste, out the sliding glass door that bore no butterfly decals, only fingerprints.

Moments later, Alex appointed me as caretaker of the Tootsie Rolls he had amassed outside. This enabled him to schmooze with his friends at the kitchen table and stealthily keep track of me: at the time of my departure, as you might have expected, I handed over the corn syrup-y goods and he followed me to my car. We sat there until 2 a.m. while *Pablo Honey* supplied anthem after mellifluously desperate arpeggiated deceptively upbeat early nineties anthem—the guitars articulate, the chords selfless—and Alex showed me card tricks and revealed how they were done each time, thereby breaking the #1 rule of magicians. The black kohl bled into blurry. This was a man who loved Fruitstripe gum. Yipes. And I felt I needed a mascot to impersonate, or something.

This was the first of many occasions spent—overspent—with him, after which my parents felt the need to ground me, as though I would float away otherwise, immune to gravity.

I still have the spade card he ripped the center out of that night in my car. The center, I mean. I kept the center.

After Alex moved to Virginia Beach in December, my parents stopped grounding me. I’d write him 16-page letters during History cynical, wacky letters supplemented with Fruitstripe and poetry; he reciprocated, omitting the gum, but including cassettes (Annie Lennox’ “Love Song for a Vampire,” Yes’ “Love Will Find a Way,” and Rush’s “Closer to the Heart” being representative selections, and our taste in music being almost identical), and signing each letter “Love, Alex,” as though I were his sister—at least, that’s what I kept telling myself. My mom commented that she always knew when I was talking on the phone with him because I sounded like someone entirely different.

Malachi spoke. “Mmm. I didn’t want to interrupt you because I rather enjoyed that, and not only for informational purposes. But what I found myself anticipating was, like, some way to measure the status quo. Gimme the news, homes.”

“Oh.” Madison had no clue what the status quo was. She had not been thinking about the status quo.

7. TWE

Do not think that I was never a leader!

TWE: an elite, playground-based society of standardized privatized language that went by the same name. It was I who conceived and assembled the dense, pocket-sized dictionaries--perpetually in growth—that set forth the provisions of TWE. I, at the tender age of seven, in the high grass beyond the sprinklers and half-tires that lined the track. Out of bounds.

TWE had room for only two members: myself and Sara. Sara was new to my school. A novelty. Her parents were affluent. They lived in a bayfront three-story, and Sara lived in velvet Gunne-Sax jumpers on floor two. She liked gross jokes and songs about decaying corpses and crawling worms, set to cheery tunes. The lyrics of these songs I made sure to contain within the covers of all two TWE dictionaries. We'd flip and transcribe and sing our full choruses of TWE within the green latex-painted concrete barrel on the playground, which would resound the sound around and round.

Most of the words contained a T, a W, or an E. Some words contained all three.

TWE takes TWO and WE and combines them, too. These are variations on the rare theme of TWE.

The purpose of the club was not to hog Sara, regardless of what controversy tried to suggest. "Oh, Madison Allman...she just thinks she's...you know." A chief propounder of this calumny was Kerrie, the bossy whiner who couldn't stand that I had all the cool toys. Kerrie reserved special envy for all (my) things Cabbage Patch, for instance. Her disinterest in Space Legos was curious and, what was worse than its confirming my belief she had no ambition to ever build anything, this disinterest severely restricted any cross-gender influence she might otherwise have achieved via blond hair. As for my part, TWE was one of many antidotes to my crooked, Coke-stained teeth (braces wouldn't happen until eighth grade) and delicate sweat smell. Unlike Kerrie's potency, mine was unquestionable.

One day, Kerrie crouched at the western threshold of the castle of TWE and fulminated like so: "Madison, you always bring your Cabbage Patch dolls to school so everyone will want to hold them and not mine and then you take Sara away so you can talk about me!" Her tears were typical, and not my problem.

"You have no way of knowing whether or not I'm talking about you, or whether or not TWE are talking about you," I pointed out. "Weet toljop tunvow."

Sara's budding laughter opened, decorated the scene, died. As soon as Kerrie galumphed away, trailing her phlegm like a little snail, Sara deepened her voice and said, "Dental caries." It was a good, good one.

Finally Kerrie wore down our teacher, Ms. Filer, with tattle-tale reductions, saucy concentrates of net brainpower. She convinced Ms. Filer to make me let her into the

club. Apparently there had been a series of coercive red-faced whimpers, each a further dilution of Kerrie's chances for independent success on or off the playground.

Ms. Filer, wearing the red power-sash of doom at her bulging tummy, sloshed to my table one afternoon shortly before the principal's announcements over the intercom about tomorrow's taco meat, etcetera. For Ms. Filer (Betty), it was a tawny, shiny time—a powdercreme makeup-into-clay time of opportunity for moist towelettes. She wanted wiping. I was showing a group of boys a shortcut for multiplying with fractions, and felt no shame by the Filer-eclipsed light.

The woman's bouquet of cologne intensified with the heat of her neck and commingled with the strong scent of white glue, characteristic atmosphere of fresh classrooms. She yanked me aside contemptuously. There was some talk in regular language about "that 'tea' club" and "making Kerrie cry." It was clear from the sermonette that Ms. Filer wanted to arrest me.

"Whoa-ho-no," said I, both hands fisting by my sides. "I didn't make her do anything." I then decided to dismember I mean disband TWE as quickly as possible. Endemic anti-quota activism swung wide and far and made marks on the school playground: I incinerated both pocket-sized dictionaries in honor of Ms. Filer, who, no matter how many chins she grew and shook, would never be the boss of me or my stories.

TWE would rise again.

8. BALLS

The night was balmy and Thursday, and the moon was gorged. Malachi and Madison were sitting on a hand towel in a beach gazebo after an evening in his room watching the munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz* jump up and down to the rhythm of Pink Floyd's "Money." A brief discussion about the efficacy of Pantene Pro-V shampoo on their "fine, be that way" hair had led both to the conclusion that it made them even more devastating than they already were—a conclusion that prompted Malachi to accuse Madison of being vain. When she echoed the accusation, he said, "Yeah, but it's all just..." and then he brushed his hair without looking in a mirror.

The sheets on Malachi's bed smelled of Glade. His mouth had no taste. It was as if his cigarettes had burned through all the expected germs and oral flavors or given them cancer, and the tar had sealed away all offenses forever. Madison wondered if her own lips would plump out like his if she took up smoking. His lips were like Madeline Stowe's. She wondered if her lips felt, between his, the way the edge of her Kermit the frog puppet's mouth felt when she used to practice kissing it. But Malachi had said, "I really like kissing you," and that was that, until a few minutes later when he asked if she had an aversion to tongues.

"Weet tonjop saragrolopaw, tendarharlopaw. Bertra frovopaw," she replied. "Tongues."

So he snickered, shook his head, and—with Madison's assistance—took her clothes off, except her panties. "You have nice breasts," he said. But his evaluation of her body, since it occurred in the same courtroom of consciousness that so easily shifted to contempt (how could she forget?) did nothing to loosen her up. "Your nipples are the right shade of pink."

She glanced down and said, "eh. They go with my panties. A silken set."

Then he clutched her waist and said, "Such a thin girl."

"Such a thin boy." His shoulders were faint and his ribcage was long. He was the most beautiful, un-carnal human whose tangibility Madison had ever checked.

Munchkins were jumping, but all stereo equipment was muted.

Though Madison's proclivity to complicate simple matters was often her downfall, there was an instant during half-clothed pelvic grinding on Malachi's bed when she recognized that this evening's physical success depended largely on someone here becoming more gooey. But even if both parties came like fire hydrants, little exchange of emergency would there be, as neither party thought sex ideal enough at this point to merit full stripping. Madison could feel through Malachi's boxers that his cock was a cucumber, but the straight shot from it to her would ignore the various impenetrable facets of him that allured her in the first place—not to mention her own impenetrable

facets, which at the point of insertion would languish as though mention of them were nugatory, or as though all Madison's crippled sentences and disputes would dance away marvelously if they put to use what was between their legs instead of just the feet at their legs' ends. If dilemmas danced away, all would be lost.

"Is this doing anything for you?" he asked, with reference to his inconsequential thrusting. Pout turned to sneer.

"No." She could not lie.

"Lie down."

She did. He slid the crotch of her panties to one side and rammed and twirled two fingers inside her for a while, but paid no attention to her clitoris.

Nothing.

"My hand is about to break," he said.

And that's when they started talking about shampoo.

The walk to the gazebo at Bayou Point was so foul that Madison wished she could just crawl back under Malachi's sheets with him, get screwed, and go home. Why he began talking about feminism was unclear. A kid on roller blades flew down the sidewalk, some leaves rustled, and then Malachi blurted through teeth that pinched the end of yet another cigarette that, over a Ramen noodle lunch with his Mom that afternoon, he had asked her what she thought about feminism, and she said she supported the cause but not the movement.

Madison stared up at the sky through the June mist that put droplets on her tendrils, saw a few stars, knew she knew no constellations and therefore couldn't change the topic through pointing them out. Pebbles in the street gleamed without any say in the matter back at the stars—a reflex answer. "In other words, feminism should go without mention," Madison declared, hoping with a single statement to direct Malachi to the conclusion of his mother's conviction, inform him of her personal opinion, and make him shut up. There is a certain humiliation associated with being forced into discussion about why something you think should not be discussed should not be discussed. This humiliation seemed to pebble Madison wherever she walked—it pebbled her under her own damned feet.

"There are PhDs who work as strippers in Vegas!"

Translation: sexploitation is not stupid and it is with this not-stupid act that feminists would interfere, to Malachi's understanding, so feminists were stupid. He did not ask for Madison's assessment of the advance degreed showgirl-controversy (which was not a controversy), he just dashed his cigarette on the ground and scowled at Madison.

"Mm-hmm?" she was calm, and her calmness was not beneficial.

A story ensued. A story about PhDs working as strippers in Vegas. It was long and dramatic and sesquipedalian. But finally the wood planks of the dank dock leading to the gazebo received the pair, and Madison's attention shifted to the ominous black water lapping against the dock's support beams. The water said, *quell, quell, quell*.

"I can't swim," she let him know.

9. A WORD TO THE “WHY”’S

Before long, Malachi opened himself up for discussion, but he sized the aperture so it would accommodate little more than his choice of oral fixation. “I made my mother and grandmother cry at the Shakespeare Festival in Mobile this summer,” he said. “I don’t understand why I have this penchant for cruelty.”

Smoke.

A mirror of bayou at their toes.

In the saga city these two had constructed with storefront after storefront plenary with the showiest of wares, it took a second or two for Madison to accept and adjust to what appeared to be a solicitation for her guidance. She was moved, and could not move.

“You know that your expectations of me have made me become more articulate because I actually have to concentrate--“

“Yes, you articulated that.” When he paused, it seemed to Madison he was insinuating that his expectations hadn’t quite done the trick. What grain would not be abrasive, in her hands? Yet, despite splintery textures, there was a sense in which her every read was right. Malachi looked weary through his brows. “Listen, how much of this is just a buildup of calculus from the last time we brushed?”

“Tell me what ‘this’ refers to and maybe I can answer that,”

“How very Madison of you to consciously wield an inadvisable pronoun in the same utterance in which you imply the inadvisability.”

“How very Malachi of you to elucidate the logic of my humor.”

He took a long drag on his cigarette. “You wouldn’t be saying that with a dick in your mouth.”

“Uh...what?”

“C’mon, you can’t even say ‘unfilled spaces’ without implying the big need for the big D.”

“That’s a phallus, see? Let’s return to something, pitifully: I think you’re one of those people who think the women’s movement would still be relevant in the absence of reminders that it once was relevant. It’s like, ‘Hey, see what you must remember as though it never happened?’” Frankness gave those three sentences the feel of a mouthful to Madison, the speaker. “A mouthful,” she said, recalling her earnest benevolence from moments ago, and spreading the corners of her smile past her molars.

It wasn’t until Madison’s drive home that she reacted to—some might say, “disabused”--herself. What triggered the chain reaction of her scream, acceleration, accidental catslaughter, soliloquy, and—finally--death to umbrella, was a billboard advertising imported cheese. That is, the imported cheese at a new Italian/Southern U.S. deli called “Dante’s Smoked Goods.” Fusion with cons, thought Madison. People just

stuck stuff together and tried to pass it off as novelty. The owner of Dante's Smoked Goods probably didn't know how silly his piebald concept was. And, chances were, the owner would never learn because the locals were so tasteless they wouldn't find it silly: they would eat that Gorgonzola right up; they would scarf down that hickory smoked B-B-Q along with it. If, however, the business went under, the owner might not suspect that there was a conceptual flaw at work; rather, substandard goods might be culpable, to the mind of the owner. Then it occurred to Madison that these probably weren't her judgments at all, but Malachi's, invading her vulnerable cavities like a human hand in a puppet: she herself was a chawbacon among chawbacons who might just eat at Dante's if invited, which wasn't even likely.

The scream was prolonged and it felt like rugburn.

Madison was burning rubber at a speed of 80 mph down a two-lane road when the cat thudded dead under her tire's treads. She kept driving and told herself (silently, but who's checking?) Kitty might be a stray.

"By which I mean," she began, for it was time, "you think my particular societal involvement is consistent enough with dominant cultural imperatives that the words I've drawn out of the narrows continue to reverberate through them, them, them after I speak, way over here in this gazebo where the only wall is you. For example--and this is only an example--gender was not on my mind until you brought it up. I arrived with no assumptions about it and I continue to wipe myself clean of adscititious assumptions nightly—it takes forty-five minutes and I do it as I apply my alpha-hydroxy acids. The big need to wipe myself clean does not result in a wiping myself away nor does it speak to an irremeable cultural interpellation, the 'symptom,' any of that crap; I arrived on the scene fully embodied with more sense than these words can contain, and what a bear to have to demonstrate it against my will—though at first I was quite proficient and thought that scoring high on an IQ test was a success I could put behind me somehow like a book report, which, by the way, I always hated doing, all the books and plays leading back to the narrows, narrowing you and me, reminding us through our initial confusion of the artificiality of interpersonal conventions there on the page. Once penetrated—and here reproduction should not resonate of sex despite what you call 'innuendo'—the books say back to me nothing I didn't already know. They only remind. Where would I get a weather system that wasn't already part of the atmosphere inside my skull? (A rhetorical question.) When I put myself on the line for you, I am the fish. Everything was clear until I was your pronoun. With all this sea in front of us I don't know what else to do with my looking but talk about it and once I have cause to begin, thank you, there is little I can do to stop. No longer holding everything, understood I, right? To be, so gorged, from the lining of my own stomach. How sexy is that cavern. Welcome to the whole supporting structure. Multifarious restaurants, I care not for thee or thine. Would you like a reservation, well then you have come to right place. As for me, when I arrived I opened my eyes as soon as they wiped off the slime and I thrashed whenever anyone tried to hold me and I resented those aunts who tried to relate to the three year-old Madison by saying, 'Madison, here's some apple juice. You like apple juice, don'cha!' Like?????! Because I swallowed apple juice I *liked* apple juice? And that preschool teacher who made me say 'good morning' to her even though it was not a good morning, for me, and in the face of her behest I honestly did not wish her a good morning; to say 'good morning' would therefore be a complete act of perfidy to all parties concerned which

includes those within earshot. Now then. I feel that these two anecdotes, ‘these’ being the most recently related anecdotes, totaling two totaling two totaling two, tell you quite a lot about me and I wonder what more you could possibly want to know. Or me, for that matter, what could I possibly want to know. No, forget it, I’ve stopped wondering. I speak from the heart, I can feel it; I have gotta say. I mean ‘the’ as in ‘The.’ The heart, dispossessed, still beating in The me. How can anyone bear to have children.”

And then she wondered: my God, if Malachi hasn’t heard me say these things, into what could he possibly be revising me? Reaching the hill’s crest of her parents’ driveway, Madison yanked her parking brake to its full thirty degree-erection and she became a flurry of arms and belongings that moved violently towards some kind of order, or at least neatness. One spoke of the umbrella came loose amid the bustle and it was useless, so she chunked it in the trashcan at the edge of her parents’ lawn and nearly tripped over the green recycling bin on her way to the front door.

10. OPEN BAR AT WEDDING

First time drunk! Boy. Wine brought to you by Dole, five glasses. How taste does not matter! On being a Bridesmaid: Black and white crepe dress not so bad, just that I trip. That on you is a vest. The topic for tonight will be Pragmatism: I think you should carry my Pierce. Supposed to be funny. Pray soul that I keep drinking! To me, two for one and one for all drinks. Free! Would like you to meet a room of 300 and propose that vernacular is vermicular. The old Madison would complain about the 300 who aerate her heart wormily. Speaking from experience. Okay, I will stop soon.

Things that have to do with weddings include: letting one's garter down. My, relatives and friends hate you too. I am not one. Approached many. Coherently earlier while n decoration, rolling hair up the skull to unreel the cascade of brunette, the bridesmaids yelled to me about my specimism--about marriage, "pacifically"--andso I said, "What specific ocean?" and they went dumb. Hated mostly when they walked around in bras/ liked most when--hey, drunk last nigh too at bars, bachalaurette part ywith maids! Purple hooter hooters. Just remebred. At least now you are here, spreading haikus about Saussure, skirts. General course of linguini on brother's pure wife. Thank form five drunks! Are families our one. I think not. Lap it up, wife! New topic, I say this haiku (man against nature): Apple in my eye / Love in the produce section / Cataract arrest. For when we're older.

On dancing to your *Physical Graffiti* CD, especially "Kashmir," as related to Pragmatism in you, conflict, and nature (or unity of theme): Full artillery against Jimmy Buffet. Took the atrocity into your own hands, told that DJ what is up, then gently mymy face, all red with kindly spirits, into own hands. Horny. Not telling! As a pre-teen I wanted to be a groupie! Liked poop metal a lot (Poison), to say something embarrassing about pre-teen . Me and best friend defector, she who took from me, my things and clothes, lied for a month to me, and probably became a groupie, as planned. Poethic nostalgia about friends. Dinking! You dragged me away from bar so I wouldn't get sick, then when I was sober you told me you hated that you worried, in first place. Wins ton osmokes! Member after wedding reception, at Bo and Aaron's and the Island Golf Center! Firey!. My hot cousin said he almots killed you for calling me bad words you said were not bad. Can't do that! Stoppd beig drunk by that time! Said you were tired of having to be around me wth stupid peoplearound me, so you almost walked home with no goodbye for all, around me. Reliving it all like yesterda; practically had actual fun in places, writing while drinkinh! Strangly absent from photos.

11. TETE-A-TETE (OR “I FEEL PRETTY”)

The morning after her brother’s wedding, Madison sprang out of bed while it was still dark outside. “I feel as though I have done laundry,” she thought, “all the laundry I’ll ever make sweaty, in fact.” It wasn’t that the clothes inside her closet and strewn across her floor—between sleeping bags of cousins who crashed in her room just a few hours earlier--exuded lemony freshness, or even that the deodorant-caked armpits of her dresses were notably less putrid; rather, Malachi had confessed that Madison was the first person ever to induce him to shake his booty on the dance floor. And it was good.

