

TALE OF MYSELF

A Memoir

by Jonathan Wesley Bell

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Pastor's study Stockton, Kansas 1951. Left to Right: Alan David Bell, me Jonathan Wesley, Rev. S. Mancil Bell, Frances Eleanor Little Bell, Stephen Mancil Bell.

I AM BORN

“What in the name of plus perfect hell!”

Father says this to me. Protestant Bell says so to me. Pastor Bell enunciates so to me, It’s among his hit parade of favorite expletives, chosen from his Parson’s closet of invective.

Reverend Dr. S. Mancil Bell is naked. His Milky Way butt stills mid hump. Red hair drips sweat from his finely modeled forehead onto his Galaxy of freckles. Mother alone bears witness as he comes floridly, fondly in the threadbare room.

Usually it’s harmless. Like tonight, although father’s commentary can also be loaded with a cruel verbal buckshot. A brilliant man he’s so articulate in his colic, giving a fearsome (and accurate) bespoke harangue that the very thought of it keeps timorous stuttering blushing me in line.

Tricky me I’m one of his 250 million reeling spermatozoa that wins the race to get between mother’s gold medal flour thighs. She of the pursed beautiful lips,

drifting below him with her lovely neck arched up as if posing for a copy of Bellini's Saint Teresa in ecstasy.

A squeaky box spring sound track accompanies the holy moment in a back bedroom of grandfather Little's parsonage in Kinsley, Kansas in March, 1948. The box spring plays a wacky soundtrack just for me. Something by Spike Jones.

This man is the reverend 'Mancil Bell,' growing up his nickname was 'Still Mad Bell.' 'SM Bell.' My sire. Grandmother Bell always called him Mancil and so he was. Nevertheless he was also one hell of a fiery red headed man, still mad. Sometimes jolly, sometimes morose. Prone to an indifferent cruelty.

Mancil jerks his head up into an ultimate intimate eye rolling throe. Being religious he does not use profanity as do many men when they arrive. Some in my experience being quite uproarious.

'Mancil', my Bells were dirt poor sharecroppers in the stunted, tainted Wire Grass region of far southern Alabama. But they were rich in names like this one. 'Mancil,' spoken soft as a gulf water breeze. His diminutive being Manky. Pet monkey name.

'Mancil' bestowed perhaps in hope it would save them. Great grandfather Zachariah, grandmother Tiersey; Consider my grandfather Bell, his given name through life being 'Greenberry'. They were illiterate with only my grandmother May Skinner bringing a lamp of awareness to shine on their dark minds, folk left out of rural electrification..

This giving me birth woman is mother, an educated, middle class yankee. She's Frances Eleanor Bell nee 'Little.' Good taste name for good taste folks. Francis has a bachelor's degree. Her mother, grandmother Laverna Louise, also had a BA from back in the dawn of education for American women. They never spoke of these matters as that would have been vulgar.

'Vulgar' I learned even when young was to be avoided elst one tempted the vulgar to overwhelm the gates with staves and B.O. and burn the topless towers of Ilium. Pride too was shunned which was ridiculous because no people walking the earth were ever more proud than my Bells.

Proud, ignorant, self destructive, but the men had big dicks, were fiercely proud of them too, and too of their big red low hanging balls.

The women were tough, robusto cunts. Tropical black coffee feigning blandness. They were curvacious pink and salacious, keeping their passion flower cunt pride wrapped tight about their shoulders.

Mother caught hold of my soul as it squirted into her from father. Once in hand mother will cunt never let it go. Not ever. Even now Mother cunt keeps me in hand no matter.

Dead dear lady I hope you have no inkling of how much I resented you. The same hope goes that father had no hint of how much I feared and disliked him.

Then as I steamed inside mother Father kissed her passionately in all the places where she permitted him to go, meaning he got no more than three pecks and those restricted to her voluptuous mouth. He could be mean to her but never brutal, never threatened her. He loved her to death as true as this autobiography. My memoir of truth or consequences, this selfie tale of myself.

Scalding as his vituperations were they never made her cry. Anyway neither of them ever wept, never perspired, groaned or farted to my knowledge.

He worshipped her from the distance at which she kept him. Intuiting how dangerous he might be if she allowed him more intimacy than she'd already permitted, perhaps regretfully.

My father had just returned from five years of unrelieved incredible war the worst of which he relived toward midnight eating ice-cream compulsively in our family room alone, TV blaring, sitting before it in deep gloom. Orhdruf Death Camp on film in his head. Death camp and all he adored war.

Without yet being given a church to serve, a living to earn, my parents were therefore staying for a few months with my serial sex-killer grandparents, my grandfather himself an ordained pastor and my grandmother an elegant aristocratic type lady but terminally neurotic—everything about her was brittle from ankles to brains—who had lost her way amid her sheaths of wretched poetry that someone really ought to have forbidden her to write.

My parents had been fucking silently as possible because my grandparents were talking about fried chicken directly below them in the parsonage kitchen. I hope they were having giggles at my expense my irrepressible father still crazy with US- army lust and my metro-sexual mother who in a daze of misunderstanding probably never accepted the fact that she actually ought to wear underwear when going out when instead she never wore it except in bed.

To have gathered me there was not easy. My mother came from the Brahmin class that most high and proper middle class Kansas caste. And never from anywhere else except by way of her tremendous erudition drawn from books. As long as she lived I never knew her to not know the exact meaning of a word and use it correctly. And father, too often off elsewhere even when he was in the same room, came from rural poverty in Alabama so visceral it had almost killed him and if it hadn't been for the Great Depression would never have let him escape—the two of them so distant, so utterly different one from the other—to have ended up together in that noisy bed is breathtaking and heartbreaking.

Resounding moment of my incarnation peculiar to me like a thousand church tower bells ringing victory for their -my-- coming.

There, the southern poor boy who thought he could walk on Yankee snow, buoyant on frozen water. A miracle on ice in the time when he still believed in one. And there the prudish parsonage girl who ran the tap to hide the rumble of her treacherous, shameful bowels.

Getting them together naked into that bed is a joke achievement of destiny of which I am proud. Were they really naked? Hope so for their sake. I wonder because my people seem to me to have been acutely, miserably, horribly repressed.

Begot in Kinsley but born in Stockton. Stockton, Kansas was more than 200 miles from where my mother had gone to Wichita high school, it was 1,100 miles to Red Level, Alabama where my father had been schooled. Just before the war they were together but as very poor students in Boston 1,730 miles distant from all they'd known. Only a month before my conception father had still been in uniform with the US army in Trieste, Italy and that was an impossible distance of 5,244 miles from the racketing bed in Kinsley.

Father lay thinking that he'd just pleased my mother quite well, with his big bell cock and his balls hanging down like moist baseballs between his redhead milky thighs, still striving to be the best; mother hadn't a thought for that only mildly irritated by the clammy crud on her belly.

Mostly she had her mind on the fried chicken. My family, both sides, loved good food. Classical music. Reading. Dressing up. Riveting landscapes. Stirring mildly wicked literature, and being alone (to find ecstasy in the music, soft core porn and musings of their own solitary heads). I have never been happier than when alone.

Nevertheless I got mixed together sometimes perhaps in the wrong ways. I was

briskly stirred—Kansas, Alabama, Boston, fried chicken and Trieste. The many me's of Jonathan Wesley Bell were delivered without fanfare or rococo splendor onto the lone prairie, beached in a small room reeking of cheap midwife perfume (mother wore perfume in a quick dab behind each ear, but only of Rochas).

Father had brought her a bottle back from the war. Gray unlit Paris. By then he was a Major in the army and could splurge on her. Near her, her perfume sillage, was a trilling of sylvan pipes—that's one fuck of a terrible sentence yet just so I would now eulogize it.

The Rochas was used so parsimoniously that it lasted for decades, at least she thought it did. Being used long after it had turned to the vaguest memory.

I was shoved out into atmosphere with a slurp of placenta, my spaceman suit broken. I landed at more than a height of 1800 feet. On the Plain of Western Kansas, in the ranching community of Stockton, Rooks County, in the desolate place were the High Plains begin their inexorable rise, climbing in their peculiar terrain of sweeping treeless vistas unremitting except for gullies and low rolling hills.

Then going onwards, upwards even more, struggling with infinity, until stopped short by the inevitability of the Rockies. I came into an upstairs bedroom of a quite humble white clapboard house. My birth came in January. The early morning hour was inescapably one of deep winter, high plains bursts of wild wind and snow drifts in open country higher than the tomb at Halicarnassus. The scene was dramatic only in its deep darkness, startling without a moon. The murdering cold a dark tomb for all.

Or thereabouts. The stars shown starkly clear like crystal ornaments dangling in the firmament. My mother thought I was the coolest thing since soap.

At my birth angels sang to me in the forlorn town of Stockton, Kansas. Not much of an audience, Stockton had then a population of 1800, now less than 1400 and steadily faltering indexed to the water table of the Great Plains. There is something oddly fulfilling about coming from a dying place. It makes me feel like I too have the plague of failed rural renewal, bubonic of industrial farming. That in another life I was a large empty parking lot delineated and subdivided by failed Git'n Go shrubbery, lying fallow until I can catch a passing Walmart.

The village or little town, as you will, was at night no more than an atoll of a few uncertain street lights, to give a pitiful relief. No cars, trucks and not a single body about. Stockton would have looked the same as it does today. Silence ruled, a muted oceanic isolation abounded. Waves upon waves of ranch land beat on the place's barren shore. I can imagine it, see, hear, feel it with utter clarity. This because it hasn't

changed in the past 75 years, except for becoming emptier, lonelier. One striking change a disaster in its own scale, the town's hundreds of tall elm trees are gone, dying, dead, left standing as skeleton cut down in legions, victims of Dutch Elm disease and drought. With the elms dead the little town is stark naked. No shade to be found. It looks pathetic, as hoary as in the aftermath of an atomic bomb.

I alone broke that High Plains pervasive obscurity, at my hour of arrival, all events—time and matter-- were started up haltingly like an old cold Ford pick up engine. This sure knowledge of existential self I like to believe explains why I've been an atheist from birth as well as a committed nudist, Socialist and failed writer, hedonist, Spiritualist, poet, womanizer, novelist, homo. A brilliant salesman too which of all things I did not particularly want to be.

Attendant, just my mother, Frances Eleanor Bell, and an anonymous midwife were witnesses to the holy event of my entrance, cold as it was ugly on cheap linoleum, like an escapade on ice with spangles and cheesy fake smiles. The parsonage would have been shuddering in that unremitting Rocky Mountain wind blowing from 500 miles away to reach the small house with the swing on the porch ghost swingers in the wind creaking in their arthritic bare bones. There was a requisite tornado cellar out back like a tomb for a Moundbuilder family. The upstairs was a basic A-frame with one small window. The parsonage would have been lit up against the heavy gloom, the cold, the demonic wind. Lit sharp to welcome me.

I see my mother's familiar wide thick muff. It's parted for my wet head of hair oozing through. Of course I wailed, we who survive birth all do so. A commonality we quickly ignore.

First cry and the midwife lay me onto my mother's tit, a nice full one, that rubens-esque pillow. My father, the reverend, has now come into the room and to the bedside. He kisses my mother with the ardor he has for her, will have until she dies. An ardor she can't return except to dote on him like another child in her calm and complete decorum.

Father arrives. He says something like "Honey, did you hear? It's a boy! He's got a nice set. Most of his arms and legs too. Not sure about his fingers and toes. I didn't stop to count. Two eyes for sure. Guess we don't need to expose him on the rocks. I can tell he's just as smart as you are." Father preferred a racing banter talk of the age.

My father is in one of his bipolar ecstasies, glad tidings and mirth all about. I wonder how long that one lasted -- I am bipolar as well, bisexual too — which I'm sure he was not, and left handed. As an adult I'll have a cock of more than 8 inches

the likes of which set me always aside in Kansas, Texas, New York, England France and Ethiopia. It presented me with a mixed bag of good news and bad tidings. Too large for my own good.

The cursed cock I inherited from someone. I did not make it up from play dough. Only 2% have the same or larger. I wasn't fixated by it, not at all. It was invisible to me at first then became an extreme embarrassment. Other men stared. Wickedly shy by nature anything can make me blush. I blushed out of control in changing rooms and such so deeply that I was taunted through school as 'cherry cheeks.'

Cherry Cheeks' and 'Big-Dick.' How miserable to blush, how unmanly, how weak. It is not a chimera. A doctor in a sleep clinic in Toulouse measured it once erect after a shot of Papaverine. He said it was for science. 20.30 cm. A girl friend refused to blow me, "I'm not a deep throat" she told me while gagging on the head.

"Of course he's a boy, Mancil." She says so to my father, the reverend S. Mancil Bell, who stands grinning stupidly by the bed, lights dancing in the lens of his glasses. In a suit, tie and white shirt. As he always dressed. That foxy charming grin of his is worn that night for me.

"Boys, that's what you make, Mancil. Where are his brothers? They should come and see him. Look he just smiled. He says hello."

"Maybe he just took a dump," Whispered brother Steve having just entered. He stood nudging Alan's knees in shabby hand me down overalls, made them buckle in giggles as they were pushed forward into the crowded room.

Both the fuss over the lapse in a correct middle name and the implicit assumption that it should matter a lot to anyone indicates how I was from birth set aside, designated 'special', deluded from the get-go as both truly blessed and immaculately cursed. In my family we all were living in such figments. My parents were too proud to have it otherwise. Cursed and blessed were they, this duality pleased us with ourselves. Greatly, just as for poor Job. Pride goeth before an 'oopsy daisy doodle' like a finger chronically in the nose.

This justifies my Bell clan being born hearty except with a degenerate's genetically deformed heart. Turtle Ninjas be we. It's something called Left Ventricular Non Compacted Cardio Myopathy, intrinsic of us in our most arcane wiring both sexes. Bells must be different even in their death certificates. To me it's like being born Jewish a sure tragic pride in our own tragedy.

Her mother, my grandmother LaVerna was speaking downstairs, high pitched Eleanor Roosevelt voice disapproving, “She interrupted Bach, I heard her clear up at the front, said grandmother Verna imitating a country woman talk, “Well I fry mine in grease.””

Father had an old record player, a large gangly box. The dead of night of my birth he let it roar for awhile. Probably a middle brow piece, maudlin violin and from the bow of Fritz Kreisler. ‘ Songs My Mother Taught Me’ with a tear streaked sleeve. Just a judicious guess.

In time this phonograph he’ll replace with an early stereophonic system, somewhat sleeker, and with a sound that more than filled the parsonage. Perhaps to the dismay of our neighbors who did not approve of us, ever.

Years gone by when alone and not playing with myself, onanism was my earliest crime, pastime and playmate, I would turn it up to a bellowing rage to fill the parsonage with a rampaging and dissident din of Beethoven, to whom I romped naked and erect, a failed rebel against the staid brown furniture scuffed up beyond fixing by our shared insouciant nature and gathering a Sumerian dust in the darkened rooms, all the shades always drawn down tight. Our home life lived in gloom because my mother held a inviolable disesteem for the outside world. They weren’t good enough, they didn’t deserve us, they would kill us if let inside.

She manifestly kept our lives shrouded, sequestered behind those lowered and closed blinds, and tightly closed thick drapes. This seemed to me as I grew older to be more for her protection than ours.

Safe in this world, hers, she would flop down on a living room carpet to read Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner to her heart’s content. Bare legs bent up at the knees, feet bare wiggling.

This closeted world she made for our family she fiercely protected from encroachment. Virtually no one was allowed into it. She spoke to visitors on the porch or if of no importance to my father’s church business on the crabgrass lawn that each summer was left to grow high in a barrier of weeds.

Inside our house mother wore no girdle or bra, no hose or shoes. I soon learned that she rarely wore underwear either except during a period. Her hair was often uncombed. On a daily basis she didn’t waste time for applying any makeup.

For Sunday all this changed for the duties of church,. Then she wore one of her of her tasteful and tailored outfits, bought in last gasp sales in the best stores in Kansas

City when we made our very occasional trips there. On Sundays her hair was perfect. Her hair make was pastor's-wife perfect. She also dabbed the most discrete finger tip of French perfume to the base of her throat so that in passing she gave the finest ephemeral vision of a Parisian café. She wore no jewelry but her wedding ring, a slim gold watch and earrings—small elegant things that my father had brought back to her from his time as an Army Major in Europe. The wedding ring, a story too.

One morning she had me secretly accompany her to downtown Kansas City, to find a sleazy pawn shop in an unladylike part of the town. Even for me 19 it was a bit alarming. For mother it was an adventure. Her eyes sparked.

She hocked her ring with a gentle smile to a surprised looking pawnbroker who in turn looked down to make sure his zipper was OK. I don't know why she pawned the ring. She would never say. Soon enough it was back on her finger.

Otherwise she never cleaned house. She washed the dishes only on the occasions when she was between books and couldn't decide on what to begin next. When my father would rage at her "Clean up this hovel, Missy Mac!" his most agitated invective for her.

In return she'd merely pursed her lips in disapproval and threw a dish towel over the mess. As for us we were schooled in what she called 'The Bishop Dana Dawson cleaning.' What were to do if we heard an expensive car in the driveway and peeked to see that the Bishop had come unannounced in his big black Buick? We had two minutes. All portable detritus was to be hauled into my parents bedroom, leaving the door closed. She would kick her piles of books under the sofa. Same with empty Dr. Pepper cans and plates of sandwich crusts and crumbs.

Anything awry was straightened. Including for once, we ourselves in her incredibly tolerant estimation.

Music and books define us in my mind, in a land without great music or masterpieces of literature. Our very home walls were held up by books, or so it seemed. Hundreds of books.

But If we wanted cleaned sheets we had to change them ourselves. An Ironed shirt? When young she taught us to iron.

She did not permit anyone, even our closest friends, inside the parsonage. And should any who might evade her gain entry, should they ever dare touch the keys on our piano without permission, which most did, or squeeze the fruit in order to remark "Hey, it's real" were banished for life.

Mother set the tone for our parsonage existence. Ever polite. Ruled by kindness and consideration. Stoic acceptance. Cool defense.

Mother was angry so rarely that when she was it was like a tornado sky had darkened us in doom. Her otherwise dreamy brown eyes frosted into deep dark pools. Her bud lips straightened, no more roses. She would never say a word. She would never cry not even when my father was at his most stinging and nasty verbal abuse.

I never heard her utter a disparaging word. Good Kansas pioneer stock. Father born on the lone prairie in a Soddy. Grandfather born in County Fermanagh, Ulster.

Should a would-be friend manage to cross her line and into the house, after they left she would say blandly, that his behavior was 'vulgar.' This became her kiss of death statement about someone, a somebody turned unforgivingly unacceptable that lonely me had hoped would become a friend.

All this happened while her placid and impervious, pretty face beamed a deep and abiding love straight into the core of our beings.

She was a good looking woman who loved good food, cooked with a bit of class, wore her nice clothes with refined pride. When my father was doing his graduate studies they had live in an immigrant section of Boston. I think this instilled in Francis Eleanor her love for Thais by Massenet, and where she went back to in memory to weep into a handy dish towel every time she heard our recording of Beethoven's Seventh playing through its third movement.

When safely alone this unusual lady of perfect manners bubbled in mirth at anything pretentious or witty—unusual especially for a pastor's wife in Kansas in the 1950s. I was molded into the unorthodox, iconoclastic, heretical creature that I am by her. And I am also a writer as I'm certain she wanted to be. I too never wear underwear.

This was my first and most important base for writing.

Music and sex seem to have medleyed in me as early as 8. I began playing the piano then, picking up the violin a few years later, and finally the clarinet when I was 12. Only the piano would I be true to, studying it until I was 17. I think it is Music in particular that wedded me to language quite early on. I was deeply moved by Beethoven, Mozart, Handel, Brahms, the operas of Wagner and Verdi.

Steve introduced jazz into the parsonage, Miles Davis, Peggy Lee, Surprisingly my parents accepted it, although I didn't understand it it filled me with disturbances that I took with excitement to be pagan urges and profane thoughts.

Alan was passionate for rock 'n roll, which my father forbade so I heard it only when he was away. The Big Bopper, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Everly Brothers and my favorite Buddy Holly. I recall when on a trip west to visit Uncle Hubert and Aunt Ethel in Salt Lake city that Buddy Holly's death was announced and how Alan cried for him.

Aunt Ethel's mother had been named Pioneer Mother of Oklahoma and she kept that heritage close, proud of it like fresh polished silver. Ethel had worked for years as a saleswoman in the Women's Dept. of Auer Bach's Dept Store a sophisticated spot on the rough map of Salt Lake. She'd tell stories about the Auer Bach family, Jewish, rare enough in the West of that time. They were in contrast to all her Mormon customers. It was Ethel who told me about the Mormon way—long underwear, golden tablets in a farmer's field near Palmyra, NY, no coffee, to me eccentricities to marvel at. She was the first to tell me in a low voice about the when the Mormons massacred a wagon train of settlers. early I had a course in comparative religions teaching me they're all the same in a nutshell.

Like all my uncles, Hubert had money, he'd been a smart young oil field worker who managed to work his way up into the boardroom of Chevron Oil. He also played the jug and would send us tapes of himself in concert.

Whatever the music we at home had I would play it, rocking crazily to it in our old rocker that reliably took me away in a trance to many exotic and mystical places.

When alone in our house in Concordia, Kansas, I'd open the curtains wide for the sun, for letting all the world inside that my mother worked so determinedly to forbid. This was my trench warfare against her. From then on I fought her power over me.

Then I'd dance naked across the plate glass window in the living. With my little boy erection bobbling up and down. I'd prance across our sedate upper middle class view until in regret I'd hear father's car in the driveway and scamper for my clothes.

This steroid blare of musical tectonic plates in a very short while waxed to include reading. At About the same age as the piano I started to gulp down books. I went through our entire World Book Encyclopedia set, 1947 edition in 19 volumes. I read the history books I found in the local Carnegie Library, especially on the Ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome, Egypt. I also read whatever novels I could find, consuming them. Junk and great literature alike, I went at them fast and furious without much comprehension.

For about a decade my mother read aloud to me ever night. She read me the complete oeuvre of Dickens and when done started over again. For this reason I know Dickens best of any writer.

My freshman year in College I began serious writing, short stories only. Most of these were terrible. Although my third or fourth attempt, *The Present*, was published when I was 19 by the University of Kansas literary magazine, *The Cottonwood Review*. It is mercifully short but I think not so bad given my age and lack of discipline and effort. It's heavily under the sway of D.H. Lawrence and Steinbeck, saving influences if one must have an influences to sway to and be saved by.

D.H. Lawrence masterpieces had more sex so they took precedence. He became my mentor when in my first revolt against my parents I thought I wanted more than Dickens. My callow literary youth.

Enter my mother. It as she who actually bought for my 12th birthday a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, unexpurgated. I probably masturbated to each of its pages, that made possible because I had passed definitively through puberty at age 11. If living D.H. Lawrence might well feel deeply honored by this salute, even aroused.

Beyond the sex and defiance in his work, however, and more so even, it was his wonderful lyricism that made me a camp follower. Music in language I already heard in my head. Now I wanted so much to let it inform my scribbling.

So Lawrence got me under his thumb and I consumed most of his writings like French bread and fig jam, with adolescent ardor. Cocaine in the nose, hard cock up the asshole

Me. Identity is in as much flux as a tight ass slopped down in slick.

My tormentors arrive, my heroes for life, my brothers now rotted away in their graves who I hate and love to this day, they now appear in the room. My brothers are Stephen Mancil, 10 years and Alan David, seven years. Tellingly we are separated in age by a War. World War II.

Mother had pulled the sheet up over my head to hide her breast from the curious glances of the boys. That too was typical of her, decorum always, ever the lady in all things, quietly speaking in her being of class and self containment, stoicism and a mystic calm. The lost Irish trudging across the evil prairie without a murmur of complaint.

My brothers peer down at me, always so it seems from a height I can't reach.

Already plotting? Jealousy percolates thick and sad around the three of us.

Steve sneers at me, too intelligent and hyper active. "What do we do with him? We don't even know him. Is he alive?"

Alan pokes a finger at me and laughs, a truly beautiful little boy hiding a broken heart. "Maybe we can sell him to the neighbors tomorrow." And they try eventually to do so, when I am three. They haul me door to door in their red wagon. Back and forth we went through that lower middle class neighborhood. Wichita not so good. The pitch, "If you buy him you can have sex with him."

Which of them invented that? Steve. At my birth mother was 32, and handsome, toothy it was true but a face good enough for the Hollywood of the 50s. A buxom woman animated by a winsome glow.

Father was 35, and handsome. His a healthy masculine presence, good features, a grin that flashed like a neon sign.

Steve and Alan were handsome. We were a good looking family, which bade no good, to none of us. Intelligence and ego were our hallmarks. Pride was our greatest nemesis. There were no people, none around anything at all like us. We were one offs, will always be so, custom tailored Brahmins in a strange land. This was my own plague.

Like them I was smart and handsome. Like them I was primed to go off in self destruction.

A gusting howl in the night. For some reason the dog answered the wind with a bark, he was called Vicar. He is only here to complete the attendants of this event.

"What in the name of plus perfect hell, get that damnable low down cur out of this room! There's a new Bell in here! The only thing dirtier than a dog is the human hand!"

My father would have enunciated this very clearly. Father was prone to giving declarative military orders in disturbing ways. Delivered to us from his invisible pulpit in the sweet Alabama accent of the gulf region, which even Boston University could not eradicate. We had no luck with pets, they never lasted, neither dogs nor cats. Even our one parakeet, Jolly Cholly, flying free and jollying up the dining room dipped before our eyes to be boiled alive in a rare freedom flight-witch trial. Dying stick legs

going straight up in mother's Thanksgiving dinner gravy.

The baby was content. At that time kept always content. Kept content as long as possible in a self-conscious way that would come to mask many lies. There were secrets and shrouded things in all our Parsonages—I lived in seven.

My parents had agreed to name me Jonathan Edwards Bell, to honor the early notable American theologian and writer. But in registering me my infamously absent-minded father slipped a cog and made me 'Wesley' after the founder of Methodism—of myriad examples he once drove more than 50 miles through Kansas with his Bible flapping on the car roof, on comers tooting and flashing their brights. Maybe giving onlookers the impression it was a Shriners parade. Twice he drove the wrong direction to up somewhere obscure in Nebraska, a double obscurity.

This mistake I think, the first of many, was a quite early manifestation of how pleasantly fucked up my life would be. And of how divided and dissolute and disappointed our family would become once fate stopped applauding our looks and wit. We were all failures.

On the High Plains that night emptiness received me all about compounded by abounding self-destructiveness. Emptiness plus the Good and the Bad roamed high and low seeking for a resting place for me, in me.

I have a question, why was was the most important of all books at that time in that place for all known souls, the Jewish-Christian holy book, why was it not the center of our family? I didn't even read it until I was at university. Given we were a pastor's family. My mother a pastor's daughter. Why? Now I think perhaps to us the too ardent religion was itself something vulgar.

Surely there must have been ambivalence of some high degree lurking like bugs in the dark corners of our parsonage. We had only a 15 minute prayer session every morning at the breakfast table. It sufficed as my religious education.

We had but one fast and sure religion rule, attend church on Sundays but otherwise first clean your own butt on Saturday evening. One bath a week. This unblessed rite of washing away our sins and putting on our glad apparel was mother's way of preparing our bodies for sacrifice, sending the events of the week, the dirt and shame, in a gray grimy lascivious sucking down the tub drain so we could be born again.

I can only be very thankful that religion did not seriously rule us. Intentionally or not I was thereby given a relatively free mind, license to be idiotic. A rare and

wonderful gift. A mind wiped cleaner than the Pope's ass.

After my father died I found an old leather bound copy of Dante's Inferno among his possessions.

On the front page bottom left he had written in his very bold and clear script: "Only a Christian would love this book so much as to steal it."

THAT MOTHER OF MINE

In our near stygian parsonage I lived in gloom until leaving for university. Only then did I get turned loose into the light. That was because mother held an inviolable disesteem for the outside world. She was instinctively a sort of mystic hermit.

Mother, Frances Eleanor Little, manifestly kept our lives shrouded in a kind of fog clinging to our old, brown wooden furniture, rooms choked with furniture from the 20s and 30s, mainly a lot of heavy scuffed chairs and veneered tables, many somber, tall bookcases packed tight with titles, plus sofas and armchairs of cautious good taste. Almost everything had been given to us by my grandmother, the enigmatic Verna Cane Little, these originating in parsonages across Kansas.

For you see mother too had been raised in a parsonage.

Apparently this had made an immense impression on her, turned her to rebelling and a sweet iconoclasm.

And then of course on the walls were the gravures of odd themes— dancing pastel nymphs, garlanded marriage scenes, Rome in ruins, and an especially regarded copy of a work by some renaissance Dutch second tier artist. That lithograph was quite large in its ornate frame, 3x4, depicting two goodies their heads bent in gossip over their morning coffee. This work was my favorite and I would stare long at it while I rocked into my countless meditative trances, until I'd step into it and disappear from myself.

Books, books, books were the only bric-a-brac. No crosses, no sentimental prints of Jesus as an Anglo Saxon so pretty and groomed that there could be no doubt but that he was gay. No religious imagery at all. Strange parsonage.

The general jumble gave an impression of faded gentility.

Mother arranged the rooms in a faux grandeur, on the edge of pretentious, but saved from that because our household god was shabby good taste in deep brown wood under a dim film of dust. Mother never dusted.

Those darkened rooms, all that dark furniture, I am most at home in Faustian stage sets.

My grandfather, Rev. William Fletcher Little, was not a successful pastor and so my grandparents had moved ever one or two years hauling their/our furniture back and forth across Kansas with their two daughters one of whom was refined to pretension and prone to

airs, the other being my willful unadorned mother.

My grandmother need no airs, none. she was naturally the real thing. Grand by nature, elegance and refinement in her genes.

Perhaps without meaning to she was grandfather's problem. A town's only duchess living in the Methodist parsonage. She couldn't help being naturally imposing.

So they were dispatched frequently going like refugees from one dusty speck of a sorry depression-blighted town to another.

This hand-me-down interior world of ours mother kept obsessively sequestered by drawn window shades, lowered and closed blinds, she used clothes pins to tightly pinch together the thick drapes.

As I grew older I saw this more for my mother's protection than ours. She'd been scarred by small town inquisitions and gossip.

In those times a pastor's family was too prominent to be ignored, a poor and powerless elite.

Safe in such a world, hers, she would flop down on a living room carpet to read Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner to her heart's content. Bare legs bent up awards at the knees, bare feet wiggling.

This closeted world she made for our family she fiercely protected from encroachment. Virtually no one was allowed into it. She spoke to visitors on the front porch or if of no importance to my father's church business out on the scabrous crabgrass lawn that each summer was left to grow high and evil in a protective acervate barrier of weeds.

Recall that mother was wife to one of the, if not the, most prominent pastor in the towns where I grew up. Everyone knew who we were. Everyone took regard of us.

How unorthodox a home my mother kept is attributed to by the act that after seven years in Concordia, on moving out day our neighbors on either side threw a goodbye party—we were NOT invited—they stood on their anal-compulsive Republican lawns to toast their martini glasses to us in great relief as we drove away.

I think that the chronic unruliness of our desiccated yard, a startling standout amid the middle class grooming of its neighbors, just like the closed-tight forbidding fortress of our house itself, that these were warnings to stay away. Mother's way of aiming a loaded gun at the rest of the world.

Safe inside her walls mother wore no girdle or bra, no hose or shoes. On a daily basis she didn't waste time applying any makeup. I soon learned that she wore no underwear either except during a period.

Her hair was often uncombed and in a gesture so typical of her, every few minutes she'd sweep a hand up and back on the chestnut curls that looped over her bright shining eyes.

For Sunday all this changed for the duties of church. Then she put on a proud show of her best gentility. She'd wear one of her tasteful and tailored outfits, bought in last gasp sales in the best stores in Kansas City when we made our very occasional trips there.