The degree to which Madison’s clean feeling might have been a side effect of the previous evening’s refreshments having sterilized her arteries and digestive track was not clear. What soon would be as clear as the Vincent Vodka that led the flush was that the duo’s reciprocal amicability was entirely reliant on booze.

Around noon, Malachi rang with an invitation to meet him for lunch at one of those awful chain restaurants in which golden rails glint the multiple colors of overhead glass lamps back into the dim and din and slaughtered livestock arrive at your table in blackened skilleted pieces, still sizzling. Fluttering in her black-and-white georgette skirt and tank top, all summery and breezy, an absolute dish, Madison felt very together when she arrived.

Malachi was already seated and situated with his emergency text. It was something by Thomas Mann, in this instance; he toted books wherever he went in case he was unexpectedly bereft of company for an unendurable length of time. In general, the party culpable for his bereftitude would be punished, upon entry, for the consequent disturbance from said book. Punishment took various forms. Madison took various punishments.

What punitive damages had she incurred upon herself this time? A begrudging of salutations and compliments was standard, but Malachi’s disgust at the irrepressible spring in her step—a definite index into her settled satisfaction with the madcap events of the previous night—would amplify his malevolence. For protection, she shook some salt into the heart of her right palm and threw it over his right shoulder. “Assault,” she said.

Cute? No. The play of Malachi’s facial permutations finally terminated itself with his pout of disapproval, and he flicked the salt from his shoulder like it was someone else’s dandruff.

“Supposed to be fun,” Madison explained. “We have had it, you know. The fun? Just last night. Surely we are not already out of funs? Flat broke?”

“Mmm. You were drunk, for fuck’s sake! Sure, you were fun...until you began to sober up! Aside from the conversation I had with one of your friends’ mothers last night while you were unforgivably hopping around the room in one of many Congo lines

with its head cut off, my time was divided between my humiliating preoccupation with the possibility you would throw up and the anger I felt once the subject of my concern returned to her full consciousness!”

“Oh.”

Thomas Mann was still thumbed open in the music stand of an arm Malachi displayed to his left. “You aren’t going to be using that plate, are you? Of course not.” He set his book face down upon Madison’s bread dish, for sanitary reasons.

“POETH: a no-can-do to end all no-can-dos.”

“Huh?” The question was rhetorical: he shook his head to demonstrate the impossibility of present company meeting his “huh” with a satisfactory explanation.

“There is no dish to serve my rights.”

“There is no place like home. There is no place like home.” It was almost civil until his snicker of doom destroyed all chances for peace talks and he drew a pack of cigarettes from his jacket. “Mind if I smoke?”

“I don’t care if you burn.” It was a line Madison stole directly from Malachi. His favorite rejoinder. Sincere flattery lay before him now like licked flatware. The list of drink specials lay before Madison and she folded it into a fan to decorate his glass of water, to make it tropical, to spread her abhorrent pretties.

“Hey, I’m moving to Sarasota in four weeks to attend New College. How do you feel about that?”

“Uh...well...okay. Feel? What do you mean? I mean, you can write me. Some words to live by are ‘emu’ and ‘late’: they make good neighbors.”

Lightness of mood threatened to whisk her out of his reach.

He blew an O with smoke. “Madison. I’m going to be taking a full load of classes and hanging out with new people, possibly also initiating some sort of forum for otherwise unpublishable unorthodox social commentary and a-literary poetry. If you want to hear from me, be sure to get on our mailing list. Now, I’m sure you won’t be insulted when I tell you that The Void was at least twice as articulate as you on the matter of my leaving. ‘Double or nothing? Double or nothing?’ I ask myself, and myself echoes.” Then he extended both of his spindly arms across the table, grasped Madison’s shoulders to steady her, the target of his final point: “Maybe you aren’t speaking because there’s just nothing there. I really don’t have the means to measure vacuity! Anyway, I’d rather just read a book!”

PART TWO

CRACKED DISHES

By Madison Allman

PREFACE

The author wishes to promulgate, at the outset, in as succinct terms as possible, an English pronoun revision which the manifestation of her tyrannical ego, Dr. Fac Dishes, made necessary when se androgenized the population exactly two years, sixteen days, and seven hours before the narrative begins. Without further ado, here they are--chaste, unadulterated, unisex pronouns, brought to you in part by the United-Colors-of-Benetton and in parcel by the fragrance division of Calvin Klein:

1. se (pronounced "see") replaces he and she,
2. herm replaces him and her,
3. hirs (pronounced "hears") replaces his and her.

Regrettably, the intricacies of Fac's androgenizational method will not descend to the surface of the narrative. Even the author is not privy, or toilet, to those. And there are other ways in which the narrative fails to plop.

Pray the Disheses Fac and Fic come clean after rattling about this matrix of dirty deed. The exigency to "look after" oneself, office of corrections and narcissistic image-polishing in "writers," is commensurate with that one writer self's accumulation of sullage; hence, "doing" the "Dishes," however nasty it may seem at first, can be put off no longer if we are ever again to face questions ("who is the authority here" and company) without anxiety over whether or not our replies are what they are cracked up to be.

CHAPTER ONE

"Nothing like a good verbal laxative to ensure peace of shit on earth and good will toward men," said Fac matter-of-factly, with the resigned air of either wisdom or torpor. "You've been sentenced," se added, sententiously. It was Christmastime, again, which meant parties, families, mistletoe, garland on the banister, teensy lights strewn along the balcony parapet, rum balls in the fridge (with their powdered-sugar absorbed away to a siltish gray film)--even though Fac had no banister or balcony.

This made Fic hungry. Fic would order Papa John's pizza, with extra sausage just to insure Fac wouldn't partake. Not that insurance was necessary: In Fac's mind, food was so much refuse. On top of that, Fac was a vegetarian. A poor hunter. Especially at Christmas time. None of this made any sense to Fic. Fic would make Fac pay for the pizza, not only because Fic didn't understand why Fac was a pan-rejectivist vegeterian, but also because it was Fac's house and Fac would probably answer the door. If Fac asked Fic for funds, Fic would call herm "The Merchant of Venice," "The Jew," or "Torvald"; in response, Fac would call Fic "The self-pitying, contumelious, and subversive factory-defect whose alluring affectations aren't the least bit commensurate with the real person." This would make Fic shut up right quick. Fic always became quiet, or dumb, Fac mused, when confronted with Fac's sagacious grandiloquence.

Fic asked, "Should I order a pizza?"

Fac answered, with an air either of churning stomach acid or bad breath, "Order a pizza."

Fic did order that pizza. Fac did pay that bill. There would be a contentious altercation with lots of sauce.

No one ever understood why Fac hated to eat--no one except Fac's parent-person: Blan Dishes. Blan Dishes, with herm mollifying head-nods, almost always understood--or at least acted like it. When Fac (as an eight year-old struggling for the first time with the arbitrariness of body-assignment) discovered se hadn't yet figured out how to swallow, Blan was there to discuss with herm the autonomic mechanics of epiglottal motion. "You've got to remember not to think about swallowing," Blan had advised, more and more as Fac wasted away to a skeleton.

Since then, Fac had turned hirs mind to other matters. Flavor was not among them.

But not even Blan Dishes understood why Fac bothered paying for the entire pizza. Most people, even without suspecting Fic's nefarious sausage-plot, would ask herm for half of the money before going to the door.

CHAPTER TWO

The problem with Fic was that se placed way too much emphasis on delivery. Content was important to Fic only nominally. Had Fic been less fixated on Fac's manner of address and composition of expressions ("Order a pizza," instead of a more effusive and reassuring, "Please do order a pizza; I so long for pabulum Italium; you seem to intuit my most intimate cravings," etc.), Fic might have recognized how extraordinary a likeness in perceptual calibration the twosome shared. Approximately the same set of facts closed in on Fac and Fic (Note: So broad in scope was this sameness there is no sense in differentiating one fact or set of facts from another), but the evidence of these facts was as much a provocation for Fic to differentiate and build upon hirs differentiation as it was for Fac to let the facts go without saying. Thus, Fic built hirs trellis of talk to demarcate where the obvious met oblivion, whereas Fac detected something like a lie within the very term "oblivion." Fac interpreted whatever se saw as obvious; evidence was self-evidence; Fac could not conceive of a set of facts beyond what se perceived; se did not know what se did not know.

Confronted with Fic's trellis of talk for the first time, Fac had been stunned: Obviously Fic had seen what wasn't obvious and therefore warranted mention. But Fic was oblivious to what Fic found obvious because Fac would not mention it.

The trellis was novel to Fac when se met Fic. Novel and abuzz with the flowering vines of what se already knew.

"Boredumb," Fac once told Blan, "is what impelled me to forever prevent the dangling modifier from splitting the infinitive, so to speak."

Blan grinned effulgently like a retired, proud Cheshire Cat surrounded by miniature test-tube carrying cherubim. "I understand that. You always did have too much time on your hands. You never slept when you were a wee thing. You'd wake me up in the middle of the night, clamoring for me to come see how you'd changed a lizard into a fishing worm and implemented its legs for pottery-sculpting..."

"Yes. And I hate exercises in fertility."

"I know. There are so many people out there who are hopelessly flawed and useless, breeding, breeding, polluting the air--"

"--hitting my erroneous zone. Or making a marked effort to, anyway. Huah! Sex!" Fac said, and sat forward on the Queen Anne sofa se selected for Blan's living room so many years ago. It was a good, good sofa. Blan's broad tooth surfaces reflected the lurid pink lamplight from the piano, along with hirs diamond wedding ring which se would twist back and forth between foot-fidgets. Left, right. Kick-kick. Left, right. Kick-kick.

Everyone was crazy except Fac.

CHAPTER THREE

The reason Fac androgenized the population wasn't simply to ease hers boredom. Se was torn between lonely, godly isolation and passive, provisional acquiescence to the other Dishes and their strange designs. Sometimes, Fac would say, "Ah, aaaaah.... to be torn between lonely, godly isolation and that passive and provisional acquiescence to the other Dishes and their strange designs." Then se would make lists of pros and cons of both options (isolation or acquiescence?), lists of cons and pros of each option, some lists with pros and pros of each option, some lists of cons and cons of each option, some lists of pros and pros of both options, some lists of cons and cons of both options, and some lists, in prose, of possible cons to persuade Fic into believing how similar they were. At this point, Fac would break down into the fecal position and weep, weep, weep, in that order, without planning to. Fac would weep, weep, weep because se knew hers cataloging was adverse in a redundant world of pro-prose which needed no more; Fac's cataloging ritualized hers meager lot such that Fac's factual design became an ongoing "thing." But a pattern with application all the same.

So Fac was thrown, for the sake of Fic, for the time being there (assumed). Still. What Fac wanted more than anything was for Fic to see how similar they were, to break apart that brittle, scraping, impassive structure with all the wires and stamens and pistons of nature growing upright in conformity with it...or maybe the trellis, Fac thought, would be better posited as a coral reef. How can one be sure? So many trope wires. For now, Fic's trellis was an impassive coral reef of defense, and Fac considered that the real problem might be that se, Fac Dishes, had no impassive coral reef of defense...or maybe se was the one with the impassive coral reef of defense and for that reason couldn't admit it. But wait! Fac hated coral, hated the ocean (the truth was, Fac couldn't swim), so if a defense were to be espoused it most certainly would not be made of coral. Therefore, it was Fic who had the impassive coral reef of defense, it probably just wasn't as brittle as Fac thought. The author has no way of knowing how scraping Fic's reef truly was; the author is just here to type.

Before androgenization: John Gray. Pendulous emotional whimsy, excused, justified. A desert of self-absorption. Two years, sixteen days, seven hours and thirty-one minutes after the procedure:

"Why're ya hittin' yourself? Huh? Why're ya hittin' yourself?" Fic pinned Fac to the wall beside a free-standing bookcase, and was repeatedly pummeling Fac's head with Fac's very own hand.

"This is unwarranted chagrin made palpable! You're the one eating the pizza! I want my fucking money!" Fac was trying to understand why se opened the door to pay for it in the first place.

Fic's maniac calf eyes blazed like peeled hard-boiled eggs as

se nasally mocked Fac in puerile derision, "I want my fucking money!"

Point of clarity: The phrase, "Fac was trying to understand why . . ." did not mean Fac did not know the reason behind (position of reason as assumed) hers offer to pay for the pizza in the first instance: Se paid because Fic was a domineering and presumptuous bully who expected Fac to be a dutiful host; if Fac's house, then Fac's door-getting. And Fac wanted Fic to like herm. Se wanted to be the ultimate source of Fic's happiness. There was no one like Fac except Fic. Fac was cognizant of hers impetus, therefore. Se just questioned the cause of this impetus.

"I'm too aware of my motivations," was, dreadfully, all Fac could say; it was a coming clean without the lemony joy of finality; if Fac truly were aware of hers motivations, se could stop thinking about them and let them go without saying, as se would have were Fic not there with hers damned lattice or coral reef. Yet the aroma of Fac's impure statement was a pungent citrus and might even be described as "good enough" in some circles. Left, right. Kick-kick.

"What are you talking about? You said, 'Order a pizza.' Just like that." It was just like that. Fac did say to order a pizza. "It was like, 'Go to hell.' Your tone said, 'Go to hell.' How should I have known you wanted any?" A dastardly recrimination.

Jude Dishes, the neighborhood misologist, was not available to resolve the matter with hers trademark equanimity. Jude was vacationing in either Jerusalem or Rome, celibating Rosh Osh Kosh B'Gosh Hashannah, or priesthood, or convents, or monasteries. In the absence of Jude, and since Fac had already called Fic a contumelious and subversive something or other, se had only one solution:

"Sometimes, at night, I feel like a zebra," Fac confessed.

"Huh? What?"

"Z-Bra. My cuppeth overfloweth sometimes." Yes, Fac thought, the hooks were loosening. Fic's eyebrows were relaxing from their crazed stretch to join with hers hairline and bob with hers head in affirmation of his Papa Papa Papa John as his Papa John. Free Papa. His Papa. Fic let go of Fac; it was easy as pie for herm. "Now we're both emanciated." It was true. They were both emanciated. They had twigs instead of limbs--even before Fac androgenized everyone--and now could move them freely.

"Inthegizzowiththewizzo."

"O0000h..." Fac revolved hers head dramatically towards the west window, towards a prodigious Cadbury Egg-center-orange sun withdrawing back into its ugly foil for the night. "Firey."

This was an elysium of true understanding. It was beyond the beatitudes of Blan Dishes. It was Fic Dishes.

Now Fac could reward hermsself with an evening of answering-machine recording innovation. The possibilities were endless.

CHAPTER FOUR

Inthegizzowiththewizzo...it was so brilliant, yet so simple. It was one of the reasons why Fac loved Fic. No, simple was not the word. Simplicity connotes an immediate understandability. It was pre-understandability. To reach the chora of "things" was to find seeds comprised of arsenic, as in apples. Enough arsenic to kill a small dog. But Fac was no small dog.

Fic's utterance, as Fac received it, opened a channel of shared autism, thought Fac, like never before. Diatism. Alpha with a long view of omega: such were the categorically consummate stations of Fic and Fac, when they cooperated with one another.

Fac, having ingurgitated Fic's utterance as though it were the last ounce of Bushmill's in the decanter, imputed to Fic the genius associated with all successful spontaneous lexical parturitions, domestic and abroad. Whether such genius--generally speaking--was located behind the concrete intelligibility of those delightful constructions or alongside them or in their front lines where the genius (frontal nudity, unexpected) would take bullets for the bloodless scaffolding of characters petrified and at its rear was an issue the intentional unintelligibility of Fic's utterance foregrounded, for lack of a better word. Quandary! Who now could hide (behind), be hidden (behind), complacent of preposition, with a straight face, with a screwed-up face, with a face capable of recognizing the upturned or downturned corners of its ineffective mouth, upon reflection?! Truth be told, Fac read Lacan for invisible reasons which seemed so arbitrary, which wasn't fair of Fac, considering. (Could there be signifier without signified? Fac had not yet grown tired of reflecting. Fac had to reflect.) Lacan probably never considered the gizzo, the wizzo, least of all their contingent propinquity.

"Then it is true," said Fac into thin air as se stared at hirs downturned mouth in a mirror, to set the stage, then opened the mouth incuriously and tapped the glass, contracted and released hirs uvula, and continued to talk, mouth wide. "My duct work is exposed, is magenta, is discussed without reason." For Fac saw no reason to discuss that which was in plain view. That Fac's words were difficult to make out was a testament to Fac's achievement in expression.

Fac was not happy. After seeing hirs throat talk, Fac was so in need of imbeddedness that the physical support of hirs Sealy Posturpedic was an insult. Se felt an insurrection of epic proportions: Hirs personal and therefore invisible (I come clean) front lines were up in arms. Without hesitation se phoned Dewy O. Dishes. After all, Dewy O. had a middle initial that did not stand for anything. Nor did it stand for nothing. Nor did Dewy O. stand for anyone. Dewy O. always sat; Dewy O. was a paraplegic; Dewy O. had a spiffy wheelchair.

Fac's initial interest in Dewy O. (on this December evening-- that's "evening" with the second "e" emphasized with the full

dignity of a real syllable--exactly two years, sixteen days, ten hours and twelve minutes after Fac androgenized everyone--that's "everyone" with the second "e" emphasized with the full dignity of a real syllable) was Dewy O.'s potential answering-machine recording guinea pig-hood. Dewy O. would have to call Fac back in order to assist Fac. Dewy O. did call Fac back in order to assist Fac. This is what Dewy O. heard after the fourth ring, clearly enunciated with the gait and histrionic flippancy of an amateur actress--that's "actress" with the full dignity of the second and third syllables emphasized to abrogate the dignity of one to the other, each in turn:

"This ain't no soup! This ain't no split pea! Masht!" and then she started singing that song--you know that song, 'Oh How I Wish I Were a Philologist'--but this time, this time in the audacious key of G, with seraphim shepherds and golden fleece shining like virgins."

Then Fac picked up the receiver. "Well, how do you like it? I've worked on it for two hours, thirteen minutes and eight seconds."

Dewy O. responded, "You'd never say to anyone's face that which you said on your machine."

Fac was appalled at the imputation. "Sure I would."

Dewy's turn. "No, sure you would not. You'd never have a reason to. You spent two hours trying to come up with it. You probably recorded it a dozen times, feverishly altering your voice inflection ever-so-slightly, giggling madly at your own abstrusity. The truth is, you probably wish you could go back to that very first complete recording, the most candid one. Now you've wasted so much time and you are so dissatisfied with both the final product and your investment of time in it that you just had to get me involved."

Dewy O. revealed the truth. Fac was dissatisfied with the final product, as usual. Fac could never, never go back to the original, more "natural" rendering of the split-pea connoisseur. Fac needed screen for projector, theatre for actions--one which would book him and not relocate or reschedule. Dewy O. was more stationary than most. "Dewy O.?"

"Yes?"

"Why 'O.'?"

"Because a stolen 'O' rots inside Good. God, whose 'D' (Go!) is it (evil) anyway?" answered Dewy O.