On Sundays her hair was perfect. Then her makeup was pastor's-wife discrete. She also dabbed the most infinitesimal drop of French perfume to the base of her throat so that in passing she gave the ephemeral vision of a Parisian antique store on the Rue de Rivoli. She wore no jewelry except for her wedding ring (which she herself would pawn to pay bills in a sleazy KC pawn shop, on the sly of father who would believe her story that it needed repair) a slim gold watch and earrings—small elegant things that my father had brought back to her from Italy, acquired in his time as an Army officer in Europe.

Otherwise she never cleaned house. She washed the dishes only on the occasions when she was between books and couldn't decide on what to begin next.

Finally my father would explode in rage and fury at her, shouting "Missy Mac, clean up this nigger hovel!" This his most profound, Alabama invective to fling at her. Including her most detested word. Mother was an FDR Democrat and abolitionist through and through.

Then she'd merely admonish him with an even "Mancil, please don't speak that way, it makes you sound like Governor Wallace and I know you don't want to be him." This came from her lips pursed in disapproval.

To placate him she'd smile sweetly and neatly spread a dish towel over the offending mess in the sink. She might even swipe irresolutely at the kitchen table with a damp cloth.

Mother never made our beds, never changed the sheets. She'd leave fresh ones for us on the stairs. She ironed my father's shirts, but nothing for us. Instead she taught us to iron, to do so if we wanted ironed clothes. None of this was done by her in the slightest rancor. She dwelled with her four men in her happy, loving, impish little girl way. Always on her own terms.

As for us we were schooled in what she called 'The Bishop Dana Dawson cleaning.'

What were we to do at the sound of an expensive car in the driveway and peeked to see that the Bishop had come unannounced? All portable detritus was to be hauled into a back room, door closed. She would kick her piles of books under the sofa. Same with empty Dr. Pepper cans and plates of sandwich crusts. She'd scamper for stockings and bra, run a brush through her hair.

We could be ready for the Bishop in five minutes flat. The Bishop was fond of me so my job was to run out to their car and stall them with boyish gibberish.

Music and books define us in my mind, we were an oasis on the High Plains surrounded by a vastness without great music or masterpieces of literature. Our very home walls were held up by books, or so it seemed. Hundreds of books.

She did not permit our closest friends inside. And any friend who ever dared touch the keys on our piano without permission, which most did, or squeeze the fruit in order to remark "Gosh, it's real" were banished for life.

If a would-be friend managed to cross her line and get into the house, and then broke her code of acceptable good manners, after they left she would say blandly, "well that was vulgar." This became her kiss of death statement about someone, somebody that lonely me had hoped would become a friend.

Mother set the tone for our parsonage existence. Ever polite, governed by kindness and consideration, and her strict politeness and manners above all. She emanated a Stoic acceptance of what she had and did not have.

Mother ruled by love, a thick tapioca pudding of it, which is why my later rebellion against it would reenact the fall of the angel Satan.

She was angry so rarely that when it did happen it arrived for us like a silent film version of Armageddon.

Her otherwise dreamy brown eyes frosted over before snapping into deep dark pools. Her bud lips clenched, no more roses. She would never say a word in her anger. She would never cry from it not even when my father was giving her his most stinging and nasty verbal abuse.

I never heard her utter a disparaging word. Good Kansas pioneer stock.

But for the most part her placid and impervious, pretty face beamed a deep and abiding love straight into the core of us.

She was a good looking woman tending to plump and buxom who loved good food, cooked with a bit of class, had pride in it.

When my father was doing his graduate studies they had lived for three years in an immigrant section of Boston. This gave her a range of odd dishes to cook.

It was in Boston that she came to love opera, Thais by Massenet in particular. Grand tragic music swept her off into a reverie of tears, gushing them into a handy hanky. She did so without fail every time she heard our recording of Beethoven's Seventh playing through its third movement.

Of course she never swore, never uttered an unkind, sarcastic or even ironic word. Most of all she gloried in us, she thought us so distinguished, telling us that often. Her pleasure was just to have long talks with us at the kitchen table. She was always interesting, always entertaining. I suppose that mattered more than doing the dishes.

In turn we worshipped her. She became our Holy little Mother. That is until I in a peak of idiocy came to highly resent her, feeling that she was emasculating me.

One mystery to me was her religion. I have come to think 45 years after her death that she must have been a pagan in a patina of shining sweet Christianity.

This became clear when in a rite of spring our sky would turn blue-black and the tree limbs thrashed and blew apart like exploding hay. We were breathless waiting for Odin to descend. She'd go outside, to the front yard and stand with upturned face in anticipation of the coming of the storm which sometimes was as grand as a tornado. Then she seem to gone far away, a lonely stoic in her silent adoration of the sky, the wind, the rain.

Kansas storms filled her with a violent magic that none of us comprehended (least of all my father who'd be taking shelter in the basement with a flashlight). Yes there was a pagan element to her. A North Sea Irish totem in her hidden self.

While ho-hum Methodist for the rest of the year she always took one week in August to disappear in a telling escapade. Later

I learned this was to the Unity Church Village in Kansas City, Missouri. She'd return without comment or explanation.

That is where the world headquarters of a small sect are located on a sprawling 1200 acre site rich with buildings from the 1920s. What unity lacked in size it made up for in money, lots of money. Unity membership is largely made up of movie actresses. Why I

cannot say. For mother this annual retreat was so intensely private that I never thought to ask about it.

I am now better informed. Briefly, Unity teaches that all people can improve the quality of their lives through thought. Unity describes itself as having no particular creed, no set dogma, and no required ritual. It maintains that there is good in every approach to God and in every religion that is fulfilling someone's needs. Pabulum for those fearing the definitive.

How like mother!

Finally, Mother, was also an exhibitionist. More than once my "pals" (I had none hence the ironic quotation marks) would be biking about the neighborhood in the summer heat of Concordia. They'd find me and yell out, "hey Bell, go see what's in your front yard." I would, with sinking heart, and yes there was mother sitting amid our weeds on a lawn chair her dress hiked up to catch a cooling breeze. She'd be sitting front and center to shoot the beaver at any passerby.

At such times if I approached her she'd be in a sweet daze. I knew it was impossible for her not know what she was doing.

Although angry and deeply resentful I never had the heart to tell her to lower her dress. Truly, mother's muff was a large fur ball .

In time, after university and her death, even on into my 50s, my resentment of her turned to anger at how much she controlled me. For a long period I actually forgot the sound of her voice, what she looked like. She disappeared from my life.

But of course she was too outstanding and dear to remain vanquished. Eventually she came back to me as a ghostly presence and our old camaraderie returned. I am so sorry to have squandered so much of my living time without her. Now I look forward to her holding my hand when I die.

She unwittingly molded me into an unorthodox, heretical crazy creature. And I am also a writer as I know she wanted me to be with all her heart.

How came this woman out of context come to be? I learned only a little about it. Much had to do with Grandmother Verna. Some also to her mix of orthodox and unorthodox thought. Part to a mixture of unusual intelligence with a naturally calm and benevolent disposition.

Grandfather William Fletcher was indubitably in the mix as well. In fact watching

closely as I did I came to wonder sometimes if he and mother weren't the same person. Their similarity was astonishing. Kind, quiet, extremely self contained souls. For good reason, I use the word stoic for them in my mind.

The significant difference was in their intelligence.

Grandfather was a very sweet passive man, but he didn't shine with wit like mother did. He'd been born in a soddy on the barren prairie, the son of a teacher and farmer, in turn the son of a teacher and farmer, generations of the same back to the time they followed Cromwell from Scotland to Ulster. Their temperament gave them fortitude as pioneers. This strong benign personality and character startlingly continues in the family despite the terrors of the Bells. When mother was diagnosed with end-stage cancer she came home from the doctor and asked us what we'd like for dinner.

Verna was different. Febrile, critical, brilliant and I think neurotic. She was beautiful with remarkably fine facial bones, a long neck, piercing eyes. She carried herself aristocratically. She had very small wrists and ankles. She was slim. And so effortlessly elegant in person but also in her deportment, how she did her hair, the clothes she chose. How opposite from mother as a child.

She was among the 5% of American women earning a Bachelor's degree in 1890. She never used it. Instead, prone to migraine's, it's said, she spent much of her afternoons in shaded rooms writing poetry and reading.

Her mornings were frenetic, however. First thing she'd open all doors and windows. Then she'd strip down every bod to wash the sheets. After that she'd gather up the carpets to take them out to be beaten by a broom. She'd take a bucket of sand and a long handled stiff brush to scour all her wooden floors.

Her house was not merely impeccable, it was antiseptic. While not be asked to help in the work, her daughters war expected to keep it perfect.

She had nice furniture, nice clothes. Except for housework she wore black from hat down to shoes. Her blonde hair turned slowly to a snow white. She kept it piled into a tight bun. At night I, her favorite grandchild, was elected to watch when she seated at a vanity she'd let her hair down in what I remember as a magnificent cascade fell to the floor. She taught me how to carefully brush it. And later to use the curling iron.

Grandmother always brought me wonderful books with magical illustrations. Unlike my dissident mother I adored her. From evidence Mother probably hated her. It's unclear. The favoritism for sister Ruth was excruciatingly patent. I think mother bore a lifetime of hurt that her naturally good nature found no release for, most of the time.

When grandmother died I was riding in one of the funeral cortege cars, sitting beside mother. I remember saying "don't cry" to her. She answered "I am not crying, dear. I never loved her."

Very late in her life and long after Mother's death Aunt Ruth told me this. "Your mother and your grandmother were sitting together one time. I was playing the piano. All of a sudden your mother stabbed your grandmother with a hat pin."

That's eloquent enough especially for such a gentle person as mother.

Whatever devilment was at play, for myself I can say with a cleared head that Mother more than anyone made me who I am. Although never stabbing anyone, I did once try to strangle someone. Oh, and I never wear underwear.

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

And now comes my fall from grace, when hell caught in strong arms and held me fast. Age seven but age is immaterial because it isn't chronological to me. I don't remember the crucial details, damn it, the who and exactly 'what' of it. I only recall the following, written below. It is ever just so without change, strong as old whisky, aging me since it occurred. I am b.c. and a.d. to this happening. But it doesn't hurt me. It's lost in a painless cloud of unknowing.

Puny milk white me I'm naked on a dirty mattress. Someone holds my ankles tight, without mercy. Legs are spread.

I'm on the cement floor of someone's house, a strange house it seems, dim and dank. The scary mattress material is white with blue stripes gathered by many white buttons. It feels gritty to my bare back, scrapes my bare legs and butt. I can see tufts of what to me look like shreds of medical cotton balls licking out of the mattress.

Along with those buttons I can only recall calling for incessantly for help, from mother who never rescues me. And the breathless stinging crying. The stink of a high tide of tears.

Then at what seems to be the 'ending' of the drama I see someone holding a bicycle pump and pressing the nozzle against my cute little asshole. A voice says "if you tell I'll come back and stick this in you. I'll pump you up till you explode."

So I never told. At least not for a long time and even then hesitantly. The memories are not retrieved, they are indelible like a tattoo on my hippocampus. In place although lost there in a field of imperturbable blackness of ancient brain and cracked skull with no hope of ever seeing a red light on for a far distant EXIT.

Who did it? Right away without a shred of evidence and for more than 25 years I blamed my brothers without saying a word about it to them. Just knowing their imperturbable guilt.

When I did at last confront my broken china memory and them it came as part of what was my first mental breakdown. I've had more than one. the first being the

worst. June 1, 2000. I woke to having become another person. I'd been shattered as the Rolling Stones put it. I was born again without warning. It came as a thunderclap that ripped me into shreds, shook at the feet of my life from then on. I wonder about it still, the dark terrible place inside me where I can't go no matter how hard I try.

MY SECOND COMING

Epiphanies! Comings and goings. Life shaping, shifting. Another one in the moment when cum spurted out of my cock for the first time. Lord help me I became a man, except I was 10. It was a thin weak shooting of drool, a fine clear incongruous liquid of life. It happened as I lay playing with myself, spread naked on Paul Post's bed. I was reading a Superman comic and as usual was turned on by Superman's body, his tights, the hint of a bulge between his legs.

Paul my best one and only friend was also naked on the bed but had not arrived yet, would not for another three years, at the same golden moment of one's first ejaculation, a moment of such pure revelation that for me it is framed in time as my flowering as a person, my premier burst of inner self into a joyous explosion of bodily expression.

I looked in awe mixed with utter astonishment at the liquid, my liquid, pooled now at the base of my cock. It glistened in the strong light from a glaring overhead light bulb.

It was a very dark night in summer, in a small Kansas town. We were in a screened upstairs porch. Paul's parents were in bed away from us in his large house. I was sleeping over as I did almost every Friday night. The bed besides our two naked bodies was littered with comics.

"Paul . . . I think it happened. I think I did it! Look!" Paul's round face, big bright eyes with long lashes and a head of black short hair, suddenly darted up from the comic he was reading to focus avidly on my body. He put a finger in the pool of cum. "I don't believe it, you did!" He was as excited as I was. My true life had begun.

MISSIONARY BARREL

How quaint missionaries seem today. Yet I recall them as integral to life in my father's parsonage. That place of my childhood of worn out furniture and tall wooden shelves that make for a castle keep guarding hundreds of books no longer read, for art ignored, and great music now left unheard. Sad for me? Not at all, an implausible distinction.

My parsonages, I lived in several, together they make for a ruin of identical places where in another life I once lived. They seem utterly unique today. The parsonage was an unusually calm and hidden place ruled by my parents' gentle persuasion for a benign religion that was tolerant of others as long as the others behaved themselves. Everyone being simulacrums, renderings of the same well behaved child model.

Mainly I grew up in a home of Intelligent thought or at least I thought so.

Now I wonder if it was so or simply more brain washing.

Evil didn't exist there. It was subsumed up into the cloud of unknowing. In this I felt abandoned by the crowd and increasingly unrecognizable, a wonderful neglect giving me added value in my own eyes. Cerebral excess while all the while below my body ran riot.

My parents welcomed into our parsonages these characters, missionaries, who absolutely could no longer exist: Aunt Harriet, Russell King, E. Stanley Jones.

'Tolerance' for mother and father being always the greatest of civilized gentilities. Yet also, I came to learn, one leaving us defenseless in our superiority. Our Rome waiting for another good sacking, for Barbarians on the lookout for a cheap motel to stop with us for the night.

The good Christians around were certainly intolerant of us, sometimes cruelly so. Christianity taught doubt. Also anguish. Also a grand giugnot fear.

My parents adhered to a low key, high brow Protestantism that was eclectic and embracive. A weight of bad breath seeping from the interstices among good teeth. For them Christianity meant a mild, Christ centered, mysticism with a tonic of

Humanist thought.

Yet in their day these characters knew excitement, world events, and especially some of the people who had a profound impact on the 20th century.

Missionaries of the same persuasion were respected as spreading enlightenment, more so than as agents of crude proselytizing.

Already by the time I was 11, somewhat more than midway through the 'Great Republic's' second century, such a home as my parent's parsonage had become quite unusual especially so on the Great Plains where we lived. Today it would be more than surreal. It would be unintelligible, its language lost like Latin.

Aunt Harriet had been a missionary to China, Russell King still was one to Africa and the great (to me) E. Stanley, as we called him, had spent his life in India. In their suitcases they brought into our home these three great alternatives to European orthodoxy and global hegemony.

I think my bellicose, rebellious spirit, that hallmark of me for good and for ill, was nurtured in part by the momentous revolutions in points of view that these three themselves had been altered by and were living witnesses to.

Yet, soon enough I'd come to indignantly rebel against them too. That was their importance as well. How can we fight for our freedom if there is nothing to fight against? They gave me quite real images to destroy in my adolescent, iconoclastic fury. They like my parents I would come to both love and abhor.

Looking behind me I see that their ultimate gift to me was a love for mankind, for its poor, sick, helpless, manipulated and ignorant folk. They tried to their utmost to turn teeming masses into miserable individuals. How ashamed I feel for failing to follow them in their glorious if futile quest. No matter how close I felt to them, I remained a useless spectator.

Sister Harriet

A teacher for 30 years in China. I knew Aunt Harriet in the 1950s when she visited us in Kansas once a year. Then in her mid -70s to me she was only interesting in that in the 1920s she'd been abducted by a Chinese Warlord and held for ransom.

I can now imagine the old woman, poor and alone, planning her annual calendar like a Progress by the Virgin Queen to bankrupt her lords. She'd include

beside our family similar stays with her many acquaintances.

She was not my aunt at all, no relation, her title was honorific. My parents knew her from their early happy years of marriage, back in the mid 1930s in Boston, where my father attended seminary, Boston University School of Theology.

Returning from China to Boston in the 1930s Harriet's work was to help missionary families returning from the field adjust back into American life.

She stretched this vocation to include my parents who themselves were in great need of 'adjusting'. Being young, inexperienced and most likely terrified of having arrived in their first real city. Neither would have known anywhere larger than Wichita, a small city then with a narrow mentality.

It was Harriet who opened them to previously unimaginable experiences from what they'd known in depression-era Alabama and Kansas. Harriet who toured them through Boston's museums, taken them to the symphony and opera, introduced them to the panoply of its immigrant cuisines. Much of what was in our parsonage, in my child's brain, came from her influence.

Aunt Harriet didn't notice me. Even at 11 I understood she was off in her own private China. She talked of that repeatedly, in a sharp Boston accent, a chatter of bad breath. Mother explained the odor came from her cheap false teeth.

Kidnapped by a Chinese warlord! That fired me up inspired as I was by Charlie Chan movies and my older brothers' fulsome explain of what 'rape' meant. It's dubious that Aunt Harriet was ever ravished, surely a homely face and androgynous figure kept her safe. Most of all she likely remained pristine because 'damaged goods' were less valuable in barter.

She'd been captured somewhere in the sprawl of China's northern half. The half of a vast country that was almost entirely parceled out among the Warlord factions that came to rule it in the void left by the end of Manchu rule.

At last ransomed she'd returned to some passing notoriety. Apparently she enjoyed that because I could see how she looked about her even with us in Cloud County Kansas (it is a real place), perhaps wistfully expecting to be recognized.

To my disappointment Harriet never talked of that, I only knew about it from my parents. Instead, her conversation centered on the horrors of Communist China. She gave harrowing accounts of the heroic (to her) struggles of the Nationalists—the

champions of all things great and good. She'd get visibly distressed over what they'd been reduced to, the tiny National Republic of China (the designation I myself was firmly instructed to use) on Taiwan, in Taipei.

Harriet had been particularly close to the Soong sisters, legendary luminaries of China as it 'awakened.' They were three Christian women from a most wealthy and powerful Shanghai family. The three were educated in the US and were also Methodists so the connection to Harriet was direct. The Soong sisters are legendary for intelligence, assertiveness. It didn't hurt that they were striking. They were Soong Ailing, Soong Ching-ling, Soong Mei-ling.

Soon Ailing became spouse to the richest man in China. She had a hand through him, as the country's Finance Minister, in creating the national bank of China.

Ching-ling, married Sun Yat-sen the first president of China and known as the father of modern China. After his death this one went on to be a highly influential Communist Party supporter. From 1959 to 1972 she served as the joint Vice Present of Communist China. Ultimately, Ching-ling would be named Honorary Chairman of the nation.

When Ching-ling died in the 1980s aged 99, three days of national mourning were declared and Chinese flags were flown at half mast.

And then there was the youngest sister, Mei-ling, a true beauty and the particular friend of Harriet's. She married the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek. This made her, foremost, First Lady of mainland China and then later of

Taiwan. She too wielded real power. As Madame Chiang Kai-shek she became a global celebrity.

Harriet's connection to and friendship with these three astonishing Soong sisters gave her keys to their kingdoms—she simply knew everyone of importance in Chinese history from say 1915 to 1930.

Our dining room would crowd with these people as Aunt Harriet brought them in with her anecdotes. She'd survived monstrous battles, plagues and great natural disasters. Harriet had apparently thrived in that upheave, that fraught history.

Is it any wonder that my parents welcomed her to free load off them in return for such stirring, amazing, incomparable entertainment.

Russell

Care for the most benighted. He fits in as bringing Albert Schweitzer into my home. Unfortunately, as a child but only to myself, I called Russell King ‘the nose.’

As a boy it was difficult for me to look Russell King in the face. He’d been given such an extreme pug nose, cartilage incredibly almost up to his frontal lobe, short to his skull, that I fancied I could see into his skull and watch his brain pulse with thoughts of fund raising ploys. Furthering this his nostrils were unfortunately round and large, moist and inviting, two horrible mysteries. For me his tiny nose was monstrous in its implications.

He visits home to the States were to raise money for Schweitzer’s hospital in Lambarene, in what was at the time French Equatorial Africa (now Gabon). Once he brought along two children from Africa, his own. A boy and a girl, odd, very pale replicas of himself. To my dismay they’d inherited the same nose. When during that visit the three Russell noses were together in a room of our home I’d begin to wonder if theirs were in fact the heads of a monkey species.

But I believed Russell King to have been a good man. Even though I got the impression that mother did not approve of him. To have asked her about it would have been vulgar so her disfavor remains a mystery.

Otherwise he brought us Africa in his suitcase. Before my acquaintance with Russell King my imagined Africa was a place like a movie set for the films of the Tarzan novels that I adored. A place of friendly looking jungle, comic natives and a wonderful welcoming chimp to cavort with. His house was even like my own tree house in our backyard perched in the sheltering arms of a large quaint tree.

During each of his visits our living room would be darkened one evening while we sat in folding chairs. The beam of light from the whirring projector lit our small audience in profile. King splashed his slides one by one, click after click, onto a bed sheet screen that my mother had strung up. He spoke a running commentary.

Startling Images swam over me so strange they made me cringe. Interminable slides of Africans, sometimes grinning, more often their faces taut in a zombie-like rictus terribly eloquent of a dumb suffering.

Entire heads appeared disappeared into the horror of ‘elephant man’ virus, feet and hands were shown eaten alive by leprosy, eyes pierced at me in near-to death throes of cholera and malaria.

Albert Schweitzer, rather than Tarzan, was the great star of these slide shows. Albert Schweitzer needed no credit, with his baroque mustache in a fury, his acne scarred cheeks, his head either a crown of white glory or else covered in a smarmy looking pith helmet.

Schweitzer was hailed as a genius. Moreover, a good one, if we can still believe that of any man. At the time he was known around the world, much less so now I think, goodness become a weakness or worse a deceit. He received the Nobel Peace prize in 1952. He was both a medical doctor and a doctor of philosophy. He was a great organist, maybe the greatest of his age.

His central, simple concept of 'Reverence For Life' was strangely alien to our world in Kansas. The Cold War encroached around us dotting our empty landscape in a multitude of missile silos.

Schweitzer's Reverence For Life is even more antique now. A musty world of missionary relics. is care for the shunned- lepers and those afflicted with the dreaded sleeping sickness- at his virtually hand built hospital carved from the deepest dark jungle heart of what was then French Equatorial Africa. It seemed saintly then while now we have no saints.

Then he was a man to be seriously revered. Especially by my parents who goose stepped in his parade. During Russell King's slide shows in our living room my mother would weep at the photos of the afflicted, at scenes with Schweitzer in his hospital and of the sick children in his care crowding round him for attention.

For me, I was in my music phase. My admiration of Schweitzer was also for his stature as a great virtuoso of the organ. It was a period of several years in my boyhood and teen years when I assiduously if abysmally played piano, violin and clarinet. I reverently listened to Schweitzer's Columbia recordings of the Bach organ preludes, toccatas, passacaglias and fugues.

During Russell King's slide shows in our living room my mother would weep at the photos of the afflicted, at scenes with Schweitzer in his hospital and of the sick children in his care crowding round him for attention.

My father did not weep at the slide photos of lepers. Not once did I see a tear on him, not even when my mother died. But he did weep once. Mother told me so. That time on his seeing the stacks of naked dead in the Ohrdruf Death Camp where he'd been at the time of its liberation. My guess is that those terrible scenes there had drained him, leaving him lost to emotion other than a terrible anger for the rest of his

life. My very own father was a peripheral victim of the collective barbarism of a civilized people, also our living proof that the nightmare had been real.

Father took photographs of what he saw. Confessions of atrocity for those too blind to see, himself included. I have them now. What they show infects me too. Dead people in dead photos so alive they kill you.

Clear to me now how he suffered from the evil he'd witnessed

E. Stanley Jones, or just E. Stanley to us, remains a rarity to me, a genuine Christian. He was certainly the most important missionary to come our way, the best known to our family. I have a fortified recollection of him as a refined gentleman, sensitive and intelligent, quintessentially kind.

He visited us often when we lived in Concordia. That was because of his international Christian Ashram movement for which my father was the Kansas Director. That was an unpaid position in addition to his regular work on the Bishop's cabinet.

The Ashram demanded a great deal of organizing, taking place for a week each summer. A week adhering to E. Stanley's precepts for his Christian Ashram of intense prayer, seclusion and spiritual reflection. E. Stanley called it a "retreat for the soul." I attended because my father dutifully subscribed his family.

E. Stanley wedded Christianity to the framework of the Hindu Ashram because he had spent a life time in India as a missionary and too because Mahatma Gandhi had been a close friend. On the afternoon of the Mahatma's assassination Jones was in fact on his way through New Delhi for a meeting with Gandhi. One that to his great sorrow would never be kept.

Jones wrote 30 books, some best sellers in their day (Christ of the Indian Road alone sold more than a million copies in 1924). But the most acclaimed was his biography Gandhi—Portrayal of a Friend. 'Portrayal of a Friend' is credited by Martin Luther King as the major inspiration for his own non-violent crusade.

Time Magazine described E. Stanley as "The world's greatest missionary." Perhaps he was. Jones, a confidant of such disparate characters as FDR and Nehru, a two time nominee for the Nobel Peace Prize and recipient of the Gandhi Peace Award in 1963, was also a constant diplomat which explains his frequent visits to the White House.

Circles within circles drawn back to the circle of light over our dining room table.

My parents were further closely linked to E. Stanley by Asbury College, where in Kentucky's Blue Grass region my parents had gone to school during the Depression, where they met and fell in love. More than a generation before, E. Stanley had taught at Asbury before heading to India.

As an intelligent and sensitive child it is understandable that I fell for E. Stanley. Being close to him made me feel I was in turn close to the great Gandhi, my greatest hero.

On a speaking tour for peace in the U.S. when World War Two began, the British refused to allow E. Stanley back into India. That due to his sympathies for the India National Congress and Nehru. For years he was kept separated from his family.

Given my nature I was highly susceptible to the E. Stanley Jones Ashram experience, a global movement he created in 1930 in the Himalayas. So much so that on a hot and humid August night alone in a dorm room of Kansas Wesleyan College, the campus then hosting the Kansas Ashram, while truly awake, I vividly saw Jesus come through the window and land in my room.

It was so profoundly real. Few moments in my life are clearer. If I close my eyes I see it now. In alarm I jumped out of bed in my underwear, tears on my cheeks, and raced to another room where my parents were sleeping.

There I blubbered my tale of a Technicolor visitation. It seems to me that while my father was excited about my being blessed, my mother was nonchalant. "How nice, Jonie, now go back to sleep. You can stay with us."

Next morning my parents stayed in character, mother calm, father agitated perhaps feeling that through his son he'd had a sorely needed verification of faith. Me? It's fuzzy, although I am certain that a pervading peace had numbed my chronic fears and phobias.

Father took me at breakfast to see E. Stanley. He asked me to tell the experience to him. It was a bit like Jesus being presented at the Temple.

E. Stanley then took me with him, just us two, for a stroll across the campus of Kansas Wesleyan. What wisdom did I receive from E. Stanley? Sadly I recall nothing, except, and I must render it in a close paraphrase.

"Jonathan, when we are young we can have experiences that seem incredible.

They are so great to us. Then sometimes when we are older the same experiences can seem not so important after all.”

What a wise old man. Stupid little boy. It took me years to understand that I hadn't understood anything he'd said. Even more to know I still don't understand a thing.

What a pleasure it has been able to write about my missionaries even so inadequately, to remember them and in turn have them recall me, a sweet faced nothing. I feel that I've honored something purer than I was even then. Then already turning over ripe, ready to ooze rot onto the kitchen tablecloth. Already brimming with pretension, already posing to play villainous parts as I've come along, already self destructive in the name of my ambition.

DOG AND CAT ARE FRIENDS

Growing up I had scant friends. Same as an adult, Same now as I am dying By choice it now seems. Before puberty never any girl friends and no more than one boy friend at a time. It didn't occur to me to be lonely. I had books, music, drawing and maps to accompany me. Maps I made for myself of my own myth making, island kingdoms in lush purple seas. Through time I acquired hundreds of these maps. my maps to my interior world. That way I could never be lost.

I also had little surrogate friends, our pets. Most didn't last long partially because we lived at a time and in places where dogs and cats ran free. Ran out their short lives. Due too to the fact that we were distracted folk blind to lurking small evils and ill omens creatures.

I loved them with the sincerity of a little boy. In turn this devotion was reciprocated. Cat or dog they were mine. Mine mine all mine. While otherwise to varying degrees they were only tolerant, or intolerant, of my family.

My passion for my little friends was ultimately unkind because it forced their animal natures to submit to my love, to me alone. I made them mutate into creatures of my imagination.

Lucky The Unlucky

My first writing in print was about one of them, Lucky. I saw him run over by a truck in front of our house in Concordia when I was eight. A heavy appliance delivery truck that didn't even stop. Dad comforted me, clergyman that he was, "He didn't feel a thing, Jonie. It was so quick." A searing memory that has never left me.

The poem I wrote afterwards so moved my father that he submitted it without my knowledge to the national children's magazine of the Methodist church, which then was a big deal, the church that is.

It was accepted. Terrible juvenilia, here included only because it shows how a mere dog could get such a grip on me, or on any child.

I wish to think my language art has improved since then, but secretly wonder. My parents who were assured they had a child genius to rival Chatterton ordered about

a million copies, none survive. A girl of 14 wrote me a fan letter. I recall she was from Chillicothe, a place intriguing me until I passed through it. The town is where industrial sliced bread was invented.

After reading the letter mother remarked how sad it was that the poor girl was retarded. Sarcasm was unknown to mother. Perhaps the girl was benighted. Certainly without doubt mother never uttered a disparaging word of anyone. Or in my memory of any place, not even Chillicothe. She was simply taking the letter into evidence at face value.

I was so proud to be a published poet. It went far more than necessary toward the loss of my Lucky.

Who Cares

All that came and all that went was good.

All the gladness is gone—and in its place is grief.

The world has lost a sturdy pup, but Who cares? I do.

Who cares? There's a question. You Care, don't you?

Who cares? The moon keeps on. The world does not know.

I know down in my heart. I care. Nothing is lost except a pup?

Who cares? His name was Lucky. He was my puppy. I care.

Handy & His Sidekick Nimrod

It happened whenever we'd return home in the night. Perhaps coming back from dinner out, Concordia had one restaurant, the Skyliner, or from a movie. Concordia had three theaters, the Brown Grand, the Strand, plus the Big Chief Drive-in in the summer.

But most often it would happen when we were coming home late from another one of the incessant church meetings I had no alternative but to endure. God damn those church meetings.

From the back seat I'd watch for it to happen, for the amazing show to start. With great anticipation I waited for my father to open the garage door, another of his priestly functions. I was ten and that event made me believe in the inexplicable nature of things.

The beam of our car lights would light up the interior of the garage like a small stage, sleds hanging on the walls, clutter of rakes and shovels. Oil-spill Rorschach on the cement.

At the back in a box two heads would appear side by side, Cerberus! Four eyes glinted their own lights back at us. No alarm knowing well who was arriving. Those eyes were of Nimrod and Handy, our cat and dog, they who always slept together entwined for life.

Genetically the two were bits and pieces of this and that. About them my older brother Steve remarked, "I think they're queers." I'd been informed of what that meant.

I didn't think he could possibly be right. But sometimes I wondered with the thrill of illicit knowledge what when on in the garage once we turned off the light.

Nimrod the cat descended from the margins of a barbarian mix. Nimrod had a typical tabby head stuck on the body of a scraggly alley cat. Not a becoming mix.

Dog Handy was somewhat more than half coyote. A rancher from the empty wild outside of town gave us Handy when he was still a puppy. He grew to be of medium size, short grey and tan fur, with a long bushy tail. His coyote part showed most clearly in that tail, in his sharply pointed erect ears and his piercing devil eyes.