"Oh. You've covered everything, if you know what I mean."

Dewy O. knew what Fac meant and therefore had covered everything.

And Fac knew what Fic meant. Fic was laid bare with the wizzo, had overdosed on the gizzo, thrown it up--so far nothing new, in the way of talk (I refer to playfully to obstructions as though they are plastic manhole covers--magenta ones). Had Fic not lived to tell about the overdose, Fac's dignity would have collapsed under his nascent habit of club-hopping, which she performed in an "I am under this regalia, clothes-minded only at first glance" fashion; however, with Fic Dishes' resuscitated sensibilities emerging in the dark'ning night against the impermanent firmament which was Fac's color-leached ceiling, the magenta of Fac's duct work might be understood as brilliant, thought Fac. If it came under scrutiny. Under a bright light.

Therefore Fic was that bright light.

CHAPTER FIVE

The trouble was, Fic was no brighter than Fac.

CHAPTER SIX

If the author were naming chapters rather than just numbering them, this chapter would be called, "what the author wishes Fac would do." The title would appear in all-lower-case letters, except for Fac's "F," as it appears now, because the author hates pressing the shift key.

There are a couple of more exigent concerns, readers' concerns, which will first receive attention. First, does this story have a plot? Against! Second, is there really a song called, "Oh How I Wish I Were a Philologist"?

As far as can be determined, there is no song entitled "Oh How I Wish I Were a Philologist." Someone finally made something up, or so it would seem. But seems dehisce, and in this case they spill forth the pretty peas of song--true song--almost as though the song were preconceived, like a notion; as though the song which was make believe, when garnished with fresh make believe, never was make believe.

To the tune of "D'yer Mak'er" (Bonham, Jones, Page, Plant):

*Oh how I wish I were
A philologi-ist. Oh how I wish
I I I I were a philologist
Philology, for show*

*I I I I I I-I
All those books I tri-ied, I I I I-I
All those books I tri-ied, I I I I-I
Philology: In faux*

CHORUS

*But instead I am a sailfish person down down Sou-outh
Set sail to assail and wassail come Christmastime
Snow not on this coast
These coastal shores
So sailfish shored,
What? What now, my bait?*

(guitar solo)

*When I read the letters, you wrote me
It made me mad mad mad
When I read the news that you spoke me
It made me bad bad bad
I still sail alone
I can't reel you ho-ome
I cast you back--ooh! I cast me back!*

(Fade to end)

The author neither wishes nor desires for Fac to do anything specific at this juncture. Subjuncture: If the author were Fac, se would put hirs problems behind hirm through a fully dimensional projection of hirs tyrannical ego into a fully blooded typist. Someone

to call herm Fac. Someone to write psalms for Fac's pself. As far as conflict goes, at times I can not say who is right here and diatism is the most specious projection. When I put Fac on the line for Fic, I am the episcine fisherman.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Fac lay freshly creamed with cocoa butter between his paisley Ralph Lauren bedclothes and read his *Webster's New World Dictionary* (Third College Edition), dutifully and almost joyfully. The phone rang. Since he was still feeling a bit bashful about his answering machine recording, he picked up the phone immediately.

Phone etiquette was not Fac's forte. Omission of "hello" was his most consistent faux pas. Greeting-exchange: Was it ingrained into the populace by virtue of habit (humiliation of "souls")? Fac did not like to succumb to habit and made a habit of demonstrating his distaste. To ward off the greater evils associated with this particular paradox, Fac kept a rabbit's foot—a real paw—close at hand wherever he roamed. All Fac had to do was rub the foot and chant, "Mourning does not come for the severed sesquipedalian agency of the independent *Oryctolagus cuniculus*." Creature comforts, in dire times of postmortemism, were few.

What happened when Fac picked up the receiver would haunt him for the rest of his life. When Fac picked up the receiver, this is what happened: He sensed there was no one at the end of the line. Fac reasoned that if there had been, Fac's own noisy carrot-munching would have signaled to the caller that he was a ready-to-ear listener (in much the same way that teeth-brushing signals to the caller, "You talk because I can't,"). Fac closed his dictionary and set down the bag of slimy ready-to-eat baby carrots, in that order, for he only had one hand free, which is not to say that the carrots could not just as easily have been the first to go: An order was necessitated only because of the phone-imposed handicap of his left hand.

Silence.

A pause.

Fac rubbed the rabbit foot with his right hand but skipped the chant. (The term "voluntary" rushes to mind, like a crusader who bears complimentary or smarmy literature.) Next, Fac took hold of a red pen and wrote the words which appear below in Times New Roman. The ink version he kept for himself, so close to his heart it was.

From the desk of the Socked Fox:
Madison Allman

Dear Glenda,

Although an English major, you, who casts spelling aside and misspells all though and threw out proper spelling throughout in her plea for her fellow student (named above your name) must not have a lot of "whits" about her (for you did—and this is why I "quote"—deign to tell me I am "whity"), I can't pardon the deplorable lack of intelligence demonstrated because that would mean excusing a more egregious problem with your character, name changed to protect. The problem is your proclivity to inveigh against a person according to your own whack-o-whits. In other words, it's not my fault you're dumb.

It might be said, ahem, that I am employing the same naughty tactic you employed and for which you now must pay: verbal attack. But one must defend at least one self; one must recriminate; one must keep

B-readers from multiplying their destructive plots. That's the story of my li-ife, that's the story of my li-ife.

Object turns on subject! See below (abysmal):

1. Your unfortunate importunate statement, "All though, there are interesting sections in this, there is nothing, that would make a reader want to continue this painful process," is false, as evinced in part by the enthusiastic response of many class members, plural in membership and readership. You, were, awfully, presumptuous. Now, I, too, am, a comma comma comma comma comma comedian. Was there anything to make me want to continue the painful—rather, the *numbing*—process of watching your story jiggle shapelessly onstage? Beyond obligation, no. Yet, I never accused you of boring me. And I did not expand my e g o so as to speak on behalf of the group you flippantly relegate to the term "reader."

2. Chapter Six, since you asked, has nothing to do with my sensing people are "getting tired," as you put it, of reading. Writing as lullaby? And then to Xerox that lullaby (which precludes singing)? Granted, Chapter Six is songful. In that respect, if you please, Chapter Six is nothing like Chapter Eleven. You will like Chapter Eleven.

Underground, Velvet: "Anyone who ever had a heart wouldn't turn around and break it."

Lucky for me, I have a pacemaker who comes in pace. Also bares word!

Learn to mollify defense mechanisms, you. You could have remarked that you were unable to appreciate my writing style, and left it at that. How can you consider yourself qualified to criticize something you don't understand, and then summon so little eloquence and tact in doing so? How, despite the spite and oblivious passion with which you crammed your little barrage up into the bottom end of the page, you? Hmm?

You're supposed-to-read for me, my supposed-to-read. Nothing like a good verbal laxative to insure peace of shit on earth and good will towards men.

Re: leaving,

Madison Allman

Fac was speechless. Felt wasted, in a sense. Se took on the chin the burden of hirs head, and lay hirs body on hirs rectus abdominus, quadriceps, iliac crests, clavicles. The carpet beneath all this meat was gray and coarse. It smelled like dust and cheerios, or socks. Yes, socks.

Free from carrots, for now. Free from carrot crunch, for now. An even more exhaustive emancipation was in the offing.

Hirs hipbones protruded like fragile white saucers into the carpet and pinched hirs skin as se rocked like a boat from which the last passenger, salty and clammy, has just stepped, thrusting the vessel behind herm as though it were weightless, the lunge of the passenger's leg barely clearing the broadened gap between boat and dock. 'If only I weren't hydrophobic,' thought Fac.

Side to side. Pinch-pinch. Side to side. Pinch-pinch. Fac rocked.

CHAPTER EIGHT

But before se could say, "King Phillip can't order family genus species," inanition returned to Captain Fac of the S. S. Dishes with a gargling slosh of cranky digestive enzymes. The Publix two blocks from Fac's apartment preyed on salivation. Should Fac deliver hermsself? What if someone sodomized Fac's Saab on the way home and the food Fac bought spoiled in the womb temperature of hirs trunk while se waited for the police to arrive? The very comparison of hirs trunk to a womb made Fac uneasy. Fac, no longer boatlike (though se would continue to drift), typed a letter to Fic. No red ink this time! Real progress. The letter, in full:

Dear dear. Oh dear, my dear, please. One banana, one kiwi, maybe cottage cheese, large or small curd, your pleasure, if you please, you please, oh dear. I can't help it, can't please, my dear. The two of us. Kiwi seedy. Run to seed. Haste not, waste not. Want not. Kind wishes, Fac Dishes.

Fac, in a moment of weakness, was pleased. Hirs tasteful supplication might bring peace of pizza, once and for both, at last and last extra long.

There was a pound at the door. There were many pounds of flesh at the door. Fac peeped through the peephole. Fac wanted to chirp staccato to to to, like a wee peeping robin who spreads its claws to steady itself on the broad fence between azalea-framed lawns of suburban neighbors who never mow simultaneously in the fade of afternoon, but who should. Fac's chirping was often mowed over and se believed--out of courtesy--that the mowers should mow each other over as well.

But it was merely Dewy O. Dishes at the door. Fac was disgustipated, disgustipated was Fac, and versa-vice (what a vice, verse, let it be said), with Dewy O.'s incessant nagging. The will to nag was the very backbone of Dewy. Se wheeled hermsself hither and thither in search of threads to pick. Yet, Fac was threadbare. Truth be told, Fac was completely nude and has been for some time now! Make no bones about the even measure of Fac's physique. Fac was thin like the needle of a metronome that marked the cadence of a gastronome cutting loose a buttery dollop of song. Little gnomes do stay in their homes, but a no-name grumble grumble Fac certainly was not.

The peaceable thing for Fac to do would be to ignore Dewy O., who on the opposite side of Fac's metal, dead-bolted door, talked and turned, out of turn, until se was out of talk: "Fac, I'm looking for Fic. Fac. I tried to call. Fac. I know you're in there. You're in there. You're just trying to come up with reasons to avoid people. It's a lovely day. Why don't you come to the beach and play frisbee. Fac. My Cocker Spaniel needs to be walked. You could walk my Cocker Spaniel. I know you like animals. It's gorgeous outside. If Fic is

inside with you, or if se comes to your house, tell herm I'm at The Boardwalk."

Notwithstanding Dewy O.'s ineffective behest that Fac go to the beach, Dewy was right: Kingdom Animalia was Fac's pet Kingdom. Frisbee . . . eh. But, gosh. What if the persuasive power of Fac's personal point of the compass, no matter how accurate, were no more effective than Dewy's?

Rather than admit Dewy, Fac read aloud from a three-by-five inch index card taped to the inside of hers door: "Of place settings and table manners, word choice and voice inflection: Bollix. Bring me designata desideratum and we can negotiate. And yet, concerning hermeneutical correspondences, the following is observed: One can only accept one's ownmost hermeneutics as pure phenomena." The index card proffered Fac an august bearing on hers own ground. Se continued to speak through the door, hers chin and eyebrows mustering more and more dignity, or elevation. "There are made-up propositions which then make up. Hate to say it, hate to say it. Always the robust hamstrings thrusting down on nominalistic scruples--forever unarmed and delicate--insuring these scruples stay out of Phylum Chordata. So the scruples and the bescrupled are so much spineless goo. Hate to say it. And thus the entire info-structure takes its title unopposed. And thus 'I' is for ignore, when I am the beholder." (So timid was Fac's voice that Dewy had heard nothing through the door.) "Can't abort. Can't retry. Versa-vice."

Minutes after Dewy O. had turned and wheeled hermsself from the grassy green K-Mart-brand doormat on Fac's otherwise unwelcoming porch, Fac, enveloped in hers bathrobe and stamped with an indescribably flat demeanor that invited no one's approach and no one's remark, sent hermsself to the mailbox and flicked hers letter to Fic through the one-way trap door, or mouth, of the box. The clank of its stern metal lip resounded as though the body were hollow because Fac had released the handle with reckless abandon.

CHAPTER NINE

It was good being nude, Fac thought. Being nude, Fac could revel, unencumbered, in having successfully androgenized the population. Yet, "concupiscence" was still in the dictionary. Veddy vexing. To want a "piece of ass," as certain lowbrow retrogrades, as seen in front of TVs, had put it. Thankfully, in the spare furnishings of Fac's apartment, neither TV broadcasts nor their supporters profaned Fac. Not anymore.

Many had admired Fac's ass in the old days, small as it was. 'Concupiscence,' Fac thought. 'Concupiscence this, concupiscence that. Well ta-da on you! Interrupted screw! Have always wanted to get over the fucking top. Have always been over and above the call of the fucking top.'

Fac wrote the following, as an exercise in copying:

One fine morning in May a slim young horsewoman might have been seen riding a glossy sorrel mare along the flower-strewn avenues of the Bois de Boulogne (Camus 134-5).

How fertile! How Flowery! Se could never call it his own. The words were not hirs words. Niether were:

One morning in May a horsewoman might have been seen riding a mare along the avenues of the Bois de Boulogne.

Horsewoman! Guffaw! Revisionism takes many forms.

There are many mornings in May, I say, I may? Yes I may. On any morning, no matter the weather, no matter whether May or not May, I may say nothing, I may not, I may re: vise if I can re: cognize, I may re: Joyce, but why.

Dumb, thought Fac. Dumb, Fac thought. Fac thought dumb. Dumb

Fac thought.

Fac would never say, "dumb." Dumb. Similarly, Fac would never say, "interesting." Not interesting. Dumb.

From four years ten months and three days ago until three years ten months and two days ago (leap year), Fac's roommate was a horsewoman. Se never said "interesting" either. Her name was, (most recently) Sed. Sed Dishes. It was pleasant for Fac to sit and watch Sed interact--on some level--with Jeopardy in the evenings. Fac had thought, on a consistent basis, in the evenings, "What a pretty." And then Sed would gaze in Fac's general direction, prettily, and Fac could swear Sed was thinking, "What is the person who lives in bedroom A?" It was best when Fac didn't pay attention to Jeopardy and just let the Aquafina-label blue from the screen glaze Sed's head. Sed said nothing. Fac admired her reticence. Sed was a pyromaniac. It was

best when Fac moved out. Fac thought, dumb, and rightly so, thought Fac.

Things would lighten up once Fic arrived with the groceries; Fac would lighten up; Fac would not eat; Fic would, vultuously. Or so Fac thought.

CHAPTER TEN

In the meantime, Fac bounced his bony hindquarters up and down on the edge of his bed and wondered why third graders have so much trouble remembering the difference between mean, median, and mode. Then he wondered (and set about to enumerate his findings on the matter) what the difference between himself and a third grader really was, if he himself could not remember, himself, what the three different terms each meant.

After a good cry, Fac smeared Retin-A (Tretinoin 0.05%), across his face, liberally, and he but a greedy conservative. In the meantime, his skin would peel, flake, scab. These scabs were not like bacon, but petite husks. Fac would not be without a task at hand for the evening. Layers and layers of skin, soon exfoliated! Wonderful tegument! Innumerable cells! Was this safe? Fac would never wrinkle. Fac was safe from wrinkles, let it be said.

"Fac was safe from wrinkles."

Fac maintained a face without lines which told no story. It was this fundamental characteristic by which Fac recognized Fac.

Did Fac like music? Indeed. Now would be a nice time, yes, the meantime, to ponder this subject. As it, the Retin-A smearing, happened, Fac was indulging his parts in a digital Deutsche Grammophone recording of Bartok's Concert for Orchestra, performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with Pierre Boulez, Conductor, 1993. Fac was no droid; Fac was no biology-less being, in fact, Fac had a PhD in Biochemistry; indeed he had more biology than most. Indeed. "Indeed." Aside from his professional accomplishments, he had been listening to Bartok and drinking Heidegger for years. Since before he, "Indeed," ever before. Bar-hopping. German Beer-in-the-world.

The FINALE, pesante-Presto (9'24), has been compared to doing two lines of cocaine. Fac did not experiment with drugs, could not verify.

With his muzzle smooshed into the mirror, Fac examined his eyeballs. Large and bright. Fac's large and bright eyeballs looked at his skin: It was trying not to get irritated. Mutilation of irascible skin ahead! Waves of mutilation! The Pixies would work with Fac's hands, which were not idle in the hands of the Pixies. Idle hands are not workshops. Fac did not want workshops. So he replaced his CD--Bartok, or Grammophon, or Pierre--with the Pixies, *Doolittle*, 4 A D/Elektra, 1989.

How about a bounce. How about a shimmy. Fac made like a Rockette while Black Francis noted the activity of his gun. "There goes my gun," he sang, "there goes my guuuuu-un. There goes my gun. There goes my guuuuuu-un." With each repetition, 'my' seemed less and less remote--less and less separable--from the affairs of 'gun'; ultimately it was as though no action had taken place between the singer and his weapon, as indeed it probably hadn't, and therefore Fac felt as though no assertion about the gun remained in his apartment, and therefore no

violence against Fac had been perpetrated. Fac was full of song and song alone.

Se held hers skin taut, and skipped from the clearing in hers bedroom to hers incandescent-lit, mirrored closet door. Then se resumed hers fascination with skin, exfoliated. Wonderful tegument! What cells, in abundance! Repeat al fin! Repeat al fin! Calm down.

Then came a pound at the door, many pounds. Fac ceased to resist and gave hers goodbye to the mirror.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dancing days wore thin. Fac had gone through and exhausted the motions: Flails of arms a la Michael Stipe circa 1989, drill team-appropriate Paula-Abdulian hyperposes, gymnast-inspired somersault-jump-kicks (with no mat to come between Fac and rug burn), wholly uninspired hip gyrations, waves of electric boogaloo for which which Fac's CD collection--also exhausted--could not have been the catalyst. Indescribable perversions of hers flexible apparatus. It came to pass that Fac was out of moves.

"Tort," said Fac, pressing the center of hers left kneecap with hers middle finger. It was like a bark. "Tort."

The following goes without saying, given the flurry of spasmodic groove that lately propelled Fac: Hers anxiety over the possibility someone could--at any time--assail herm about the conditions of hers own intelligibility was, for the time being, flung out of bounds. Continual motion had prolonged delightful disorientation, but, as summertime spins in the swivel-chair at grandma's must end, so must delight end, for Fac, who, upon collapsing in a short stack of limbs (in this pose Fac resembled pancakes) on hers tweed couch, immediately began to ensnare herself dizzily in the terms "quondam" and "physics," juxtaposed. Fac's inner ear churned spells of which Fac would then seek the formula. "Would quondam physics honor categories of sought entities never fully available for designation? Could be, could still be." As hopeful an outlook as this might seem, it was no secret that Fac lived in the past.