Nimrod was older. He'd just showed up, an adult, to call to us at the back door. Mother started dropping scraps for the beggar. He stayed. Never came in the house. Like my friends she never let him in.

Love Affairs

I loved Nimrod. I loved Handy to distraction. Only a child can invest so much—all their heart, mind and imagination—into a love affair with an animal. And animals, at least cats and dogs, will return the obsession with even more focus.

During the day they played together. They'd play hide and go seek meaning Nimrod would be desperate to hide and ever eager Handy would drag the poor cat about. They played 'toss and catch' too, meaning that Handy would toss Nimrod up in the air and catch him by the scruff, harmlessly, before he hit earth.

They also played 'bury the bone'. Holding Nimrod in his mouth Handy would dig a hole furiously. Then try to cover him before he could escape.

Handy seemed to enjoy the play greatly. Nimrod I would describe as being

philosophical about it all. A cat can be stoic. Only very occasionally did he extend a claw to chastise Handy with a tweak. They quickly made up.

Nimrod clearly played 'mother.' He groomed Handy with rough affection. Handy was the mischievous 'little' brother. Just like me.

Then it came that by accident or intent Nimrod was poisoned. Gone for a couple of days he crawled home to die in my lap. My teardrops plopped on his head.

Handy mourned long and hard for him. For months, not mere days or weeks. Pining in the box in the garage or moping about the yard sniffing at evocative holes.

A Crazy Kid

Then my fixation on Handy became even more profound. I had no other companion so I invested my all in him. I began to have him in the house in my bed, something my mother had sternly forbidden before the death of Nimrod.

First he came to pass the night with me. Then he began to spend time with me there after school. Every afternoon I had an ongoing habit of settling myself propped up with pillows and a book for hours, often too with a drawing board in hand. I had a ream of white paper all to myself, a box of pens and crayons.

Mostly I drew maps of imaginary lands, their rivers, mountains and coastlines. I'd dream up the cities. I created nations in depth with history, the lineage of their rulers, and of course many wars by land and sea. These sessions passed for me like blissful trances.

My ultimate homage to my companion in this bed-boat ride into another world was to crown him Prince Handy. This evolved into him becoming Emperor Handinius The First, The Terrible, Scourge of Heaven and Earth.

Throughout I'd stroke Handy, tell him what I was doing, show him my drawings. He never ceased to be thoroughly interested. He'd wag his tail in praise. Lick my hand to show me his admiration. Now and then he poke a pink tip of penis at me.

Decline and Fall

The spell broke when I developed a badly infected ingrown toe nail. Dr. Emory of the town's hospital operated on it. Actually St. Joseph was the one hospital in all of North Central Kansas, an area larger than Maryland. It was exotic to young- Protestant me with nuns in the flesh in full habit floating along the corridors by office of deus ex machina.

They were the Sisters of St. Joseph and their Nazareth mother house was also in Concordia, an immense pile of Victorian whimsy with a round window on top called the 'eye of St. Nazareth' because it was said that through it the nuns spied on everyone in town.

Perhaps their magical blessings wouldn't take on me because even as a child I was a nascent apostate. Necessarily the wound swelled and oozed. When placed in hospital, doctor warned my parents that gangrene had set in. I had a second, then a third operation. The toe cut back to the bone.

In all I passed two months in St. Joseph with that damn infection that would not heal. My father's revenge was to tell everyone he came across that Dr. Emory was 'indubitably on the staff' at St. Joseph.

This cost me my friend. During the travail, my first, I'd ask daily about Handy. Missing him was a greater pain than my big toe. Good Christians, my parents would change the subject since lying was a dreadful sin. My father would blush his redheaded blush. Mother would look tragic and about ready to burst out into some choice lines of Ophelia's.

They lied! They'd killed my Handy! They covered it up with lies!

When I came home it was to a house without Handy. My parents said that during my absence he started straying off, something part-coyote dogs would do. They said there were a couple of complaints of biting.

Then had come the evening when a scout troop from Nebraska came to perform Indian dances in the Concordia band shell. It so exhilarate Handy that he crashed the stage and to the uproar of the audience bit all the dancers into savage whooping.

Chief Krazny, a Czech like so many in Cloud County, one of the two-man Concordia police force, did not find it clever. There were deadly consequences.

Afterwards father always kept faithful to his story that he'd been forced to give Handy to a kind rural family living far away on the margin of the known world. I could hear a rifle shot in the dark interior of the mind. It went off inside myself, where similar horrible things hid I now intuited. That shot took out my innocence, a contract killing. Along a scary street. In a stinking doorway.

Without doubt this was the great tragedy of my early life. I didn't get over it for many years. Losing Handy was like being torn apart. Watching my parents try a feeble lying was like seeing faith crumble on an ancient papyrus.

Even 30 years later when I first needed an on-line password, one came to mind directly without bidding. Handinius1. Handy The Terrible. The Great And Unforgiving Handy. One possible alternative came to mind as well. Lies! All Lies!

THE SEXLOGS

This is a naked narrative, a sexual memoir. To make it so I'm writing this naked. Looking down I see my lap, naked. My dear dick is beginning take interest, to flutter in its nest of curls. Writing naked about being naked is turning me on.

The truth, naked truth, as told by me—the sexual egoist, exhibitionist, voyeur, both the queer and straight fellow (those opposite drives that compel my mind)-- about the ecstasy, sorrow and meaning of sex in one man's life. But just as our actual nakedness changes throughout our time of existing, just so do our minds, our memories, our spirits. Truth therefore is also in flux in this event we call 'ourselves'—so too is it in the event I call 'myself'.

Truth about me sexually is not a constant. Does that make some of what I am writing now a lie?

Sometimes surely it will, but then again as I am on the cusp of the leavings of my vitality in body and mind, and am starting this work before the advent of decrepitude, oughtn't this moment of myself also be a culmination of what I remember, have experienced and learned? A question in progress.

Yet I am persuaded this is the best moment for rendering a cameo of my 'truth' in sex, as in a mirror in which I stand naked turning about, lying down face up, face down, legs together, legs spread, arms open to receive, arms covering my face in shame. Turning in a gyre, as Yeats wrote. I mean it to be so.

My sexual life with others, as well of course the sex I had, have, alone, is of such great and abiding importance to me over a span of more than 50 years, of such fascination and compulsion, that telling of it drives me to this memoir. "How Can We Know the Teller From The Tale?" Oh William Butler, you wrote my life.

AVE NAKED ME

Ejaculate dribbled out of my cock for the first time when I was 10. It was a weak gruel. I was orgasming my skinny self silly shaking in a richter scale 20 event. It felt like I was being turned inside out. Felt as if all my nerves were linked firecrackers linked and going off at the same moment. Mouth gaping in a silent scream I went

thrashing about wondering if I was dying from the thrill of it.

This happened to me without warning while I lay playing with myself, spread naked on Paul Post's bed. I was reading a Superman comic and as usual was turned on by Superman's body, his tights, the hint of a bulge in the crotch of his red panties.

Paul was also naked on the bed but had not arrived yet, would not arrive for another three years, at the same golden moment of one's first ejaculation, a moment of such pure revelation that for me it is framed in time as my flowering as a person, my premier burst of inner self into a joyous explosion of bodily expression came replete with a thin watery gruel of ejaculate and purple prose to pass around like Watch Tower leaflets.

I looked in awe mixed with utter astonishment at the liquid, my liquid, pooled now at the base of my cock. It glistened in the strong light from a glaring overhead light bulb.

It was a very dark night in summer, in a small Kansas town. The marauding scourge of life crazed insects tried to get at us. We were secure in a screened upstairs porch. Paul's parents were in bed away from us in his large house. I was sleeping over as I did almost every Friday night. The bed besides our two naked bodies was littered with comics.

"Paul . . . I think it happened. I think I did it! Look!" Paul's round face, big bright eyes with long lashes and a head of black short hair, suddenly darted up from the comic he was reading to focus avidly on my body. He put a finger in the pool of cum. "I don't believe it, you did!" He was excited too.

I am 59 years old as I write. A careful calculation thus gives me between 30 – 32,000 ejaculations since that first moment of wonder. Further figuring shows me that approximately 6-7,000 of these were with another person(s), male and female. Thus I say that about 20% of my cum-ings were with others, and 80% were by jacking off alone.

A quick jack off for me requires a minute, a more typical hand working, a languid one might take an average of 10 minutes—although I am greedy for climaxing. With others the timing for me is lost in pleasure, or unfortunately when young in shame or dread, nevertheless I believe 15 to 30 minutes covers most of the deeds. As with my beloved wife, until recently, sex was love making—another subject entirely—and requires the time it requires, no less, no more—I can only guess at the passage of minutes this has meant.

In sum I think that sex activity has consumed about 200 days of my existence, a mere 1% of my being. What a disappointing calculation! Would that it were 10 fold that.

Adolescence hit me like a Panzer division in battle delirium. It rolled over my body, it blew up my child's mind and I as swiftly capitulated to adulthood in flesh and thought, thought not yet –still not yet in spirit.

My mind reeled from the changes, pubic hair growing like spring grass, underarm hair, although no chest hair for sometime. By end of age 11 I stood 6 feet. My cock grew with even more speed. When that first ejaculation occurred I recall I could not hold it in my fist, only by my fingers. Yet in 18 months or less perhaps it attained the size it has now. The same for my balls, once such delicate marbles they fell full and as big as hen's eggs in a sack that drooped low to my asshole.

What did I receive in such a rush? When soft my cock measured about 5 inches when warm, meaning sadly in changing rooms and showers. When aroused to extremity it rose to 8 inches, 5 1/2 inches in girth. Yes, I was given a large cock: is this the repetitive theme of my sexual memoir? No. Yes. I cannot decide. Of significant importance for certain.

I have indeed wondered if large cocked men are more promiscuous (with themselves and with others) because there is more sexual surface to their bodies to play with, show to others, to use to pleasure others.

But no, reason and experience tells me that small cocked men can be horny as hell while a man with a 10 inches in his pants can be truly sexually repressed. I do love my cock and balls. I have since they developed. They explain, I think, my obsession with sex, my exhibitionism, voyeurism, my urge to seduce and be seduced – and too helped promote the homo part of my self.

Cocks are all different, of course, and nature gave me not only length and girth, but statuesqueness as well. I am well shaped in my organ, soft or hard, it is fair colored with delicate, appealing veining. When erect it stands straight, neither curving to one side nor up. It juts out horizontally from my groin.

The doctor who circumcised me did so with care, there is no scarring. The remaining foreskin wrinkles like a ruff about the head when soft; when hard it is taut but still comely. My corona flares perfectly in a bell shape the slightly larger at rim than the shaft itself while the meatus is delicately pink and almost as fleshy as a clitoris.

My balls too are fetching, as I see them, as others have told me, The ball sac

hangs more than two inches below my perineum before the balls themselves nest, one dropping lower as usual than the other. First time my oldest brother saw me naked as an adult he howled, "Judas Priest, take a look at that kid's gonads!"

After my thatch pushed forth it was indeed a tangle of sparse hairs blonde—a few years later turning to carrot.

To gain what I got by the beginning of age 12 was not easy to manage. It caused problems I am still resolving almost half a century later. Jacking off was simple enough an act even burdened as it was by secrecy and obsession. But then there began adventures with others that were not so easy to execute or absorb into my self, physically or mentally.

The trouble with sex I learned was that humans were involved-- luring it, allured by it, loving it, despising it. The trouble with sex I learned was what it did to my own very human needs and fears. It is in fact like acid, the soul on LSD.

FIRST IN SHOW

Jonathan sat on a dead tree limb, alone as usual. The spot was safely away from the shit brown slug-like flow of the river, a river of dark terror for the boy.

He had come here to shelter from the others, from their occasional cruelties and more so from the cloak of invisibility that the boys had thrown around him. Cruelty he was accustomed to from his elementary school but being reduced to a zero in the universe-void that haunted his nights crushed him to tears.

His sheltering spot was thus a hiding place, where he spent as much of the day as possible. He read here, swallowing the words in the books he'd brought from home in quick gulps. Jonathan had Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* today, beside him on the log.

Jonathan was beating off, as this also was the only place for it at Camp Merrydale. The Methodist boys camp, where his parents had forced him off to for two weeks,-- on his own for the first time away from the fastness of his parsonage home--occupied several acres along the Solomon River just outside Abilene, Kansas.

At eleven and a half those weeks in August, miserably hot August, Jonathan was taller than almost every boy in camp. He also had passed through puberty and his hard cock when risen up as now would have been the envy of many a grown man.

Not wishing to place his bare butt on the log—always afraid of nature, of the surprises it might hold, of spiders, rats and snakes—he had his underwear and shorts pulled down below his already fulsome balls. Light through the leaves around him dappled his short spray of pubic hair, an ephemeral down of white, with deep red flickering shadows that flared out as the feeble breeze came and went, shimmering across his lap of delicately soft skin.

As he masturbated, Jonathan held no tangible fantasy to work with, nothing other than the sight of his own sex, performing what was habitual. He did so innocent of experience or even visual images. A rite of pure expression, abstract expression, he moved towards orgasm, orgasm being the reward of this act of self art in one so young and estranged.

As he came, the release of energy literally rocked him back, his convulsive loins poured pleasure out onto the detritus below, the mélange of crumbled dead leaves around his sandals, small twigs, bits of bark, spots of sandy soil, and cum jetted dangerously near to a trail of small black ants.

In orgasm Jonathan had what others older might call an out of body experience. He actually lost mental focus on himself or his surroundings. For a boy who wished to be rid of himself this was the real bliss of coming.

He came in a rictus, lips and cheeks clenched around bared teeth, all this in a full body muscle cramp. Eyes rolled. Muttering like a hyena yelping for its mate.

Covering himself when the last stream of white froth shot forth he leaned forward to see if the ants were OK. His father, the good Methodist minister who he feared and hated, had taught him when young by a good hard spanking never to kick through an ant pile, admonishing him to love all life and kill nothing but what might be needed for food. The boy had internalized the lesson, and would honor it all of his own life.

Good, he watched the ants marched on unperturbed.

“Hey! Preacher’s kid. . . “ Jonathan knew the voice. Quickly he hid the book, swept a sandal over the semen drops, recoiled, smiled up into the light as was his want when approached by others he feared or disliked; as if a smile could protect him.

His log lay in hiding from the direction of the camp, about half a mile from any cabin. Nearer to the river, cotton wood saplings, poplars, sumac and scrub oaks gave him cover. Here he disappeared quietly, unnoticed from all camp ‘activities’—all of which he detested and feared, fearing most of all the obligatory baseball. Any sport

left him in misery as he was awkward, hopelessly left handed, confused and self conscious. He had no coordination or skills.

This was one foundation for boys' disdain for him, here and at home. Perhaps the other was the fear they could smell on him, something that aroused their pack instinct. Perhaps that he was tall. Perhaps that he read constantly. Perhaps because he was thoughtful, withdrawn, blushed a deep red when someone he didn't know or like looked at him or spoke to him. Jonathan carried the aura of keen sensitivity, of being inscrutably different. Jonathan was an easy prey. Jonathan, the Perrot of boyhood culture.

Gary Sagemuller had arrived at the log. This boy was the only one at Camp Merrydale to pay attention to Jonathan, sometimes trying to follow him as he deftly wrapped himself more fully in his cloak of invisibility. Today he had found him at last.

"What ya doin' back here, beating your pud I bet, that is if you even know how... squirrel bait..." Gary was stout and strong. He was 13, but shorter by a foot than Jonathan. He had thick bushy legs, short arms, thick neck, a bulldog face.

Jonathan blushed. Hating it as the blood ran to his cheeks. At home the girls taunted him as 'cherry cheeks' and the boys yelled 'hey big dick head' as somehow the word about his dick size had spread. Here no one had yet seen his dick. He kept it a secret.

"Just reading ... do you like books? I can loan you one..."

"Fuck no dumbbo, I wanna see you jack off. You can! I seen it hard in your pants. Do it now!" Gary stepped closer to the log. He was stroking his own crotch, staring at Jonathan with menacing sneer to make him even uglier—the ugliness of the bullies drawn to Jonathan.

"I don't want to" retorted Jonathan, clutching The Idiot protectively over his crotch.

"Do it or I'll bust your gut!" Gary grabbed him by his camp shirt and knocked him backwards off the log. Jonathan scrambled sideways just in time to miss being pinned as Gary lunged forward.

On his feet, Jonathan retreated a step, "No, I won't!"

"Hear ya got a big un. Show it to me now or I'll stomp you flat as a

pancake”

Gary shoved Jonathan back down on the log. He held him in place with one hand knotted over the Camp Merrydale logo on his shirt—a cabin among trees with a cross above—while with the other he unzipped Jonathan’s shorts. “Then suck my dick, queer...” Gary pulled out his own, a very hard, very unpleasant looking dick red as a blister. Stubby but thick like its owner. It was more like a miniature bludgeon than an erect penis.

“I won’t do that, go away!” yelled Jonathan, hoping that if he yelled this would be over.

Gary stuck it towards Jonathan’s mouth. In one quick reprise Jonathan fisted Gary in the balls and leaped off book in hand. As he ran back to the camp he heard Gary yelling “preacher boy’s a homo, preacher boy’s a homo...”

Camp Merrydale was a collection of cabins, where the boys bunked, a flag pole where the American flag fluttered listlessly, and a central log building, screened in, that served for mess hall and the head councilors office. A baseball field had been laid out on flat ground to the side. The head councilors pickup parked at one side of the field.

When Jonathan came running back a game was in progress. Other boys he knew would be swimming through the hot afternoon in the dead waters of the Solomon. There would be no boys in the cabins or mess hall. But the pickup showed him that the head councilor was about.

Each boy could have one call home, camp rules. Jonathan had not used his but now, just starting the second week of hell, he rushed in a panic to find Rev. Bob Olson.

‘Bob’ looked at Jonathan as he darted in to his office with a less than happy regard. Each summer Camp Merrydale had one loner, one kid who didn’t fit in, but in his experience Bob Olson didn’t suppose he had seen one this strange and vulnerable.

He tried to smother his dislike of the boy.

“May I call home now, Bob?” the boy stuttered. The stuttering and lisping that had plagued him for years were almost gone now, as for two years Jonathan had had speech therapy. He could speak to be understood. But in stress he also might slip back.

“What’s the matter, Jonathan? Anything happen today?” The reverend used his most practiced kind voice with this boy.

“Nottthhinng, nnnnoo....I need to tell my folkth thomeething about mmmmy ddddddog. I jjjjjuth thought of it. Itgh rrrreal important.”

So Jonathan got his call, at the camp’s single telephone, out by the flagpole.

His mother answered, a huge relief. “You OK Jonie?” She had her worried voice on. “We miss you but are so proud you are doing well at camp.” Her soft educated way of speaking, a voice without much identity except for an annoying perfection.

“Mama, I want to come home. I can’t stand being here anymore. Please come get me, please mama! I hate it here.

A pause on the other end, then his mother’s cultivated words returned. It made him betrayed that the world around him could be so articulate and clear.

“Your father and I want you to stay, Jonie. You’ll benefit from this. I know you dear. I know you can’t rock there, or perhaps read and draw as much as you would like, but it is also a good way to find new friends....”

“Oh mama, it is so bad here. You can’t imagine.” He’d begun to wail, something cutting him to the quick of his pride. “You must come get me. Come today!”

“I’m sorry Sweetheart, not everything you need is in books. So cheer up and keep your head high, it’s only one more week. Then you’ll be back with us. I love you, dear...”

With that the conversation was over. And that was when a dizzying swirl of fear and loneliness came sweeping down upon Jonathan like a drowning tide of black mud. This was the starting point of his first personally directed sickness, a sort of cerebral charley horse that agonized him into actual fever. He would be prone to more for the next three years or so, one time managing to evade school for an entire month.

He came to crave the isolation of his illnesses, and for the freedom they allowed for his reading, listening to Beethoven over and over, for drawing hundreds of maps of imaginary kingdoms, and of course, for rocking and the ultimate of all the ever more numerous sexual rhapsodies with himself.

But this first orchestrated illness—if indeed it was, as old Jonathan looking back wonders if perhaps there was some actual viral snake in that young body moving in flow with its bouts of dread and mental disorientation—became a genuine crisis.

Bob looked at the tall agitated boy before him, white hair, a handsome face—for 11 he was the most advanced boy at the Camp, and Bob thought perhaps the most so ever to attend Camp Merrydale in his term as its Director. Jonathan's father had advised Bob that his son was different. Extremely shy and sensitive, were the words. The Reverend Dr. S. Mancil Bell explained in a soft voice for Bob's ears only that his son had been tested by the school at end of recent term. That the boy had unusually high intelligence and, seemingly, personal problems from that plus an early puberty that made him unhappy.

Rev. Bob disliked the boy even more for this. Jonathan had arrived at camp with a curse on him, the Reverend Dr. S. Mancil Bell was in fact Bob's boss as the small-town Methodist church he served lay inside the jurisdiction of Dr. Bell's authority—an area of 72 churches. The Rev. Dr. S. Mancil Bell in fact held a place on the Bishop's cabinet.

It made Bob look with more attention now at Jonathan. Actually, the boy did not look well. Danger...

"Bob? Bob I think I need to go lie down." The only boy in camp who knew how to use lie and lay, thought Rev Bob.

He put a hand on the boy's forehead, it seemed faintly warm, but far from worrisome. "Alright, I'll be in to take your temperature later."

Later Jonathan did have some temperature. In the night he started to shiver, increasing stages of shivering until his whole body shook. In between he would pore sweat, soaking his sheets. By morning Bob decided it was time. Jonathan seemed confused, almost delirious.

He got the boy, who'd managed himself to put on dry underwear under his sheets, into his camp shorts and t-shirt, socks and tennis shoes.

He wrapped the boy in a blanket and tucked him into the passenger side of the truck. They bounced along in silence to Abilene. Jonathan seemed to sleep through the 15 minute drive to town.

The doctor and his young nurse were waiting for them, as Bob had called ahead to say he thought he had an emergency. The three of them managed to get Jonathan on the examination table, sitting up with the table tilted upwards to support his back.

Morning sunshine, dazzling August light, filled the windows and made the Doctor's office itself shine as if illuminated from inside. The kind of clarity that bestows a carved out reality to the shapes it touches.

"He's only 11," offered Rev. Bob, to emphasize that this tall boy was still a child. The doctor had Jonathan's shirt off and proceeded with the standard exam.

Doctor, Bob and nurse, who Jonathan thought pretty and liked very much because she hovered over him with a consoling concern, stood in a close ring in front of him like an audience to his illness.

"I need to examine your lower stomach, son. So I'll open your pants now, OK?"

Without waiting for a reply from Jonathan, which would have been 'no don't do that please,' the doctor gently unbuttoned the shorts, unzipped them, and then peeled underwear and shorts down Jonathan's thighs.

That was when Jonathan's sex life changed, for these three viewing him who obviously had expected to see the usual child's body of an 11 year old, literally gaped in astonishment as the morning light fell like a halo over the beauty of his fully developed cock and balls, making his small thatch of white pubic hair even more delicate and pure.

Doctor, Reverend Bob, nurse It was the change in those eyes viewing him that he would never forget—parental like concern becoming a swift surprise and then turning to something else that Jonathan could not quite fathom, a mystery in their individual gazes on his nakedness that would excite his imagination for years to come.

Jonathan won his way home then. And with him went far more than he had brought. He carried in his head the flowering tree of his first sexual fantasy, book of life.

WORK IS PRAYER

That's a saying I heard growing up. Not at all from my parents. It was said by the old Kansas people around me.

I myself can't help but hold it in reverence. It was something urgent in me that has transubstantiated into my writing, fiction and journalism. Writing is prayer. If I weren't an atheist I could commit to that.

I've held 21 paid jobs in my life, before setting up my own business when I was 35, here in France. From then on I remained stubbornly self employed. I'd discovered a weakness in my personality. I can not be told what to do. I can not be a minion.

It's a serious flaw and one I can't escape.

Too proud and independent by nature, too much pride by far that can be too easily chafed, too much anger then to contain. Throughout never once was I fired.

Again, I was too proud for that disgrace. I quit all my jobs. When I'd found another that paid better or that I thought was better suited, or when I returned to school.

From the time I was 14 I was increasingly financially independent accepting only small sums from my parents. To do this I sometimes held two jobs at once.

At fifteen I bought my first old car with my savings. From then on I bought other cars. I paid for gas, maintenance. I bought my cigarettes, my beer and vodka, I took my girlfriends on dates. I bought most of my clothes, and anyway by 14 I was shoplifting a lot of them.

With my first job I worked for my middle brother Alan David Bell. He was seven years older, very handsome, played the tuba in the Concordia High marching band, worked out with weights, had a job in the meat department at the local Bogart's super market—our father remarking that he had more cuts on his hands than were known to modern day butchers.

Alan also had a 1950 Studebaker Business Coupe. To this day for me it's the

sleekest and most beautiful car ever produced in America with its rocket nose and its swept back body in waves of sculptured steel. It had been painted a shiny cream by a previous owner with bright red tongues of fire licking lasciviously back along the door panels. Obviously only a high school boy could have bought that.

Two doors, one wide low window on each side. The car oozed sex as did Alan himself, although at that age I thought it was his after shave.

When he started working a second job delivering the special Sunday Edition of the Salina Journal newspaper to its subscribers in Concordia to my great excitement he asked to hire me as his helper. My parents agreed as long as I would actually wake up every Sunday consistently to help him.

Salina was our big town with an astounding population of 50,000. It was 60 miles away with nothing between, no villages, no gas stations, only a few abandoned farmhouses left to rot after the Great Depression. Nothing but rolling treeless prairie. Cattle country.

At 3 am the Sunday Greyhound bus from Salina delivered its two baggage holds full of newspapers. The load of papers arrived at the only hotel in Concordia, the Baron House, in the morning darkness of three a.m.

At that time Concordia was totally deserted. We were always the only car on the streets, all of them brick streets that lapped rhythmically under the Studebaker.

Bricks that for me confusingly read 'Coffeyville' a town on the far side side of the state notorious for outlaws.

"Maybe they dropped the bomb," Alan remarked often of the scene to make me even more spooked than I was by the desolation. Bombs were real.

Stephen Mancil Bell my oldest brother. Steve, who had by then disappeared for a few years somewhere far away, who no one talked about but who made mother cry. In his own time he'd worked his high school summers on building the underground silos for the Nike missiles that dotted the empty countryside about us. Protecting Cloud County?

Or just scaring the shit out of it. The atomic warheads were meant to be top secret but everyone in north central Kansas knew about them, prayed for them to sleep on in their giant silos. Let sleeping giants lie.

Going downtown, the few blocks of it, that in itself was an adventure to me. Especially as I had a passion for hotels. And the Baron House was perfect. It had been built of stone in the 1880s, with 100 rooms. By 1959 it had faltered considerably, yet still operated for an occasional train crew, some sad looking salesmen, and of course what my brothers had already instructed me on graphically, the Kama Sutra coupling of adulterous couples performing their antique antics in its shabby rooms.

Downtown Concordia had not yet been destroyed by a Wal-Mart. So although Concordia itself was barely a population of 7000 (it has since indeed been Wal- marded, losing its stores and 40% of its population) it then served an entire kingdom of farmers and ranchers. There was the hulking Bon Marche department store where you still heard old ladies speaking French, the Brown Grand Opera (turned over to movies) and the largest building in town, the Nazareth Mother House of the Sisters of St Joseph, larger even than the Cloud County Court house. These gave Concordia grandeur in my innocent eyes. I have always been drawn to the grand. Faux and genuine. Thriving or dying.

The paper came in three sections, to be assembled by us, then stacked into the car. Then at home each one had to be folded lengthwise and folded again twice more into equal parts so that the ends could be tucked together. All to produced an object resembling in shape and thickness what would now be recognized around the world as a Big Mac box. Then there was no such thing as a McDonald's anywhere in that lonesome stretch of northern Kansas, or in the State itself.

Alan I thought was brilliant at organization. We did it all to plan, from pickup at the bus depot to folding to delivery. At the end, returning home at about about 8 a.m. at the very latest, 7:30 was the goal we never managed to meet—later than 8:00 and the phone began ringing at the house with impatient subscribers demanding to know where their Sunday paper was.

The papers were folded on the kitchen table in Indian silence, we daren't wake the Reverend, my Father on his busiest day of the week, we let our own sleeping giant lie. That task done, which alone I liked in my job, we'd haul it all out filling up the passenger side up front and the entire back seat area almost to the roof. Only enough space remained for skinny me to slip in onto of the folded Journals, riding on my stomach legs scrunched up into the back window. The necessity for a mini helper probably landed me the job.

Like that, we could go journeying into the still night time town delivering the esteemed Sunday Edition of the Salina Journal to the town's front walkways and front porches, about 550 of them.

Cruising at a funereal pace along the route Alan threw from the driver's side, me from the other. He had the addresses taped to the dashboard. The car's design gave me scant space for a good throw. Also I was a terrible thrower to begin with. I detested and dreaded sports of any kind, baseball most particularly.

Alan had just cause to be perturbed by me. More than a few of the papers I folded came undone. Then too my throws would land on the wrong lawn or hit the dog barking in the yard, or worse, bang the subscriber out early to search in the shrubbery for the paper.

But done at last we'd head back to the house where mother had made fresh cinnamon buns for us. Then we just with time to get ourselves ready for church—scrubbing away at the printing ink that blackened our hands and streaked our faces.

Alan paid me my agreed to \$10. Ten dollars for about 5 hours of not so easy work. I'd have sore arms from all the tossing and a lot of car sickness from riding in the backseat. My fingers ached from the folding. The skin of the fingertips were so sensitized I wanted to scream from nerve pain whenever they touched more paper and ink. However, I was truly ecstatic with my \$10, and felt so manly from the work.

Best of all it at last brought Alan and I closer. We never had been. It was how I came to love my brother discovering what a tender soul he was. By temperament much like my mother calm and stoic. Yes he could be sharp with me driving me close to tears.

Like the rest of the family, however, he knew that I was morbidly sensitive. He too treated me so carefully that I felt shame for being what I thought was a weakling. Yet in my memory he never complained. Sometimes he would even ask me out of kindness to recite the Roman emperors in their order. Attention that made me happy.

Passages From The Epic Poem of Early Youth

Ever shoot beavers? I did that too-- with a pencil for prop. Susan Hardin, regarded by all as poor white trash at Harrison Junior High, wore no panties (like mother dearest herself). So merely drop a pencil in homeroom and glance back about three desks and you won a peek at a few tousled blond pubes, a wee sneak preview of a sad skinny girl's snatch

Sex in junior high was necessarily quite something—for one and all I surmise, in one way or another, for better or worse. Mainly it didn't happen for those of us from the upper class, meaning monied or landed, meaning the few who could read like my parents.

We had no land, no money, but we knew the trick to act like such didn't pertain to us or that we had lost it all in Monte Carlo.

I hung about Christine Foamsbie. Stacked and tall so together we did not look like freaks. Saturday nights after SHAG -- that was the dance club for kids whose families could afford the fees. Time out from dancing --we'd lurk in the darkest recesses of the parking lot where she'd let me feel her tits.

There was also Charla Rife (Jesus, where did these strange names come from) who was my actual girl friend. We would meet at the one movie theater in town and my last movie with her there she did at last lay her hand on my crotch and gave it a good hard painful squeeze. Perhaps checking for freshness? Mine was as fresh as they come.

Charla and I would stumble out from whatever movie-reality we'd ben shown blinking blindly to find Great Bend hadn't changed, hadn't gotten any greater. It was unreal in stern black and white, a one dimensional place. The same disturbingly flat screen reality. Where was color and passion? Great moments and men?

Me, I'd be flaunting a small stain of pre cum near my front left pocket.

ONE SIZE FITS ALL

The main theme to my junior high sex was of course the size of my cock. Adolescent silliness. Evidently I was rumored to have the largest cock in town--that was never proven and is I think from later observation rather unlikely. But cock worship was rife and many curious young fellows clamored to see mine.