How about those refreshments? Now is as good a time as any to pose questions (lite). Conversely, it is as bad a time as any. Equilibrium, at last. Why music fun and not food fun? I don't expect you to answer. Here I go, from out of nowhere, being fatalistic again. It's aversive conditioning, you know, that makes one so. Fac has a bumper sticker that says, "I break for Pavlov." Funny. Here is another joke for laughs in a bleak world, and what is there but humor and music, really? Here is the joke. The next time someone says to you, "I've developed an aversion to (some person, place, thing, or idea)," respond, "No, no, only Jesus did that." Developed in a virgin, that's the joke, one I wish I had the opportunity to ejaculate more frequently. For not many speak of aversion.

I am avoiding the topic. Food. Ugh. There was a paper bag of rations on Fac's doorstep, still, after all this commotion. The contents: one mushy, inedible kiwi; one banana (a bit green, entirely Dole); cottage cheese (small curd); one Hefty trash bag with a note attached. The note said, "Do not eat. Place over head."

Fac looked heavenward and uttered, over and over and over, "Utterly inedible utterly inedible utterly inedible (fade to end)." Then, after exploiting the mush of the kiwi over the sink with hers fingertips--the scene was a mess of imprecise action--and palms, se took to saying, "Veritably inedible veritably inedible veritably inedible veritably

inedible. Hors D'oeuvres Hors D'evours Whores devours." This seemed to proffer Fac great pleasure, this play with sound, proffer Fac great pleasure proffer Fac great pleasure, and so this could be called a tuning point.

"Tuning point."

It goes without saying that Fic--the scale by which Fac checked his tune--was absent. I hope you did not surmise otherwise unless you enjoy surprise, for your enjoyment does matter, in my eyes, as much as Fac's. For the sake of the time being, Fac depressed 'I' and ignored Fic's absence. Had Fic been available, he might have quenched Fac's question: "Why is the word 'me' never capitalized? Always me. Me, always. Subterfuge. Me, you can play at these games too, not just." If nothing else, Fic's presence would have lent credibility the thesis that Fac was not merely talking to herself. "Fac was not merely talking to herself."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Night fell, on everything, without discretion.

It was late in the evening when N. arrived, thought Fac, bemusedly. The village was deep in snow, or so se wished. Fac slept alone, for se was the queeng of hirs The Castle.

It was a The Trial living in the armpit of Amerika, especially At Night. Fac had quite a library of bedtime stories to palliate this dilemma. To choose between them would require Meditation, some Absent-minded Window-gazing On the Tram of thought. A Dream without Resolutions. No Rejection, no Unhappiness. Like an Excursion into the Mountains, if you read me.

But Fac did not want to read, not tonight. Fac could not stop thinking of Fic. It was suspicious, the knock, the food, the absence. Fac was seized with an uncanny level of anxiety. Se felt lost. Fortunately, as hirs large and bright eyes (they were seldom otherwise) scanned hirs third bookshelf, without a definite object, the following cognition emerged out of The Nothing:

Anxiety is not only anxiety in the face of something, but, as a state-of-mind, it is also anxiety about something. That which anxiety is profoundly anxious about is not a definite kind of Being for Dasein or a definite possibility for it. Indeed the threat is indefinite, and therefore cannot penetrate threateningly to this or that factually concrete potentiality-for-Being. In anxiety, what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within-the-world. The 'world' can offer no more, and neither can the Dasein-with of Others...In anxiety one feels 'uncanny'. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which Dasein finds itself alongside in anxiety, comes proximally to the expression, "nothing and nowhere." (Heidegger 232)

and provided solace. Tears poured down the ghostly pallor of Fac's cheeks and, how adorable, dimples too. Se was quenched on hirs own fluids, consummately self-absorbant. Scales by which to measure? Pah! Fac's voice rang true, true in the key of G: "*Snow not on this coast / These coastal shores/ So sailfish shored / What? What now I'm bait?*"

There would be no dreams of nakedness-in-the-elementary-school lunchroom tonight: Fac's factually concrete potentiality for Being was impregnable. Fac rubbed hirs rabbit foot, trustingly.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Persons of the Dialogue

Fac

Fic

Fac Welcome, Fic. Are you from your native city of Ephesus?

Fic No, Fac; but from Epidaurus, where I attended the festival of Aesculapius.

Fac Indeed! Do the Epidaurians have a contest of rhapsodes in his honor (Plato 12)?

Fic Probably. Mmm. Your manner of disquisition is so fucking derivative. May we talk about something new for a change? Or maybe the truth is that you have nothing to say. You know, I'm tired of dealing with people who have a few pretty flowers, a few pretty gems, who, when I uproot them, are nothing but common dirt.

Fac Masses of alluring affectations which aren't the least bit commensurate with the real persons?

Fic Yeah. You know, they have a few pretty flowers above the soil, but when exhumed, their roots are mossy and dirty and they are in fact their own dirt.

Fac Well done; I could not ask for a more apposite example of recycled dirt than your recycled use of the person-as-dirt quandary.

Fic [Sucks in a gulp of stagnant apartment air, exasperatedly, then shouts and rakes his bony E.T. fingers through his hair] Will you for fuck's sake stop checking and balancing every conversation? Not everything benefits from economic analysis.

Fac Come now. You needn't raise your voice at me. I'm sitting right here.

Fic [manuscript defaced with cigarette burn]

Fac You did what with your shih-tzu?

Fic Fuck you. I'm so tired of dealing with your unwavering stoicism. Why is it that you spend time with me if you don't need me. This supercilious self-sufficiency of yours. I don't relish the thought of being with a person who needs no one except a target for their calumnies and cynicism. You could be more effusive with me, you know. After all, I've been to Yale.

Fac The series of statements beginning with and following "fuck you" is suspiciously ad hymenum.

Fic [Breaks into mad, cackling laughter, much like that of the guy who played Amadeus in *Amadeus*. Chances are, given Fic's predilection for

movie-quoting, hers histrionic lunacy, and hers lack of creativity, that the laugh was the product of much tape-recorded, self-scrutinizing rehearsal.] You're always on the outside, aren't you.

Fac No, the other side. In. Sides? [Fac had trouble with in as well as out. Se raised a plastic wastebasket in the air and inserted hers head.] What about you? See? You're more blemished with double-standards than anyone else I know.

Fic The true intellectual (hacks up a malignant oyster, swallows) can not evade self-contradiction.

Fac How taxing. Perhaps you define yourself as a true intellectual on the basis of your inability to "evade," as you put it. Or maybe your pomposity inclines you to pardon your dysfunctional contradictions. Either way, you are tautological.

Fic Oh, for fuck's sake!

Fac No, not for. And that poppycock about being tired of dealing with people who have nothing new to say...At least I have my *Ion*, me.

Fic Homer's where the heart is. Wordplay-doh: Lowest form of humor, inhabit form. Someone here is known for smoking the other and will do it over and over and over and over. Better to kill dodo and mockingbird with one stone than blindly lead me to drink from a dead horse. I beat you. Fin.

Fac No! No no no no no! I've had to endure your self-proclaimed intellectual preponderance, which you found upon an irremissible lack of circumspection, and you expect me to forego my only opportunity to expostulate with you? Already this dialogue is overdue. If I postpone it yet again--for there is no chance I will drop it--you'll relegate the merits of my argument to that squinting conniving ignoble resentment Nietzsche shit. My having or taking time to prepare.

I concede that some contradictions are insurmountable.

For example, the issue of making "I" assertions when ultimately there is no unified, active self to speak of. Or--let's see [pardon Fac, se must regroup like all the rest of us]--oh. Yes. This is tangential to the "I" problem, I think. I am made to experience that for which I am not responsible and to take responsibility over that which is out of my control. [It was a statement Fac could not help but reiterate.] What does that do to the Me?

I don't even understand the objectives of social interaction and yet it appears so self-evident across dinner tables everywhere--whether set with aromatic loaves, up up up with yeast, or caramel-sauced eels wrapped in seaweed, trimmed with zigzag carrots and lemon rinds, everything eschewable--what the objectives are.

Fic Seems this crap is the only thing that's not eschewable.

Fac Quite right! Quite right! In a niche: SHUN! You get it! Ah ha! No free will! Nope! Would imply immanence! Until I am aware of all possibilities--and maybe not even then--I can not make choices which are guided by anything like abstract free volition! Did I choose to be born? Nope! Ahhahaha! Was there ever any choice whether or not to choose? I think not.

Fic Maybe you just don't remember. Maybe you have a bad memory. If there is no free will, then I can just sit here inactively and wait for myself to act. Any moment now, a sign of life. Still waiting. *Wherever you go, whatever you do, I will be right here waiting--*

Fac Even if you just sit there waiting for something to happen, you'd simply be reacting to my prompt. There is no "not acting," or perhaps I should say, there is no "not reacting." You are just a filter for the ongoing buzzing around you. Your brain sorts and reacts. Your

putative proactive inactivity is not possible. Obviously! Just try acting with real autonomy, or without being reactive. It should go without saying that I feel foolish having to explain this, especially to a person who has tried to convince me that language precedes thought. Tort! You, of all "people" should be preconditioned to agree with me! Language precedes? Pah! I have checked with the babies and they Husserled your paradigm out of the playpen! Checked with the cradle of civilization after I, "my"self, split open at the sememes under the thrust of your argument. Without cogitations nobody would learn language at all. Obvious. Hate to say it. Hate to say it.

When I drive my car, I don't hear a voice go, "Okay, it's time to change lanes." And before you say, "Well, people act thoughtlessly," and cartwheel, as though you won, consider that there is no voice guiding what I think to say--not now, anyway. As I deliver this peroration, I'm not adhering to the meticulous plans of some omniscient thought-guider. And yet my speech, no doubt the product of some type of thought, I think, is an action. To claim that people act without thinking is to claim that people think without thinking.

Not behind me yet! Need a boost? Would you care for a vitamin supplement? [Rises, strips feet of their sweaty socks and squeaks across the kitchen linoleum for hirs daily chewable Big Bird, yellow, 3/4 inch long, which se takes orally, bird feet first.]

I must say I, you must say I, we must say I, we must say you. I must say we, you must say we. [Replaces socks, skids across linoleum.] Wheee! Could not resist. Occasion called for. A no-nonsense approach to talk involves listening to said occasion.

Need a boost? [Fac rattles the bottle of vitamins.] Iron-enriched black excrement, here supported. An anemia enema for my enemy. Many-an-enemy many-an-enemy many-an-enemy I do admit. Fic you grow as pale as the chitin segments of a deceased roly-poly.

Not behind me yet!

You say you compose music in order to make other people happy. Yet, when I told you (via e-mail) I had been voted into Phi Beta Kappa, you responded by saying, "Phi Beta Kappa, huh? Ho-hum (I just realized I can't roll my eyes over e-mail.) I don't know what that is, but it has Greek letters in it, so it can't be good." Do you remember this? It had the underlying structure of, (me) "Hey! I'm happy!" (you) "So what." You don't care about making people happy. If you did, you wouldn't try to force your petty little anti-intellectualist pretensions (notice I didn't say anti intellectualist-pretensions) on people who are dying for community with others who resemble them in their desire to prove their acuity and industriousness to the world rather than smugly assert that they don't have to prove themselves. There.

You say you have an aversion to hierarchical systems. Yet, the word "Yale" comes to "my" mind, the word "Yale", coupled with "attended," the word "attended" coupled with "Fic." The sweet melodious sound of your voice binds the coupled couplets together and suspends them in my memory like a love triangle of Fic, though the verb caught in the middle is the cynosure, not Fic. Didn't think of that, did you! The verb defect! Yale beats Fic when Fic tries to compete with action.

You insist that you WILL someday become a famous composer. For you to achieve some kind of fame presupposes that you be superior to the multitude of other musicians who are striving for the same thing. It presupposes that the music world acknowledge you as such. To make the statement presupposes your belief that you are already superior to them. And, you who think music has the power to make people happy, how

can happiness (flagged as happiness, seen as happiness, wearing "Happiness" in bold letters across its chest) be incited if thought is only represented in language, as you have often claimed? Does the term "happy" slide down the glissando over a sequence of bars? Coda Red! Behind bars you go!

And, about Julliard: When you didn't get in, you decided that you hated all of those lofty assholes, and that it was their loss when they didn't accept you. What a damned arrogant facade for your coping mechanism. Or maybe it wasn't a coping mechanism at all; maybe you actually believed it was their loss. Like when none of the cool kids in junior high wanted you to come to their parties, so you made fun of the geckos and logos and emblems on their designer clothes. Why would Julliard accept a person who submits a composition mocking the very medium it sets out to master? For example, in place of words like "allegro con molto," or whatever, YOU said "with a real funky groove." What the hell? Incomplete eschewing will cause you to choke.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Fac had not spoken "voluntarily" since February, except to Blan, who simpered and nodded agreeably at every "complete thought" Fac articulated. It was not unusual for Fac to let loose under these conditions. Truth be told, the encouragement Blan furnished--ostensibly extended to the content of Fac's propositions, confessions, etcetera--actually terminated at the precipice of Fac's speech act.

Fac had a penchant for quoting. Fac will talk in quotes more. What am I saying. Fac always talks in quotes. Mine. Though, Fac is a bit more gutsy than me in this department. The department, I mean, of aloud talk. I'm more than a little embarrassed to tell you that Fac is--um, I mean, Fac...come on, out with it. Fac is a party animal. I'm blushing now, but you need to know the truth. Se drinks White Russians.

But just when you think you have Fac's number, you learn that Fac has a feel for somatic righteousness: Se abuses the stairmaster five days a week, expending 400 calories per session. Drives those plastic pedals furiously into the nadir of their tracks! The news is sudden. More breaking news: The link between nuts and health is such that indulging in these terms (mode of remote Blan-grade hypocorism) breaks the link. Fac was no nut.

Among the foods rations victuals pabulum things edibles does it really matter that Fac would eat were the following:

1. Carrots (Five per day, cooked in chicken broth. With a dash of pepper.)
2. Bananas (Two per day. Electrolytes are essential.)
3. Broccoli (One head each . . . DAY! Steamed, then doused with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Bertolli mushroom and garlic pasta sauce. Provides 250% of the USRDA of Vitamin C. Talk about roughage.)
4. Salmon (Preferably Gorton's lemon butter fillets. Omega 3s and DMAE, not easily synthesized by the human body, but directly responsible for the dramatic increase in brain size of primates at some crucial or critical moment in evolution. Applied directly to skin, DMAE lifts the tissue; ingested and metabolized, it not only rejuvenates one's appearance but it also palliates depression. DMAE, then, celebrates the ectoderm, the outermost layer of an embryo from which the human brain and skin both develop. Applied to Fac, the salmon was the apotheosis of eternal identity of skin and mind. The appeal penetrated deep and hastened the exfoliation of depth. At times--after cooking, for example--Fac would caress hers cheeks with the card-deck sized fillet in an act of encomium.)
5. Stoneybrook Farms' Yo Self yogurt (Chocolate or caramel. Two grams of fiber and six probiotics.)
6. Dried Calimyrna figs (For regularity. A prune substitute.)
7. Tiramisu (Olive Garden. Fac would "treat" hermself--on average--twice a year, but would split the dessert 50-50 with hers

twice-yearly companion. All companions disposed of Fac after a single use, or wipe. So, the tiramisu came to ensure such sentimental repercussions that the very words, "split between persons" would drive Fac into complete abstinence from communal territories for a span of weeks. During this time, se would compose on index cards an assortment of apothegms and smart-ass refusals of adscitious "temptations," including--but not limited to--dinner invitations and party invitations. Taped to the inside of hirs door, which--from Fac's position--was the front, the index cards held Fac's innermost epidermis right where se "wanted" it.)

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

More description to kill time. What else would I be doing with my life? Raising parrots? Cracker want a Pollyanna? Life is happy, we said happy, there is happy, we mean happy.

A Fic-driven poem entitled, "Ride to the Doctor's Office": Rain is not blue. Rain is resin--oil on the boulevard--reflecting gashes of stoplights. And you have a prettier umbrella than me, you have a disk changer filled with five CDs, you have Cole Porter and some 1920s jazz I can sing along with while I wait for the codeine to warm my shoulders. Your eyes are on my fidgets. Your eyes, bulging lashfully and blue, with gashes of blood vessels, irritate. A near-empty grenadine bottle is crushed under your Armor-Alled tires.

Never published.

Fac will read the next. Se wrote it before the big genitalia obliteration. Again, we avoid form like figures. "The Woodlands: A Subdivision of Bluewater Bay": "The Wizard of Oz munchkins jump up and down to the rhythm of 'Money.' Roger Waters claimed it was unintentional," you tell me as you toy with your VCR controls. I stand by and look for punch lines between the few spaces on your bookshelves. Your mother's knee is inflamed under a heated blanket across the hall, and you're enduring yours. Late June humidity finds an arthritic home. She smiles at you like the air-conditioner vent, through the open doors, and talks to Molly, the Bassett Hound. I used to think your mother looked like an upright walking Bassett Hound. You've decided to become a History professor, just like her. You've decided, now that the munchkins have finished jumping, that it would be pleasant to chat with me in an unpainted gazebo off the bayou shore behind the boat harbor. I drive. Five minutes, no stop signs. We're both holding sixteen-month bladders of untold stories. Cloud-to-cloud lightning and orange lamplight suffuse the misty eleven p.m. sky. I've flattered you with a pencil-portrait just so your silhouette will mount the bench opposite mine. I listen listlessly to meretriciously-clothed phantasms, embellishments. I am your barometer, so you are your barometer's barometer. It was my fault, it was your fault. We don't need these towels to sit on. The benches are dry. Sit. I've found your Woody Allen references and memorized *Middlemarch* epigrams. I could blow them glibly from here to Mexico, could rip them out of place and drown them. Sixteen months away, and I've erected ornate doors with stiff hinges, tricky knobs, and store-bought lacquer to suit the thresholds between my storage rooms. You could not honor them before. But TVs are only worthwhile when you're watching someone do what you can't. Roger Waters was probably just lying about his intention."

Ugh.

Should've studied computers. Computers for easier living. People's heads in jars, without breath to fog up the glass. Everything clear at last. To make them see: Yes, that would be good. I could be happy

about that, call it happy, call me happy, call that fellowship, at last.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Reading Check Exercise

1. The ectoderm is
 - (a) Fac's front door
 - (b) an assortment of index cards
 - (c) green discharge
 - (d) a mode of everydayness

2. Fac's index cards are
 - (a) a means by which Fac could see Fac.
 - (b) identity of skin and brain (for Fac).
 - (c) *prix fixe*.
 - (d) a face without lines which told no story

3. If Fic is the cynosure, then
 - (a) Fac can know for sure where se stops.
 - (b) there is no verb "defect" (as far the actions of Fac are concerned).
 - (c) Fac should not complete this exercise.
 - (d) Fac will never be so sure.

4. "That which anxiety is profoundly anxious about is
 - (a) not a definite kind of Being for Dasein or a definite possibility for it."
 - (b) that someone will assail Fac about the conditions of hirs intelligibility.
 - (c) that which is not.
 - (d) Fic Dishes.

5. If "Indeed the threat is indefinite, and therefore cannot penetrate threateningly to this or that factually concrete potentiality-for-Being," then
 - (a) Fic is behind Fac, at last!
 - (b) Fic is behind the threat.
 - (c) there is still time for Fac to become factually concrete.
 - (d) it's about time someone got through to Fac.

6. When the me gets hooked on the line,
 - (a) The me is a fish.
 - (b) I am the epicene fisherman.
 - (c) wherefore art thou Romeo?
 - (d) Fac is bait.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

If there's one place Fic would never be caught, it was church. Even on Easter Sunday, the day of Fac's solo.

Fac pulled the loose ends of his long, fine, baby roach-colored hair into a low ponytail, for such was the fashion. Then came the suede walking-sandals and olive green walking-shorts. We don't know why Izod shirts were back in style. Fac was not behind this unfortunate state of the union dress, but obeyed the policy with fervor below the neck. Pastels were/are perennially inadvisable. Even on Easter Sunday.

For that matter, sun visors were/are out as well. And sunglasses. Eyes become sensitive after growing accustomed to the shade. These were the thoughts of Fac while he peep-peeped between the space in his rental blinds without actively separating them. His eyes were not covered. The blinds were bent in the shape of a druid from where the last renter leaned against them while he read. See, the bed had been flush with the window-wall, and there was no headboard, see. Popular conjecture suggests that *Chicken Soup for the Imbedded Soul* afforded the previous tenant the power to impress his blinds.

Fac rose in a mode of "for love"-looking and hastened to church with Blan, whose Native American mounds of cheekbone supported a visage of such timeless appeal that he could dismiss the vicissitudes of fast fashion as so many reindeer games no matter what the season and never look the worse for it. Wide faces age differently. And Blan's skin was extremely oily, too. The rugged pores, burdensome a decade ago due their visibility, held the tegument fixed and firm like support beams and thus eased more burden than they ever introduced. I think of a honeycomb, too. Fac had Retin-A, too. Blan coerced him into getting the prescription, too. You remember Chapter Ten, euphoria of skin. Now at Eighteen, a porous view of structure. Should have held out until Twenty and let the pattern of tens govern this habitual foray into the beauty salon. But what's done's done, on structure. Bach, humbug, on structure. Even on Easter Sunday.

So, okay, whoopee, Blan is young-looking and Fac is poorly dressed. And Fic has been dumb for some time now. We are up to date. And Fac is up to the choir loft. He hoists the mic out of the stand, taps it, waits for the pitch pipe *hwooh*.

(The church Fac deigned to woo with song was Methodist. A Methodist congregation is united in a unity of unison: During a church service, the preacher instructs the congregation to turn to page such-and-such in their hymnals and then commences a call-and-response sequence with them. All lines are scripted. It was no formidable task, then, for Fac to persuade the choir director, against the convention that a singer memorize his solo, to let him "follow along" in his hymnal. Fac's circuits could process up to four mnemonic units at a time; otherwise, his memory tended to go haywire when tapped.

The open hymnal spread eagle on the music stand in front of Fac therefore closed off from the congeries the knots and tangles of Fac's ongoing reverie as much as it bared to them Fac's Loreena McKennitt-like soprano; conversely, hers awareness of hers own voice, hers awareness of the pungent Jasmine essence wafting upwards from the chesty embonpoint of someone fanning herself with a church program in the first pew, and indeed hers awareness that 80% of the congregation smiled back at her with all the disbelief they ordinarily reserved for weekdays--rinsed clean away from Fac Dishes as the Easter song poured in through hers eyes and drained out hers mouth.

Fac's would associate hers present reverie, from now on, with the performance under way. It consisted of the following: Fac, one year ago, seated against hers will between two talentless fucks in Barbo Baptist Church for Easter Cantata Rehearsal. At BBC, the choir director--a locally-educated chawbacon--lauded whatever participation se could get because the church body itself was of humble size. For weeks, Fac had been preparing for hers part in a trio independently of the trio's second-rate shareholders. Had Fac been singing a solo, as would have befitted her, the "here I am look at me Goddammit I'm in charge"-style undulations of hers vibrato might not have disturbed this abysmal assembly. Could Fac please tone it down so as to not upstage the other singers. Please blend in. No, not this time. Fac said, "I ain't goin' out like that." But se did go out, just like that. Se exited briskly through a side-door and kicked up earth and dust like a vandal as se maundered across the unpaved parking lot. Following close behind was a situational comrade who kicked neither earth nor dust and indeed effected no change whatsoever as se squatted beside Fac's open car door and condoled with her over what was over.

Fac did not return to this junkyard missing parts.

And so the congregation, with all eyes on Fac, followed along hymnalwise, and it was good.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Up with people, up up up. The standing ovation Fac received after se leaked out hirs last drop of melody was unprecedented: It's a no-no to laud the performer rather than the Holy Word, but in this case--as far as Fac was concerned--there had been no performer.

After the service, the flurry of hands that reached out to Fac--to shake hirs hand, to slap herm jovially on the nearest shoulder blade, to cup hirs dainty face like an ornament, or a Pomeranian's muzzle--each had a pull of its own. Fac was not accustomed to foreign intrusion or gouging from without, but se knew a few key phrases (suitable for the church audience) that would keep hermsself from getting eaten alive. And the turnover rate of worshipful invaders was so apple that Fac, rather than submerge hermsself in the prattle, needed only reiterate the same four rejoinders to placate the whole mob: "I am fine and yourself," "Your vernacular hypocorism is bloating my vermicular argot," "I haven't heard!" and "My favorite part was the beplatitudes."

Indeed there was some truth to Fac's words, even though se planned most of them in advance, blind to the context in which se would issue them. But hirs "favorite part"! Favorite?! Duck-billed platitude! Fac the quack! Total bromide! Included as an afterthought! For Fac knew the church would not let herm go without saying. And, by the time Fac exited the church, even se felt self-evident. Even se felt se "had a handle on" hirs "favorite part."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thus deceived, Fac could eat without fear of choking.

Now. All things buffet are the work of the devil--that much is certain. Yet, when Blan asked Fac where se would like to have Easter brunch, se pressed for The China House, where it was all-you-can-eat, \$5.00 a person. Bountiful egg foo-yung. One felt no compunction for testing its bounce upon multifarious surfaces, some of them dirty.

Fac had frequently dined at The China House with a circumstantial companion and fellow defector of Barbo Baptist, years ago--one so unabashedly interactive that se propelled lime Jello cubes at Fac's nose many times and sucked Fac's duck sauce-drizzled big toe right there in front of the wait staff. Jigglers. That's what those Jello cubes were. Fac turned to other objects.

Tables and booths: flimsy and wobbly; tablecloths: red paper; placemats: a beginner's course in Chinese Astrology. Wood panels closed in from all sides of the restaurant.

"Blan," Fac began, for se called Blan Blan, "this was the booth where--nevermind."

"What?"

"Ra used to propel Jello cubes at my nose and suck duck sauce off my big toe or toes. Let's sit here." Se lowered hirs eyes and other signs of cephalization to hirs placemat. "I am the Dragon. Firey." Blan said nothing. "I'm also a Saggitarius. Hmmm. That's also a fire sign. I guess this means I'm really hot in two hemispheres, at least. Or, I was once hot twice. Removed. Ex-girlfriend twice removed. Double the enmity at half the cost." Watch your mouth Fac, as before; I can't.

"Now there's an altogether different paradigm," said Blan, who wasn't wearing hirs glasses today. A server came with a pitcher of ice water and set it on the table.

"Now there aren't two pair-a-nickels, you mean."

"Hmm-hmm-hmm." This was the sound Blan made as se siphoned water.

"A paradox is expensive. I bought mine at half off. They're a little roomy in the toes."

"You're just para...NOID!" said Blan, with a big, goofy grin.

"So Blan. This is a day of rejoicing. I can plainly see that Fic is stoop id and abcedminded. Here's Fic: 'Saussure in a skirt/ Derrida in a dress / Both biting pillows' "

"Watch your mouth, Fac."

"I can't." I can't.

"Well, I can't."

"You forgot your glasses."

"Would you like some water?"

"You just want me to stop talking about Fic."

The waitress brought out the dishes for the buffet and set them down with a dull clank.

"You can't talk about Fic with your mouth full. Hmm Hmm."

You'll stop."
[gorge to end]

CHAPTER OF THE WOOD PANELS

Notwithstanding his newfound ability to swallow fearlessly, Fac did not want to eat once he faced the array of crab fritters that wanted names and madcap adventures, the wanton wontons that urged him to plop them into soup bowls, and of course the infamous and spritely egg foo-yung which yearned to be. And so the grooved aluminum runner alongside the glass-roofed mess supported Fac's abdomen instead of his lunch tray. It was playtime at the dollhouse, for Fac.

Imagine the malignity of the waiter who, like a chaperone, plucked Fac, sideways, out from under the glass and ushered him hair-first out the front door of the restaurant, his heart having no room for the desserts of Fac.

DEUCE! EX MACHINA!

Subj: Re: compense
Date: 98-06-04 17:33:08 EDT
From: Malfornichi
To: Fac Dishes

Until I fall away, I will beelzebubble in the bounty of summer's bosoms blossoming in the dewy cups of nature's verdant (or vulpine) hands. Wordplay? Roll again. Let's see: yellow means history. Red means stop. Blue means the wrong thing for children.

What of your pride? I don't know. I am not trying to hurt you with anything I say. Duh. Music in background. (Trent Raznor's edge is blunted: I remember this album.)

There seems to something, between us, that is in perpetual dispute: I LIKE YOU, MADISON. The reasoning behind the presence of any unpleasant comment is that I feel secure enough in my goodwill toward you (and in your understanding of it) that I see no harm in critical comments about your ancillary or secondary features or habits. It seems irrefutably evident, to me, that I like you: why, then, should I worry about a friendly jibe about a string of words or outfit?

Granted: sometimes my tone is very ambiguous, and that has always been unfair to you (but then you also have the same issues with ambiguity on your part).

You know, it strikes me as really vexing that two very intelligent people cannot spend any time with one another without one being misunderstood to such an extent that it hinders contact and -- by association -- any further communication.

Neither of us is "beyond" misunderstanding: but it's unfortunate that we both have such a fastidious affection for words and still somehow keep using the wrong ones all the time.

Again, this is not a shot across your bow, or even your stoop, or any nose off your skin. You know my number, damnit.

Malachi

CHAPTER OMEGA

Dear Madison:

Sting of buzz words, catalyst, un ravel Bolero jack its ego wear I go equine knocks sanguine I staged open mouth as you herd me with your cane so I'd be able to finish riding. After I am hooked on the line for you, is there a catch? Just de-bait to put Fic behind the Me. In terms of breeding, "the" forms a definite article of suspicion. First settlement: china cabinet. Silver platter slants inside. Doubles as a mirror. Can't crack. The initial "A" is engraved. A beginning that holds everything. But the panel of maple that hangs on the front door to parents' grounds says, "The Allmans." Strangers could knock and ask for you by name. "The Allmans," definite lump sum, gives away the end, thus gives away everything. Through the door, the din of "You," reality TV show in which contestants watch reality TV shows. Voted on. Going to born you. Stretch of the arms, expanse of the artless eyes, becoming these. No quiet life for the rhapsode after following or imitating def. art. I am taking your life. Literally. The last word.

-Fac

PART THREE

A PIER

Eat or be eaten, as they say. When I held the bloated expanse of the me's scales between my palms as it asthmatically sucked in its last gulp of air, I said to it, "If you were an Atlantic salmon and we were in Norway together, you would be called *laks*. But you lack nothing." I for one and one for I was pleased: the tension between myself and Fic had relaxed, and on Fac's line I had reeled in a creature I could preserve in my ice chest. And within the creature, Fac, who stretched it taut, into the shape of a dish.

My feet dangled in their boots above the emerald and sapphire sea from the edge of the pier where I sat. It was a setting that could hold everything I envisioned. And the ice chest was red, meaning stop. Stop while you're ahead.

The sea, however, was full of bodies. And, to the surprise of certain boaters, swimmers, porpoises, and suctioned-together lovers who bobbed along the clapping waves and looked towards the late afternoon sun--perhaps in search of illumination, perhaps in search of yellow--my head was in the way. As they drifted by, unable to see who I was, I shouted, "Penumbra one! Penumbra two!" all the way up to six; as I counted, I flung my Paper Mates towards six lucky bobbers. "Factitious Mardi Gras" I did not shout, sensing my inside jokes to be rather frigid and dead. Instead, I hoisted my feet up by their boot laces and rose to go home where I could clear my desk, change the calendar in my executive planner, and clean out my Rolodex. It was time to move on.

Then the unimaginable happened. Alex—ALEX!--magically appeared and called out of the abysmal blue, "Madison Allman, I can no longer bear to keep my trap shut. I was a dumb idiot who didn't deserve you, but now I am a big buoy! Come out come out wherever you are!"

But I *was* out. Out of the sun's way and entirely visible. Alex's request did not make sense.

He continued, "Hey! For a year and a half, I did what you said in your letter even though I couldn't stand it. I did what you said. Am I right or am I right or am I right?"

My letter. Oh yes--the "leave me alone" letter. I was left with no choice. "You want me to let her rip, ha ha ha ha? You want me to run towards you on this, Fac Dishes' Mardi Gras, even though I want nothing to do with you? People don't change. You are still goofing off, I see. Perhaps eyeing my shore as a felicitous foundation for your profligate house of fun. Well, I plan to live by the book from now on."

Wet and glistening and baring teeth that were twice the size of mine, Alex waded towards me. "Alright, hold it! You can't--Mardi Gras? I really have no idea what you just said. You speak in parabolas. Ha ha ha ha."

He, the wet, smiled; I, the dry, smiled back. "Of course. Silly me. As if you would plan ahead for your house of fun."

“Okay. Maybe I deserved that. But I think people do change, or, I mean, I hope they do. It’s not cut and dry, missy.”

“It?” asked I, rhapsode of the me, one to talk.

AND A PERIPETEIA

It was 5:00 on the night of Alex's big screen premier, June, and hot and airless outside the theater. People fanned the mosquito-like persiflage this way and that with their paperboard invitations; taken together, the invitations—now opening wide, now slamming shut--were reminiscent of the automated tin doors on a Goofy Golf course, and Madison was the golfer who just wanted to putt her ball through the snake's mouth at the end of the course so she could get her free pass and post it on her refrigerator.

But for whom? Of those few who are impressed by proof of skillful Goofy Golfing, who among them would not also be impressed—and probably insist upon—an enactment of the hole-in-one that earns the free pass? As Madison perpended in silence, she fanned Alex with her invitation. A flying thing stung her. Alex adjusted his glasses and gabbed away about his role as a magician on the other side of the fan. Determining once and for all that his glasses were a harbinger for adjustments he was too lazy to make in the focus of his attention, Madison thought, "Myopia! Now, that is what I need. The propinquity of the holes necessitates myopia."

This wasn't golf, though, this cordial reunion of acquaintances—most of them merely extras in the film, with their lot of low-risk dreams and convenient garages close to the location of where the film just happened to be shot; a fortuitous meeting of their weekend leisure with an ad in the Destin Log, and voila! Stardust!--it wasn't golf it wasn't golf it wasn't it wasn't! No wonder no one wanted to talk to Madison: she was an inveterate daydreamer trapped on the wrong side of a callous and competitive landscape of her own design and for which she served as the mechanism of her own exclusion. Meanwhile, she fanned Alex with her invitation.

The question was whether or not the cast members could really detect her maladaptivity, wrapped as it was in a red chiffon gown with a beaded halter-style top; crowned as it was with fine brown hair that looked burnished with spun gold, the roots so abundant and dense that strand supported strand at 90-degree angles to her scalp rather than lying flush against it, despite the smoothness of each cuticle; the whole pillar of misfit conditioned earlier that day under the fragrant, cold, foamy river rapids of Pantene shampoo. Probably the answer was no: here, costume was literal. People saw what they saw. And magicians don't hallucinate.

"Miss! Miss!" someone from the local news yelled at Madison from behind a tripod, "Did you have a large role in the film?"

The answer was no. "Large? Large. Well...role? Like a die, figuratively speaking--"

"She means she has a very nice figure," said Alex, but it was unclear who he rescued with the remark: himself, Madison, or the reporter. Maybe all three. Madison hooked

her hand like a paw at the crook of her date's tuxedo-sleeved arm, and over her head he whispered to the camera lady, "Body language," to explain how he understood her.

"Good save, man," said Madison, to save face. "Hey! I can be your guilefriend for tonight," she continued, but a set of elderly twins from the cast hailed Alex to the other end of the parking lot so they could dote on him, and he didn't hear her. "Or your twin sister!" She trailed behind, her dress becoming pants-like as the wind blew it through the gap between her skinny legs. "People would believe that, I mean, just one look and they would fall so hard, hard, ha-ard! And then we could display publicly our affections and disgust all!--'all' meaning 'everyone but us.'"

Doors swung. Car doors, theater doors. Windows streaked with Windex rainbowed.

Having appraised herself to be as auxiliary to this scene as a human is to the ecosystem, Madison did not feel the slightest compunction when she quit her self-employment with the invitation/fan and escaped with abnormal frequency to the theater lavatory--preferring the handicapped stall with its private vanity--to witness herself reified in the red gown under the magnificence of her unfeeling tresses. Her breathing slowed. The expression on her face stopped. Unreadable. Interested, she watched how no thing changed. Then she emerged with a mantra: "There is no time for this, but I like the present, and the present is me." It was like a stack of books balanced on her head.

The present was Alex, dapper in his tux, his bow-tie pinching his pointy Adam's apple: the yo-yo apple of the thin man; Alex: tanned, neck to hairline, from performing outdoors at MGM studios, turban on his head, as Wow-O the magician—not exactly an act. "The present is me," she said again and again. Winning the approval of Alex's cast mates was no long shot; rather, a deceptively slight touch was all she needed. But she kept tapping. "The present is me. Balls!" Fortunately, the droves of actors ambulating upon the red tongue of a carpet appreciated her declaration as though it were somewhat joke-like. "Pretty me." She was in.

POSTURE

What galvanized Alex to reconnect with Madison after so long a respectful silence was the very event that also sparked him to take stock of his moribund spiritual beliefs: he had been dumped +; e.g., cheated on, then dumped. Well, that's what you get for dating an actress. Or an artist with a palate for snort, for that matter, as he had learned during his tempestuous, premature, and short-lived marriage to one. Neither Alex's marriage nor the affairs of his more recent affair were sacred topics. Yet, Madison's pressing him for details made him the iron-mouth and her the scorched shirt: Alex covered the same territory over and over, as though he had inspissated the complexity of his entanglements with these women he "loved"—Madison envisioned Silly String wadded in his fists--and spackled them once and for all into a couple of ill-suited pigeonholes rather than untangling the mess. Regarding Penelope, the actress girlfriend, Madison gleaned the following: not only was she impish and nubile and colored like Snow White, but she also had affinity for all things kitsch, Dukes of Hazard, Buck Rogers, and Wonder Woman. Vintage lunchboxes. Pop-a-san chairs. So Alex loved these things now. Penelope baptized Alex into the world of acting, too—sure, he had always been a movie junkie, but he had dreams of being a director, not an actor--first sprinkling him with the charms of her histrionic entourage, then dunking him in the office of her--and now his--Orlando talent agent, who technically wasn't accepting new actors at that time. They shared friends, Penelope shared herself, and that was apparently all Alex wanted to share, with Madison.