When I was 12 Coach Love liked it too, sometimes waiting for me to come out of the showers so he could take a nonchalant, Board of Education-approved gander. Doing this more and more often he took to standing quite close up to my bare chest for a clinical short arm inspection. Coach Love would stand before me head bent before my naked boyhood as if in prayer to the god of cocks. After inspecting me while I writhed in awkwardness he would look up, wink, give me a knowing grin. He was short and totally bald. A bizarre satyr with showers and naked boys for backdrop.

Others were more demanding, Brian Moore lived on a scraggly small farm out of town. He had buck teeth, a mouth that would not quite close, fat cheeks. But he'd invite me to sleep over then get me to jack off so he could watch. All I clearly remember is that the house had no heating, damn cold. His fingers to match.

«Gorsssh» he exclaimed when the weisel popped, or was that odd local pronunciation of gosh given at the size of my member. From him the word went to his cousin, whose name I don't recall. The cousin took to sitting on the bench beside me after showers in gym with his beak nose glued to within five inches of my dick--"You sure gotta big 'un Bell. Can I feel it?" I always let him. That amounted to a 2 second blind grope holding me cupped while he wildly turned his head from side to side making sure no one caught him.

This same fellow then took to more advanced action. He sat in front of me in homeroom and whenever possibility presented itself reached his arm back to do some more leisurely exploration of my jeans crotch. This in an effort to get me hard, in which I obliged. At the time I gloried in such stardom.

But my real sexual experience was with an even stranger companion, Tom Lecture. He ran with the tough set and I never thought he'd want to even talk to me. But he lived nearby and so one afternoon after school when I had been home sick he came by and asked to see me--surprised the shit out of me for sure. A tough showing

up out of nowhere to visit a not very popular wimp.

What he had in mind was to start a wrestling match with me in bed, wherein to gain advantage--and he was far stronger than I--he thrust a hand down my pants to grab my balls. Despite my weak protests this ploy led to him unzipping my pants--balls still clenched in his fist and have a bit of a roam on the open range of my privates.

Roaming was all that happened, then, instead on he took me up as a buddy in crime. He taught me elaborate ruses to steal condoms for which at the time I'd no use for , cigarettes, records, books. On Saturday afternoons we shoplifted all over Great Bend. I had to hide the stuff in the far reaches of my father's basement. One Saturday afternoon--farmer shopping day in Great Bend and the stores were jammed--I remember later adding up about 60\$ in purloined goods as my share of our sack of the town.

We smoked together. We broke into empty houses and vandalized them. Our most daring deed was to repeatedly vandalize the Lutheran church in Great Bend. We'd sneak in when it was empty through a back window we could pry up. We smoke and dropped the butts on the carpets. Pissed on the altar. Our ultimately gag was to take a doll from the church nursery, strip it bare and draw tits and a big hairy pussy on it (I was artist in residence) then hang it over the cross at the front of the church. That was the most satisfying rebellion of my youth.

One such outing--THE LAST--we got caught by the young Lutheran pastor. He marched us to his car, put me in back and Tom up front. He then drove us about town slowly talking to us about how badly we'd behaved. He scared me shitless because I feared he knew who I was. Turned out he did. After about 30 minutes of preaching hard to us he let me out without directions at my own house.

Truly truly he did know I was the son of the right Reverend Doctor S. Mancil Bell, head of the largest congregation in Great Bend. I was shaking in terror when he drove off with Tom.

Nothing came of it, my father remained clearly oblivious. Tom made no comments of his own. He was a silent young fellow by nature. But, we didn't go back to the church again.

I do believe one, for me, ever spectacular event resulted from this incident. Actually now so many years and experiences later I know beyond doubt that something directly related did take place, although it simply left me in shock and awe, coming as it did from no where.

A couple of weeks after our interlude with the Lutheran pastor I was spending the night at Tom's. When I did that we didn't play around with each other although we did sneak out to go window peeping all over Great Bend in the wee hours of the night.

That night however, instead, Tom climbed up into my top of his bunk bed and leaned over my middle. "Hey, I want to show you something that's cool," with that he pulled back the sheet, pulled my underwear down without another word then took my cock in his fingers and rubbed it for a while. It performed for him, rising hard.

Then--and this was the electric moment of my junior high sex years--Tom closed his eyes, and to my utter amazement opened his mouth and placed over the head of my cock.

I was stunned by the act and by the sensations he caused as he slowly sucked on me. He did this for maybe a minute, that was all. I didn't come, although I would have soon enough if he had proceeded. He just suddenly stoped jumped down and got back into his own lower bunk. It never happened again. No reference was ever made to it. We didn't see much of each other after that and then my father was reassigned to Woodland Methodist in Wichita--a move ending this although the beginning of another.

Today I figure my first suck came from his first suck--from that young Lutheran pastor, passed on like a relay baton. Fellatio in the pastor's car after having dropped me off at my door.

That would explain the quiet end to what ought to have been a very serious escapade for me, and too the odd sudden knowledge that Tom shared with me--just as he had shared playing boyhood bandit with me through the streets of Great Bend.

WRECK OF THE GALAXY

When I turned 14 I had my first car accident. Pioneering the many to follow. None caused bodily harm except the most spectacular on a rainy night in Florence and even it left no one maimed or dead.

But they did harm my ego, which obviously needed some denting because it has always popped back tenaciously. This first one was in Great Bend, Kansas.

Three causes for it. I was taking Drivers Education at Harrison Junior high, with a martinet, former marine, for instructor. I disliked him intensely, also a bit frightened of him. Improbably, his name was Bligh. He told me I was the worst student in the class. That was true.

I claim reasonable excuses: the mean asshole made me nervous, then too there was something to do I think with my being left handed—a quite strong handedness—that means when someone gives me a direction, as in a direction to turn, I have to orient myself quickly by secretly scribbling something invisible with my left hand.

My vivid imagination contributed too. I often saw myself disintegrating at the wheel and driving Bligh and two of my fellow students in the back seat into a wild out of control frolic. A horror ride to hell ending upside down, wheels churning, just before it all bursts into a dramatic cinematic explosion.

I think father perceived that I was being bullied by Mr. Bligh. In our chats he would ask me “How goeth the captain?” “Have you walked the plank again, me laddie?” “Don’t mutiny my son, them be perilous waters.” And so forth. Father enjoyed his own wit immensely. Like me he had also read the Bounty Trilogy with joy.

I begged father to take me out for an illegal practice session. He firmly refuse, saying it not only broke the law but any damage would fall on us financially.

Then I turned to mother. She was ever my second self so of course she felt my distress over learning to drive.

At first despite my pleas she held firm. To do anything behind my father’s back filled me with fear, my mother with shame. But at last I prevailed. She alone in the

family was not afraid of father.

One very cold morning just days after my 14th birthday in January we sneaked out just as the sky lightened. To dress quickly without alerting father mother had kept her nightgown on and for modesty turned her winter coat backwards, asking me to button her up the back.

So it was “ahoy matey.” Off we mutineers went in father’s two year old 1961 Ford Galaxy. Mother rode placidly beside me, probably enjoying it all.

We made it a block and a half.

Deciding to try a right turn I ran amok and turned left.

Instead of the brake I hit the accelerator. Mother and I careened at decent speed off the street. The Galaxy barked up the curb, onto a lawn, glanced off a tree and crashed to a stop against someone’s house. A bedroom wall. The Galaxy hissed and steamed.

Placid as ever my mother simply turned to me and said, “Oh Jonie, I’m so sorry this happened to you.” My family name was Jonie, a created spelling. I used it until I hated it. My parents had refused ‘Johnny’ and Jon was absolutely forbidden. From Jonie I passed directly on to Jonathan, Hebrew I was told for ‘God’s gift’—some gift.

The man yelling at us was in his pajamas, scrawny and mean, anger puffed out from an unshaven frog face, from his stubbly chops, from his scrawny chest heaving in rage. Probably a retired oil field worker as that was Great Bend’s *raison d’etre*. At its peak the town was surrounded by 3,000 oil wells. There were a couple even in the town’s park.

“God Damn kid,” he piped at me. “You’ve cracked my foundation! I should haul you out and beat the crap out of you.” And that sort of thing. One or two of the home’s windows were also broken. While the front of the Ford looked like it had taken a knock out punch from Rocky Marciano.

The Great Bend police were soon there. Photographers too, from the Great Bend Tribune. Yes. Mother and I were on the Tribune’s front page the next day, father’s ruined Galaxy too. He was also referenced in the article. ‘Jonathan Bell is the son of Reverend Dr. Mancil Bell, pastor of First Methodist church, which was of course the largest, wealthiest church in town with a huge spaceship like dome thanks to the abundance of oil money.

What is perplexing is that, although I braced for the worst, come time for him to deal with me father didn't lose his temper, not once about this incident. He did make me go back to Drivers Ed class, to face the terrible Bligh who had me stand up before the class while he used me as a whipping boy for the pleasure of all. I do recall recounting this when asked at supper how the day gone, dissolving into tears.

Father was strangely subdued. Somehow I later learned that he then went for a talk with my tormenter. Father had a razor tongue and knew well how to maim his victims to advantage. Bligh never bothered me again.

For my crime I had to face the judge of juvenile court. Down at courthouse square to the Barton County Court House. I was given eight weekends of community service—defined as cleaning up the Courthouse grounds. Typically, I never asked what penance my mother received, nor how much in damages and fines my father owed. I was as usual far too self preoccupied to think of them.

The entire story simply disappeared from the parsonage, and from my mind.

Years later in cleaning out the last house where my parents had lived it was a surprise when I found among my mother's papers, kept carefully, the front page of the Great Bend Tribune, article plus photo—me, mother with her coat on backwards, the Ford, all caught like outlaws in the act.

Then the details returned to mind. And most especially that my difficult, temperamental father was the hero of this tale. BRITANNIA RULES THE COOL

I've been in this room for a long long time. Oh in truth perhaps not yet an hour. Time is useless except in passing. I'm only 14. If only. I felt so old and wise.

In truth today at this moment I've been here (or 'there' as you wish) for almost 60 years. Myself now and myself then, we two lie together. We think, observe, wonder surprised. The older me, my I, is chagrined at failing to reach any conclusions. The 14 year old me doesn't know anything about conclusions.

Today I am introspective, as is my want. I'm seeing the sure truth of time when I look down at my aged hands, wrinkles moving on this clavier. Staring into the tunnel of time and memory, I go following my trail back, retracing my own solitary footprints.

I'm come to the moment and place where I believe I began to have a first concept of me. It's the when-where- and why of beginning to behold myself. Laugh at

the self image, admire it, despise it, cry for that me in all its sorry glory. On the bed back then my changing began, from it I first arose as a changeling.

We arrived in this parsonage, the fifth I've known so far in my life, manse as the people here call it, this afternoon. We came by train from London Euston Station, by BOAC from Idlewild Airport, by TWA from Wichita, by car from Great Bend.

Less than three days away from Great Bend, Kansas. That's a difference of eight hours behind here, or me, to then and the west. But time for me floats away surreal as a cork bobbling in the Atlantic. It's an easy mind trick when one is 14 and has lived a life time in only these three days of too many 'firsts'.

My first plane trip from Wichita to New York! I start mapping. It's an obsession I have, trying to figure where everything is or should be. My first night in a New York hotel, the Edison—I know where to find it, just off Times Square! First transatlantic crossing! First landing in London!

First train trip in Britain my seduced eyes reflecting back at me from where they are plastered dazzled inside the frame of a second class train window! Twice seeing, literally, and blinded by myself.

Then the first consternating sights of England's dark satanic mills, crumbling down ruins gurgling in a bad stink of mold! No reading had warned me of them. Row houses everywhere in a skein web of macadam.

Then at last Liverpool's bulk rising stark and dark directly out of the estuary, made even more monumental by its bombed down spaces, the dramatic gaps between the rotten teeth of its black buildings.

Mid-afternoon and the sixty degrees F goes deep in my virgin flesh where I lie under two blankets and something else I've never experienced before, an amorphous mash potato-like mound of what mother claims is called an eiderdown. Principally, I'm in bed, fully clothed for warmth. I've even kept my shoes on.

Face up as if dead I'm alone in the room designated as mine. On the bed I am to sleep in for the next three months. A stay of 13 weeks, 90 days, I've counted. It seems so long when young.

Father and mother know a lot about Britain, mother because she's read everything, father because he was also here during the second World War. Father was selected among pastors across the US to exchange churches for the summer.

This is the manse of the reverend Babcock and family, Claremont Road Methodist church, Wallesey, Birkenhead. They're replacing us- the reverend Bell and family- in Great Bend, which at first to the Bell family's amusement the Babcock's thought to be 'Great Ben', Kansas, big become great.

My first encounter that with the British sense of uniqueness and entitlement, an endearing trait which in time morphs for me into 'irritating' and finally into 'pitiful.'

This bedroom in this foreign house is taller than it is wide. This gives an impression of my having become a small promotional toy at the bottom of a cereal box.

How could the British Empire fit into this box? It does even if the fit is a bit snug. In 1963 the empire has lost the majority of its one-time land area and population. Never mind a great deal still remains to dismay the world and beguile a boy fascinated by glory, longing for its tingle even in decay.

But how to rectify the then still-lingering pomposities of empire with this harshly redacted and dreary ? Pulling the eiderdown closer I discover its own serious limitations because my shoes, scuffed by long confined travel since last shined, poke out below, my toes thrust into permafrost. They are pointing toward, and too close to, the streaking rain that's razoring the window pane.

I try to analyze the smell of this place. Damp in all its vestiges. Forever wet wool, dry rot and mold, coal soot slopped in a porridge, permeating whiff of boiled mutton, burnt sausage, stale potatoes, charred tomatoes. Sour milk! Soggy cornflakes.

Odor transfigures onto the ceiling high above then comes back slipping down onto me like never-drying paint oozing from an on-high invisible fresco of the Industrial unEnlightenment.

Who the fuck am I? Where the fuck am I? Thanks to my older brothers, Steve and Alan—Steve 24 and Alan 21- I already talk, think, in a vivid vernacular. From them my thoughts already begin to paddle about in doubt of everything.

On my right flows the Mersey River and estuary separating me from the Liverpool docks and the odd pomposity of the city's 'three graces', the Liver

Building, the Cunard Line and the Port of Liverpool building. On the opposite side, to my left, my side by nature, the River Dee and its estuary bind me to the

mystical border line of the magical realm of Wales. To there where that summer we'll be going almost every weekend.

In revenge this is a small shabby bedroom, so in my eyes at least blinkered as I am by American middle class wealth. The single bed is wooden. The wardrobe is too. Window and door match. It could all have come from the same tree. I'm abiding in a good deal—apt word— of swollen veneer.

The hall door into here had swelled a bit tight too when I first tried it—a tentative attempt in alarm of what lurked for me beyond.

There is an old porcelain sink in here. A sink in a bedroom! Its off-off once-white surfaces are a display of fissures. Another kind of map I can't read. The single faucet drips a very old yellow stain, plipping a Bolero phrase at me. Music that makes the room feel even colder and more terrible than it is. What a grim place in which to be ecstatic. But I am. So excited I'm breathless. My teenage spirit pulses with expectations of something unfathomable.

Wallasey in 1963. I go there easily, like flying again in a click of heels from Wichita to New York to London. To Wallasey on the Mersey river. I am transported to its place and time as easily as crossing from my study here and now to the living room of this far older, much friendlier, French farmhouse.

Aw, what extreme exhilaration the first hour in that room was, is, for me. Nothing in memory resembles it, except drinking strong coffee on speed. Reading Yeats on acid, "Of what is past, or passing, or to come." Or above all fucking on a Saurian night in Lawrence, agile bodies bleeding out into each other from one too many beers.

What the fuck! There I am. At 14, tall, more than 6 feet, filling the bed, spilling out of it my thoughts No more than a lad still astonished by his erections. I'm a large twink struggling out of a lanky adolescence that I'm shedding behind me like the rattle snake skin I once find on the lone prairie.

That chilly springtime room of England's faded and corrupted charm, I'm in a place too rich in my mind then and now, a holy land among others, still dwelling about Jonathan in so many archeological-dig strata names. Chaucer, Spencer. Shakespeare! Byron, Shelley, Coleridge, Keats. Dickens! D.H.Lawrence! Me!

It's swooning with a profusion of places and identity—The British Empire, Europe, The United Kingdom, England, the blacklands, Greater Liverpool, The Wirral, Birkenhead, Wales, that Mersey River, The Irish Sea, the town of Wallasey.

All overwhelmingly impressive to me because I'm coming from a place of so few names, except most eloquently and simply Kansas.

This speck of space I'm in is the upstairs of the manse, parsonage to me, of the Claremont Road Methodist Church. What a pleasure for me to put my tongue to all the applicable brand new very old brand names.

Nearby, in their own bedrooms in this house of creepy gloom my parents and brothers are also resting. They give my bewildered self a much needed reassurance although I would never consider articulating so much. My habit is to swagger when I think, never when I walk, too shy.

All this remembering is unknown and topsy turvy old mossy stuff, but far too marvelous for fear to intrude upon. I am here! Listen to me. Bold and blazing I proceed an adventurer with a fluttering heart.

The family there is felled in mutual existential gluttony by this long day's journey into 'here', a journey we dearly wish to end as we are all surfeited by it, drugged, over-stuffed like the once-genteel furniture in the rooms below.

But me? I'm too eager to shock, too smug by far in what I think to be thinking—"I'm an atheist!" I confide in a teen voice to those I don't fear in some way.

I lie in bed less than 15 miles from the border with Wales. A place I have as yet absolutely no reference for at all. Excepting it is vaguely Celtic. I am as well. Wales then a pageant blur in my head hiding more of the unknown, of golden griffins, crimson banners, a wild mountain language, horrible mines bored deep down into hell.

Northern afternoon light is in the room. Iron light. There's a single bare bulb, I've left it on overhead for warmth and companionship. It's a silly dangle down sun. It does nothing.

And in Great Bend it would be something like a merry cloudless sky decked with a huge cheery sun over a warm 80 degrees. Zipity Doo Dah.

Here I'm reeling delightedly betrayed by this delighting turn of events. This narrow room, on this eiderdown, only a 14 year old boy of too much imagination can feel so ancient.

Then I'd not yet walked up the short distance from the manse to the point where Wallasey stands above the Irish Sea. But I intuited it very intimately,

understanding that it was there, heaving away silent, salient, sloppy.

It was supposedly the spring following the worst ever winter in known British history. Seems all the people I was meeting were a bit high, giddy, as if rejoicing in surviving an ice age.

A miserable limey pigeon hunkers into its feathers on the outside window ledge. It coos a trill the very same as the pigeons of Kansas like to sing.

I am enthralled. In love with it all. This is creepy to my heart's desire.

Through my window of time I see that in 1963 the British Empire is taking a decided listing toward its final demise. Except for the rich everyone suffers still in thrall to Post War austerity.

But 1963 Britain was birthing a new cultural power, a musical one, which began replacing the trumpet blasts for charges of yore. This led by The Beatles, whose music dominated the radio of that summer—Please Please Me, From Me To You— and the Rolling Stones, Come On. Their first single was released four days after we arrived. Their lyrics were of esoteric genius to me, profound, abstruse:

Come on, since me and my baby parted
Come on, I can't get started
Come on, I can't afford to check
I wish somebody'd come along and run into it and wreck it

Me and the bedroom are in a crepuscular time. Constipated. Shitless from first flying, culture shock too. Thirteen and I hadn't had a chance to shoot my wad in at least two days It was for me an eternity of brutal constipation, Kansas and an american mind set blocked up inside me in concrete turds. My cock ached for its habitual climax thrill another kind of constipation.

Can it really remain so close to me, that long ago time? Simple revelation, easy as peeling open the little door on an advent calendar. I see it in its living steam on the reflection of a breathless breath.

I'd come 4500 miles to be half a mile from the shore of the Irish Sea, not much more than 100 miles away from the Irish coast. Ireland, where my mother's grandfather and grandmother were born.

People she had known well, and I knew too at least from their photogenic cameos curling up in her drawer of family keepsakes. Handsome persons, prim, self

righteous, the us-against-them sort of Ulster folk. Just the right kind of faces for black and white photos, or for Klan meetings.

They had made the journey in the opposite direction from the one I'd just taken. Were they as stunned by its challenge to everything imagined or known before?

Then, that afternoon, the monsters of me went colliding outside my chilling room without a view (except of more somber rain and more brick walls in a landscape built of brick) plus a solitary angle, of the drain pipe ferrying a course of rain water from the slate roof down to the tiny bricked over backyard.

My smiling young self trolls that dying afternoon. It's wandered in on me like a wave of the neighboring Irish Sea. Over such a sea I'm keeping an alarmed watch for Viking long boats, horrifying all before them, coming closer and closer intent on snatching me away.

Recently I've learned that many notable individuals were born and/or raised in this town of Wallasey. Eric Idle comes from here, of Monty Python fame. So too Charles Crichton, director of the films *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *A fish Called Wanda*. And also Malcolm Lowry, of course he would come from here. Under *The Volcano*. A work of genius erupting.

Doth a savage humor lurk here parasiting upon the innocent? Does an inappropriate snicker wait to leech onto one's soul? Is it where my fall from grace comes from, imbibed in the tap water, consumed in the fish and chips? I think the devil once came fuming up from the toilet bowl here to pry open my anus and invade my virgin self while I sit brooding innocently on a porcelain shitter made in Devon.

A nightmare that becomes reality the day in the manse when I do find a drowned rat in the toilet bowl water. My first rat!

Fourteen. Adolescence has made me crazy with lust for new thoughts, sensations. Infatuations burst like bombs around me while I lie here inert with longing to acquire all seductive bodies, all art, all ideas.

In less than three years I've metamorphosed from a sweet child into a cruelly sensitive man creature who blushes crimson monstrously upon a word, a glance, any dreamed up Ovidian indiscretion that I yearn so ardently to have for myself. Oh please please please, let it all, everything and anything happen to me.

My life is lived only in books. I moon for hours over books of history, fiction,

poetry. Probably far too many of them are crammed into my small psyche. I'm become hundreds of pages, but sadly lack a table of contents.

It's mid afternoon but through the one high narrow window the afternoon is as dim as dusk at home.

Here age and decline all around make me feel so American and so young. I've already sensed instinctively it is too dangerous to be naked here, my clothes under the blankets they comfort me.

I am felled by tricks of time and transit, mowed down along with the rest of my family by what I now know to be jet lag – then a plane traveler's plague without a name. I'm trying without luck to nap it off. Next I'll try soap and water.

WHEN THE MOON

Hits Your Eye
Like A Big Pizza Pie

August night 1963. Florence Italy. Hot.

Young boy in a tub. Hardly naked, not so brave, he has his pants on. Boy quaking. His name is Jonathan Bell.

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FROM ME!” The nun’s voice after him is a bulldyke’s hacking cough into a speeding tin can.

Jonathan crouches feeling hedonistically exposed without shirt, shoes and socks. Those items are on the floor of this ancient hotel.

After finishing his third, and last glass of wine he’d inexplicably dropped them there on the sudden, losing them in sweet innocence in the steaminess of a Florentine, August night.

The girls being older had clapped derisively at the sight of his skinny doughboy chest. Deriding him as they continued to drink cheap Chianti from their hotel room glasses.

That night the boy’s three glasses are too many too much of the first wine, first alcohol of any kind, he’s ever drunk. The chianti belonged to the high school girls. They’d intended it for lulling his brothers, those dear little Delilahs.

The girls aren’t clapping now. It’s to be a memorable silence ominous for a life time.

Jonathan is curling his toes in dismay. It’s the first great panic of his short life. He is 14.

It’s his baptism in such turmoil, coming no less in an ancient hotel room in an alternative reality. A singular experience then for a boy from Great Bend, Kansas.

Jonathan is painfully, remarkably fair. His baby skin is like the color of the tub in

the strong electric light, fine china touched in pink. He's peaches and cream all over, excepting a searing hot-poker dab of scarlet on each cheek. He loathes those with all his being.

He yearns to be the rock fence posts and barbed wire of home.

Those slashes of cherry, in Kansas his classmates torment him with his nickname 'cherry cheeks,' are spreading larger and larger as the seconds pass over his suffering.

The hated flush suffuses his entire face and neck. It creeps down his torso which as yet has no down anywhere except a blondish small patch under his arms and between his legs, 'down there' a place only he knows about.

A few Florentine painters, at least a few—Pontormo, Il Sodoma, Andrea del Sarto— might have brawled over the favors of this young man or if nothing more than to claim him as a model for their very own David. His coloring and limbs would have turned Michelangelo into a pool of melted paint. Leonardo into a crema paradiso.

Bronzino would have stood in the corner and moaned.

Don't tell him any such unimaginable things, sinful old world visions, High Renaissance hijinks. Most of all that at 14 he is pretty—perhaps less than 70% or so but youth makes the most of less—and he'd have lit up into an apoplectic and final Seventh-Seal sort of ruddiness.

The girls are also American as is the nun More so even than the boy, being unsullied by culture and history. At the moment the girls supplicate together in contrition. They plead to a Sister

Monica Brigid about this, to Sister Monica Brigid about that, Sister Brigid of Kildare who is surely frigid.

The boy is indifferent to such beseeching because he doesn't venerate anything.

The girls are called Debbie and Sandy, to rhyme perhaps with Barbie, with whom they share a plastic aspect in eye and cheek. If so the boy would be their Ken doll, made safe by his lack of parts.

He'd been delivered by his older brothers to their door that evening at 8:30,

blushing Tintoretto hues at the very the hour they'd set for assignation.

Jonathan is in Florence with his mother and older brothers because they are taking a three week tour of Italy, a gift from their father who stayed behind to do his pastoring, an international exchange pastorate, at the church in Wallasey, England.

Besides Jonathan's mother and brothers, Steve and Alan, the bus carries the load of 18 teenage girls, their two duenna nuns and an extreme weight in suitcases.

In 1963 any bus tour of Italy was necessarily up scale. To pay for this one for his wife and sons, the Kansas parson had cashed in his life insurance policies praying he wouldn't die.

Before the advent of mass tourism, the hotels on such a tour were grand, the restaurants heralded. They'd not yet had even a slice of pizza.

Sister Monica Brigid is the boss and looks it. Her presence is detected in the susurrance of a heavy full metal habit skirt. In 1963, in the very midst of Vatican II, the nun is still dressed in full battle drag.

Dead-fish belly jowls squeeze out of her wimple. Perhaps tightening her eyes still closer together, if that were possible, or so the whim could seem to those scrutinizing her (few did). This sister draped herself in what for the boy was an inordinately grisly crucifix.

Jonathan didn't pray anymore, proud to think he'd left superstition behind with puberty. At the moment however he prays fervently.

"Go away! Sweet Jesus! Oh please! You god damn bitch!" Although young he had his vernacular down.

Earlier in the other room the girls were coming and going although hardly speaking of Michelangelo—they'd chattered on and on about things to buy. Already over burdened with 'Made In Italy' they still craved for more.

During their dismal party they'd spoken only a few words to the stripling, ignoring him because he was three years younger and thereby irrelevant. So he danced by himself to the radio, mainly to Rita Pavone singing 'Cuore' half a dozen times. The hit of that summer in Italy.

Mio cuore

Tu stai soffrendo
 Cosa posso fare per the Mi sono innamorata
 Per te pace no, no, non c'e! Heart of mine
 You who are suffering What can I do for you. I fell in Love
 For you there's no peace anywhere.

To that the boy danced a slow virginal rendition of the Twist (the one approved of in Kansas). The only dance he knew. Not easily done to Rita Pavone.

The girls find him so hilarious they've forgotten to be arrogant and join in (theirs an East Coast version of the Twist that lit up the Boy's cherry cheeks). That evening's one young moment.

Suddenly, mid contrappusto, the scene popped. All fell still by yet another 'Office- of- the -Night' banging on a Florentine hall door. Same knock that had once stilled Benevento Cellini mid course mid plunge into a boy's bottom.

Sister Monica Brigid's medieval mind stilled them dead in dread as her meat ball fist slammed on wood.

BAM BAM BAM. "LET ME IN!"

Debbie and Sandy were instantly stricken, neither giving a squeal nor a sigh of doom. They were privileged seniors from Saint Scholastica Academy in Baltimore County, 'The County' as it was known. A Catholic school, respect the capital C, where the more prosperous citizens of Brooklandville, Greenspring and Owings Mills strutted their spoils and not very demur daughters.

Jonathan came that evening to intuit, a bitter knowledge, how much the girls despised his feckless person. Steve and Alan, the brothers he so idolized, had brought him along with the wine, but for protection, exchanging knowing looks while giving him reassuring smiles as he troop along after them.

No matter that the County girls' invitation to party was with the young men only, no little brother. That had gone without saying.

At the voice on the other side of the door the girls sibilated together a hushed alarm not unlike 'go for help, the Visigoths are here.'

"Oh no, it's that fat turd Sister Monica Brigid! HIDE! HIDE!" From this point on the evening banter goes in caps with exclamation points. All was lisped in horrified

whispers.

At “HIDE!” he, the boy, the only he, had jumped off in terror to do just that, ending up in the bathtub with the curtain drawn.

“DEBORAH CATHERINE! ALISANDE! OPEN THIS DOOR!”

A huge body is breaching the hotel room, the creature will soon be coming for Jonathan who’d be found out despite the shirt on his nose.

The beast’s probably got large yellow teeth too just like Sister Monica Brigid.

Jonathan’s cringes sliding down the slippery slide of the porcelain until his head is stopped by the drain. He’s sweating mightily as he progresses, something that humiliates him because he knows that when he starts to perspire nothing can staunch it. It always becomes an on going torrent. Drops of it are already crash banging—damn it, why so alarmingly loud- onto the tub.

Now the radio is silenced. Turned off in a brutal act. Emasculation by can opener. All the boy in the bathtub hears is the nun shouting, and the girls yelping in snot and tears as if flayed alive.

The nun hollers for him, how terrible when exterminator turns into his terminator, becomes his inquisitor. Shit! This is for real.

And cometh indeed the nun does, old yeller with her nose down.

Accompanying her is the faint chant of rattling crucifix and rosary. The dark ages are again nigh as if 400 years of Enlightenment had been erased by the whimper down a drain behind a plastic shower curtain.

The girls had plotted the time well between the time they’d give the boys to arrive and bed check.

They’d have an hour and half to do the adventure with Jonathan’s older brothers, for dancing to the radio, flirting coyly, taking no more than a pretend sip of ruby red danger while they fidgeted expectantly in their chairs. Hot bottomed.

However, those naughty brothers of his didn’t even pretend to take even one glass of the toxin wine before abruptly leaving him in such ill tempered care. No pleading from the girls could make them stay. They’d sidled off into the Florentine

night looking for older, riper pleasures.

Then Jonathan's presence, cheeks brightening the room, was for the girls an unforgivable insult. It stoked the scorned young ladies' disdain. In a pout Debbie Buttafuoco turned the radio up to deny him any chance of speaking. It was their downfall.

The girls could not have been more different, Debbie lean, dark Italian, pretty but with predator features, a biting tongue. Sandy plump, tall, a German redhead with freckles. All they shared was what they wore the St Scholastica uniform, pleated grey skirt of maidenly length, navy blue blazer with the St Scholastica emblem, white blouse with button down collar, (and what the two hated most) knee high gray socks.

Blaring Italian pop songs had summoned Sister Monica Brigid half an hour earlier than expected.

These girls roomed for the tour from choice, why might seem inexplicable except that one was the daughter of a high billing gynecologist, the other of an even higher billing anesthesiologist. Both were price tags on legs.

Religious warfare seethed below the surface of their tour bus. It had surreptitiously riven the tour group in twain, schism! Luther. Reformation. Counter Reformation. Inquisitors. Jesuits! It cleaved the bus with girls and chaperones keeping together to the fore close to the resident tour guide for safety: the pastor's wife and his three sons segregated off to themselves at the back where exhaust fumes muddled the view.

In the bathroom a blob of ominous cloud shifts in a rush. It's coming clearer through the drawn veil of a plastic shower curtain. Pentimento!

Behind the curtain the boy tries to morph into something small. This means pretending he's not six feet tall with long skinny arms, a skinny torso, no muscle.

He's writhing in two, pressed down in terror, some nausea too, overcome by Italian hotel room disinfectant. Rehearsing for another deposition from the Cross.