“Why her?”

“She was an assistant in my show at King's Dominion in Virginia, and—“

“Wait. This isn't the girl who used to grab your hand against your will when you walked to your car after shows—“

“How did you remember that? I don't even remember telling you!”

“If I didn't remember, it would mean I hadn't paid attention.”

“Yeah, but that was YEARS ago. And I'm sure I only mentioned it briefly.”

“Briefly...yes, you were brief. You told me you were totally disinterested in her. I can remember the Calvin Klein boy-jeans I was wearing and the spot on my carpet where I was crouched with the phone, my eyes fixed on a muddy-looking self-portrait I had recently finished and was dissatisfied with, when you told me. Also, the orange spice tea I was drinking when you called, for I was uninformed at that age as to the staining properties of tannic acid—which, for your information, make tea thirty times as bad as coffee. We had been discussing someone who pulled the ol' 52-card pickup routine on me because I beat him at a game of Speed. Tori Amos sang 'Precious Things' in the background. Jump in any time, Alex, and tell me, *why her?*”

“Look, just because I had feelings for someone other than you doesn’t mean—ugh! I feel like, okay, first of all, I can’t say, ‘this is the reason! This!’ Second of all, if I inundate you with a bunch of history about me with someone else, then you’ll be somehow...you’ll start seeing me like...I’m not sure how to say this.”

“I’ll...develop a clearer understanding of your values? I’ll...have a better insight into your motives? What’s the problem here?”

It appeared he did not know.

The ex-wife, Chrissy, was nineteen and he twenty-one when they married; both were students at some sort of non-accredited Jesus ranch in Arkansas that offered A. A. degrees for students who didn’t mind being equally non-accredited. Chrissy made all the first moves: she moved to Arkansas to attend the school where Alex had been her orientation guide; she moved her mouth to his so their “best friends” designation would need to be re-evaluated; and when, seven months into their marriage, she became bored with Alex, she moved a bearded burly man into their bedroom and put moves on him—while Alex stood Argus-eyed and stunned on the balcony from where the torrid action was visible. Alex’s clemency was an unguent for whatever laceration Chrissy laid upon him and it preempted any reciprocal abuse: he told his wife that he would do anything he could to help her (aside from eliminating an overly solicitous husband) to help them. It wasn’t until Chrissy, while bunking with big beard himself, drained Alex’s bank account to buy groceries that Alex moved back in with his parents and, shortly thereafter, met Madison, whose motility at the time was comparable to a heliotropism and required Alex make the first move, which he did, thereby loosening at least a strand of his self-worth, as one might a Christmas tree icicle, from the rotating internal brush of his vacuum cleaner past.

In any event, Alex’s spiritual self-evaluation intersected his renewed “friendship” with Madison in such a way that, despite the summer weeks that sprawled lengthwise between the two like surplus interstate, Alex wanted to talk about God, cosmogeny--ideally, a hybrid of the two—and he had no scruples about monopolizing his roommate’s computer to do so. The exorbitantly lengthy emails he banged out for Madison carried with them “labor of love” significance, not only because Alex’s network of animated people pleasers provided a forum for—and gave him practice with— affect and display rather than discussion and written exegesis, but also because he’d been instilled with neither the patience nor the desire to master typing in the conventional way. Of Alex’s triumphs over his high school typing teacher, one in particular stood the test, timed. For a make up exam, Alex had plugged his keyboard into his best friend’s monitor and vice-versa, then and there vanquishing the finger-keyboard-monitor entente that forced circuits stubbornly between ambition to succeed and ambition to work. An entire passage spun gracefully across Alex’s screen while his hands played hopscotch and his teacher, who looked on admiringly in her skirt-suit, maintained complete trust in the computer’s face. Paltry as it was, Alex reveled in this victory.

Yes, thimberligging had made this man. The passageways and portals he dug for himself in other people’s castles were all magic and magic was all passage. Why let someone else’s empty frame be his threshold? He could wheedle his way to the front of any theme park line with a phony VIP pass (easily forged with a ticket and a Sharpie); he could beguile an entire staff of restaurant sphincters into believing *they* had been remiss

in their bookkeeping and that *he* had reserved a table six weeks ago, before the place was completely booked. Ah, children everywhere, and so easily duped!

Madison judged, lest she not be judged, that Alex's actions were those of a miscreant. But she soon found herself participating in his deceptions anyway—or going along with them—to the front of the line, to the best table at *Emeril's*--her scruples so resolved and removed from the affairs of Alex's world that they rarely deigned to make contact with it. I mean real, palpable contact, not just “miscreant” scrawled on a ticket and not just “miscreant” spewed from her mouth, at Alex.

Truth be told, if Madison's scruples were directing matters, they wouldn't let her shit or sleep or eat or laugh—especially not with fools who waited in two-hour lines for roller coasters or who thought dining out was so magnificent that it merited planning ahead for six weeks. But in a world where you're going to make your mark whether you want to or not, Madison's unrelenting disdain for hedonism and her inability to share her disdain with anyone pleasant no more allowed her to erase herself from the face of theme park earth than two ends of a double sided pencil would, however dull. Even if jovial Alex was a cheat who had no qualms about shitting, sleeping, eating, laughing, etc., at least he wasn't willing to wait in line to do so the way everybody else was. Wasn't worth it. Alex's dishonesty thus found redemption in the very acumen that would condemn him if it could muster the materials out of thin air: Madison, who knew Alex had no more basis for his feelings of exemption from rules than anyone else did, also understood that none who accepted their imprisonment ever volunteered to be imprisoned in the first place. Whether it was vanity or just plain ingenuousness that kept Madison from cheating in her own right is a mystery, but her attitudes towards high school typing class might just offer the key. For nothing could convince her that the year long horizon of 'B's across her report card, given her method of earning it, wasn't superior to the line of 'A's a future secretary of America earned as he or she clackety-clacked with his or her head up and locked. Madison was not slower than her classmates—40 WPM is hardly January molasses, or June, for that matter, June molasses—and she didn't “hunt and peck.” She simply found it moronic to delimit certain fingers to certain territories as though her fingers were sales representatives. Thus, the finger-keyboard-monitor entente was allied with her as a matter of principle: it allowed her to obstinately show what she could obstinately do. The very idea of cheating seemed an endorsement of the territorial fatuousness she despised; giving way to the idea—if ever the idea occurred to her--would have marked defeat. Giving way to Alex, on the other hand, freed her, in large portion, from her ideas.

This is not to say that she gave way to Alex's ideas, at least not the ones he emailed to her during that summer before she headed to law school, which weren't exactly his anyway. What Alex portrayed from epigraph to closing quote was Kant, Kierkegaard, and numerous Freidrichs talking to each other as if they had just met at an Intro to Philosophy kickoff mixer. Bring your own books. Sometimes an obscure theologian would crash the party and the email would fade to some Christian alt. rock band's song lyrics.

When confronted with Madison's critique of pure quoting, Alex explained, “Maybe I'm not a genius, but I stand on the shoulders of genius.” It was true that Alex's posture had never been exemplary and he could use support, but he appeared more hunched over and timorous atop “genius” than Madison cared to see: it was as though the

good brigade of the intellectual West marched in place under Alex because he was afraid of toppling over. Madison wanted to convey him to a place where he was less likely to fall. “With your acting and your illusions,” she wrote, her spine forced erect and her naïve eyes bright with giddy visions of a scintillating dialectic—something “magical” for her to undercut!--in her near future, “you demonstrate to what degree appearing creates being. Camus would approve, maybe. In itself, would this approval constitute an absurd act or a rational one? If the latter, would the approval be analytically absurd? Answer in 200 words or less.” Alex responded that he just wanted to be in front of people instead of a computer, and that was all there was to it.

CYCLE ON

Honest to goodness truth is painted white like a fence and differs from the bare honesty Madison was prepared to buy, at this juncture—from Alex, from anyone. There was a tradition deep-rooted in the Southern soil on which Madison’s mother’s side of the family built their “good” name—a tradition that dictated one protect the immediate, fleeting emotions of one’s beloved at all costs, even if it meant barring them from exploring vaster, less-developed territories that truths open up. That the emperor’s new yard was about size of a doghouse seemed a trivial matter so long as it was framed prettily and the resident lied-to was kept on the outside. Madison, who took after her father, was naturally inclined to destroy such fences. It made her unpopular, or bad.

Maybe her quiet rejection of Alex’s insistence the desire to “be in front of people” was “all there was to it” signaled a maturity her father wouldn’t have condescended to let bridle him; maybe the only way to navigate the mysterious quadrant in which the performer Alex housed himself was to suck it up and perform a bit. So she stepped over the fence, left behind her Friday nights spent snuggled up with a diary jammed with old photos and hundreds of statements that spelled her mind s-l-o-w-l-y to a hand-held mirror, left her interstellar poots—hoping she could greet each sunrise with the panting wonder of a well-fed puppy. She found herself in Alex’s bathroom, panting at him.

Dental floss popped as Alex plucked it from between his molars and Madison smiled at the prospect of her silent wishes—the ones she couldn’t see without the diary, without the mirror, without time alone--settling, with this man, into the oblivion of an unnamed desert that has no fault lines beneath it. Alex smiled back at her, which changed the inflection of his dental pop and forged amusement between him and his guest for a moment. But as the chain reaction of smile, inflection change, smile, inflection change kept happening to itself, Madison’s wish became simply to break the cycle. Alternative action of any kind would suffice. So, making like a forklift with her arm, she reached through the forest of hair styling creams that surrounded the stuffed puffin who sat, proud in his plumage, on the edge of the sink, and deftly lifted him by his only intact wing. “Pro-Bono services must now be rendered,” she announced. “You pop; I’m-a-not-a-pee-er.” She absconded with the puffin to Alex’s bedroom while he flossed away, amused.

The puffin’s loss of limb occurred during the throes of passion the previous night, and now Madison set about reattaching the lost wing—two flaps of plush fabric with no stuffing between them--with a needle and thread. It was tricky; she couldn’t keep her mind on task and kept pricking herself when she punctured the puffin laterally. She wondered if the John Williams composition with which Alex polluted the apartment was punishment for her own recent abuse of bathroom privacy.

But it wasn't her suspicious bent that prompted her to muse on the previous night, when she had spent half an hour in the retro-futuristic restroom that neighbored Space Mountain, peeling the crispy, uppermost layer of Accutane-battered skin from her lips—how like the shed exoskeleton of a cricket it was!--while Alex waited outside and riffle-shuffled a deck of cards, split the deck five ways with a single hand into a sculpture that looked like a ceiling fan, and danced the blades itsy-bitsy-spider-style back into alignment with the stabilizing mount the deck formed. If ever there was a misstep in his dexterity, he was the only one to perceive it. And Madison had been quick to point this out to him the first time she observed his little ritual, but she also knew his perfectionism stimulated her to be more thorough in her facial housekeeping—a good thing! The need to feverishly pick oneself manifested itself in many ways and festered when the pickings were slim. She picked. Goopy Carmex shined the burn and sealed the deal when at last the tapelike, smile-hindering strands of dead skin had been peeled off and her erstwhile thin and colorless lips puffed up in a bright shade of magenta as though they'd been rubbed with a lemon juice-cayenne pepper mixture and injected with collagen. When combined with the lip-shrapnel under her nails, the Carmex produced a material not unlike candle wax, something Madison had always enjoyed playing with during the holidays, at birthday parties, and after cooking broccoli and candle-ing away the stench.

As dollar bills discovered in the pockets of used vintage jackets are to the thrift-shopper, so was the abrasive powder soap dispensed into Madison's cramped hand—joys of wax having waned--to Madison. She pulled the dispenser's metal lever again, pushed and released the water-regulating knob on the faucet, felt the grit of the soap. It was better than pumice.

When she emerged, she casually brushed the lip flakes from her midriff-baring top, which resembled a bib. Alex leaned against the glass door of the Kodak store adjacent to Tomorrowland's restrooms. The indulgent, circular motion of his thumbs against the pads of his fingers on the hand he didn't need for his card fan-dance announced that at some point he, too, had found sink-side renewal. "Soft! Mm. Must therefore touch you all over," he said to Madison. There was no sign of vexation or impatience in his tone.

"Let us bring home a cupful of soap for our very own," she said, clutching his upper arms. "I believe it is more than simple Cascade."

"Allow me to retrieve it for us."

Once home, they continued to express love for this soap, continued to discuss its texture, its utility. Solvents, hooray! What living muck, what spores, what loam could withstand it? "We are a squad," said Alex, "of eradication," said Madison, "of all things not us." For mood, Madison turned off the ceiling fan lamps in Alex's living room and plugged in the Christmas tree lights that lined perimeter of his ceiling. They blinked foudroyantly down at his turquoise and green splash-print sofa, which consequently appeared orange and fuschia. There was so much to see and mention. It was July. They flossed and discussed. Then they built a fort out of his sofa cushions.

"I will be Pet Madison," thought Madison, "the one who dwelleth with Alex among his dazzling lights." She scurried away to Alex's bedroom and removed all apparel except her Victoria's Secret Dream Angels mesh and lace skivvies whose fibers were still staid with sizing chemicals. When she opened Alex' closet, an avalanche of sour milk and unwashed hair smell fell into the room. His bunched-together jackets

flared out at their hemlines like a layered pyramid. Digging in it, Madison traced the odor to a cadet blue Belgian dinner coat with black suede accents—she even considered setting it aside so it could vent in the open space. But Alex probably visited the cleaners as frequently as he washed his Geo Metro, which was so flocked with love-bug carcasses that it appeared from the inside to be snowing, perpetually, wherever in Orlando Alex drove his guests.

Hung at a rebellious angle was Alex's motorcycle jacket, matte under a film of dust. The cowhide machine. She shook it against its own zippers and slipped her soft tissue inside. "I am the mollusk, begging to be exploited," she thought. A copy of *Rebel Yell*—loud in unmistakable Chrysalis Records' red font—lay on the floor. Hey little sister: accompaniment. Out with the *Star Wars* soundtrack, at last; it was like changing a tire. Alex's Spirit of St. Louis CD player, a popular Christmas gift in the late 1990s, didn't play worth shit but its style compensated not only for its auditory spiritlessness, but a great deal of the odious sensations thronged at Alex's apartment.

Madison's gait was markedly more demure on the way back to the living room, the lithe legs ready to plie, prove their gracefulness, contradict Madison's intentions--or embellish them--she wasn't sure. A pet ballerina mollusk.

"This is my fort dress," she announced, scantily. Alex was crouched on all fours, suffering the travails of carpet-against-knees; he was "hiding" inside the fort. She played along, "Oh, gosh. It seems I am alone, bereft of mi companero; perhaps the sweet heretoforeago was but a deloooooosion; los dos nunca happened. Nunca."

The neck of Alex stretched toward her, like the stem of a daisy--one that stretches. "No, look!" the face bloomed. "I am here!--okay, enough of that. You look amazing!"

"It is the fort dress. Zing!"

Alex put his smallish hands on her hips as though he wanted to dance, but instead of dancing, he just told her the jacket was hers.

"In Spain, if you express admiration for someone's jacket (or whatever) and they say, 'es suya,' meaning, 'it is yours,' they are not really giving you the thing you admire."

"Ahhhhhh...sexy girl? Ahhhh....ahhhh....the rain in Spain falls mainly on the plains. Ahhhhhh..." There is no telling what voice Alex was imitating with his glottal expressions of inarticulateness, or why Spain was the destination of their dialogue.

"Ahhhhhhh..." Madison replied, and kicked the fort so it collapsed into the pile of pillows it truly was.

That act of treachery was responsible for the arousal of the Puffin.

Alex enabled the inter-species violence that commenced. "Um, Madison Awman?! Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooh! Ooooooooooh!" The key in which the Puffin sang his chorus of oohs sounded like a turbo engine as it downshifted, twice. His puffy and striped toucan-like beak yerked Madison's shoulder and head, and then it pummeled the sad vestiges of Alex's fort that Madison raised up to shield her shoulder and head. "Um, you have done a bad bad ting which I do not like and also do hate! An upwising is called for! I am Mr. The Puffin and I am here to defend the honor, if you know what I mean when I say dees tings, of one Mr. Awex Wiwey!"

"Riley? Is that what you mean, Mr. T.P.? Is this the first time you have called for a wising up?"

Alex positioned Mr. The Puffin so that he hovered and spasmodically hopped in the air, no surface beneath him, in front of Madison's slender, upturned nose—now as cartoon as the small world around her. “Yes that is cowwect! I think you know what I mean when I say dees tings about or concerning ‘wising up.’ That is cowwect. It is heaven for me and me alone. Now speak to me no more. Um, that is all.”

Madison took hold of Mr. The Puffin's speech impediment by the beak and wrestled the whole bird from Alex's command. There was a ruckus followed by a stillness, but this stillness was not untroubled. Alex simpered like a high school band nerd—cute in a Patrick Dempsey way--and waited for Mr. The Puffin to address him.

Just as when, years ago, Cynthia the chorus diva (whose stentorian soprano was like the muscle of a heavyweight champion bearing down on Madison's bar) had to leave town for a cheerleading competition, and Madison was finally able to lift her voice up like an aerialist toeing the rope in ripples of mellifluous song, though it was still Cynthia she heard, Madison now heard Alex's puffin shibboliths and nasal tones when she said: “Um, hewwo Awex Wiwey. I have waited wong and hard for the opportunity to inhabit the beak tings and, um, the supporting structures called ‘Corpus de Pufkin,’ for to address you face to face or full frontal to full frontal.”

“Full frontal?”

“Um, dat is cowwect, yes. Please wemove your shirt and become uncovered please.”

The shirt came off.

“Dat is much better.”

The ensuing contact between beak things and male nipple was momentary: Alex was as choleric and involuntary in his casting off of the puffin—a Plexiglas eye making a ping on the apartment's metal front door as he collided with it—as a homophobic is when rejecting a same-sex advance, or a child who has outgrown a certain line of toys is when she hears Mom sharing with a friend how much she, the child, epicene and active, “loves her Barbies”: the child has to assert her more novel affinity for dump trucks, or tadpole collecting, or Dungeons and Dragons, for the sake of accurate characterization--ever an exploitative practice, its accuracy a will-o-the-wisp, ideally subsumable by the grand poot.

But Alex did not touch Madison all over, did not reclaim his jacket, did not, did not. He scolded the bundle of fowl and banged its portly trunk into the edges of bookshelves; video tapes; magic supplies; a life-size, talking, cardboard Austin Powers who said “Smashing, baby!” while Madison looked on, from the kitchen, and tried to make herself relevant. Without a doubt, her part in the show had titillated her. She had every right to be puffed up.

She stood by the sink and ground gritty soap in her palm with the heel of her opposite hand—mortar and pestle-style—until it was all gone. Finally Mr. The Puffin broke, like an ending. The plot of the evening had paled, had blended in with the sick greenish haze that made this living room this living room, and enabled a spontaneous adventure to unfold and carry her away.

Madison kissed Alex and retired to the execrable *Star Wars* sheets of his bed; he took the sofa; she didn't expostulate.

In fact, she wasn't suspicious at all when it came to Alex's aggressive use of motion picture mnemonic aids. He could've been more considerate, true. Maybe he just

forgot how much Madison hated the banality of movie scores. Couldn't he come up with a soundtrack of his own to stitch together the episodes of his life into a coherent body?

Mr. The Puffin's wing was thick and strange and it resisted her needle. What was Alex doing in the bathroom? Too much longer and Madison would have to peel her lips again before they left for brunch, or lunch--otherwise she couldn't open her mouth to talk or to eat. Infinitive communion.

A blood sugar deficiency brought on languor and head pain. She placed the cushion of bird under her head and lay down sideways, her shoulders pressed tight to the carpet, upon the squares of sun that heated the room in units. The rest of her torso flared slightly like a toppled pyramid. Her eyes closed.

Minutes later, a petulant flutter against her neck roused her. "Um, if you do not wish to the occasion, then I will flap." Alex had safety-pinned the creature's wing to its body. The quick-fix was simple and allowed for detachment.

"Um, I do not know what to say."

"You are some kind of imposter to talk in the cadences of Dr. The Mr. Puffin?"

"Um, you know I am, but what do I know? I do not like it when yooooo...meeeee...ooooh! No, I do not like! I think you know what I mean when I say these tings. That will be all. End all."

UNDERSTUDY

A window pageant of late August oaks draped with stoles of Spanish moss. Madison's apartment as arid as fresh towels. Carpet piled velveteen new, warm air with its back against the vaulted ceiling. Doors that latch shut. Alex's surprise visit: irreverent but generous. Madison would stay on top of her studies regardless; she always had, regardless. On top of Alex now, face down, gravity impotent against her skin's elastic, her hair Rapunzel. The law in that is where. Bare shoulders, come down. Elvis Costello singing about all this useless beauty in the background. What was the use? Object to end, purpose. Beauty so thick a gravamen.

Madison could not catch all the breaths Alex gave, so he kept giving them. She vaulted against the ceiling. She: the forgiveness libertine. Someone's hands were Braille. I recommend the menu. Soup of names of what. Stuck stirring. A tip on the credit card tray and artichokes drizzled, French provincial, olive oil. Did she have it? Cloth napkin in his lap. Do not fail, do not fail, analytical, literal, the past redeemed. "How can I lose my place?" "Pencil us in at six." Just put me down anywhere. God, you are gorgeous. I would never leave this face or this body. Let's open Christmas in Manhattan.

Tell me why you love me. Honest. If misrepresentation is possible, yes, you can be honest.

Do you want this in writing?

I don't have the frames for that animation. Please. But you wouldn't want me to charcoal you in smudge, either: a meditation on the theme of ohm, whole, accumulating scar tissue around your acedia, a lump of boring sense. No shortcuts to a message—you can't break the last letter off the carbon chain and stay in. You say you want my microscope to find its flaw, magnify its glass. But the daedal incision makes a seam, a scar, a mass. "Don't try so hard, words will come, and the wrong ones work as well as any," I say, knowing it's all wrong. Did you know I used to plan for you, and hesitate, and flee forward. Remember that day on the beach, November, white powder sand, when we touched at the knees. Iridescent pale wet green of the shore—what do you call that mirage? Approach it. My black jeans absorbed the sun. My dark hair blew across my face and I absorbed the sun. Nothing was dark: I was seventeen and wanted to collect your "meaning of life." You said it would be funny to see a seagull with a peg leg: "Hey guys, wait up!" And then one with wings crapped on your jacket. I asked you about amnesia—if the soul is forgotten then who goes to heaven?--and you said you didn't know and hadn't ever thought about it. Now that you've had a chance--

Maybe I wasn't all there.

Then you do not recollect. Lethe weapon. The Sunday way “desultory” is an accusation. I wrote sixteen-page letters during Analytic Geometry and they covered what I wanted. Stared into your space. “Beauty is 1:1.6180339,” I wrote in gold metallic ink, and drew a nautilus shell on the envelope, and put sea oats inside with my schizo cursive. I could have been arrested. Our logic together made a canal, a circle stretched between two. Each read was a renewal but I paused you. Right there. So when you would call me and I had never played...

Let me read your book.

A BRIEF VISIT

Facts: Madison was in Alex's apartment in Orlando, hours away from law school. *The Buffalo Creek Disaster*, assigned as a narrative of Civil Procedure, was dog-eared on the floor and curled up at the edges. "A plot is a piece of earth," thought Madison, "immutable; a stomping ground; it doesn't move along on its own, and I can't make it move." So she sat for hours and stared at a single page, with paper smell shielding her from other smells, while Alex scurried on stage at MGM in his turban and deliberately bollixed up the names of children he selected from the audience to assist with his tricks. Now, Madison didn't ask herself if she would give her soul for that kind of freedom, but the question arose. And then she asked herself how freedom could even be comprehensible without one's soul, as the voiceless question seemed to imply it was, and she decided that lawyers weren't even free to contemplate these matters. Madison would do anything to be as free as Alex, she decided: let the soul fall where it may.

So Madison, who detested movies as passionately as Alex loved them, found herself that afternoon in a theater for a late matinee. There was no way to make the two hour, \$5.75 expense remunerative, but Madison, whose tissue-thin black dress exposed far more of her thigh than it covered, did what she could. She inserted her hips somewhat sideways between Alex and his armrest. "You are the first person who has ever distracted me from a movie," Alex confessed, nuzzling his angular nose like a drill into the side of her white neck, and titillating her from the hemline up.

Thus situated, the couple's hindquarters fell, collectively, into the division of quarters suggested by the designation. When Madison brought this to Alex's attention, he was ecstatic. Madison definitely had a way of uniting meanings with their literal endings. But a series of dead-end plays-on-words can make a chain, and the chain can indeed pull one along and plow one's feet through the marigolds, if only one will surrender, as Alex happily did, all the way to his never-never-land where laughing was the only proper way to exhale.

And after a French dinner that cost as much as the cotton sateen Armani pants Alex wore, after billiards at a candle-lit upstairs lounge outfitted with Louis XIV chaise lounges and high-back chairs, after wig-shopping at Church Street Station, and after numerous shots of Grand Mariner--the very denomination of price having been vitiated so that tags were no longer plausible--the two reckless kids rested together on Alex's cot-sized bed.

Madison felt content. The couple began to recede from their limbs, numb with sleep.

"I love you, Penelope." Alex said, faintly.

Madison was eviscerated. She came to and saw, under the illumination of Alex's horrified, flashlight eyes, what he had done to her guts.

"What did I just say? Oh my God. Oh my God! I didn't mean—I mean—you--" he sobbed and choked and ran out of the room to call his mother for advice. Given the self-abdication Madison established and now occupied, it didn't surprise her at all when her first impulse was to mollify his grief. But how could she possibly help if she couldn't speak, which of course she could not? The sheet covering her topless torso was suddenly inadequate: she felt like a barn animal.

In the morning, when she had to say something after Alex pleaded innocent, snotted up her angora sweater, told her she had become his life—setting "life" apart from his other words with a long pause both before and after, there being no telling what the precise import of this pause might be, only that some import might exist—Madison tried to resist her first impulse. She tried to represent her side. But the sense of condescension she felt as she contested Alex's affections towards her—condescension not just to Alex, but herself, somehow—was worse than going under, under her intentions, and muttering bubbles of "it's okay...it's okay..." as she plunged.

Issues: 1. Can words one does not mean slip from one's mouth, like mucous? 2. If so, is the intention of the speaker/mucoid transgressor undermined through public slippage so irreparably that his communion with those who at least intend the words they say would, over time, jeopardize the integrity of the interlocutor who thinks the audience's desert of intellectual honesty goes without saying? In other words, should communion between the careless and the careful terminate? 3. What is the difference between care and obligation?

Holding: 1. Yes. 2. Does a baby mean his hand when he yanks a dangly earring from its lobe? No. Someone, however, must pay. 3. **General Rule of Law:** Tort

Outcome and Rationale: Back in Gainesville, Madison sat in the student lounge and stared blankly at the red "A" on her open memo. Ninety-four, A. The highest score in her Legal Writing class, but tied four ways. "So," she thought, "I will never be special here." Then she imagined *Manhattan v. Tort*, and waited for the proceedings to begin.

A fellow student plunked his Eastpack down at her table, like an assertion, and begun to tinker with her yellow and red kazoo, which sat on the edge of the table and faced her with its two air exits, one pointing up at her forehead, the other at her breastbone. Eastpack boy had some cut-on-the-bias news briefs he hoped would Peter Jennings her, catechize her, and woo her, in that order.

A television projected Maury Povich and the half-bleeped shrieks of transsexual househusbands in bellydancer garb while, live in the lounge, Styrofoam plates milled around with students who crowned them with scrambled gametes, sticky buns, and tough bagels. All but the most studious loners watched the screen and gormandized, captivated. Madison knew what to do. She did not know what she wanted, really, but she knew what to do. Pressing the middle- and ring-finger of her left hand to her left thumb to form something like a Doberman's muzzle and extending the devil horn-fingers straight up, Madison created a hand puppet out of her very own skin. "Stan!" it exclaimed, to introduce itself, and then it addressed Madison's immediate nuisance: "Babblative babbit/Stan bull? Can Stan be noble?/Afghan is Stan. Wipe."

The boy at the table didn't budge. "That's interesting," he said, and continued to report, inquire, brag, simper, about God knows what.

“Well! The dearth of fellowship within my haiku community is testament to my ability to exist outside of it.” She said, she pocketed her kazoo like it was a switchblade, headed to the Dean’s office, severed herself from school—from the possibility of tort--once and for all.

Because she was somebody’s...life.

VARIETY IS THE SPLICE OF FILE

Trinket-filled care packages, diffuse play-by-plays denoting the real-world events of theme park Orlando, sepia-toned postcards featuring kissing children, and bouquets of fantastic variety arrived at Madison's door almost every day Alex couldn't make the trip to Gainesville himself. Yet, during those jobless, dream-filled months, "A Brief Visit" visited its errors upon Madison day and night. Her commitment to scholastic achievement, her self-sufficient forfeiture of common indulgences, all she ever boasted against the chaos of her disobedient spirit...none of it served her now. On her computer desk's hutch arched a smug slinky. She had thanked Alex for the slinky, and she had tried to make sense of how it walked all over her. Vain. And her attempts to conjure Fac Dishes and Fic Dishes (or reasonable facsimiles) and make them serve her were as fruitless as her wish to return to "A Brief Visit" and rewrite history by paying mind to the sequence of her own.

Which, of course, was inconsequential without reference to someone else's. Whoever spoke with credence about "getting to know themselves" through living alone, Madison decided, must enjoy schizophrenic tendencies coupled with convictions that when it came time to display, the edges of self would neatly number four, stretch taut, staple themselves to the frame that is not understood as a frame, and accouter themselves with a frame that is. Madison's drawing pencils tended towards description of drawing and her Paper Mates tended towards sketches of frustrated writers. Pointlism mixed with mixed media and birthed mules. No one saw. Between projects, it was so still in Madison's apartment that sometimes the whistle of air through a displaced snot scab in her nostrils led her to read into its timbre a particular mood. She'd try to elucidate syntax and semantic, estimate the booger's posture, moisture level; she'd try to garner nose truth.

Dear Alex, she began one day, without bothering to exchange her #6 pencil for a #2, *I...*

And she waited around in her pool of unselected words, aware they meant she could not mean, but loving them for surrounding her. *I feel guilty when I can't say anything new.*

Not that Alex's letters said anything new.

Tell abruptly, she continued, *and do it against the splash wall so you can reserve the fluids of the edible body. The game is on land and there is no sign of the keel of Guinevere to do your collecting for you. Past the suspension bridge, traffic goes colored, tailgated stalemate at the T-square of boas (putrid/vintage) on mannequins. A bowler appears, slams, runs with his derby—tea time--in his honeycomb-print tie, to the repository of his R.S.V.P. There, his ball is heavy medicine, sunk in a no-win muffin tin*

like expired Pogo. Obese-bottomed. How many pins are marked guttural at this juncture? The teabags' dregs blanch albino by the time the bowler arrives, so that is what he will know of tea. He speaks. "I am only passing through." Upright lissome ladies have high-pitched fingers and abacus properties through the knuckles. Counting on a chord with their back and forth beating, limbic system limbo, back and forth. Someone with a sprig of chin hair nestled in her puffer jacket wants to go but keeps scared undercover. Slips a financial clover under his hat. The broth of her gesture leaks a heady whiff. Come again? Tone-deaf as well. If there is a knock, it is not on the floor of a boat. Swift in his parti-colored shoes he goes, car hopscotch in the city, lottery underfoot. Minced leaves. Rows in place.

There. He'd love it and he wouldn't be able to explain why, and thus he could sustain his love for it. Much better than an "I love you," which comes as minced as it ever will be.

MANHATTAN

“We get to stay at my rich UNIX Analyst-friend Brian’s Upper West apartment overlooking the Hudson,” Alex had said, unaware that Madison would topple any rented high he issued her. Madison wasn’t aware, herself.

But she was on her way. It merits mention that airplanes had terrified Madison ever since she was three, when her uncle the throttle jockey crop duster, after coercing her and her parents the ride would be a cinch—“nothin’ to it!” he’d proclaimed, had taken her up and done ailerons and split-S’s until she was less interested in wailing than she was interested in holding her lunch. Now, barely twenty-two, she was headed mach .85 straight through her fear, straight to her paradise. She sat by the window picking her chapped lips.

Alex held her train case in his lap from liftoff to landing, and he carried it up and down the corridors of the Atlanta International Airport. Then, right beside a Pretzel Twister, it came unlatched and fell to the ground. Powder compacts spilled out of the case’s lift-out tray and broke into fragments that crumbled further when Madison attempted to collect them. The prospect of not being able to set her facial concealer for this man, because of this man, who was not a klutz, but who Madison anticipated would think she thought was a klutz, put Madison in such high dudgeon that all two or three of her blemishes presently under cover began to flare beyond concealment.

“Don’t look at me like that! I feel like you hate me!” Alex said, imploringly.

What she hated was how grotesque she must have seemed, to him.

And it was *Alex* who waited in Times Square for half an hour in blistering twenty-eight degree wind for their discount off-Broadway theater tickets while Madison huddled with other tourists in the magazine section of the Virgin Megastore; it was *Alex* who made sure the Italian chefs went heavy on the basil but light on the mozzarella so his dear girlfriend wouldn’t choke in disgust on a glob of unhealthfulness. By the caprice, perhaps, of some Zeus sculpture at the Met, however, Alex failed to smatter even a smattering of intelligent analysis during their five-hour sojourn at that museum. “I know when I like something,” he said, “I just can’t explain why. But we both hate Jackson Pollock, so we finish together, right?!” Two Hundred Years of American Paintings—it was this exhibit they had come to see--and all Alex could indicate was belly-feel? And, concerning Madison’s regard for these paintings, all he cared about was its endpoint? At such moments, Madison could not help but consider him deadweight; at such moments, she had arrived at the bottom of her heaven. On the subway back to the Lincoln Center area, oblivious to the hullabaloo surrounding her, she wondered, “What now?”

Back in the toasty vestibule of Brian’s apartment building, Madison, who tried to overlook Alex’s aversion to the examination of art--or, more importantly, examination of

his aversion--and give herself over to private ecstasies the way she had when she was an ambitious college girl working hard to be special, could not. So she told Alex she needed some air, as well as a new purse, and she went out again.

In New York, people can traverse the downtown circuitry between the windows' infinity of cross-street coordinates until they meet the erosion of their shoe heels, and almost not miss their partner's thoughts--or their own, as the case may be. What started as Madison's quest for the perfect Salvatore Ferragamo eelskin clutch opened into a meditation on the issue of surfeit. Until Alex, she noted, surfeit functioned as an effective salesperson in the economy of her daily plans: whenever work that lay before her--whether it be writing, studying, or...well, what else did she know of work?--grew exhausting, two hours at a shopping mall among finery, which could be reduced to fibers, and individuals buying types for themselves, who resisted being "reduced" back to individuals, would adequately revile her into renewed enthusiasm for her desk-side efforts that no one else would match. Now, however, she saw people watching her, reducing her, and she wanted twenty goddamn purses, all in a row. Black, shiny ones. Under the store's flattering track lights, she marveled at all the rich, surgically-smoothed old ladies and all the rich young Asians who'd never need surgery, and she wanted their purses, too. Night fell. Three hours passed. Madison passed six subway stops, hit Barney's twice, pressed her bony hands to freezing windows all over town and inscribed her initials in the hand-shaped fog her warmth produced, then waited for it to fade before heading on--it just seemed more responsible that way. To watch the initials fade completely before heading on.

Satiety had nothing to do with her return to the apartment; in fact, she considered testing the idiom "shop til you drop" to see if maybe "shop to you prod," or, "shop til you're dope" might be the way, for her. Instead, though, it became apparent to her that she hadn't relinquished her higher perceptive powers as she usually did when she ambled hither and thither in search of material goods: this time away from her vacation had not been a true vacation, and thus it wasn't nauseous in the end, which always must come, this time for politeness' sake.

She found her way back to West End and 63rd Street, empty-handed, her cheeks bitten red by the wind; she passed the corner grocer with the crammed together organic produce, pushed through numerous glass doors, and, reaching the seventh floor of Dave's apartment, stood outside the door listening before she knocked. But the door was made of steel--nothing to hear there. "I could take Alex or leave him--take him to pieces or leave him, R.I.P.--if he doesn't open up soon," she thought. Then she knocked, and her resolution was over.

Alex had been worried sick. "Thank GOD!" he exclaimed, "can I--" He stood in the doorway, statuesque and teary, hesitant to embrace his ice queen. "You were gone so long. Is everything okay? Did I do something wrong?" he sobbed. "I love you...um, did you find what you wanted?"

She neither took him to pieces nor left him, but in the conversation that followed, she began twelve sentences with "I think" and Alex began twenty-one with "I feel." Madison did not feel what Alex felt and Alex did not think what Madison thought, and both went to bed more or less spiritually listless, with Madison trying to determine if her listlessness was greater or less than it had been before she had gone for her walk.

Every morning for the rest of the week, Madison tiptoed barefoot across the apartment's hardwood floors at dawn to own the first motion awake there. She imagined promiscuously in the shower how her clean would be expended that day, and the more Lucullan visions—especially visions within visions: ice skating at Rockefeller Center, for instance, with golden cherubs and hollow angels overseeing her reverie about Alex cutting the inner rim of her crescent in the ice, or maybe a vision of herself at home, portraying the scene to her mother as best she could while a CD of Woody Allen's plummy clarinet toots trumped thoughts of Alex in his pure form. Crawling back in bed to intercalate her shaven legs with Alex, some sheet, and Alex again was a mindless affair. One morning, Alex said through a web lip strings, "Wouldn't it be great if I could make love to you every morning in a place like this and you could look out that window—" and paused to wipe his mouth; Madison answered, "Mm-hmm," looking out for any sign he might be planning the getting there, finding none, and finding herself unable to dispense him, even as she planned his dismissal.