Their personal on-board guide is an overwhelmed fellow who travelled along with them to explain all in exotic English (his favorite saying, "Italian pipples is good pipples"). Even for American tourist athletes of the day this had been an endurance training. They were in fact being readied for an assault on Rome.

After a few days in Venice, the boy, his mother and brothers had come rolling along together with girls and nuns down the peninsula. They went stopping as much as proceeding — Padua, Verona, Mantua, Ferrara, Rimini, Bologna, Modena, Parma.

Everywhere, the boy's mother gave her delighted half smile. She took Italy like sunshine on her face. His brothers had vowed to fart in every church and they did.

On bus the young ladies blathered or sang campfire songs. One of the seniors had brought along her guitar and strummed Dominique for all inchoately. Smiling as she sang, of course. This distraction irritated the boy. Jonathan called it 'The Singing Nun's Lobotomy Song'.

Instead, the boy wanted only to study the window with all his intent, to carve the scenes into his brain, all that they drove through, every detail, in order to take Italy back without any loss to Kansas.

Steve also entertained them. Once by repeatedly flipping an ice cream cup spoon at the back of Sister Monica Brigid's habit while intermittently crouching down in his seat to intone "s-c- c-c-r-oooo-t-u-m-m-m," in a low priestly voice, and then pierce out with a high and rapid scream "SCROTUM!!!". The same as if a mouse were at play with the Eunuchs.

"YOU IN THERE COME OUT THIS INSTANT!" With that the clamor of metal rings above plays the xylophone down the boy's spine. Dring Dring Dring.

Hitchcock destroying our innocence. "GOT YOU!"

Curtain flung back, the hearty nun replaces it. She's a monolithic black habit looming in threat over the tub and its miserable occupant. She points at the boy's naked breast.

Trecento eyes blaze, maybe made extra vengeful from bombardment by that wooden ice cream cup spoon. But Sister Monica Brigid is taken aback. She's surprised at what she's found.

Beyond disbelief there's a hint too of disappointment in the way she glances at the quaking boy. She'd obviously expected (hoped) to find one or both of his brothers.

These Protestants! They were even more devious and Godless than she'd

accounted for. This blushing eunuch of a boy was already corrupted in heresy.

That day their bus brought them rocking and rolling through Tuscany. It began with Pisa which according to their program was for the Battistero, 1363, the Leaning Tower where everyone took another photo they would never look at, the Duomo dedicated to the Virgin (yawn) and the huge Camposanto still in shatters from an allied bomb (oops).

Everything in Pisa was also sinking, just like Venice. Everything everywhere either sank, crumbled or had been bombed.

And then swerving and honking they were taken to Luca, to the Duomo, for a surprise, a Madonna and Child, this one by Ghirlandaio a name no one could pronounce or wanted to. As a bonus, unreferenced in the day's program, they stopped for a surprise Madonna and Child by Fra Bartolommeo, 1509. No wonder Italian artists were all dead.

From there they bussed on in basic silence, except for the slapping of cards as the bored girls endlessly played gin.

Onwards to have lunch, anticipated by all, in Pistoia—followed by the Duomo with attention drawn to the main portal lunette, Madonna and Child by Andrea Della Robbia. Then they paused in Prato. There to admire a work they all took interest in, a lunette by Andrea Della Robbia, Madonna and Child. That Duomo too had seemed to be sinking even as they stood inside it making them glad to be pushed on.

Afternoon entertainment was journeying to visit Sesto, the Pieve there, to see something different. All took interest—a Circumcision by Jacopo Vignali who in blessed relief none had heard of.

The Protestant mother and her circumcised sons found this hilarious.

In weary joy they were de-bussed almost too stiff to walk at this centuries old hotel subsiding into Florence's via Porta Rossa. The town's 'Centro' rose around them forbidding, somber huge stones giving them claustrophobia like a tight closet. A look and most were too certain that a lot more Madonna's were awaiting them.

“GET OUT HERE THIS MINUTE!”

Jonathan clambers out of the tub in his awkward, new, man-boy body feeling like he's just been cited in a Kinsey Report.

“PUT YOUR SHIRT ON!” ordered Sister Monica Brigid.

Buttoning his shirt on the trot, his passage through the bedroom goes ignored. Teen angst there blights the careful color coordination in a room where even the doorknobs were Botticellian.

“I’LL HAVE YOU THROWN OFF THE BUS!”

Once in the corridor of the Albergo Porta Rossa Jonathan glances back over his shoulder while he makes his escape. Something nipped at the back of his neck. Behind he sees the cutout form of Sister Monica Brigid poking her nun’s head sideways out of the room to watch him.

Corridor tiles glitter from centuries of scrubbing. There are pots of Mediterranean succulents.

Perfectly still the nun’s head is another inanimate thing along the line of prints decorating the hallway. It’s a gallery of drawings by School-of-Rafael wannabes.

“Mother” went off the siren in the boy’s head. She was still his ultimate defense. Quite likely in her own room Sister Brigid echoed his lament, “MOTHER?” Catholicism is surely as bizarre as any other religion ever imagined.

In the morning, into the crowded breakfast room, Sister Monica Brigid makes her most practiced stage entrance. “MOTHER” Prays the nun from Baltimore, Maryland approaching those in the breakfast room letting her habit shish like a sharp blade through the veil of time.

She knows she’s at her best In a demanding, commanding splay of warts and gray hair.. Authority of office hangs on her in Christian trinkets. The air parts for her maidenhead, does a Red Sea act as she comes straight for the table of the mother and her desperado son.

Their table lays strewn by many empty dishes, they both liked to eat well.

Crumbs from an assortment of Italian breakfast treats litter the table cloth, Albergo Porta Rossa takes pride in its breakfast. Mother and son have tried everything, the ciambella with lemon, bruttiboni and almonds, panforte, and the boy’s favorite the zeppole.

Sister Monica Brigid gives the table an atom smashing glance. With the edge of her hand she clears away a swath in breakfast pastry crumbs. Sweeps them to the floor.

Sweetly the mother is saying, "We can make room for you, Sister. Would like to join us? You seem to be hungry? There are so many good things here to try."

The mother had been placidly reading about Ghiberti's doors. Monumental portals to the baptistery in the hard heart of Florence. Masterpieces of the early Renaissance they took Ghiberti 21 years to execute. Doors Michelangelo in awe named The Gates of Paradise.

Sister Monica Brigid, always in mourning for a dead God, stands too near, a threatening presence over their breakfast table. Her moon face suspends above them looking oddly squashed as if someone heavy had sat on it.

Before the nun can begin her practiced denunciation, now with a preamble addition of something like "I couldn't care less," the mother continues. She too knows how to be ruthless.

Her ever placid smile spreads in a sfumato brush stroke across her face. She stares up at the nun straight on. The boy knows that one well.

"I hear you interrupted their little party last night. A shame. We haven't much time to be young."

"Would you like to read about The Gates of Paradise? They are quite close by. I think we are to walk over." She is giving everyone her deepest enigmatic Irish Sea smile.

"We can look at them but we can't touch. No one may touch. No one can open them."

UP UTE PASS

Summer of my 16th year I landed my first man job. I was hired to be the dishwasher for the summer at the Fisherman's Inn restaurant in Green Mountain Falls, Colorado. Except for a couple of short summer camps I'd never been away from home, from my doting mother and father. Suddenly I was to be transported 500 miles away from them to the West.

Home was the sedate safety of my father's parsonage in Wichita. Home was a state of mind. Itinerant pastors family that we were we moved every few years to a different town, another parsonage. We moved about while everything about us remained the same.

Prayer and Christian Humanism followed along, the same worn furniture, the Victorian etchings in heavy frames, same books and phonographs. I felt packaged in my parents enlightened creeds and opinions.

I thought that if I'd shit in the living they'd say "how nice, Jonie, now let's listen to Beethoven's Seventh again."

My course then was set for no more smothering parental love. I was bound for hell to escape from 'safe'.

At 16 I wanted somewhat inchoately yet most ardently to break free from the spell of that ephemeral home so ancient and crumbling.

I shall be telling this with a sigh. Somewhere ages and ages hence. No one will want to hear it: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."

I'd gotten the job through a friend of a friend of a friend who'd had the same job before me. Best that he didn't warn me. Hiring was handled, sight unseen on both sides, by mail.

I was sent off by greyhound bus from Wichita in late June. Bob Dilts, my employer, was to meet me at the bus station in Colorado Springs. Bob Dilts, owner with his wife Ruthie of the restaurant. Co-owner and chef.

I'd been in a state of dread mixed with high 16-year-old excitement ever since learning I had the job. The long trip from Wichita to 'the Springs', as I came to know it, was the same. As the bus left Wichita I was hit in full by consternation of the unknown.

It swirled in a Dervish skirt distorted by the diesel grime and fleeting images framed by that bus window. On my way at last. I was falling off my flat unexciting earth and tumbling into the Mountain king delirium of a forest fastness.

The 1965 summer didn't quite deliver on my great expectations. But it did change me radically. So substantively in time that in retrospect of an adult, regarding that palimpsest drawing of himself, I see how pivotal it was.

The people of Kansas frequent Colorado in the summer. It's their closest escape from heat and humidity. My parents had taken me twice to the Rockies during August. One of my summer camps had been there too.

Such frail familiarity felt deceptively reassuring. In truth it was no preparation at all for what awaited me.

I remember Bob from that first time. Bob Dilts. Nothing I can write will do him justice. But 'Scrawny' is indeed the key word.

I've seen no living man more emaciated. Cavernous cheeks and a chin so cleft it looked like someone had taken a hatchet to his skull. That twig of a neck. Those leg bones swimming in trouser legs. He inspired the unsavory whimsy that if one pulled off his t-shirt, yanked off his pants, he'd in fact be a skeleton.

I'd say now that Bob was somewhere in his late 60s. He smoked obsessively, Chesterfields, unfiltered. For certain he was in end-stage emphysema. Breathing came in a loud Sisyphean task with heavy crackling and wheezing.

Handsome? For sure, good features if rather craggy and dark, not once a smile. I see him in my mind like an Edward R. Murrow type of man just released from a hard labor camp.

He was short too, probably 5 ft. 5 inches. Shortness accentuated by a to-the-quick burr cut, salt and pepper hair, no bald spot. To me he looked like he'd been shrunk in the wash, surely been a giant before. He acted like one.

Ever after I would see him in the same costume, in spotless white painter's pants, an immaculate, virgin undershirt, white, white tennis shoes. A white kerchief

folded into a crisp triangle draped him, the point at his back.

Bob's blaring whiteness was in stark counterpoint to the permanent tan of his deeply wrinkled face and neck.

To his dark beetling eyes, the unusually thick black eyebrows, to the charred skin on his stalk arms.

He dwelled in a chiaroscuro duality all of his own.

Bob Dilts was a highly animated Pierrot, a tragic clown swaggering onto the stage of my life. He's since been unsurpassed as a picturesque, picaresque character.

That first charge up Ute Pass toward Green Mountain Falls was in silence. I went up in a speeding Ford station wagon, Butch, Bob's beloved ancient Boxer, steaming and slurping obscenely in the back seat.

Knowing nothing then about exotic people I simply spent the next 10 weeks staring at him in a kind of rapture. Totally bowled over by this eccentric creature who had come my way.

I fell under Bob's spell. I guess I fell in love with him. Maybe he fell for me? If so not at all Wichita bus station stuff. Maybe like Zeus and his Ganymede. Whatever, it got us through the summer, two frightened souls.

Fisherman's Inn was not a large restaurant. It seated 60 at a time at tables and eight at the counter. But in summer it did so continually without fail through lunch times and evenings. A line of people waiting for a table always threaded out the front door. Its popularity had reached a cult status despite not having a liquor license.

Green Mountain Falls had a year round population of less than 500. In the summer it freaked out with a horde of wealthy second home owners from around the country especially from Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City.

The village had nothing much at all except a small general store. And Fisherman's Inn. Nevertheless it had been a draw ever since P.T. Barnum built his grand house Chipmunk there, a mansion on the mountainside.

Green Mountain Falls centered on a small mountain lake. The restaurant faced onto it with a row of picture glass windows bringing the calendar-photo scenery

directly into the restaurant.

A hand written notice inside the restaurant announced that the chef would, for a fee, clean and cook trout fishermen brought in from the lake. I learned he genuinely did so.

The village was no more than a ring of isolated homes, several quite large. They were linked by very steep gravel roads and far too few streetlights. No sidewalks, no lawns. Everything rough and rustic. At night that mountain town lay deserted, so quiet and dark, that I thought of it in perpetual blackout for a dreaded Blitz.

Below the imported wealth, the year round citizens lived in small cabins without plumbing. Lying at 7,800 feet the place was not for the weak. Bob and Ruthie themselves passed their winters in Phoenix.

If Bob was shriveled, Ruthie was a spent husk. She somewhat mirrored him, somewhat, although no one could close to his vehemence and crude passion. Ruthie, short as Bob, also came wiry and brittle, tough and mean. But she could be kind too now and then if apt to plunging the knife into a victim's back during her delivery of spiteful commentaries.

Ruthie stayed in the comfortable apartment attached to the restaurant. Bob and Butch spent every night in a green pup tent pitched in the raw forest clearing behind the kitchen.

Remembering. I understand why Bob hired high school boys. We were cheap and too dumb to know better. The work was a sentence.

Back in 1965 I earned fifty cents an hour once figure out, with room and board. I worked 9 to 1:30, then again from 4:30 to 9, although I don't think I ever got out of the restaurant until 10. Sunday afternoons and Mondays were off. Meaning long 60 hour plus weeks. My earnings came to a flat \$30 per week. Saved it all since I had no way, no where to spend it.

How many of us ache in pity for our young selves?

No matter to me who knew no better. In taking the job I wanted one thing, to save enough to buy a used car, maybe a very used car. If I held onto it all for the entire summer. If I saved every penny. I thought I'd have just enough.

As for my life that summer the times were thus.

The Dilts put me up in a one room log cabin nearly a couple of hundred yards up above the restaurant. That had me sleeping at around 8,400 feet which didn't bother me in the least. Sweet Sixteen.

My first task of the day was to check that Bob was up, actually, I realize now, to make sure he hadn't died over the cold mountain night. I'd stand back from the pup tent and pretend bawl in a faint voice "Bbbob, Mr. Dilts?"

Grumbled curses, "Put a lid on it, you dumbass kid," and snorts from Butch would indicate that both had endured for another day.

In the kitchen my duties were as follows: take unused baked potatoes from yesterday and roll back their skins with the back side of a table knife then mash them all up for Bob to use for hash browns. That done I set to rolling a couple hundred fresh potatoes in tin foil.

Next came the chickens. A task I didn't like. I chopped up 100 hens. Supposedly thawed over night these were still frigid carcasses.

Not to gently Bob gave me lessons on preparing chickens. Showed me how to cut the tail bone, hack off the gland at the rear, cut the legs close to the body, saw through the breast bone and slip the entrails out, wedge the carcass open and then with my cleaver maul each side of the backbone to get the breasts loose.

Working on the bodies I gave them names—Petunia, Grace, Lola—to make the macabre more silly, less scary too.

My left-handedness got in the way of these operations. For this Bob would damn me to hell. Blast me with running comments about my ass and genitals. I soon learned that he'd do so at about anything I did. It didn't matter and I came to take it in stride.

Stoicism, a gift from my Parents, was very useful.

After the breakfast rush I'd have a Pike's Peak of dishes to do. It was even worse at lunch. In the evenings the insane flow of dirty dishes from the dining room left me near to tears.

I labored over two huge sinks, one with soapy hot water, the other of cold clear water with a dosing of bleach. Beside these there was a big industrial washer for me to fill. In my sleep I'd hear the rumble and sloshing of its cycles, a monster gobbling up bad

children.

No matter how I raced I still struggled to barely keep up. For me it was like being Mickey washing dishes in Fantasia. Instead of to Dukas' Sorcerer's Apprentice, however, I labored to the music of Bob's running profanity and demonic gutturals as he spun and whirred close by, a windup satanic doll trapped in punishment forever between grill and oven.

His little being of lap dog spite and animosity transformed into a towering lord of smoke, lightning everywhere, Etna eyes.

We made for quite a couple. Gaunt, short, pristine, old Bob dashing around in a blaze of white heat. Jonathan still with his baby fat and downy beard towering a foot over him permanently blushing and sweating in the heat of the moment, in the hell of the kitchen.

No work harder than in an under-staffed, hyper active, over-achieving kitchen. "God damn it, kid. You are the worst dumb ass ever. Don't you know anything! You still shitting in your pants! Don't you ever go into my dining room again. You hear me! Never! You're the filthiest dishwasher I've ever seen. You'll make the customers puke! I'll cut your balls off and hang them around your neck!"

All this referencing to my apron which by mid day I admit displayed the Fisherman's Inn's entire menu. I'd also be wet from head to shoe from slopped cruddy water. Maybe with a permanently dismayed expression on my face too. I'm sure of that. Between fear of the work, and of Bob, my self esteem had turned to hash browns. Bob's were the best ever.

But to see Bob work was a lesson in virtuoso fry cooking. He could juggle 20 orders at a time, from trout and chicken to steak and swordfish. He was the reason for the line at the door. And he knew it. An arrogant tyrant.

"Fuck all you mother fuckers. I'm an asshole. Eat me. You cunt licking douchebags." Bob gave me a salty language to last me my lifetime.

The job was my own personal hell of dishes. Yet soon enough I got into the pace of Bob's kitchen. Ruthie began to look quizzically at me, saying. "Why Bob likes you I don't know. You're so sweet. But he sure does. Most boys we have here don't last the season, or if they do they end up hating his guts, and saying so."

After the rush Bob would sit on an upturned lard bucket gasping for breath

and inhaling Chesterfields between coughs.

That was when I heard his stories. Seeing it now it was like I was invisible, sitting there like a child before him on my own bucket. He'd talk on and on, never addressing me directly or looking at me. He kept his grizzled head slumped down. His monologue was to the sawdust on the floor. In that way he'd talk until shortness of breath forced him to pause.

Bob had run away from home when he was my age, to play the trumpet professionally. That was in Wisconsin where Bob grew up, the son of a wealthy family who'd sent him off early to a private school.

He'd left to join Ringling Brothers. He'd risen to play first trumpet in the Circus band.

After a few years of that he somehow got into the restaurant business in Chicago, owning a few 'joints' until in time he ran a 400 seat establishment. That was when he got to be chummy with Al Capone.

When Capone began his businesses in Florida, dog tracks and a hotel co-owned with Meyer Lansky, he brought Bob along and set him up with a "class act" restaurant in Miami Beach itself.

After Capone went off to Leavenworth Bob had had several more restaurants along the way before ending up breathless at Fisherman's Inn in Green Mountain Falls.

Bob had also been married four times. There seemed to be kids but that part was vague. He'd met Ruthie, a receptionist, at one of his Miami places.

Ruthie and Bob shared a very strange relationship. They were in a constant, bitter feuding, often with alarming fights that erupted several times every day over anything, all things or mostly, nothing at all. For me these were abrasive.

My short life had passed in the decorum of a parsonage, a ceremonious world of quiet reflection where all violence was denied. Should there be a fight it was held with proper controls. Not too loudly. Even the thought of my parents screwing alarmed me.

While the image of Bob and Ruthie doing it came clearly, their worn-out bodies jerking along as wheezing howls were torn out of them.

Besides washing dishes I spent that summer reading. I put all my unspent

youthful passion into turning pages. Brothers Karamazov, Fathers and Sons, Ulysses, War and Peace, Sons And Lovers.

I read every night. I read when I could at work. I read on my days off— straight through from Sunday after lunch until Tuesday morning. All works of genius they filled me to over brimming with wonder and new thoughts. That summer my mind began to stir.

After work, in the mountain dark, to get back to my books I had to make my way up 600 feet alone to my ink black and cold cabin. Ruthie told me to bang garbage can lids as I went to scare off the bears. Still I'd see some now and then. She warned me to look out for a cub because then the mother might be near and I'd be in trouble.

I feared those journeys, especially the part where I'd come into my tiny cabin and need to grope blind for the pull string to the one-and-only ceiling light bulb, a bare low watt bulb that when lit in a rush would careen back and forth like a Psycho nightmare (a 1960 movie that I'd only recently been allowed to see).

Then after reading most of the night I'd be awakened first light by the eerie clumping of the old woman next door. A one-legged lady she came stumping her way to 'our' outhouse up the narrow walkway between the two cabins.

I named her the phantom of the shitter. Although my only neighbor and sharing the intimacy of that space we never met once. This ghostliness made her most vivid to me. Was she made entirely of wood? Her face a horrible mahogany? She passed me in the dark like so much else that summer. Intimations of complexities I had never supposed possible.

Over the summer I worked with Sue, Dee and Lou (Louise Romero). The three were waitresses. They were also cheerleaders from Pueblo State. Sue was a woman to me. She made my checks turn red whenever she spoke to me. A very beguiling, real woman with long blonde hair and kind blue eyes.

Dee was hilarious her black cat hair parted in the middle and tied in braids. Two other waitresses came along, young Swedish women touring the US of Working and fucking their way west. Saucy teasers. They stayed a month,

Greta and Ulla.

Greta was beautiful. Once she said “I meet a man at The Antlers, that big hotel in the town. He takes me tonight to The Garden of The Gods restaurant. You think he will fuck me? That is good, right? I wear my black crap dress.”

‘You think he will fuck me?’ and ‘Black crap dress’ became crew mottos for us, something that bound us together in hilarity.

Ulna was not pretty. She had bad teeth and skin. But my callow fantasies played in and upon her robust figure.

Above all, Lou, the youngest of the cheerleaders, was my favorite. Although even she seemed far too mature for me. She was quite pretty, dark, short. I found her Mexican-American accent, so charming that it too made me blush. But with Lou at least I could talk, jabbering away so proudly that she should be taking an interest in me.

Lou, who I soon enough had a crush on, was the real discovery of that summer. Sitting here in reverie I realize what I was too green to see then, that although she was older she was drawn to me.

Mainly we two talked books, she majored in English. I think part of her interest in me was that I had read more than she had.

One night she got me drunk for the first time in my life, on gin. It made me so sick I couldn’t drink gin again for many years. We sat under the single bare bulb of my cabin. Soon enough I felt daring and took off my shirt. She laughed and clapped her hands.

Another time she drove me down to the Springs in her old Rambler. We were listening to “I Can’t Get No Satisfaction,” the hit of that summer, when the brakes gave out. We were soon hurtling down toward Manitou Springs. US 24, then a two lane highway, had a 7% grade.

We were on our way to see “Ship of Fools”, which we never saw. Out the door Ruthie threw us one of her gloomy manic-depressive warnings, “beware an early snow.” Instead of snow we found free fall.

Lou saved us. She drove inspired and stopped us at last by pulling the car on two wheels into an escape. Rambler went half way up the escape embankment. That brought us braced for impact to stasis in a sheering crunch of the car’s underbelly.

Then, the radio played “Help Me Rhonda” another summer hit.

My last adventure with her came when we went out to dare ourselves with a night hike in the mountains. I went fantasizing that we'd fuck, my first fuck.

We went along the creek. Talked quietly passing along the empty village. Then without warning car lights caught us in the eyes, blinding lights racing straight for us. It seemed unbelievable but soon it became clear the lights were after us, those lights like beast eyes coming for us on a dark and desolate road.

We had to run for it. Again it was Lou who kept her head. "Jump for the creek, Jonathan. Do it now."

We did so just as that car of doom veered onto the shoulder in a spray of lacerating gravel. We landed in a creek of mountain ice.

More than the water left me trembling. I'd had my first lesson that evil actually existed.

Lou died at age 58. The news left me feeling desperate. I learned too that she was in fact only two years older. Also, without a shred of surprise, I read that in life she'd become a high flying lawyer. And stayed single. Probably too indomitable to resign herself fully to another.

Wonder where she got that gin?

But no, I go off the tracks. It was Bob who truly starred in the summer of my 16th year. He's in my head under a spotlight in a one act, one man, one ring, Ringling Brothers show. In a trumpet solo he's playing the Ringling Brothers Grand Entry Fanfare.

Bob reigns indelible, incredible, in my potage of memories.

Absolutely, he starred at Fisherman's Inn where he performed thrice daily for the entire dining room. This was possible because a large rectangular window had been cut out of the wall between kitchen and dining room.

It showed off Bob in the glory of his lickety-split cooking. It gave customers full access to his gyrations and impressive vernacular. He went at the carousel of orders in hyperactive frenzy, skin and bones producing plates fast enough to keep the six waitresses running. The Swedes, the Colorado State cheerleaders, plus Madge on the weekends, a woman from town.

The service window also allowed the dining room to hear Bob's running

commentary, a babble of opinions and obscenities aimed at Ruthie, the waitresses and the paying customers. His invective was a jazz rendition. It syncopated to his viscous banging of knives and skillets.

“God damn son of a bitches!” Bam. “Cock suckers!” CA- boom.
“Assholes!” Splat .

Bob also threw crockery. He tossed plates, soup bowls, cups and saucers. These were aimed at Ruthie and the girls—never at me. Somehow Bob calculated his bombardment so that his missiles always landed safely off target. It was left to me to sweep up afterwards.

The one time Bob directed his wrath at me was when in complete innocence I cleaned off his grill. “You snot nosed hick! You dumb shit! Don’t you ever touch my grill again or I’ll cut off your fingers! I’ll scramble your balls for breakfast! You worthless shrimp dick!”

What really set Bob off? Women in general, including his wife. Most of all drunks in his dining room—more than a few times the wizened little guy chased out drunks far bigger and bellicose than him. And woe be the customers who came in to order pancakes at lunch time or a cheese sandwich during the dinner rush.

Wham! – “Cocksuckers! Who the fuck cooks pancakes at noon!”

His most vivid performance erupted my last night of work. Madge, the dim but jocular local who subbed waitressing, with big tits and dumb cow eyes, made the mistake of giving him an order for a BLT just at closing time and after a bruising dinner rush.

He took one look at the check and ran after her with a plate in hand of what he’d just been cooking, a trout almandine handsomely browned. He caught up with her in the dining room delivering meals to a large group.

Swooping upon her, eyes lit, he shoved her face into what he was carrying. He mashed and swiveled the plate.

“Fucking Stupid Cunt!” roared Bob chasing her among the tables trout and tartar sauce dripping from her peroxide.

Some guests were walking out in a huff. Madge quit sobbing hysterically. Bob retreated to the kitchen from whence he brayed expletives upon the quick and the dead.

Ruthie cornered him there. She pushed him off his lard bucket throne. Even Butch was in on it. The old fellow gave a dotty bark, lapped his doggy rear and then shuffled over to lick Bob's face.

For my part, I had a swift exhilaration of a mirthful loving of it all, of them all.

Yep, I went up Ute Pass a boy. I came down it what? A man? Hardly, although somewhat nearer. A better-read boy for sure. Also, for a life time to come I'd learned how to curse with the best of them.

Bob is dead for many years. I think of this and feel there is "a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced. I fear something terrible has happened."

BATTLE FOR THE HAYSVILLE VFW

Tonight the boy drove his new old first-car, a vintage fire-engine-red, four door, DeSoto Firedome. A massive car and styled somewhat like a tank.

He was 16. Temperature had also slipped down to 16' F as the sun set. His breath wreathed. He was very much a cat alive in his six feet frame. It would be his first trip alone in his car outside the city. First of a hundred journeys in it through time— he would keep it for almost seven years— to a scheherazade of new places, people and adventures. Forward into a bonanza of sex.

For that trip he had to fill the tank which frightened him as that too he had never done before. Nothing about the evening to come gave him courage. He was going off into the unknown.

Tank full the boy awkwardly replaced the gas nozzle to the pump, keenly aware of his audience, the men at the pumps, the men staring critically at him from behind the station's plate glass.

That done he went inside to pay shy of the grown up male ambiance of the place, to him something exclusive like a bar or barbershop. The man behind the register spoke up, "Want to sell the engine?"

The prize under the hood. More than this first fellow would try to buy it. A V8 Hemi Head engine, a legend. The heavy old car could roll purring forever at 100 mph. For years it would run with him from Kansas City to Dallas at top speed for hours—no problem.

It was a huge car, weighing 3,800 lbs. He knew because he'd driven it to one of the 100s of Garvey wheat elevators just that afternoon, weighing it on the truck scales. A thrill just as it had been to get so close to a small piece of the immense Garvey family empire, the greatest wheat barons of the Great Plains. More grain elevators than any others, more than 100,000 acres of wheat land, large ranches, the most oil wells in the State, and a network of filling stations to boot. The boy knew his own brother Steve had once worked on a Garvey ranch in western Kansas.

This boy was already fascinated by the enmity between poor and rich, playing

out in front of him in this untidy prairie city. He already knew it was wealth that Americans most wanted even beyond their own souls. Always outside of the crowd he himself remained indifferent to the wealthy, he just like to study them, like monkeys in the zoo. He didn't know why.

He'd have been in wonder to know that even this gas station where he shivered in the cold was owned by the Garveys, that he was pumping Garvey oil, that the station sold fortified bread made from Garvey wheat.

Wichita was a land of the rival rich—to name a few Coleman, Beech, Cessna, Lear, Garvey, and then to the town's super wealthy Koch family. Oddly it was also an isolated bastion for a tight community of Lebanese-Syrian Christians, a well to do group and among the larger of its kind in the country. The boy went to school with many, the Colmias, Farhas and Stevens.

These families ruled the city's oblivious middle and lower-middle working class. Wichita was also a bitter field of warring underclasses, Indians come up from Oklahoma, Mexicans, poor whites and blacks a neighborhood of blight and want.

The boy strode proudly as manfully as he could back to the Firedome, waiting for its owner. Opening the door in slow motion the boy got in still feeling half a dozen stares dripping down the back of his neck like being naked and covered in whipped cream, thrill of having become a man with a man's car, excruciating wonderment.

Closing the door he pushed the key forward. What! No Ignition Key Slot? No Steering Wheel? He had climbed into the back seat. Laughter rattled the station's plate glass. The boy turned around in a fledgling rout,

Because the power steering no longer worked was a bitch for the Jonathan to drive. Radio didn't work. Neither did the clock. The powered motion for the front seat was out. But the lighter did function. Good, since he had just started smoking, unfiltered Camels, so recently that each cigarette still nauseated him.

That was the Saturday after Thanksgiving. The long weekend still giving the streets a half empty holiday feel. Crews had just finished hanging Christmas lights to brighten Wichita's uninteresting places which meant almost the entire city.

This boy was going to what he considered even a more uninteresting place, Haysville, a whole working class small town of humble homes and trailer parks about 10 miles from Wichita, due south. Haysville was the other end of the world from the Garveys and the black ghetto. Blighted by ugliness. Vulgar. Gutter snipes on parade.

His mother didn't want to be a snob, just couldn't help being one as that was how she'd been raised. The boy too although he was not yet mature enough to admit it.

As you entered Haysville a billboard declared it the Peach Capital of Kansas, and yes it was surrounded by the orchards of small poor truck farms. But no 100,000 acres of golden wheat here.

If possible Haysville looked even less appetizing in daylight. Darkness favored it, gave its ugliness obscurity. Its slap-dash appearance mellowed a bit by dust veiled gloom.

Haysville was a place of bad reputation. It too was a ghetto for the working class. Those without good taste.

The boy's oldest brother, Steve, lived there in a dirty and dilapidated duplex—living room like a closet, one bedroom, one infinitesimal toilet which so repelled the boy never used it. Steve said he thought it the remnant of a motel, from the 1940s. His landlord and lady lived in the other half of the duplex. Delmar and Peggy Brown.

They were always deliriously happy alcoholics, late 40s. Their front yard held two whole Harley's, his and hers, plus a spread of bike parts in the weeds giving the impression that they'd blown up a third one. They might have.

Steve had invited his little brother down for a party at Delmar's and Peggy's, and later for him to meet Steve's new girl friend and go to a dance at the Haysville VFW.

Steve called this woman the dragon lady. He was ever doing, saying exotic things. The boy was forever copying him.

Peggy had made a big Pumpkin pie. Delmar's new patch of home made beer filled their bathtub, ice down. Peggy and Delmar were already drunk when he arrived. Steve was about so. The boy took a beer from Delmar and a piece of pie from Peggy.