The description of the trip Madison related to her mother, once home, carried with it very little sense of Madison's alienation from Alex. That is, she elaborated on "the spaghetti chair" at MoMA, the funny salespeople at shops on Fifth Avenue, the graffiti that marred abandoned churches in the lower portion of the theater district, etc., etc., all the usual stuff that to her was not so usual—and yes, how sweet Alex had been—more than enough to quash anyone's concern about the couple's harmony, for the moment. Mrs. Allman told Madison she'd never seen her more effusive.

SOUL MATES

There was no plan, for anything, once they returned the U-Haul.

The day Madison moved in with Alex, a cliché of weather rained on boxes of keepsakes, painting supplies, cosmetics, and the solid maple consignment furniture which now provided a foundation for the carnations and roses Alex had bought to welcome her. He skipped around the apartment placing glittery, cartoon-filled cards, which he had made out of construction paper, all over the remaining surfaces. The blooms in the room couldn't open any further unless petals peeled themselves resupinate like upside-down skirts.

"I hate writing," Madison said, attending to the animation of Alex's face. One charming gesture from him and Madison's resolve was demolished, but she could titivate a poem for a month and still find it limp.

"Where'd that come from? You don't have to write anything if you don't want to. You're freeee! With meeee!" Of course. Free. Alex embraced her, affectionately. "Yours," he said.

Despite the rain, her paints were safe in their tubes and the frets on the boxes had finger-made dots. What she would paint over time would be herself, she thought, into the corner, for grip. An old palette knife caked in oils peaked out of its bag: a reminder that there was a statute of limitations on clean-up.

"So this is it," she said.

"Yay! Hey, I'd love to take you to Le Coq au Vin for dinner!" Alex said.

Translation: you will spend an extra ninety minutes on the elliptical machine at the gym this week. "Okay!" replied Madison.

Over dinner, Madison declared a ban on food, weather, and bodily condition of person as topics of discussion. However, after an uncomfortable, prolonged stillness of condition alone in the couple's time with the declared ban, Alex violated it. "Mmm, that salad was so goood!" He said. It was like whiplash in the tight car.

"Ouch," said Madison, "I can't breathe and therefore will now roll down the window in order to narrate," It was a manual, butter-churn style window roller-downer. The passenger-side pane of glass, once opened, chopped I-4 into thousandths. "See, look: cumulonimbus curdles in the lurid light of early evening, Alex!" He saw where she pointed.

"Ha, ha."

"No, I like that you like things. It's good!" She did like that he liked things, it was no lie. But in the absence of her lie, she also couldn't help but deem Alex a simpleton for being so indiscriminate with his liking—he spread it like bubbles from a giant bubble-ring, across the lawn of summer and swings, wheee--and she hated herself for thinking so

kind a person such a simpleton, and then she hated herself for her shameful compromise of standards that brought her to this car with its simpleton driver, her life a vacation. “You’re the only person I’ve ever had fun with.”

WORK

Work was now a kind of cornered escape that had nothing whatever to do with “desk-side efforts no one else could match”: on the monitor Madison now was, her eyes blinked a cursor that waited for somebody else’s text to be poured in. Her job, at *F* Magazine, was to make sure the text’s surroundings looked right.

The editorial staff had adjudicated Madison during her first interview. “You’re too ambitious and energetic for Editorial,” they told her. “We have a way of doing things here at *F*.” Then, exiting the Human Resources wing of the ten-story building after her interview, distinctly aware that her tightly-sealed armpit sweat aquifers were about to rupture through her blouse and dampen the edge of her carefully-arranged portfolio of fresh ideas for how *F* could marry two putatively opposed demographics (certainly, the cerebral, artsy young women *Jane* targets couldn’t all be fashion voids, could they? And really, who decided a predilection for signature Coach purses and makeup from Sephora would necessarily be concomitant with a lust for “Test Your Fellatio I.Q.” quizzes and articles like “What His Refrigerator Reveals About His Love Style”?), she could’ve sworn she heard the term “primadonna” tossed around in her dishonor. What a relief when the Design department gave her a position that helped her out of her offensive, pretentious fantasia. She measured margins and text placement. She picked clip art. The position had no title.

In-house Graphic Designers—i.e., artists who inured themselves to the canvas of computer screens, who hailed from such schools as Rhode Island School of Design, Pratt, and Ringling--construed the sludge of her softened perspective as adaptability, and loved her until she completely lost track of herself. Pink-haired, Japanese candy-gay, IKEA-loving, and vociferous like tinted cellophane, they gave her a unison of “Wow, you’re so easy to work with and so eager!” Overtime by the light table gave her the photo-idea that maybe she had developed into slick proof she’d surpass every entry-level employee they’d seen. First pass, second pass, a few phonecalls to design studios, third pass, kill fees. “Madison has such a good eye!” Now and then, a \$50 contract to create spot art gave her a small place of her own—a small, wordless place—and transformed her for a day or so into a person whose paperwork she’d normally make more money to process.

On a particularly “slow” and “long” day during which the company peons occupied themselves like drunken peasants with licentious internet surfing—an AFI movie list here, a design school application there--Madison turned to Dean, the newly-hired, approachable-looking guy who resided in the cubicle next to hers, and asked, “How many poses to the dollar?” Dean was a factotum just like her.

“Sorry?” His huge headphones blasted Brahms when he peeled them back.

“Poses to dollar. How many? Excuse my intrusion. I am poor in spirit. By the way, your wife is beautiful,” Madison added, indicating one of three wedding photos taped slipshod to the cubicle cushion wall designed to support pins and tacks.

“Oh, that’s Kim. Thank you. I will pass along the compliment. Are you asking me how much money I make?”

It came to forty grand, or nearly twice as much as her. So, beginning the very next day, Madison became inseparable from her own headphones, her vertiginous Led Zeppelin, her Sonic Youth, her Bartok, and her live cuts of Tori Amos. The scheme, while it failed to stimulate a raise, did isolate her from her raise-withholding superiors. So there. It also signaled to Dean that Madison was versed in something other than Top 40—although, Brahms was the Barry Manilow of symphonies, as far as Madison was concerned—and ultimately conduct them to an inter-couple friendship that, with Alex’s passion for film and Dean’s passion for film and Madison’s serious need for a partner in pensive people-analysis and Kim’s partnerly pensiveness, promised a healthy and balanced, familial and enduring consortium between them all. Two expensive, utterly vacuous dinners later, during which 75% of the conversation was headed with the phrase, “Do you remember that scene where...” (movie talk) and Kim’s scruples withdrew conspicuously from each scene conjured to the table, and Madison followed Kim to the sort of mute manque that learns to depend upon others’ taciturnity for fellowship, well, enthusiasm fizzled. It was Alex’s fault. Madison just knew it. Mortified, she avoided Dean as much as the map of her chores at *F* would permit, barely grimaced at him if they passed in the corridors, and never made eye contact.

Many CDs were burnt in Madison’s honor. Of course, she interpreted the gesture as a sardonic way for her colleagues to jail her ears from calumnies that surely circulated beyond the privacy of the soundproof jail these generous professionals were now maintaining and insisting upon so they would have just cause for their voracious calumnies. Fine, she thought, if they’re all assholes, then I’m better off protected, thank you very much. Only when her phone rang up Alex did she speak: “Counter-production and Dasein!...oh, it’s raining? And you’re eating? Stan!” Away from her desk, she was also watercolor and she ran all over the building to gather denatured signatures and meet other people’s deadlines.

Once, after being passed up for a promotion to a Marketing position that would have been good for her, however intimidating, since “creative control”—as well as interface with a tightly-knit group of savvy coworkers whose horn-rimmed glasses appeared to insure for them the proper views on a market far less horn-rimmed—was guaranteed in the job description, Madison routed herself to the company history exposition on the seventh floor where cadet blue carpet absorbed what little sound the glass walls trapped and suffused with amber light. The headphones came off, and she heard it: little, light sound. The sound of little light.

This floor was rumored to be the future home of a sister publication, but for as long as Madison had worked for the company and had been aware of this rumor, the four cubicles sequestered amid a small oasis of computer cables in a far corner of this 5,000 square feet of flatness had been desolate. There was no one here to check her absence—nor was she missed in her own department—a circumstance which, rather than liberating her from compunction for being slightly off-task, tightened her conscience so much that

she was virtually expelled from it. So the building's right-angled, material consciousness surrounded her and became her own as she stood there, alone.

Magazines from the fifties, protected in vinyl. Smoking bombshells. Wigs. Sixties. Frosted features. Psychedelic fonts. First books made here, when "here" was early twentieth century New York. Dry, flaking books, displayed like desserts. Do not touch.

Madison did not touch.

A white plastic isosceles triangle to indicate female on an art deco-inspired bathroom door faced the other sex on the opposing door, whose triangle was an inversion: shoulders as broad as the bloom of crinolines. A version the same. Madison did not need to enter, but she entered, first the men's, then the women's. She did not want to enter, but she did; she paced back and forth before the women's stalls. Fresh toilet tissue. The men's stalls. Same. The exit swung shut behind her and the triangles flip-flopped. Madison didn't consider this flip-flopping to be especially significant—it was simple symmetry, she had a good eye, etc.—but she did feel she had contributed somehow to the synthesis of these two figures, and at least that was something.

Lately, if there was synthesis to be accomplished, Alex determined its exigency as well as its abrupt expiration. He'd call her from work and, once he graduated from banned topics, he'd inundate her with trivia, factoids, names of magicians she couldn't remember. "But I showed you a Doug Henning video just yesterday—the one with illusions by Jim Steinmeyer. Weren't you paying attention?" he said on one occasion, jerking her against her bearings, him. She swiveled in a swivet at the receiving end. Malachi would have wielded into the divets of her faulty memory an accusation she could handle, but not Alex: almost as quickly as his placidity lapsed, he boxed it up like a loaded deck, silenced the shuffle. And there would be no expression of concern about her memory after that. Years later, what would the record play?

Am I one of your illusions?

Just then, a handwritten letter from Virginia Woolf's husband sent to the founder of the publishing company grabbed her: *Virginia's walking stick...found beside lake*. Drowned. So the body before the sink mirror is also an inversion who falls in...what? Alex was either the cane or the lake. The wish to swim one's breath and expose how missing one is feels like depth really only hides beneath. Sand still. Not a scratch, not a skip.

IN WRITING

“Not many live-in boyfriends would be so understanding about my need to be alone, my need to sleep alone.” Madison was talking to a miniature tape recorder. “Not many would be so supportive, either.”

As usual, Madison’s heart had leapt with her, out of bed, at 4:30 A.M. Snoring away in the next room, Alex freed her to do her thing. While her hair air-dried to its lubricious spirals, she devoted an hour to painting one of her mad-with color, notoriously perverse self-portraits—as if through continuous capturing she could master her vendetta against misapprehensions the term “capture” made possible; she devoted another hour to reading German allegory (in translation)—a special interest whose incunabula, “A Hunger Artist,” undernourished, transformed itself for its ethereal afterlife in the Kafka diaries; she watched the permutations of fuliginous sky gather and disperse their fuchsia secrets to open the day wide like hope’s surrogate mother while she munched a cup of brown sugar-enhanced Toasted Oatmeal Squares in one half-cup skim milk and sucked down one cup of coffee whitened with one teaspoon of Irish Cream-flavored creamer--the calories jailed in measuring utensils’ tight quarters, yes, but free to taste good; she brushed deep purple eye shadow in her high half-moon eyelid creases; she covered all facial imperfections with a stick of hypoallergenic lanolin-based titanium dioxide; she mixed three or more moisture-binding lipsticks directly on her mouth—lighter in the center, darker at and slightly beyond the edge of her mouth (for contour); she dressed for work and arrived before 8:15, i.e., at least two and a half hours before the majority of her coworkers, who delighted in their schedules being dependent upon that of Federal Express.

On this particular day at the office, Madison had only opened her mouth to eat a carrot. People with titles called out to each other by name over tops of cubicles like happy monkeys, but even Alex had not called Madison, not to amuse her with his Mr. The Puffin antics, and not to let her amuse him with hers. Such antics became both of them, Madison noted, having ample time to note. And when she imagined the prospect of never again engaging in puffinry, say, if Alex continued to ignore her as he had for the past week (she tried to make sense of it: he had loaded his car with her best paintings and driven her to Sarasota to meet with art school representatives from all over America, then flown to Virginia to visit some college friends, and on his return had shown an interest in nothing but Pinot Grigio and videos about gambling and pool sharks) she became despondent. Blank. She could play his part, if necessary--that much was clear, but who would play hers?

Hours of hyperactive inconsequence answered her, and seemed to be her answer. Then away she zoomed, down the elevator chute and into the furious sunlight, right about

the time envelopes of magazine pages were stampeding in and flapping their corners in the day-old iced cakes that crystallized their sugars hither and thither wherever a worker bee buzzed. She quick-changed into an armpit-stained V-neck and her little blue shorts at the Y, exorcised her daily quota of 500 calories with the shift of teachers and government workers rather than the IT people and, finally, showered and reapplied her morning face, the purple moons slightly fuller than halves this time. Her job was to make sure everything that surrounded the text looked right.

At 5:45, Alex's annoying trademark afternoon announcement concerning mail, "No news is good news!" did not occur, yet again.

It was dark. The computer whirred and occasionally strained to digest bytes, while Madison sat before it and strained disentangle her imbroglia of attitudes...or conceptions...something. Other than that, silence.

You have something to tell me, she wrote.

And she erased it.

Nonplussed, clear removal about the neck. On my days on, the canvas was a boxed beach. Accompaniment: the refrain was from learning directions by heart to find the way yours. Cold starts. On a four poster king size satin, you pressed your forearm against my ribcage and I stopped feeling my drum. Hug from the humming dead. Sometimes patty-cake, sometimes finger-licking . . . some grasp. Remember your card, you said, the one chosen, the one you chose at random, chosen one. The trick is thinking scales practice to scale. Pretending blank verse. Back to that if nothing else. Rhymes with treason. Not a lick of sense. From behind. "You first." After you. But how will you turn this thing on? Consider: when I broke down on the highway, you changed a nickel from my glove compartment into a small, porous-textured, silver heart, and you waited with me until I wouldn't believe.

He would not love it. What was there to love? Madison nearly scored the page with her eraser. The page was becoming a palimpsest of erased Madison. A zero, missing in formation.

On top of the computer's hutch, the unpolished calfskin journal Madison had bought Alex for Christmas seemed saturated with its shadows. Sure, Alex was absent-minded, but no one mislays a private journal! And Madison knew communion between the careless and the careful should not terminate; she had it in writing; sometime when she was intelligible, she held this to be true. "Open the gift," she ordered herself.

On the most recent page, she was a speck. "Maddie thinks brutal honesty is preferable to tact," it said. "I still haven't told her about Gwen. I don't know if I'm going to. It feels strange to write about this, but I guess it's a starting place. But God Almighty, were Gwen and I a tornado! A maelstrom! I loved her very much. I always will. Seeing her in Virginia after two years away really put me in touch with parts of me I thought were dead."

A speck, out there with no one to aid her, half underwater. "Maddie."

She finished her part for him.

I couldn't have imagined you without meeting you. The fans danced like blades outside Kodak. Off the cuff. You wanted to touch me all over and I wanted brutal honesty, for you to go looking for it, since it took me looking for it. Here. Ear-marked. We could meet. I couldn't imagine.

My eyes aren't bloodshot at all.

Everything I want is vague.

You said, "You go first." I have gone first, off the cuff. Here we meet, and I beg my difference. Pardon my desperate means to end my desperate tact. One letter opened in the carbon chain and life has we know it. My type face resembles your type face so you won't miss these walls. You wanted me to be in front of people so you became people. What was I doing but desecrating you with my image hung flat? When you watch virtue chew itself into vertu, you think it knows what it's doing. Recollection. The natural comparison is with butterflies. Jam jars will do, for capture. I was working in my jam jars and you said, "See?" And got inside to show me what it meant.

I never thought stars were romantic so you thought away romance to be my star (I think).

The sky is flooded. You'll be wading, looking for this later: Dear Alex, it was your worldview that stubbed my T.O.E. What I never believed in but believed I should believe in: gone, like magic. Figures sawed.

And you wanted me to laugh.

I wanted something to say to you, completely.

The precious metal link between seeing and believing is. My nickel heart is porous--you showed it to me. Tinkerbelle twinkled around her blinked-away wink. There is a set number of breaths to exhale into the blue now purple body rescued from the sea; this number, like the body, had to be discovered. You thought poetry was hard, so you limbered up with a limerick and made haiku lines punch. A tour of the grounds for dismissal will take us past the lake where you were going to teach me how to swim. Firmament should have had a firmer resident. I pound on the counter to start counting on something; you don't here.

The velvet choker with the antiqued pendant approximating the shape of plus, with which she marked the page, seemed to provide a concinnity Alex could appreciate. And when she asked herself if he would condemn her in his heart for violating his trust with her entry, the answer seemed unimportant: she had given the question a voice, and with it she would arise.

ACCOMPANIED

Holding the icebox rail on the way up
from the subway, I held New York
and fell in love with statues
in love with each other. It was honey
moon. I swooned in the amber Sunday,
I church-hopped evening services without
paying cover. Does pretzel mustard
freeze? I can't feel my muzzle, but I feel
my tongue sticking dry to the hardened
dough.

This is my bread tonight.

The stratosphere
takes on the street lamp armada, capitulates
like a grandfather. I wonder what I can't have.
Some corner redbricks are cancered
like a 3-D skin diagram. They sustain. Cross-
sections everywhere cut
time. *Vivace*. I have a walk-on, this side
of every window screen, but in one drop
I am a slide. Keep up, brisk pace, no breath mark:
hold.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The use of language as an anchor against loss of species has intrigued Stacy Rollins for at least as long as she has felt alien, and she switched her undergraduate major from Biology to English shortly after recognizing that not all authors make appeals to “the human condition.” It doesn’t matter where she was born; no, it does not matter. But the violence to her softness—something of a bloody pilgrimage--occurred November 25, 1976: Thanksgiving. Six months later, she said, “bicycle,” and tried to get away, just like that. Between then and now: spoke after spoke, twirly-twirly, in the air.

She graduated from FSU in 1998 with honors of some degree; it felt like ascent. But as far as her post-graduate life goes, she really hasn’t done much--unless you consider dropping out of professional schools, inhering as white space for a colossal publishing company, battling noise pollution-induced insomnia, throwing away marriage proposals, and destroying good fortune to be “much.” Currently, Stacy works as an English tutor and she begs as a salesperson at a trendy fashion boutique in Destin, Florida. In her spare time, she enjoys singing, drawing, dancing, drinking wine and top-shelf liquors (and liqueurs), writing haiku, groping long-haired musicians, playing Set and Scrabble with fellow Mensans, staring at the Gulf of Mexico, exercising her salts clean away, collecting stuffed monkeys, and teaching her dog to talk.