Delmar kept repeating the same thing, "Pegger, I tole you once, I tole you twice you crazy enough without getting' drink on yer ass." This was a broken record until in fury Peggy yelled "Delmy, stop that shit" and hit him straight in the eye with a piece of pumpkin pie. Their pie fight was serious.

They'd claw a finger through the pumpkin and fling the goo. Much of the pie was

splattered on them and their living room walls.

Delmar made weird beer. It's taste was so yeasty the Boy thought it was like drinking homemade sour dough bread. But it grew on him. Sixteen that the kid was.

Both Delmar and Peggy worked at Cessna. Both their 20-something year- old sons worked at Cessna. They were a family of plane builders, and it was all they'd known since leaving Arkansas during World War II. They earned decent money but chose like the rest of Haysville to live in a comfortable squalor. None of them had ever flown.

In ramshackle Haysville virtually the entire population built planes. All of Wichita's airplane factories—Boeing, Beechcraft, Cessna, and Learjet were located in the city's southeast quarter, only a few-minutes commute away. In its glory days the Wichita Boeing factory alone employed more than 40,000 and during WWII had built the B29 Super fortress. Delmar and Peggy had moved to the Wichita area to build the B29s. Only layoffs at Boeing had brought them to Cessna. They spoke of Boeing like a lost family.

Haysville was a comfy settlement for these workers and its fortunes went with the air industry, up and down. That wintry Friday the town was down and about out. All the plants were laying off. The boy understood the plight of New England mill towns, he lived in a prairie version.

Wichita and Haysville suited the okies and arkies just fine. Less than 60 miles from the Oklahoma state line the area had kept some of the Cherokee Strip, Indian Territory.

Wichita itself, 200,000 people, was a Jackson Pollock spatter painting, a sprawl of quickly built and mismatched buildings. But despite the city's gleeful partying a bitter smoke hung in the air from strong memories of Dust bowl loss and Great Depression misery.

The party had turned into an uproar of fighting between Delmar and Peggy, with Steve playing his guitar and singing Woody Guthrie, also outlaw ballads about Jesse James and Belle Starr, trying to be heard above Peggy's beloved Roger Miller's "King of the Road.

"Trailer for sale or rent. Rooms to let, fifty cents. No phone, no pool, no pets. I ain't got no cigarettes."

"Stop it right now, Peg, I wanna hear Belle Star. Sing it again, Steve." "Belle Starr, Belle Starr, tell me where you have gone since old Oklahoma's sand hills

you did roam?”

Back and forth it went. Delmar kept yelling “you bitch!,” words flung furiously at Peggy along with more of the pumpkin pie. Ignoring him, soon as her song ran through she’d lift the needle and play it again. Throughout the boy sat on the couch drinking yeast and grinning in self delight.

The party was going in bacchanalian good humor when someone knocked on the front door. Then all was changed.

Georgia walked in. Steve’s one-legged dragon lady. She did then what she always did when entering a room. She made all men stop in time, an ancient curse upon them.

She entered limping, an open thigh-length fur coat, black pant suit and for the boy the disheveled horrible room tilted and popped. This one legged woman came in and her crutch turned into an elegant accessory. Her blonde hair was pulled back tight from her face showing a cat’s forehead, a face of perfect features. She carried the assuredness of effortless superiority that beautiful women have yet without a hint of the haughty grandeur some beauties show. For the boy she would remain the loveliest woman of his life.

Steve had warned him not to gawk at the leg, So he paid it no mind. He didn’t even see it for real and wouldn’t notice it again. The rest of Georgia was all the reality he could handle. Steve said to him, “She used to model before she lost the leg.” The boy could see that was the truth.

Even Delmar and Peggy stopped clowning to grin up at her, like peasants in adoration of the Madonna. They were on all fours because until just then they’d been chasing each other and grunting. “Hey there, baby doll,” they burbled with obvious fondness.

Georgia walked straight over to the boy, to him watching her so closely it seemed she calculated every move, every word from a long experience. And what she said came in a friendly croon, a contralto voice of no particular accent that meant what it said. No ‘ain’t’s. Neither a ‘yeah’ nor a ‘ya’. Never a ‘gonna.’

How this woman came out of Coffeyville, Kansas mystified the boy. Except that it had been an outlaw border town, and he could sense something lawless about her. Something reminiscent of the Daltons in her blue eyes.

He would never know much about her, other than what his brother told. Couple items he remembered, she'd been married five times. She had four kids. Georgia herself never gave a hint of her past.

"I heard you were smart and good looking. I see that at least you're smart." She laughed like a close friend, movie star looks, wild at heart blond. "Is that your cherry bye-bye out front?" The boy didn't understand her meaning but he nodded. "Well, be careful with that. I think it's going to break a few hearts."

At last they left for the Haysville VFW. All tipsy. Georgia had been drinking vodka straight up in Peggy's one clean glass. Delmar and Peggy were in one car. Steve and Georgia drove her new 1965 Convertible Mustang. The boy went following in his Firedome, heater on high (it at least worked).

The boy went on his own because his father, the Reverend, had a midnight curfew for him, which in a couple of months he'd already be contemptuously ignoring.

Haysville's VFW was a cinder block bunker, one story with nothing to mark it except the unlit VFW lodge sign. A row of windows along the front were peeks inside, into a dim jumble of low watt lights and a crowd of bodies in a naughty no-tell and slightly festive interior.

The building tonight was surrounded by a hundred trucks and cars, all American made. The lot was dirt. It was packed tight. The boy could only park at the farthest end.

This Veteran of Foreign Wars lodge like most was dedicated to a local fallen warrior in some action great or small who only a few living now remembered. It was built for large patriotic meetings but used almost exclusively as a bar where the first vets of Vietnam (their boyish battle cries still faltering on), forgotten Korea, heroic World Wars I and II, even a quickly dying out from the Spanish American War.

All would get shit faced once a week, or nightly depending, in the gloom and maybe find some gal willing to fuck. No one said it, thought it, but this was morphine for the horror they'd seen.

It was that year's Christmas season kick off party. Tinsel fell in globs from the ceiling. The windows were framed in blinking red lights. Every male except the boy and Steve had on either a cowboy hat or a Boeing golf cap, all in polyester slacks, all wearing cowboy boots. Georgia caught the eye of every man in the place.

There was a small band in a corner playing tired favorites. The room sweated, packed tight with dancing couples. The bartenders couldn't keep up with orders. After a while the band refused to play requests for Johnny Cash's "Ballad of Ira Hayes" a favorite because then everyone could have a good reason to cry.

Soon the boy realized that Steve and Georgia had disappeared. It hurt his feelings they'd left without a goodbye. He supposed it was because Georgia couldn't dance and there was no vodka to be had. But then he found a girl so it was OK.

She was Juanita Butler. Sixteen she claimed and in the face and deportment that could be. But her body told on her, maybe she'd just turned 15, maybe. Juanita had long straight black Indian hair, brown skin and high cheekbones. The bones know. Later in a snuggling confidence she claimed half Mexican half Cherokee. She pointed out her dad on the dance floor, a big mean looking Indian who beamed benignly at Juanita.

She was small and slight. A surprisingly demure and handsome girl who said as little as possible. The boy liked her a lot.

No one knew why the fight began. It seemed a force of nature to the boy who had never seen one before. Tables toppled. Chairs were broken. The music stopped when the band joined in. The boy could see Delmar and Peggy shielding behind the nearest table top, both draped in tinsel. To be heard over the fight Peggy screeched, "Delmy, If I told you once I told you twice yer crazy 'nough without getting' drunk."

Juanita listened thoughtfully to the boy's whisper. Hand in hand they skirted the brawl and ran out the front door. The boy took her on the run to his DeSoto. It stood at the farthest back of the parking lot, no lights there. They were safely away from the fist-a-cuffing vets inside the VFW.

She didn't seem impressed by the car. He turned it on so she could hear the wondrous engine and to get the heat full going. The girl trembled against his body. He warmed her up to the motions of the Hemi Head pistons. The boy got a hard on.

"The radio doesn't work," she complained.

"The lighter does," replied the boy. They were already well perfume with Camel smoke. He pulled her face close for a kiss. And that's what they did from then on. They kissed, kissed, tongued and kissed.

Nonstop they went at it until in a dizzy rampage in an uproar of frosted dust

the Haysville police force arrived.

All five in the forces fleet charged into the parking lot. With sirens on they came swerving dramatically into the parking lot, their red lights twirling. Baby blue Dodges. They skidded to a halt in a half circle formation in front of the VFW.

The cops jumped out with guns drawn and went rushing in. Then after a couple of minutes they came rushing back outside again to hunker down behind their open doors.

That did it. A blitzkrieg of ammo flew out from inside the building, shattering the windows of the VFW. Bullets pounded into the parking lot, gouging small trenches into the earth, hitting cars, trucks. Many shots just disappeared forever up into the night sky. Someone inside ripped down the red lights around the windows.

The chief, Juanita called him, had a bullhorn in hand plastered to his lips like a Jericho trumpet.

“OK in there, you Veterans of Foreign Wars, fights over. All of you come out with your hands up.”

Someone inside yelled “Come and get us you dirty coppers,” to a roar of laughter. Strangely when the police began to fire back their bullets all went into the cinder blocks.

“This Chief ain’t gonna hurt anyone. He’d lose his job.” Explained the girl, running a cold hand of delicate fingers between the buttons of the boy’s shirt.

Thinking it unfair that his chest hair hadn’t yet started growing, he said in wonder at what he was seeing, “The veterans are firing like crazy.”

“Of course they are,” she said, “They’re all too plastered to hit anything.” Her hand moved ever so sweetly to his upper thigh.

Just in time a pickup pulled up to the DeSoto and Juanita’s dad waved for her. “Watch out for stray bullets kid,” he called out to the boy, “It might have your name on it.”

She hopped dutifully over to the truck just as the first vets began straggling out of the Haysville VFW. The battle was over. The boy felt cheated.

Juanita had left behind her telephone number on a scrap of paper. Alone in the

dark the boy quickly took care of his hard on.

A crowd of Veterans began stumbling out to stand uncertainly shivering in the cold, Haysville police force keeping them corralled in the parking lot, their communal breath a fog of carbon monoxide rising across the black cold like a threat. Men and women were too miserable to do any milling or complaining. It's like Hogan's Heroes, thought the boy. He felt the urge to laugh at the scene. For some reason he didn't. He saw it as a fizzled rebellion.

In a panic the boy noticed he'd missed his curfew. The Rev would be pissed, important because he had a bad temper and more importantly was the fount of gas money.

Pulling away from the VFW he heard a few more forlorn shots in the dark. Most of the vets were too drunk to even keep their arms up in surrender, especially those with a Grain Belt beer can in hand. Some had simply sunk down to sit on the frozen prairie earth. He wondered what the police would do with them, guessing let them go just before the older ones began succumbing to thermal shock.

Delmar hunched on the edge of the crowd. He tilted. No more now than another hung over plane-factory worker. He stood turned away from the crowd. That way the boy saw the shape of a Saturday night special tucked into the back of his jeans. In the night many things had happened. Most of all Georgia had come into his life. He'd even heard Woody Guthrie for the first time, Steve and his guitar had sung it for him. Momentous events went round and round in his sour dough beer brain.

Last the boy saw of Peggy that night, for sure he'd see her again, she came wobbling out of the VFW blinded by the police lights. The boy imagined clots of pie still stuck in her hair.

That was too bad. Peggy made the greatest down-home, Arkansas pumpkin pie anywhere. And that was a cold hearted fact.

She had her hands in the air. They were flipping the cops with double birds. Peggy wore a strand of tinsel around her neck. She was yelling too, loud and clear.

It was a good performance. She jerked in fits of fury, keeling over then bolting up straight in her passion with her head back howling.

"You assholes! Don't shoot me, God damn you. We served this country!"

This joint's holy ground. We was jes havin' some good times! You mother fuckerin' cowards. Come and get me. Come and get me now . . . Come on!"

And the frozen wind kept coming at them. Down relentlessly from the Rockies. It came across 450 miles of emptiness, no mountain in the way.



So self conscious me at left, at a most painful 16 years the same time I lost my first used rubber in my parents bedroom. This taken in the driveway of our Wichita parsonage.

NO SATISFACTION

I can't get no satisfaction, I can't get no
satisfaction 'Cause I try and I try and I try and I
try
I can't get no, I can't get no

Rolling Stones "Out Of Our Heads" Album, 1965

This could be a porn movie showing in my head. Three teens naked in a bed, a girl and two boys. They are beautiful in form simply because they are young, tender and fresh to living. Actually then, what I'm seeing isn't porn at all, is it.

My parents' bedroom. God of piping Mick prances around the bare-assed trio while the record plays. His hoofs pound out the beat. "I can't get no satisfaction."

Loud to make the devil dance too.

Fall light, the kindest of light, brushstrokes into the bedroom defining their bodies, soft edging around bold shapes, heightening them, squeezing out their substance in a pinch of admiration for their puerile loveliness of which they are so quaintly innocent. This afternoon they have time on their side.

It's a pellucid afternoon in early October. A perfect afternoon in Wichita. The afternoon lighting mutes the prairie dog town aspect of the city, its swaths of level dusty housing developments. Wichita is a well paid workers town, unpretentious by nature. Neither pretty nor ugly physically. Modest's the word.

But the kids are not, most certainly except for Jonathan who thinks he is unique. His companions in nakedness, in the bed, the bed of his parents, are simply naked. It's Jonathan who feels it heavy, complex, profound, his head making him separate from the rest of mankind.

The three lie squeezed shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, on their buttocks. The girl stares at the ceiling talking to it in an ongoing chatter about this and that most of which is incomprehensible to her listeners.

The boys turn their heads to look at the girl. They are caught in a languid moment of being thunder struck by her, thunder cracks in their glances, lightning blasts the room terrifying and teenage agony is static electric around all three.

The boys admire the girl's body. What's not to admire. Sad that these are her best moments alive, the likely pitch of her allure. She holds the boys enthralled by her firm high tits, her dimpled Venus mound, her pert heart shaped face. Her gibberish.

She, young and ripe, plucks at their erections, one in each hand gripping them in place, boys and cocks she holds spellbound. Very old story, yet always a new twist.

Occasionally she pumps them insouciant an idle stroke meant only to keep them interested. There she's got them. Literally under her thumb.

This girl in Wichita is 14, quite soon to be 15. The boys have turned 17. The trio are respectively Terri, short for Teresa, James Paul and Jonathan. Terri is the most promiscuous. She's well schooled in the matters at hand.

She's pretty because she's young but will likely turn coarse, broad face, ears peeking out of her hair. Her body is ready for children, already full figured. Might become a Wichita factory girl at Boeing, Beech, Cessna or Lear. Or Coleman could well

be her lot if she turns unlucky and she surely will, then putting together lanterns without a union to light a blind world.

She's a woman while the boys are just boys. Only her mind remains girlish, probably will remain so too. For now she's pleased, swigging her peppermint schnapps from the bottle, pleased, pleasuring.

James Paul is also initiated albeit in a roguish jock way. American way of untutored car coupling. Beaming in mirth he's told Jonathan about when back in Arkansas his football team had taken turns on a pickup bed with the town nympho. After coming the boy ahead of him had said quite seriously "Thank you ma'am."

James Paul's got what Jonathan wishes for a body. It's slim but defined by what is to him that miracle of football workouts, the Greek-marble 'v' of muscles pointing down the loin.

In contrast Jonathan, who can't even toss a football around, in nakedness is very pale, is slack, unformed. No threat, no meanness in him. Weak in wanting to be kind. Hyper sensitive to others especially those pushed outside the herd, like he is himself. And he's got far away eyes.

When this afternoon began only Jonathan was still a virgin. Something explaining why the three had come to walk about the parsonage naked, lay on his parent's bed together naked, scampered through the parsonage rooms in reckless nakedness.

Jonathan suspects the other two have lured him here. He barely knows James Paul, only for the month since school started, although already they're friends, James Paul goading him along, at times dominant. Before this afternoon he'd known nothing of the girl.

This was the nicest parsonage Jonathan had yet lived in. It belonged to Woodland church, an unforgiving middle class, most thoroughly white church in Wichita's Riverside neighborhood. Riverside, a quarter of rare and sacred waters, the Arkansas and Little Arkansas, making it thick with trees, lots of older houses the same as those clustering in small Kansas towns, a small and whimsical enclave.

The parsonage impressed Jonathan, a tri-level of four bedrooms, three baths, large bright rooms, two fireplaces. The one in the living room in particular opened into the kitchen as well, dual faced, a weird Janus touch that made him proud.

His mother had done her utmost to place their tawdry furniture in it to best

effect. Bitter dark chocolate sticks with strange Victorian flourishes, turned in a jeer no matter what she did by the cool modern lines of the rooms.

In this stage set Jonathan had now lost to Terri what in mind he most wanted to lose. That hilarious concept of innocence. But his was a deep rooted virginity more cerebral than physical. He can't take it off with his socks.

The Stones, he thinks, sum him up. Arrogant, brilliant, bohemian, no satisfaction to be found. He's so proud to never be wearing underwear and bets Mick doesn't either.

For now, however, he's not thinking much at all, left in a daze, which for him is a very big relief even if fleeting.

The three are in the bed because of James Paul . . . and because of Jonathan's dick. Floating thigh to naked thigh breathlessly high peeking down the bed amazed, at amazing naked bodies

Even so for James Paul, he who swaggers. He's the mischievous one. But charming too, a smiling attentiveness that hooks people and keeps them on his line.

Charm he can turn on and off with a switch. When charm is on and at its strongest he'll grin in the face of a person, showing his teeth wide and with his tongue slip out his big front tooth, a forgery. That's peripheral football damage from when he played middle school ball down in Pine Bluff.

First time he'd glimpsed Jonathan naked in gym class he hooted, "Damn but you are one hung preacher's kid! Never show that to a girl, she won't let you near!"

When Jonathan blushed, what he hated most, James Paul had laughed with prophetic words, "I'm gonna do something about that."

For 'That' Terri was his trojan horse. A trojan horse wearing a Trojan.

He told Jonathan, wagging his artificial tooth. "I hear of this girl. She puts out like your mama's Sunday dinner. We can do her together."

It got worse. When the three were first naked Jonathan had kept his hands cupped over himself, feeling cold and bereft. "None of that, son, show little Miss Terri. Boy's got a whopper."

He'd pulled Jonathan's hands away, who didn't have a hard on, as James Paul

did. Jonathan wasn't feeling whopping at all.

Terri had rules. No fingers in her pussy. No tongue there either. No sucking on cocks. Missionary only. Strictly one boy at a time and the other had to leave the room, no voyeurs allowed. This to Jonathan's relief. He'd been dreading a floor show of what he feared would be his bumbling way.

She'd also made them wear the Trojans she'd brought along in a jeans pocket, rolling one on each before they began. James Paul asked how come she had so many rules, "my daddy told me them." He asked how she knew how to roll on the rubbers so well and she said without hesitation, "My dad showed me how."

With her rules Jonathan felt like a cowboy with fences. I Can't Get No Satisfaction, no no no.

In payment of sorts Terri asked only that they get her a bottle of 90 proof Hiram Walker peppermint schnapps which she drank in full through their afternoon of the faun.

Jonathan bought the schnapps. When he turned 16 he wanted to drink as much as to drive. But Kansas had a strict 21 age rule on booze. Then one time someone whispered to Jonathan that if he wanted a fake ID that could be arranged. He was sent to meet a nervous Wichita State student who acted like a CIA agent.

The student took his new Kansas drivers license and cut out the last number of his birth year with an exacta knife, then typed a different number on a piece of toilet paper, a typewriter prized for the similarity in font to what Topeka used. A bleak font to go with the mural there of John Brown as a psychopath.

This drib of tissue was cut and fixed in place. The revised license was plasticized. It was perfect. It cost Jonathan \$30. Almost two weeks salary for him from his 20 hours a week as assistant janitor at Riverside Elementary.

Jonathan used his fake identity through high school and on into college. It gave him a great return, including in a package deal Terri and the peppermint schnapps.

For himself and James Paul he bought a six pack of Grain Belt beer. It sat on the wall to wall carpet beside his parents' bed condensing throughout the afternoon, afterwards leaving a ghost ring from the cans.

Terri drank in the bed her dark curly head against the backboard, same as on

her snatch, a Paleolithic carving of our Magna Mater. She made Jonathan taste the schnapps. He gagged, nothing more foul.

“Nothin’ better than peppermint schnapps,” she critiqued. Her mouth going wide open over schnapps, pronouncing it ‘shh-napes.’

In the world of Wichita High School North Terry was trash. It was a school of 2400 students most of whom were middle class. What students were different, like Jonathan, stood out stark sure as did the few black, American Indian, Mexican kids and the poor white.

Jonathan knew nothing about poor whites not even of their existence. When he drove to pick Terri up, James Paul directing him, they arrived in a neighborhood of northwest Wichita hidden away from sight where he’d been genuinely alarmed to find himself in his first trailer court.

James Paul told him, “You can tell they’re trash because they don’t pick up their trash.” Pleased with himself. He has the accent to go with white Pine Bluff that is not as heavy as in nearby Louisiana. Still when he speaks he catches the ear of people in Wichita, where his family had moved in the spring.

Aside from the merits of Jonathan’s penis James Paul admired that he had a car, that he had a fake ID and that he could offer comfortable beds at no charge for frolicking .

James Paul didn’t have a car because his father died wrapping his own around a bridge abutment in Arkansas. His mother refused to let him have the same opportunity.

James Paul wouldn’t talk about his family, not even when his mother and new step father had a baby brother for him. Jonathan didn’t even know the baby’s name. Didn’t know what home life was like for his unusual and intelligent friend.

The Cobbs were not white trash. There was money in the family, maybe from life insurance, or from what else remained obscure. One summer James Paul went to Rome. Then James Paul was given for graduation from North a new ’67 MG convertible.

After that summer the boys lost contact, James Paul going off to a fraternity at KU, Jonathan in his hulking Desoto to SMU. They never wrote, conversed again.

James Paul would come to die four times. Once in Vietnam and then again

three times more on a rain slick highway just outside Amarillo.

North put his name with others on a small monument to graduates fallen in Nam. On the class site his name appears with a red rose.

Years later out of wondering Jonathan did research and found that actually there were two James Paul Cobbs in the marine corps at the same time—one from the Finger Lakes of upstate New York, the other from Jonathan's past.

Jonathan's James Paul had never been in Vietnam, the other had died there shot down in a copter.

Then a decade on and from a further sense of needing to know, Jonathan searched him again. James Paul had gotten a law degree from the University of Georgia, using it in class action suits, then to Jonathan's surprise he'd gone to Emory's Chandler School of Theology for yet another degree.

He'd become an ordained minister in the Christian Church Disciples of Christ and then pastor of First Christian Church Disciples of Christ, Amarillo.

That morning in Amarillo he was taking his motorbike to be repaired, followed by his wife in their car. He was knocked over by a heedless driver, hit and run. In trying to pull the bike off the highway he was hit again.

Then again. Third time, he was killed.

I wonder what happened to his artificial front tooth that he wagged so merrily at the world.

For her part Terri was tragic too. She fell in love with Jonathan.

The three met up a second time for a similar afternoon of what passed for teenage fun, but that time at James Paul's home. When they fucked the second afternoon through she came to let Jonathan finger her box.

That second time is when it happened. Jonathan felt a sudden surge of pity for Terri, not so different from ejaculation, causing him to kiss her too abundantly, to caress and stroke her like a beloved kitten. He attended to her and that, embellished perhaps by the Schnapps, maybe made him completely clear to her in contrast to other boys, to James Paul for instance who ignored her except to hump hump hump.

Jonathan never lay with her again. Never mind, now she knew who he was, a striking boy that stood out from the others, who girls might scheme for. An older boy tall and with a flop of hair over his forehead, with a car, from a nice house.

North dated from the art nouveau majesty of the 1920s. More like a court house than a school. The halls of North High School were wide.

After the second liaison she'd try to catch him in those lofty halls. Terri had a friend pull his class schedule from the school office so she could ambush him after a class, arms laden with books.

She wanted the usual high school things, to be reassured by more sex, she brushed her tits up tight to him, she yearned for a proper date like to the movies, most of all of course she coveted his class ring. Something as divinely royal as being wedded in

She began passing love notes to him, scrawls of endless childish blathering that made him dry heave.

He held back strong. Gave nothing. Finally in a panic, after his fellows began taunting him about her, Jonathan decided his only choice was cruelty.

"Stay away from me! Don't talk to me again! I want nothing to do with you, ever!" This said to her after French class when she'd come up close to him possessively while trying to pass him one of her peppermint sweet love letters.

It was the French he cut so often that the teacher forgot his name. The only course he ever flunked. Prescient to his flunking life in France.

Those few words to Terri were probably the most effective he ever uttered. She jolted as if he'd hit her with a fist full-throttle to the mouth. She burst out on the spot in a torrent of tears. She ran off and out of his life, running blindly, head thrust forward like a prow, angled down, hands out in front of her groping, a trailer court girl with a broken heart.

He was to recall those tears for a lifetime, and the words that taught him how effectively words can kill. Sometimes you get what you need.

It was the last he knew of her, except when spotting her in a furtive rush down a crowded hallway desperate to avoid him. Nothing more for her, no tale of achievements or multiple deaths. Nothing of note.

But ah those young girl tears so hot. Hot! No, sizzling. Steak house stuff.

At 16 I reveled in self pity at how much pain I'd caused another. Mourned for her. For me. Yet mostly I was so delighted, relieved, more thankful than the Woodland congregation when father's sermon at last came to an Amen. Almost made me a Christian. I knew she was gone for good.

These things all happened in the week following the denouement of the second tryst. After that these doings became of no importance to young me. They faded away in sunlight, not as strong as the sun.

As an old man I've no sure memory of her face at all. I only can guess at what might pass for first love in the head of a 14 year old girl from a sleazy trailer court, literally from the wrong side of life, whose father had demonstrated for her on himself how to put on a rubber.

But then, after the three had their first party in the parsonage, Jonathan's afternoon of the Faun, something horrible haunted Jonathan. It came to Jonathan in a numbing horror.

What happened to his rubber!

He couldn't recall. He was chronically absent mind, a boy addicted to day dreaming, one lost too often in thought, in distant reveries, mooning over himself, life, a pimple.

He recalled being irritated by the weight of the used rubber dangling on his soft dick. And then?

Oh God, he even prayed one last prayer, what had he done with it. He got down on his knees to peer under and around his parents' bed. He rummaged through all his possessions, tossed his bedroom, searched the bathrooms. Even looked in books and the kitchen sink.

In his parents' balding front yard he ran a rake through the crabgrass. Found nothing except a stick of Juicy Fruit pristine in its wrapper, that he chewed.

No rubber. A couple of days and he forgot about it. Consigned it away among the host of mysteries confounding him, finding instead some other obsession to float away upon.

Yet then he was awakened one morning before school by his mother. She

banged open the door of his room. When angry, which she was only a few times in her life, her brow mottled with small beads of perspiration. Her moon face drained, became very pale. Her eyes tunneled back.

She looked exactly that way then.

My dumpy dear mother towered in judgment while I cringed down low and small onto the mattress.

“I found this under our bed.” Her tone came from the ice age. Words were enunciated too even and precise like the drum roll at an execution.

“I assume it belongs to you.” Mother flung the used rubber in my face.

OUTLAWS

Too smart. Too handsome. Of course I was doomed. If nothing else to watching Captain Astro on KAKE TV with the snot flecked fist of Denis Embry locked around my cock, sitting with my only friend each afternoon in the dark in our basement in Great Bend.

It never occurred to me that I was the best looking kid around. No inkling of that ever. Not a hint. I was incredibly credulous. My unhappiness was proof something terrible was wrong with me.

Recently I found my school photo from then. I was struck dumb. A very young star there, a most pretty boy of 17. My handsomeness tells me much about my history then. Mysteries explained. Motives made clear. And I never even guessed a thing. How could that be? My brothers only mocked me. My father would never have said anything about it. My mother, "Handsome is as handsome does. Just be kind, Jonie, also to yourself. I think you are quite distinguished." But I didn't want to be distinguished. I wanted to be cool. I wanted to look mean. Look dangerous. Cruel and dark. Seductive.

I started to smoke, Camels unfiltered. I began, drinking every night after work. I started going out by myself, driving hours aimlessly down the look alike Wichita streets. Wanting an adventure. Any adventure.

In passing my Junior year I met a jazz musician at school named Bob. I was exceedingly pleased that Bob showed me some attention, mainly calling for me about every night. My dad looked askance at this. He asked me a few questions which I made nothing of.

But then Bob stopped calling. I know why now.

North I've come to understand had two circles of 17 year old boys snared into varying degree of faggotry. Simplest was for caresses and kisses. Most advanced for sodomy, but I knew nothing of that then and would have blushed at the thought.

One circle ran around Bob Norton, the at one the most hard core. The other centered on Jack Worley the Latin teacher.

I went to the party with my friend John Howard Bell. He knew nothing of the subterranean queer sick blues going on around him. JB as we called him to keep him unique from me. JB and I were close friends, had been since I moved to Wichita. He had a Beatle's haircut turned Methodist-Republican moderate. That and angry beetle eyes.

John I do believe like me knew nothing about the subterranean queer sick blues, the homo boy culture that was in place in the Riverside neighborhood of Wichita that lapped around my so ingenuous two left feet.



Bombed Rabbi's home Jackson Miss. Cathy was only witness hence her being under Witness Protection with FBI.

I DATED THE FBI

That date we'd decided to go to a drive-in movie. I wanted to play hide the pickle. I tried to. Just got it hidden and she burst into tears. My parents wanted me to be a Victorian gentleman, which didn't take well on my libertine persona—how I saw myself then. Yet enough did to make me wilt in her distress. Any damsel.

Instead both of us sat in the back seat of my old Desoto oblivious to the screen in that Dallas drive-in theater. Her crimson lips were leaving me be-crimsoned while she played another game called West Texas Oil Well Derrick on my lap.

We missed most of the feature. In the smarmy aftermath we sat stunned while a pitch for the concession stand showed dancing popcorn.

Perhaps what happened next was induced in her by the security of my presence, or of the sheltering dark, or the almost empty drive in, or of the comforting hulk of my old Desoto's steel shell armoring us, carapace strong and sure, or perhaps just because she had quieted me down, turned me into a mere boy.

Cathy McKinnon, the name I knew her by, gave me a kiss that seemed disconcertingly motherly, also a tad trenchant, and reached around to double check that the doors were locked.

"OK for you Jonathan Bell! You must promise me on a stack of Gideon Bibles that what I tell you stays secret. You swear to me? This is serious. Swear it, Jonathan Bell!" I did in complete bewilderment.

"That man over there?" She gave a wave in the direction of a stray car parked a couple of speakers away. "That man is my FBI agent. You see I'm in witness protection."

That wave went to a nondescript Ford occupied by a single man who in the gloom seemed the definition of nondescript, although vaguely moving, a bit mysteriously. A man masturbating into a popcorn cup? Outline showed him wearing what then came to seem a standard-issue G-man trilby hat.

I could have blurted 'oh yeah, and monkeys might fly out of my butt.' I didn't. What she'd said fitted the strangeness about her. Fitted the stranger too sitting alone there in his car with a face lit up chiaroscuro by the screen.

From then on when together I'd look. The same spook would be along with us, the Mr. Nobody from that nocturne of thrills, becoming singular for his ambiguity and memorable for it.

In memory I'd describe Cathy as Doris Day touched by the dark force. Chronically cheery in a fragile way, a soap bubble you knew could burst at any second.

She wore more makeup than any young woman I'd seen, maybe have yet to see. In my poetic youth I thought of it as a mask worn to protect herself from black magic. Or one to hide behind from unkind eyes, or maybe just from her own?

Her eccentricity showed in that face. Cathy encrusted herself with layers of pancake makeup to get a Commedia dell'Arte aspect. Along with that she drew on a pair of thick crimson lips. Then she added a drool of black eyeliner, eye shadow, mascara so that her eyes and lashes loomed huge and reminded me of Gloria

Swanson's as she descends the stairs into madness at the end of Sunset Boulevard.

She first came into my view sipping on a Dr. Pepper through a straw from the bottle the way southern people drank it then. This happened there in Dallas, in the student union of Southern Methodist University, in January of 1968. I was 18 and a Freshman from Wichita.

For some reason, perhaps because of where I met her, my first daft impression was that she too was a student and a freshman. I think of myself then as a lad old for my years. From the start I got her wrong, hare-brained notions that persisted. Now I figure that she was actually about 10 years my senior.

To me she was Cathy McKinnon at least she gave that as her name. Unlikely, I would come to realize in my slow way. Nothing was for certain about her. I was about as callow as Kansas can make 'em.

The one thing about her I've never doubted, her claim to be from Jackson, Mississippi. Her accent gave that away along with her eye lash batting southern belle mannerisms, a true magnolia under a face like a novice whore's.

With blue eyes, blond hair, an arresting body that caught the look of most men, it was only her face that struck discord, jarringly. But never mind, because at 18 I was already drawn to the eccentric, and to a body like hers.

Beside sex, what drew me to that person Cathy McKinnon? In particular I came to admire her sometimes hilarious commentary on the state of things about us, the people we saw in passing. Droll, acerbic, hers was an unusual intelligence. A spirit somewhat kindred to mine.

Cathy, she told me, had been a stewardess for Braniff Air. Easy enough to see her bouncing through a terminal in a Holston uniform. Once I knew this it suited her perfectly, her Doris Day demeanor great for while the plane goes down.

This post revelation gave her considerable allure. Witness protection, the FBI, Untouchables.

Certainly she was more mature than me. A maturity perhaps honed by so many hours spent soaring precariously above the clouds. Also I admired how she gave such accomplished head.

Cathy said that back in Jackson her father owned a real estate agency. That her mother was a school teacher. Maybe so, all to be left in mystery and deception. I did

picture her family sipping mint juleps on their expansive, very white porch in leisured gentility.

”Meanwhile, as ice melted in the drinks of bemused Mississippi middle class whites, racial terrorism raged on the other side of their fences. The mini race war was fraught with cross-burnings and church-bombings, beatings and murder.

In the summer of 1964 alone Klansmen had killed six in the State, shot 35 others and beaten another 80. The homes, businesses and churches of 68 Mississippians associated with the civil rights movement were firebombed.

In the immediate Jackson area in the period just before I met Cathy, during 1966-67, a further 27 black congregations had their churches fire bombed. Four civil rights activists were murdered there by the Klan.

Arson, bombings, gunfire. Fear was thicker than the humidity. Even when I was seeing Cathy the violence in Mississippi continued with the murder in February '68 of Wharlest Jackson at least the 11th in four years by the State's radical white supremacists.

Good enough reasons to hide Cathy who'd seen the dreaded White Knights do what they oughtn't. And Southern Methodist was a good enough hiding place for her. A school then of a few thousand students, elite for the South and very expensive. By nature it was blandly conservative and politely racist.

It's campus was a mirage island of Tidewater architecture on the edge of downtown Dallas, unimaginatively harmonious, all in red brick and with loads of white columns. A lot of oil money built it to resemble a stupendous back lot for a movie about a plantation in the old South.

Come every spring and the entire university was turned over to 'Old South Week'. This when frat boys dressed in the full regalia of Confederate officers rode their horses about giving the rebel yell.

Sorority girls put on lavish gowns. Their Scarlet O'Hara hats flopped above sets of pearly whites more than a few still in glinting braces. I saw them wave their little white-gloved hands, watched astonished when they were driven in dozens of carriages up and down Bishop Boulevard, listened to lascivious tales of how they sported after dark.

The year I was there I never saw a black student, although there were plenty of other black folks.

At SMU the dorm rooms were the stuff of dreams of other universities. Rooms that were made up, cleaned every day by black maids. Gangs of maids and janitors, theirs the only black faces to encounter. Although they were never seen on or near the works of their hands—landscaped paths, spotless campus streets, stately quads. Apparent to me, they came and went invisible. I wondered what they thought of dear ole South week.

Many freshman I learned were dropped onto SMU, kids who hadn't done so well in their private schools, whose chronically absentee parents lived without their bother somewhere over the rainbow. On my dorm floor all the boys had new cars, some costing a deal more than my father made in a year. A couple had airplanes.

My fellow freshmen thought my Desoto was part of a costume that went with my long hair and beard. It was whimsy. Their reality flipped the coin of my own, first dorm floor party was held in an Architectural-Digest mansion, a wonder to me, with an ornamental creek running through the middle of the first floor.

All freshman were to live on campus, the only exception being Helen Hunt, not the actress, the youngest child of oilman H.L. Hunt then among the wealthiest men in the world. Helen was brought to school in a Bentley driven by her chauffeur.

SMU was also used by the elite of Central America to hide their young. There were three of these on my floor. A sad Jewish boy from Panama, a rambunctious youngster from Honduras who could barely speak a word of English, and the scion of the owner of the largest newspaper in Costa Rica. They were buddies of mine we all being misfits.

I saw the school as a decadent pageant, the playground for rich indolent youths, without any redeeming quality other than that it made me move on. For my sophomore year I transferred out to join fellow rebellious spirits of the time, at the University of Kansas, a prairie U that had produced as many Rhodes Scholars as Harvard.

At Southern Methodist my own mark of Cain was my long hair and beard. I stood out starkly. I was also among the few Yankees. Early in that academic year I had a peek at what life could be for young men in Dallas, either Mexican or black.

One night about midnight coming back to campus from a party a cruiser pulled me over with its light flashing. I'd been warned to be careful of this and knew I'd done nothing to deserve the stop.

He was a big cop, tall and heavy set. I made the mistake of getting out of the car. After pondering my Kansas drivers license in mute stupefaction he told me to get lost. I replied amicably "OK."

Suddenly he grabbed me by the shirt, spun me around, picked me up by the back of my pants and threw my over the hood of the Desoto, legs spread, face pressed down hard to the metal.

"Yankee boy, don't know about where you come from but down here we say 'yes sir, no sir' to our police."

Home for a weekend with her parents in Jackson Cathy had been drawn to a living room window at about 11 pm. Attracted there by something vaguely indiscrete happening outside. She told me she witnessed men running across the lawn of the house across the street.

From her description it was the kind of narrow lane the well-to-do live on. What she saw on the neighbor's lawn showed up close lit by a street lamp and a full moon.

One of the men, it seemed, watched the street. When he waved the other man threw something. An explosion followed and the front of her neighbor's house spilled out onto their lawn. It was an explosion powerful enough to knock a large house off its foundation.

The running pair came back to their car. Then Cathy saw their white faces clearly, under the streetlight, evil in the full moon moonlight.

The neighbor across the street was Rabbi Dr. Perry Nussbaum of the Beth Israel Temple, Jackson's only Jewish congregation. By luck the rabbi and his wife escaped serious injury. The home was ruined.

Most ardent and feared of all the Klan, the White Knights were credited with the bombings in Jackson related to the Beth Israel Temple- that of the Temple itself in September, 1967 and then of the Rabbi's home in November.

The attacks caused a national outcry. One can bomb dozens of churches of poor blacks, kill them too, but if you attack moneyed whites you're in deep doo-doo. In white America when the Indians attack the circle of wagons suddenly lets in Jews. As long as they look like Lauren Bacall or Paul Newman.

This to explain why Cathy became a ward of the FBI, swifted away 400 miles from Jackson to Dallas. The Bureau set her up to be ostensibly 'attending' SMU and living like any freshman coed. She'd been placed in Boaz hall one of the university's women's dorms. Dallas' Love Field being her Braniff hub they were cleverly hiding her in plain sight.

When I came back to Dallas after Spring break, following Martin Luther King's assassination in April, I found the city surreal in its calm, indifferent to a crime that left much of the country on the verge of insurrection.

I walked over to Cathy's dorm and asked for her at the desk just as I'd done over the past three months. After an awkward pause I learned she'd withdrawn from school.

Simply that and no more. Disappeared. And leaving no jet trail behind her. Not even a whisper or sigh even to this day. I was left with the lyrics that Elvis sang, "return to sender, address unknown, no such number, no such zone."

O Teacher. My Teacher!

My few good, and far rarer, great teachers are dead. O Captain! My Captain! Not once in recollection did I thank them for their effort on my behalf. Yet now I do reverence them and think of them with wistful regret. They gave so much and received, at least from me, so little in return.

I recall the many bad ones better. The majority by far. How humbling to sin in such a typically human way.

My good and great teachers eschewed sentiment in their teaching business. It was a necessary on going work for them to which they were evidently obsessively committed.

A wounded boy shielding behind false pride. Ensemble they did their best to patch me up and send me on. I think that like my parents they perceived that something bad had happened to me. Like my parents they didn't allow the mystery to be my excuse.

I found fortune in the Concordia, Kansas schools of the 1950s. We lived there for almost seven years when my father was appointed by the bishop of Kansas to supervise 72 churches across north central Kansas, an area a good deal greater than Rhode Island. Concordia was a town of 7,000 in the dead zone of the Kansas- Nebraska border. No towns at all for 65 miles to the south, to the 'city' of Salina. Nothing but far flung and scattered villages to the east and west. And to the north stretched the even more lightly populated Nebraska prairie.

Inexplicably, at that time this island of Concordia had good schools, an oddity in a rolling ocean of semi barbaric land. One indication of how unusual Concordia was in what it offered its children is that it even had a youth orchestra in which I so wretchedly played violin, no Tartini I.

My teachers there were all maiden ladies beyond middle age. They did their work robotically after so many years in the classroom. One early on stood out however. Miss Dora Engel.

Miss Engel was more than beyond middle age. She was old. Also cranky and could be quite harsh. Her obsessions were my despair, phonetics and the most arcane

points of English grammar, especially the schematic parsing of sentences. Miss Engel saw it her God given duty to shove her beloved specialties on a daily basis down the throat of every third grader who came her way.

I was hopeless with both. Every school day we were ordered one by one to the blackboard to stand alone with the snickers of classmates boiling our backs. There I stood blushing to my soul while stuttering and lisping inchoately my way along through declensions, endless sentence diagrams and phonetic renditions of multi syllabic words that I couldn't even enunciate even though I alone in the class knew the meanings of all.

I would wait in horror throughout the day for her to call my name, in whatever subject. That meant standing at attention beside my desk with a "yes Miss Engel," (yeth Missstth Eeengel) to answer her cruel onslaught of questions on the previous day's homework. Yes Miss Engel, No Miss Engel. She did not rap knuckles as some teachers did, but she was a gray vixen of biting sarcasm that drove some children, never me, to tears.

My desk mate was Sharon Thrush, from a poor family. Miss Engel so terrified Sharon that sometimes when her name was called she'd sit pissing herself, weeping as the urine dripped to the floor.

Directly opposite I had Sharon Green. Sharon was I now know severely autistic. I guess her age then at 18. Her mother dressed her however in old time frocks and pinafores, pinned up her hair in elaborate styles, a sad fantasy. Then I missed it all. I was glad Sharon diverted the taunts and abuse from my fellows onto herself.

Although almost 10 years younger, Sharon liked me. She even spoke to me and that she refused to do with anyone else in class. She'd pull her ringlets down low to hide her face and speak through them in a falsetto. If any kid teased me for this when she was around she'd attack them mean and hard. She ruled the class when Miss Engel wasn't looking.

I didn't know what to do with her. Her father was the town's meteorologist. We little devils believed when a tornado passed by it was Sharon's fault.

I think Miss Engel saw all. Like Sharon she liked me. Protected me.

How strange, most of us loved this martinet. And loved her on for years to come. A life time later I wonder why. I think it was because she really was a true teacher, and despite her guerrilla war on our ignorance we knew that however abrasively she loved us.

It was in Concordia where some anonymous-to me- angel sought to find help for my crown of thorns and cross to bear, my lisping and stuttering. I wonder if it wasn't Miss Engel.

When I was 10, and it seemed only for me, a graduate student in speech pathology at Kansas State University was found who would make the two hour drive to Concordia to work with me on Saturdays, for months, a morning and afternoon session.

To my great shame I don't remember this young woman's name. Blotto. Something of a grave offense because if anyone gave me a greater gift I don't know who it can have been. She is actually my most deserving teacher to honor, as long as I am me.

Looking back I see with more awareness that this cloud of unknowing that dropped over her face and name, anything about her, obviously had to do with my being molested. For with that came my ruined speech, and then came she as part of that. She and her lessons perhaps came too close to what hadn't healed. Still has not healed. What then I was still too frightened to relate or explain.

I do recall that she had me work from the very beginning on speaking out the alphabet letter by letter. After that it seems that she had special words for working on stuttering, others for the lisping.

She had me work for a long time, I do recall well, trying to say my brother's name, Steve. His name on my lips had been agony and for the rest of the family as well although neither of my parents showed dismay.

I wish I knew what method this graduate student used. But whatever, 'whatever' plus her wise and patient teaching, that young woman resurrected my speech. Her work has lasted for almost 60 years. My blessing on that young woman. Stuttering, lisping, those devils she vanquished except that oddly enough they come back now sometimes, when I try to speak French at which I am so miserable that it hardly makes any difference at all.

When 12 my teacher was Miss Niebergall. Kansas was settled by peoples from every part of Mattel Europe and Scandinavia, if mostly from Germany and Ukraine. She was an unorthodox soul probably pining away in our imagine-less heartland. Riveting acne scars disfigured her face. You learned to ignore them.

She had us memorize Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It was she who read aloud to us the great English poets. She played records in class and introduced us to the

music of Woody Guthrie and Odetta.

This is what Miss Neibergall told us one day when we were too acting too fresh. “I am not your friend. I am your teacher!” Unforgettable.

Then comes Mrs. Minnie Drowatsky. My Wichita high School, North, is a huge buff brick monument on the banks of The Little Arkansas river (river name pronounced R-Kansas in Kansas and Colorado where it is sourced in the Rockies). North stands as a monument to the enthusiasm of the 1920s, replete with images of our conquered enemies—Indians—sculpted high on its walls. Plus a tall, purely ornamental art deco-ish tower.

The inner courtyard held a small white clapboard structure that was the school’s journalism department. There The North Star, North’s multi-page weekly newspaper, was produced. I worked on the paper my junior and senior years, rising to front page editor. The journalism teacher was Mrs. Drowatsky, a plump owl- faced woman in her early 60s who from the start looked very disapprovingly on me. She’d seen my feckless type before. I tried my charm . By then I tried it on all usually to good effect. Minnie? No way. She’d just give me her small sarcastic smile, that kind of unkind smile that was not a genuine smile at all. I think she was the most jaded teacher I’ve had.

She was a harsh critic drilling us in the journalistic code of honor, having us study William Allen White, teaching the discipline of proofreading (which obviously from these posts I didn’t do well with).

Minnie taught clean, simple writing (something else of which I was rebellious with my passion for word drunk and pretentious scribblings), the art of ‘counting’ headlines, of writing captions and the ultimate imperative of deadlines. She taught it all and well.

Through time I’ve recounted this two year emersion in journalism in a Wichita high school and seen a look of awe in my listeners. Even those with degrees from acclaimed J-schools. She really gave a one-of-a- kind teaching of the lowest grind jobs in publishing along with the highest standards of journalism. She taught everything in detail, and then turned it over to us.

The newspaper had won several national awards through the years. Without doubt it was the foremost student paper not just in Kansas but across the prairie. Rival high school newspapers were displayed in our journalism ‘house.’ As if to show us just how high she’d set the bar.

Her dislike of me peaked the last week of my senior year when I invited my friends to partake of cherry vodka in the morning, out front of North, in my old Desoto. We sat imbibing for a while until we almost couldn't stand. Our bet was to then attend class and see who could make it the longest before being caught.

Journalism was my first-hour class. I didn't last five minutes. Minnie took one look at me and marched me away to be expelled.

This led to another lesson in life. Only two of us were allowed to graduate with our class, me the scion of Dr. Mancil Bell a prominent clergyman, and a friend of mine whose father was the principal of another Wichita high School. I recall ranting at the unfairness of this ignoring my culpability as one chief plotter.

I felt betrayed by Mrs. Drowatsky. I did not say goodbye after graduation. I forgot her. That is until I moved to New York in my mid 20s to seek a great future. I found instead near to starvation.

After submitting almost 200 applications, down to \$40 and rent in arrears, I was finally hired by an international trade journal. This purely on the basis of what I'd learned from Minnie.

My last teacher in my Legion Of Honor has no more than a fragment of a name left in my head. I recall that she was a 'Pat.' And diminutive she was, also wired tight, with febrile dew on her brow. Darkly handsome she was, fiercely intense too, black Irish, a true dark beauty and tightly armored against it. No friend she, neither love in her heart nor friendliness in her eyes. A femail Grand inquisitor Great teacher, the dark down bristling on her forearms. Yes!

I hated her. I murdered her every day in my mind over and over. She drove me to tears. She was my Freshman Composition instructor at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

For her part she had nothing but contempt for me, seeing me for what I was, a pretentious, spoiled young man who had been told again and again how gifted he was. A talented writer, and more such bullshit. Pat saw through to the truth that I was lazy and deluded by self grandeur. She knew I had never had anything demanded of me, never been whipped to perform my best. Just a big sneering baby over ripe with delusions of grandeur. She also saw clearly the hatred I held for her. And didn't care. Diminutive Pat. My Lady Of Writing.

When the first essay was returned I couldn't look at until I was back in my dorm room. I dully expected to see her gushing remarks on my writing. Instead.

Mr. Bell, you obviously have no concept of how to write. This is nonsensical gibberish. Make an appointment to see me in my office.

I did, shaking in fury, and for an hour heard her shred my writing sentence by sentence.

“You will not write another essay for this class until you can show me you have learned how to write a sentence, and then how to construct a paragraph. You know this is a prerequisite course at SMU. You will not pass until I see that you have attained proficiency in the essentials of writing.”

I was devastated. Never before and very rarely since have I felt so badly used.

So my freshman year of English composition was spent in a one-to-one tutorial with Pat. Where Pat had me writing puerile sentences. Moving only in the second semester to teaching me to write paragraphs. I had no choice but to work hard for her or risk a tongue lashing. I did pass.

But I carried a grudge against her for years until finally seeing that what she'd taught me was what I most wanted, how to write. And that so valuable I cherish above all next to my wife and children.

Ultimately, the last week, she gave me an essay to write and when that came back she'd simply written 'good' on it. With a grade of B minus.

MIDNIGHT STEEL

The graveyard shift isn't cool even by midnight. It's just another fucking hot night at Kansas City Structural Steel, here in the Argentine district, on the Kaw, its stinking simmering river bottom. These last days of August miserable heat and humidity haunt the men, me too almost a man among them. Summer of 1968 I'm 19.

This cavernous half ruined factory swallows the noise of the men at work. The building is more than ten city blocks long, a one-time cathedral of steel and glass. Its size dissipates the clunk, grind and growl of the various superannuated machines running on the plant floor in their senile cacophony.

Seven hundred and fifty men work at Kansas City Structural Steel but of those not more than 75 or so after midnight. A skeleton force for the graveyard shift.

We're mostly a quiet crew. Only the few are loud. But sometimes something crude and raw as the steel makes a ripple of laughter run through the men like a virus from gut to gut, a momentary easing of their discomfort. This happens more so on a Friday night, one such as this, when the men feel they're missing the party going on outside in the bars along Strong Avenue. Women and booze.

Summer of 1968 and I'd already worked on the angle shears at Kansas City Structural Steel for two and a half months. This is the night when I get injured.

I knew Kansas City Structural Steel could bite. I learned that my very first week. It was the night a scream dropped out of the darkness overhead. The scream hit like a thunder bomb thrown on my head from on high. An unbelievable sound it stopped everyone still. The plant was showing its teeth in a steel rage.

It was the first real scream I'd ever heard. A screech that's still in my head now rising high in dismay and astonishment. It's a lingering agony.

Soon the gossip ran between the machines. The young spic had been crushed by a sheet of steel. He'd been moving her through factory as part of her bull gang—the steel became personalized to the men, always a woman. “She got him. She took her bite a-him.”

Then came the ambulance siren, another kind of dismay. After that more

gossip. The men buzzing. The 'she' had floated into something up there. Maybe a pigeon. A lot of glass has been broken out of the ceiling through the years and the pigeons dart about like intent cherubs.

They say one pigeon is enough to send a giant slab sailing ponderously off course. Like a Macy's parade blimp on the loose. A man in the way of 100 tons of steel, a stretch of it could be 60 feet long, 15 feet wide, was but the fly to wanton boys all over again.

The angle shears is a monster of a machine, 'made in Dayton' it says above my in 50 year old lettering. Angle shears huge and antediluvian it looks to me like it could also have been dreamed up right here in Kansas City Kansas, at nightmare Structural Steel, by someone like say Charles Dickens. It cuts herculean bespoke girders.

Sometimes I reach a finger out to touch its cool dead surface, testing gingerly for its reality my heart popping secretly when I do so since I know it can bite savage and unpredictable.

This old factory sprawls out over 22 acres. Baby Leroy had told me that.

The plant was built on the Kaw, a wide flowing river, just at the point before it surges into the Missouri making the Mighty Mo even mightier.

We are also directly on the main line of the Atchison Topeka & Santa Fe RR, in the line's Argentine Yards, one of the largest rail yards in the country. Steel comes here from mills back East either by barge or on train flatbeds.

Incredible how this wreck of a factory that flouts every labor law is the largest factory west of the Mississippi for producing girders and such giant toys for bridges, skyscrapers, football stadiums.

We have no protective gear. Even the welders must supply their own shields and gloves. Yet according to Baby, Kansas City Structural Steel built 500 landing craft for D- Day. It's at least patriotic.

I'm feeling it creepy, not for the first time here, as a midnight shadow crawls down from the inscrutable black above that hangs over everything. The shadow moves languidly across my head. It tingles burrowing down my nape.

It's a sheet being moved along the factory aisle high up on the wings of one of the three ceiling cranes. As the plate goes over it sways. It also buckles giving a high steel whine like someone up there playing the saw.

Control of sway and buckle, of our lives too below those swinging death traps, is up to the crane operator. It makes them our resident celebrities.

Cultural anthropology: radio plays Jumpin' Jack Flash, Born To Be Wild, and Hello I Love You. Best sellers are Couples and Myra Breckinridge. Everybody goes to see 2001 Space Odyssey and Planets of the Apes—primates are very very popular. Nostalgia kills youth.

All lonely pleasures for me, I have no friends in Kansas City, no girl friend. After my shift at 2 am I sit alone in the heat in my car in the driveway of my parent's parsonage. I drink a six pack of Pabst beer, or more, sometimes until I am quite drunk. Then I crawl up to my dormer room as dawn begins to dream of what else on earth I could be doing.

This is the Argentine, a neighborhood in Kansas City Kansas. It's not well regarded because in part it's not scenic—the steel plant dwarfs it. It has a few blacks living up on the hill and many Chicanos below who've opened Mexican bean and cheese hole -in -the -wall joints.

Argentine is a neighborhood of about 6,000 in 1968, sitting alongside others that still give KCK its own sense of place—Armourdale, Rosedale, Strawberry Hill. Almost all of the workers at Kansas City Structural Steel come from these neighborhoods.

The majority actually drive only 15 minutes from Strawberry Hill, directly adjacent to Argentine, from the various Slavic tribes living there who came at first to work the Silver Smelter in Argentine (hence its name), and then the Santa Fe rail yard, and in turn to Kansas City Structural Steel.

We are here because my father was moved from his high church in Wichita, to the low brow one here, Metropolitan Avenue. Low brow and troubled by encroaching demographics.

Summer my dad arrived there was an ice cream social to raise money for some cause. Mid afternoon someone squealed to him that the ladies running the social were refusing to sell ice cream to the black children coming down from the hill.

To his credit in my eyes, my father went in a rage to correct the situation, "All of God's children deserve ice cream!"

Martin Luther King had been assassinated only a few weeks prior to this hot

night in August. Kansas City still stinks of its burning. Robert Kennedy had also just been assassinated, joining our elite band of murdered saints.

It's Friday night after lunch break. If you look out the nearest broken window the night's changing from gloom to dark. Inside the plant I'm all lit up in a glaring beam of light.

A knot of men are crowding in to guffaw and gawk. They're standing by the angle shears, crowding me. They've come as gossip has spread about what's going on here.

Perched on the machine is a kid about my age, I don't know him. He's got his pants and underwear down around his ankles, legs spread. Kid's pathetic pale dick and balls are clearly lit up like a one ring circus act. Light comes from the spotlight on one of the ceiling cranes. It's been parked dark and heavy above us, five stories above, like a turd in the ether.

That kid is drunk as are a few other workers since it's Friday night, get- drunk night for some. Men sneak out to the liquor store on Strong Avenue over their break. Workers are forbidden to leave the plant during their shift but there's a hole in the wire mesh fence that everyone knows about.

Someone has a radio on loud, another machine noise. This is a Kansas City Structural Steel party. Kid sits on top of the angle shears picking his exposed parts for crabs, "Girl give me 'em," he explains in slurred recitative.

When he gets one between thumb and forefinger he squints at it, holds it up although invisible to the rest of us. "You dead," he pinches in mock heroism.

Party is over when the floor boss appears always with a clip board in hand pen dangling by a string. Kid grabs up his pants. Crowd disappears fast like the rats in the men's room.

Crane lamp flicks off. The crane slips silently away. With a wrench big as my thigh I slide another slice of new girder from out of the maw of the angle shears.

"Bell, come. You're working the bull gang tonight."

Never done that before. Not what I want to do ever. Not at all. I've been dreading the possibility of it. So far I was hoping I'd be exempt from the bull gang because I am elect, I wear a coat of many colors, a bridge engineer's nephew which is

exactly how I got the job. Maybe this week they didn't win a bid? Tonight is this assignment a message for my uncle? Doubtless it is.

I catch Baby's eye as I join the work gang. He gives me a thumbs up.

Most of the summer I had night shift lunch with Baby. He was a hunk of a fellow, taller than me and built like a brick shit house. Nothing baby-like about him. We were outcasts, the two of us, because the others thought him retarded; me because they thought me too smart, a college kid with a high draft lottery number.

Baby was not at all retarded. He was my source for local folklore, especially about Argentine and the plant. Baby was 70 and this was the only place he'd ever worked. That's how he knew it had been built in 1901 on the site of the old Argentine silver smelter—largest silver smelter in the US. From him I learned there had been two US Supreme Court decisions—both 'US versus Kansas City Structural Steel'—that were famous labor law cases.

It had never been a considerate employer. "We ain't got no union, we ain't never been on strike not one single day.

"Ain't no company around with more labor infractions," he remarked between open-mouth chews of a gluey tomato and mayo sandwich.

"They get by with bribes and muscle."

Baby couldn't drive. Walked to work, took buses to shop. He'd never married.

He grew his own tomatoes, big and squat, called them box car willies. He ate one each night in season after carefully peeling and salting it.

When he saw I liked them he never forgot to bring me one too. Mine he chose a day short of first ripeness, firm, red and with yellow streaks. When he saw how clumsy I was at skinning and slicing he did it for me.

I can see his pocket knife twirling off the finest curl of tomato skin.

Every shift he wore a pair of clean bib overalls. A white undershirt showed at his neck above a long sleeved flannel shirt, no matter how hot.

Baby apparently listened a lot to the radio. Once Baby recited a report he'd heard perhaps verbatim about the great Shawnee prophet and seer Tensquatawa,

brother of Tecumseh. Tensquatawa had been vanquished at the Battle of Tippecanoe along with his vision of a pan-Indian confederacy to counter the white man. Turned out Tensquatawa came to be buried in an obscure cemetery right among us, right here in in Argentine.

“This here is a holy place. Though it don’t feel one for sure.”

Baby had been born down in the Missouri Ozarks but lived his entire life in Argentine. Four younger sisters had strayed away. Baby had lived alone with his mother until she died.

I asked about his name. He was pleased that I asked. “Ma couldn’t read or write, just like me.”

That was when I finally understood that Baby was illiterate, and why the men thought he was simple.

“When I was born they brought ma the birth certificate to fill out. She asked ‘em to read it to her. For ‘father’s name’ she had them write in ‘Leroy’ since that were her doc’s last name. Then she saw something written where they asked for a first name. “What they say there,” asked ma.

“‘Baby,’ she got told. That’s a good one, said ma, use it. So I got Baby Leroy.”

With that he popped another slice of a box car willie his lips and chewed with relish on the blood red morsel. Lunch break was over.

There were four men to a bull gang. Where I was assigned I was the youngest and the one without any experience. Except when the crane operator used his spots we worked mostly in what was only a shade from darkness.

Good, we aren’t to be moving those monster sheets. Of them I definitely had a case of steel fear. Instead we are to bring in shorter slabs, 20 feet lengths, and pile them in two stacks each about 15 feet high.

Out in the yard the steel has a shimmer under stars and moon. It’s been off loaded and left piled in the open, a thousand tons of it stocked in a mountain range as far as one can see.

I'm told to keep my gloves on, or else chance getting 'steel burn.' But sometimes to get purchase on the grappling hooks the gloves must come off and then to the touch the steel takes on another dimension. Its is an alien skin to go with the steel's look of deep frozen water, a still and stagnant surface. Or, when the crane lights sparkle over it like you're peering into the universe.

Steel stinks. It smells of a Pennsylvania steel mill. Also of a Vulcan thing from far inside the earth. The Steel for me smells of the Kaw river, of small dead mammals, of the AT&SF freight yard. It smells more whimsically like Baby Leroy's clean overalls, and a dentist's office.

The bull gang's job is to place the grappling hooks under the edges of the slabs. Nothing but the weight of the steel holds them in place. Then the gang boss checks each one. At signal the crane then lifts and slowly ever so carefully raises it and slings it away.

We follow its progress in a slow cortege escorting the steel with ridiculously pitiful guide lines in hand, heads thrown back so to watch it moving above us. It's the belly of a whale.

We proceed from the yard to inside the plant to whatever island of machines the engineer-Gods have designated. There to begin their fabrication of some steel reality out of thin air.

We place wooden wedges to separate the slabs, the grappling hooks swing free, the crane raises them and begins its flight back to the yard. Then we move in the heat and humidity slow as slugs back to fetch another.

Job's done. In the end I find myself marooned about 15 up on top of one pile of 20 sheets. I'm told to jump to its twin. The stacks are only five feet apart. I go for it without hesitation cocky in my 19 years.

I don't quite make that particular leap of faith. Jumpin' Jack Flash. Pain is a tearing nightmare, blotting out everything. Feels like my left leg's been clamped in the angle shears and snipped off.

At the emergency room they tell me that at ankle and knee the ligaments and tendons are torn. They wrap the leg in a cast from thigh to toes.

Soon someone from management is by my side. He is very solicitous. Maybe a lawyer? He has me sign papers. I do. He says I should get workman's compensation. I will. He's very pleased to say I'll get \$500 from the company for

distress. He even tells me I can have my job back next summer.

I wear the cast five months. It's a reminder every day of Kansas City Structural Steel. I do go back to the factory the following summer but to the day shift, no more Baby. Soon a fellow workers asked to buy my old DeSoto. He came to the house to fetch the car, told me the dumb guy I had had lunch with before was dead. Didn't know how.

Could have shed a tear for Baby, almost did, but didn't.

MisBehavin'

I am 20 years old and bored. Around me the Behavioral Laboratory of The University of Kansas is bright, clean, but stark empty. Starkly the same as it is every evening of my graveyard shift. Aside from cages containing 60 some pigeons and even more rats, I am alone, keenly so.

My hatred of the Behavioral Lab is out of control. Recently I began writing on the bathroom toilet stall walls, slogans from Ortega y Gasset and other rebellious minds. My most recent scrawling is my own blather, "DOWN WITH TECHNOCITY." This is futile and infantile. But it makes me laugh.

The job is to take a pigeon from its cage and moving with it to the aisle of testing boxes on one side, computers on the other, to place it under one hand on the work bench while with the other to attach electrode leads to the snap-in attachments that have been imbedded surgically behind the pigeon's legs and upward toward its butt hole.

This done I pop open a test box door and attach the dangling leads—one red, one blue—to corresponding leads inside the box. The pigeon is secured with a small harness so it cannot turn away from the plexiglass window over the lighted feed box, where the grains lie tempting under a clear light. Large round light holes are placed below the feed window and during the test these will change colors and according to the bird's response—pecking at one or another—will yield either a small portion of grain to drop into a hopper or an electric shock.

Each box has its own computer. As the test runs the results for each bird are monitored. At the end of a test my job is to write down the test results from various data screens on each bird's individual worksheet, then tear off the printed results and attach them to the pigeon's record for the night.

I learned early to run the tests so that the six test chambers run together. This so I can record all data, wire the birds and refill the chambers in one quick step and consequently have 15 minutes of empty time while the tests run. For said security reasons I'm to be in the lab for four hours on the nights I work. This means I sometimes have lag at end of shift unless I leave the birds in their chambers for a few extra minutes per session.

Supposedly this job gives me study time, and often it does. But some evenings I have nothing to pursue except a novel—once and while I've not even that.

Such is the case tonight, and explains my boredom. I leave the poor pigeons to rustle and peck in their dark chambers longer than usual, feeling both indolent and restless. The restless part most assuredly being caused by what young men think of, sex.

And I believe I think of sex more than most. This is why towards the end of my shift I am perched on my high lab stool—facing the computers with the click-clicking before me, the flutter flutter of wings behind me. I believe that in stroking me dick and balls through the cloth of my pants that I'm in full rebellion against the behaviorists, whom I loathe.

I believe while unzipping my pants and pulling out both dick and balls to the bright naked light of the lab that I am casting chaotic behavior into their computerized modeling of all things sentient.

Erection throbbing and sticking straight forward out of my fly I believe I am a satyr come to prance through all the aisles and offices of the lab, past the cages of pigeons and rats, lingering belligerently by the small oven where the dead creatures are incinerated—knowing full well that the lab door is always locked.

Now I am opening my belt, unfastening the button on my pants. They are tight pants and even open stay up firm around my buttocks. I begin gently pulling the on the corona of my cock with the five fingers of my left hand. It is silk on silk. The sensation as always is strong enough for me to close my eyes in rapture. I slide the fingers down the shaft to my pubic hair, then back up and swirl them around the head. Back and forth my fingers linger and play, tease and cavort.

I slide fingers down around the contours of my balls. I cup them. That too is a divine tickling that makes the blood tinkle. Back to the cock I clench it in my left fist and slowly move the skin up and down, up and down. Clenching my buttocks and leg muscles I begin a swifter motion.

I move down the work aisle to a waste paper basket. I want to jet openly, no covert tissues or toilet bowl. I want this orgasm free and open. I am fisting myself passionately, defiance singing through my nerves.

Starting to come I move directly over the waste paper basket. It is an

institutional black metal can, large and half full of wadded up incorrect text results, note papers, styrofoam coffee cups, pencil shavings, spilled, pigeon feed.

Behind me is a straight open aisle leading directly to the lab door. This too excites me even further, the feeling of daring, of surrender in full sight no matter how improbable a capture might be.

I make the first blast into the waste paper basket. It is a storming orgasm, wind and lighting rushing out of me. Spatter after spatter . . .

“Jonathan?” The baritone voice comes from behind. Last spatter spewing forth at the very same time.

I hurl over to my lab stool back to the door. No time to fasten my pants. I grab the pigeon test record book to clasp over my exposed lap.

“Hi Dr. Sherman . . .” I manage in a croak. My face feels the sting of crimson blushing.

Yes, it is Dr. Joel E. Sherman, head of the Department of Behavioral Science. A man in his late 40s, handsome and vainly well kept in body.

Dr. Sherman has appeared at the end of my aisle but rather than looking at me he is leaning forward head down to peer quizzically into the waste paper basket. In an agony of dread and embarrassment I focus on a computer face with wild intent, furtive side glances to Herr Doctor.

Peering done he turns with an odd smile and comes over to stand beside me. If he takes up the record book he'll also get a free shot of my limp dick with a large pearl of spent cum at its tip. But no, he merely pats me on the back with that unfathomable smile. “ Just thought I'd stop tonight to see how're you doing. Must get boring?”

Then he's gone. He took my rebellion with him too.

That night at home I am convulsed by embarrassment, punctuated by hysterical laughter. Will I be fired the next day (I wasn't)? Why did Sherman come by when he never has before?

What was the meaning of Sherman's enigmatic smile? For sure after he'd left that night I myself went back to scrutinize the black waster paper can. There was no doubt about those glistening globs on crumpled papers seasoned with pencil shavings.

It came to me then that perhaps there were reasons beyond my knowing. Could there be cameras in that lab? Was I the actual subject of their experiment?

Did I peck the wrong light and get a shock?

SCREAM OF THE MYNA BIRD

Or, Not Palm Beach

“I knew you was a Yankee because you’re so fair.”

This in the Upper Gulf accent of the Florida Panhandle. A talk reminiscent to me of my father’s family, how they spoke to me as a child, a self delighting lilt, a lazy river of speech. Although one I’d learned holding eddies, dangers, downstream.

I heard that on my arrival at last, in Madison coming by Greyhound from Mobile, and before that from New Orleans, before that from Little Rock, before that from St. Louis, and before that starting off from Kansas City. It had been a desperate trip, an 1100 mile long escape attempt, only to find me in my same old self. I sat numb my expiration date long gone, no more shelf life, like I’d been dumped for good in this sunshine acid-hangover place.

The trip finished in blinding bright Madison, Florida a theme park for a people who couldn’t get over ‘Gone With The Wind’.

Not a prospect in sight I’d taken an offer from my brother to work for him on a greyhound farm in Florida. An escape for me from much that had dead ended.

Just turned 23, 1972. Still I couldn’t arrive, even after at last stepping off that bus, because I had no known destination, no intent other than the overweening desperation of so many youths on the Great Plains. You know: ‘To get somewhere, do something, be someone’ anything other than who I feared myself to be.

I sat examining the place, thinking “So this is all? Isn’t there more? I’ve left everything and come this way for what?” Only a dinky bus office on a small town square.

It was a long-time-ago scene, the Old South of Americana byways, part of our phony mythos. It shined and shimmered at me both quaint and appalling. Small town Madison, court house square dripping tatters of Spanish moss battle flags, streamers decorating the live oaks that shaded its empty streets and walks.

Directly across from me they’d erected their Confederate monument, Spanish moss draped it too. The whole outside looked like it had died of old age.

Madison County Courthouse stood hard in the middle, shabby symbol of justice

where probably there was none.

“Ya all ought to know better than to dress like that for here,” said the white woman gleefully. She ran the depot where no business except me was happening and me she looked at bored out of her mind and sick with curiosity about who I was, why I was there, what people I belonged to, or if a stray then wondering if she oughtn’t call for the town’s one saggy-baggy policeman to come with siren going to lead me away to the cell they kept for foreigners.

First of February 1972, heart of winter in Kansas so I’d left it in a down lined coat, sweater, flannel shirt, undershirt. Far too much for the bygone Madison I’d arrived in where men were meandering in short sleeves, some wearing panama hats against the sun, carrying their palmetto fans. A few pickups parked at angles on the square barging up against the brick walkways, mealy bricks crumpled like the truck bumpers by voracious tree roots more thriving than the town itself.

I had too much to learn everywhere but particularly down there in this sugar gummy South. I didn’t yet know that the disheveled scene knew gross secrets exchanged between the bougainvillea, azalea and magnolia bushes in its blithe nights. A not so distant past, from 1972, of 16 lynchings in Madison County most of them on this Courthouse square.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root Black
 bodies swingin’ in the Southern breeze Strange
 fruit hangin’ from the poplar trees. Billie Holiday

Northwards Madison County directly borders Georgia. For the rest it’s demarcated by its waters, border lines made by the Withlacoochee, Suwanee and Acela rivers. The Suwanee river flows nearby to Madison. Mythic river of Stephen Foster— Way Down upon the Suwanee River—a sentimental journey hiding what we don’t want to see.

Way down upon the Suwanee River,
 Far, far away.
 That’s where my heart is yearning ever,
 Home where the old folks stay.

In the heart of the county lies Sand Pedro bay, not a bay, a dense swamp where people disappeared. The Gulf waters ran by, only 50 miles distant, giving Madison its sultry weather. On most afternoons during my time there a squall line

broke free briefly from above the Gulf to punctuate the almost always sunny days.

Hidden-away Madison County took me in its thrall.

Georgia, my sister in law, picked me up at the bus depot and drove me to the farm. A far better look at Madison County than what I-10 from Tallahassee had afforded. Down the County road we went by an old black man with a mule pulling a cart heavy with watermelon. He doffed his hat when we passed.

It was a mostly level land of extreme green, pine forests in all directions except where stripped back for broken, rotting farms. Kudzu made the green even greener. It rolled over bushes and trees smothering them slowly to death. Kudzu made fantastical shapes out of what it was killing, adding whimsy to the wearying expanse of sea level pine forest, bringing fantasy shapes from Japan to the Florida Panhandle.

Waiting for me was a sprawling slightly undulating farm of pristine white fences. It was dotted, for shade, by ornamentally selected pines and pecan trees. The area that had been cleared of forest for the farm amounted to about 100 acres. It contained several small structures, including the trailer where I was to stay and the pleasant looking clapboard home for the manager, where my brother's family lived.

On a rise, in this stoically featureless land, on an actual low hill, the first I'd seen since leaving Madison, Mr. Oscar K. Duke's occasional home thrust like a perched raptor surveying all through its expensive floor-to ceiling windows. I'd seen nothing else new here since arriving, making this brick and glass architectural digest house all the more startling.

My traveling had been to arrive here, to get by Greyhound to the O. K. Duke Greyhound Farm. More than 400 greyhounds were on the farm, of all ages. All of them with a far older pedigree than any American could claim.

Dogs were bred there, dames and sires, their litters raised and trained for the south Florida Tracks, glitzy palaces setup by Capone in the 30s. There were 19 tracks in Florida when I was there, with a take of more than 100 million dollars. Biscayne, Daytona Beach, Flagler and Hialeah are to name the more legendary. All big money betting machines, for high rollers drawn thick as flies to molasses.

O.K. Duke with sparse sandy hair, bland and short, freckles on face and arms, showed a predilection for leisure suits and Clarks. He was a Miami businessman, in what remained obscure. Known to us only that he owned racing kennels and a home in Palm

Beach.

He would appear on the farm for a few weekdays every-six weeks or so, arriving and leaving without announcement. When he came he'd bring along his wife an even vaguer person, rarely seen, seldom speaking. From the position of the house his presence remained undetected until he elected to drive down the rise in his Cushman four-wheel golf cart a jaunty red pennant hanging sickly in the thick air.

Soon after making his presence known we were expected up in our best for a bar-b-que on the terrace of the big house. For that he'd also bring prize custom-cut steaks and boxes of French wine, French cheeses and Cuban cigars.

Along with the steaks the Dukes brought their Boston accents and too the aura of lifetimes spent in an interior-decorated world made for them to walk through. On the rise, in his sleek house of big views, in the living room for all to see, O.K. positioned an extravagant telescope on a tripod clearly positioned for spying on us and the rest of his chattel.

He was big brother's boss, Georgia's also, boss of Buddy. Of the greyhounds most importantly. He was boss of the snakes in the fields, the kids, of Joe the Myna bird the family pet who knew one thing to say "call the dogs!"

Of me too. Duke knew with noblesse oblige innateness that he was one of the bosses of creation. All this was his occasional plaything. Yet he wasn't a bad sort, just not much of a sort at all.

In 1972 Madison County was poor, among the poorest counties in Florida. Going with that it was said to be roughly 50-50 black to white, no one was saying for sure but it seemed to me that racial mix was far from accurate. But true, most of the few whites I saw were poor too. A small class of elite whites ruled the County.

Lumbering the pine forest for big paper companies gave the county its only economy, employed its white people. Simply enough black people were not employed. Black citizens were for the most part uncounted in any census ever held. Except it was known that when the county was first 'discovered' whites brought in black slaves to such an extent that they outnumbered whites three to one. Same ratio for the resident white-fear-of-blacks factor.

Madison was by far the largest town, population about 3,500, virtually all white. The other three places of human habitation on the map, like Lee the nearest hamlet to the farm were also white and held fewer than 100 souls. When living there I saw that

the county claimed to have had some 13,000 people. Where were they? I couldn't guess. Hiding? Peek a boo.

Brother said the black people lived back in the deep forest or in the swamps, mostly on the small stricken share-cropping places, no running water or electricity.

Their number was guess-timated in order to keep up the district's representation, its historic importance, in Tallahassee and Washington, To fend off its enemy to the far south, the new-rich power grabbers, Yankees come carpet bagging along the State's gold coast.

He told me that the black people were born without certificates. Died without certificates. Raised without schools.

They were for the most part, intentionally or not, kept illiterate and prevented by literacy tests from voting. The 1965 Voting Rights Act whizzed directly over the piney tip tops of Madison County. Never landed. No one knew of it. No one cared as long as folks could keep it low, keep things the same.

Buddy was part of this wilderness culture. He'd been a legacy when Duke bought the farm, then a small greyhound farm barely clear of the forest. He just came along with the land. His principal value in that he was exceptionally kind to the dogs, a great merit.

Buddy was the first black man I worked with. First I'd ever known something about, my life to then being lived immersed in the utter pallid whiteness of Kansas.

In 1972, Buddy was a revelation. He was a deep shade of black, blacker than I'd seen anywhere. In the beginning that made me uncomfortable, why I didn't think to ask myself. But being intelligent and differential by habit, such mitigated his skin tone. Best of all his features were not particularly 'negroid'. He was when looked at quite handsome. Admittedly it took me a while to look closely since that wasn't done then. Above all he came prissily clean, always in fresh washed clothes, no musk offending my store bought sensibilities.

The extent of my knowledge of black America came from my admiring reading of Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Eldridge Cleaver (I was proud of being a safely middle-class radical) and of course James Baldwin. They sensitized me to our yankee-doodle-dandy race culture, sensitized but didn't cleanse me.

I suppose I was giving Buddy a score of 80 on my Wichita High School North

black-to-white acceptability test, somewhere between James Brown (bottom) and Harry Belafonte (top).

Buddy was the one man I've encountered with 11 fingers. He had an extra small thumb grown onto one hand. Inbreeding said Steve, just like the greyhounds.

Also, soon as shadows dripped deep off the kudzu Buddy prepared to go home. He wouldn't stay on the farm without sunlight. "There be ghosts here," he explained. "Bad ones. It's haunted."

Said Steve, "It probably is. Should be."

Buddy joined in for the breeding of Ballyleah Gearra, in the living room of the farm manager's house. Duke had bought her unproven for \$25,000 from an Irish farm. Translated to 2020 value that's more than \$150,000.

Ballyleah was a small young bitch from an exceptional Anglo-Irish bloodline. Duke bought her from a farm in County Cork. It was her first breeding.

Greyhounds are an ancient fantasy breed. For most of their long acquaintance with man they have always been the strict reserve of nobility, of royalty. Their first man-made images are more than 8,000 years old. They appear on the tombs of pharaohs in hunting scenes. Greyhound coursing, called 'The Sport of Queens' in tribute to Queen Elizabeth I who was so impassioned for the dogs, is the ancestor of greyhound racing.

Through careful selection they have been sculpted in time by man into finely wrought creatures of speed their life force focused on hunting, chasing for deer and other game in packs. Their delicate long legs and aerodynamic snouts are symbols of speed. This heritage had its price. Greyhounds have become inbred.

Their foremost difficulty was in mating. Through multiple generations of being selected, they were bred only according to plan, their abdomens have been made evermore petite to allow for throttling hind leg haunches until the dog's penis is often too small to lock into the bitch. This means they need human help, to be held together male and female until the procreative act is accomplished.

First time she came in heat that's what we did in Steve and Georgia's living room, glasses of gin and tonic in hand to celebrate. Buddy joined us but wouldn't drink.

Duke himself had chosen 'Mabel's' first mate, an especially fiery dog, a beautiful fawn fellow. He was about 25% larger. He proved a task to hold steady.

Greyhounds have two names, one for their lineage chart and how they appear in the racetrack programs, the other for the kennel where they are raised and kept all their lives. The Irish farm had dubbed her Mabel, as in 'get off the table Mabel the quarter's for the beer', a joke on her aristocracy versus her purpose,

The dog knew what he was expected to do, sometimes they didn't. Once he'd mounted her Mabel's forelegs gave out and she nosedived to the carpet. She showed the whites of her eyes and whined softly. The two were kept braced together by Steve's forearm wrapping them tightly under their loins.

Buddy held the dog by the leash. He crooned to Mabel and stroked her in sympathy, repetitively. "Mama got a cold? Poor mama."

Once a high pressure zone from the north got stuck over us on the farm. For days the unusually high heat made work in the sun near untenable. Steve went to town and bought a straw Panama hat for each of us, Georgia and kids too.

Buddy wouldn't even touch his, refused it indignantly. "Won't never wear no boss man hat."

I was familiar with the American Old South. My father was born and raised around Geneva, Alabama, as far south in Alabama as one can get. Same kind of landscape, same proximity to the Gulf, same culture. We made several trips with him through the area so growing up I saw the 'colored' only signs on drinking fountains, even on grocery store doors—common for there to be two, one for each race as if contamination from a sack of Wonder Bread might diminish a white person's God given superiority.

On such trips we went by custom to visit Mizz Champion and Old Frances. Mizz Champion lived in Lapine, Alabama. A true hamlet in the pines. She was a non-blood relation who my dad had known forever. Hers was the largest house in the clearing, a rambling old place, not antebellum but nevertheless with dignity to it.

My father always arranged for us to be there for lunch, that because Mizz Champion's servant, Old Frances, was a cook of fame. Old Francis liked my dad so she'd lay the table with her best fare when we came by.

Given her name it can be assumed 'Old Frances' was a black woman, the very same age as Mizz Champion.

Eventually Old Frances died leaving Mizz Champion in a lingering grief. My wife and I visited her in Lapine. She sat sad and alone in her house of many rooms. She said, "Since Old Frances died on me things haven't never been the same. No other colored woman could take her place. And though I tried with white women I just couldn't make em into a good servant."

Not long after I started work on the O.K. Duke Greyhound Farm I broke my nose. Did it to myself. In his intro course to me on farm labor Steve had emphasized the importance of standing a rake with its teeth away from you. Late one afternoon I neglected this axiom and when returning for it stepped down so hard that the handle banged me in the face with all the force it possessed. I saw the zodiac.

When my face swelled into a black and green mush I knew I needed a doctor. "I'll call Dr. Bubb," Georgia soothed me with this on seeing me come into the kitchen. "You know there are only two doctors in Madison County and he's the only one who can read an x-ray."

So she called and got me an appointment in a week, a week? "The x-ray is a mobile unit comes once a week from Tallahassee."

My appointment was end of the morning, Dr. Bubb kept leisurely hours so it was the best time on offer. He was in considerable demand. In 1972 the people of Madison County, at least the whites, were supposed to have their stools checked regularly for the various parasites living in the soil. They were advised to always wear shoes. The whites did. Everywhere, rot and sucking worms.

Amazing, I found the waiting room empty, although I could hear a low drone of conversation seeping mysteriously out of the walls. The nurse came through and when she opened a door to my surprise I was peering into a second waiting room full of black people. In Madison County the sick and dying were segregated too.

Georgia said white people, those who could and could afford to, drove to Tallahassee for medical care. I thought there was some link between this dereliction of civic duty, something obscured by sunshine and flowers, Confederate war dead memorials and Spanish moss, that went with the fact that in 1972 there was not one public library in the county.

I rarely left the farm except to go once every two weeks to the farmers coop in

Live Oak. I drove the big farm truck to have the bed piled up high and fat with 60 bales of hay which would then be used for changing out the Brood bitch kennels. I also went with Steve and Georgia every week on our booze run to Valdosta, Georgia, about an hour away across the beginnings of the Okefenokee swamp. Chief among Madison County drawbacks, to us, was this problem. It was Dry.

For me that swamp drive was fascinating, so alien to anything I had known. Sometimes on our way along the empty highway we'd startle up a consort pair of great sand hill cranes to go rising on their seven foot wing spans.

Beside going to Valdosta for several trays of cheap beer and a half dozen quarts of gin we'd stop at a small shack in the city's colored town for bar-b-que. At least spare ribs dripping with homemade sauce weren't segregated.

Otherwise I was stuck on the farm, stifling my young man's urges, perplexed and a bit frightened of the hazy, slow poke place where I'd landed. Then the movie Shaft came to Madison. I borrowed Steve's truck and drove into town to see it.

Courthouse Square was empty in the dark, the town lit only by the few wan street lights strung across intersections by frail lines. Theater, County's one theater, showed Shaft once a day at 10.

Georgia had wondered aloud. "I hear this is the first ever black movie to show in Madison. I wonder they got permission to show it at all."

After seeing it I wondered too. It was only first appearing here a full year after its release so there might have been some hot debate. My only conclusion was that someone had made a big mistake.

The ticket booth girl and the refreshment counter high school boy both white looked at me without alarm. What could be alarming to them in Madison?

Pushing open the auditorium doors I heard a dull congestion. Once inside, in the gloom, it got quiet. Eyes once adjusted to the darkened theater I saw I was the one and only person in the audience.

Movie started, first up a hint of urban cool, the monster cricket pulsing, sonic thrusts of Isaac Hayes' theme music. Getting louder and louder, strutting its way up from out of the New York subway. Times Square bedazzles, gets bedazzled. Then comes the pure lounge lizard slink of the lordly head and swagger of Richard Roundtree. At end of the credits, screen fills with a black man's ego, rare enough in Madison County, or anywhere in America: 'Directed By Gordon Parks'.

But in those heroic opening minutes nothing compared to when Shaft shoots the finger at a white cabby. Things then came clear. The theater suddenly erupted with clapping, stomping, cheering. It started raining popcorn, Dr. Pepper cups. I had ice in my hair.

Turning around to look up I saw that while I might be the only white man down below, the balcony above, of the Bijou, was jam packed with jubilant Madison County black folks.

“It ain’t a Christian thing,” opined Buddy when I told him all about the movie.

“Groovy!” praised Georgia.

Steve could only say: “About time.”

“Call the dogs!” screamed Joe the Mynah bird.

Orgy On Vermont Street

I was in rut in the final three years of my life in Lawrence. I was so confident of my brilliance, of my well muscled body from so much exercise and running. How I loved to run, no silly jogging--real wild hard running for miles every day, every day. It was a use of the body not unlike the thrill and pleasure of sex. Looking at that Jonathan turns me on now. He is an object, like a statue of a faun in my mind. No relation to me.

But He (me) did rut. I fucked fucked fucked. I fucked every day throughout those years, for a long time fucking four different women a week plus a fellow in rotations. Five fucks a week. Sometimes I'd fuck one for a weekend, then alternate among the rest during the week. I was very discrete, the people I fucked were each in a separate submarine hold with the hatch wheel screwed tight.

Linda Bombach, Janice Russell, Georgia Kennedy, Jane, any man desirable (they were legion). And the fucking of women and of a man bore no difference to me. It was fucking.

Linda and Jane were the best fucks. Linda always wanted it from behind so, as she said, she could feel my balls slapping her asshole and inner thighs. Jane liked it curled up double in my arms so that I held her up as I plowed her hard from underneath--she said it made her feel like a little girl. Janice gave great head and I loved to eat her pussy--fiery red pubes and soft milky skin. She had a huge lab who often slurped my balls when I got out of bed to take a leak. That dog had a wide liver red tongue so strong it could lift my balls up together with one loving oozing gush of canine relish.

Georgia was the most demanding as she went apeshit as soon as the head of a dick touched her pussy--writhing in death agony, fevered and flaying, frying out and lurching at my with unleashed rubenesque Irish female power. I had to hold her with all my strength just to get fully inserted. And she wanted to fuck on stairs, on car hoods, on rough ground. We spent a weekend in El Paso in a dirty old hotel, fucking in a slop pale lake of sweat with the ceiling fan on high but doing nothing to cool us down.

Janice I fell in love with somewhat. She would bath me in her bathtub like a baby then stand me naked sitting before me on the toilet, towel me gently taking

me in hand and whispering 'you have the most beautiful cock, so beautiful....' Like a Frankish queen I thought, and she'd play it true wrapping her long red hair around my dick and running her hands over my buttocks.

Janice and I ended badly. We got stoned and fought and I started to beat her up and the landlord ran down from upstairs where I was living and was shouting saying he'd call the cops and she ran out into the night crying. Bad. Very bad. I ache with shame over that now.

Then there's my fellow of choice, a compulsive fuck. If you haven't fucked a man it's hard to explain the difference, the odd thrill of mastery, the sense of abandon and lawlessness. I humped him harder than the women, faster, coming quicker. He was more in love with me than any of the women. Was it likewise for me?

I know it hurt them far more than them to know (guess) how much traveling my cock was doing, how many bodies it was pleasuring. He wanted me to fuck him on his back, as I pushed his legs apart and up to his shoulders. But liked best to fuck him like a dog from behind finally forcing him flat with my arm around his loins to hold him up so to get the most strategy fo plunging.

Linda was crazy. When I told her it was over she stalked me. Haunting my apartment scratching at my door at any hour, leaving notes under my car wipers, long expressions of unrequited love, one running for more than 20 pages of stream of conscious dementia. She followed me on the streets, in her car. Ran after me on the sidewalk. Called me a dozen times each day at work. If she could get close enough she'd strike out at me like a python, grabbing me by my cock to wrap in her hand, squeeze. If allowed she'd have swallowed me whole and alive.

Alone of the women Linda really knew that I was banging Gregg at the same time. Once he and I went to a big truck stop in Topeka. She'd just started as a waitress there. She got my table. It remains the meanest, darkest, most haunting burger and fries of my times. She jabbed down the knife and fork at me, the plates. Tears were flying, hers that is. And she kept mumbling louder and louder, 'You and your little friend, you bastard, you and your little friend have ruined my life.'

Maybe I did. Poor friend, he just looked like a turtle with a semi tire about to come down on its shell.

Sometimes I fucked two of them the same day. I arranged it all to be ever so sensitive.

One night toward the end of this tight ass-and-slick madness I took a night off and got stoned by myself naked in my basement apartment. Took polaroids of me, all parts, all phases of arousal. Using that camera to bore into who I might be, and what relationship my flesh had to my mind, or vice versa, or for what the fuck reason.

My posing session, total self absorption, total ego and maleness at 20,000 feet and soaring, that was closing signature, closure to a period of my life. I still have the photos, scanned orgy of vanity--fading black and whites of a foreigner from the dark ages of my experience. I look at these often in wonder. Who was that!

They are oddly pathetic. The face--not mine, never mine--evokes emotions I don't understand, feelings so obvious and so blatant but saying what. I don't get the message now.

Fucking no longer interests me so much. I can't do it so well as before, to please all concerned.

I want to write more as I feel like rolling on and and on and on. But there is a line of craziness I'm touching, a forbidden realm of the senses, like the third rail in the subway, and slowly I find myself breathless in a tired electric current and old, very old and very tired. The line of thought trickles to an old man's tinkle. Time to flush.

So this begins the stopping. Are any readers still reading? Any gladness? Probably, most of all relieved I'd think. Why do I pick on you, dear reader? Who else is there?

INCIDENT AT LONE STAR

All water holds deep threat. For me a personal antagonism, a mutual animosity. I know its ancient secrets, the barbarous things with teeth, suckers, tentacles that can rip into your flesh, peel away your hide. I know.

Also there is drowning to be considered—in depth. I've felt that panic a few times. The child man who cannot swim struggling up to be free of water, panicked, an hallucinogenic fight to escape, gasping for breath but swallow water instead. Legs kick about of no more use than a frog's electrified in your high school lab.

Terror is doom come round.

This small lake, this water is no more frightening to me than most others. I loath them equally. Except that the water of Lone Star in my mind's eye remains too foul for thought. It is turn-away ugly. Indubitably so for me, even in dry Kansas made seemingly safe by its vast parched sky and desiccated land.

Lone Star did give much and sure unease as I lay on it. Precariously afloat on its scum, pretending to an idling bliss while in fact utterly becalmed without help at hand. Surrounded by it. Hysterics assuaged only by the tenuous treacherous security of my inflatable rubber raft. A raft bought for this purpose. It heaves with a Mickey Mouse emblem to hold me up safe, in counter culture silliness, at belly and loins, both of which are naked and plastered to hot plastic.

My inflatable raft is sucking rubber on my body this hot summer day. I'm on my stomach legs raised at the knees to keep my toes out of the water and away from snapping turtles, if there are any here. My chin rests on crooked arms, folded hands under my bearded chin. Fingers thus kept safe on the raft, so that nothing grotesque and inimical can nudge them, nibble them, and perhaps send me away screaming, mortified, shamed back to the quick of my young man's self.

The mud-water lies under a layer of dead, dying, insects.

It is a La Brea tar pit ooze both repellent and fascinating. This lake water is too murky for reflection, nothing more in it than a dark cloud of unknowing.

I peer over the edge of my raft scrutinizing the lake surface for myth, Odysseus, Jason, or for nightmare images—my own Raft of the Medusa or a Titanic lifeboat crushed in a frosted sea trying bid farewell to hundreds upon hundreds of desperate and drowning people.

Above me the sky is an empty pallor. Sun is a melting glob of butter.

On all sides the lake lies dead. But the lake at least is surrounded by life, rimmed by old trees, oak, cottonwood and sycamore, a wilting green salad that from the sound must be the roost for entire nations of locusts and cicadas. Grasshoppers, crickets and katydids.

The cheap raft seems to my fearful mind to be losing air. I'm barely buoyed here in the middle of Lone Star Lake.

I'm naked. Everyone is naked here. All are vulnerable. They say naked is a state of freedom. I am not sure of that. I feel exposed. An imposter with nothing to hide behind and the focus of all judging eyes.

Also, everyone here is young. More vulnerability. Inexperience makes for a weird variable in human affairs. Such renders the scene in a languid post-bacchanal sensual drowse.

This is a skinny dipping lake for University of Kansas grad students, of which I am one.

Voyeurs, exhibitionists, the curious and the thrill seeker bored that at Lone Star nothing ever happens. Except just now I am watching for the first time ever a young couple fucking in the water.

He stands I suppose up to his ankles in mud, up to his navel in a coy draping of the muddy drink. She pins him tight with her legs, riding him so that her feet rock up and down with the motion of his hips, are her toes curling. They show and hide, a single stark white corpse gyrating out of a syrup, like a sporting game to be the first to escape from the treacle.

Their eyes roll. They are indifferent to all. They are finished in a gasping struggle.

Attention shifts.

Lone Star is a small lake, more of a glorified farm pond. The name doesn't refer at all I've been told to Texas—rather to the 'Evening Star Road' that connects it from somewhere but that here snaggles off into a deeply pitted and rutted dead end.

Does Venus, our Queen and love star, lie buried in this inscrutable depth? Impossible. Yet the young coupled have coupled in it.

Without them this lake can't ripple or wave. No undulation of hips allowed.

By surface Lone Star spreads around me in a sullen thick shit. By shape the lake is an asshole. No way could it to be harmless.

I knew the lake water's secret. It was a poisoned sludge impersonating a summertime lake so to lure innocence—of children, youths and larking dogs— into the evil of its viscous Silurian soup.

That long long ago lake water was a great surprise when it ran trickling, transubstantiated, and clear from your fingers. Slipped warm and friendly down your stomach and thighs.

But on falling back in place it would splatter abhorrently, die again. Lie ironed out as before. Lone Star lake could never reflect. Too turgid. Not even a great sky made so wide and encompassing, so fair, a grand July sky in Kansas, could do more than give you an alternate point of view to ponder, a hope for the ethereal. A heaven to its hell.

Or so it seemed to me naked on my raft trying to keep as much of me, hands and feet, safely away from Lone Star. Especially of water I am not a reliable narrator.

My sense that it was an enemy came from my older brothers. My first memory of water in more than the bathtub was of me standing in shallows on the St. Augustine Florida beach. Lapped by tickling waves I could see through the there- and -then impeccably pure Atlantic to the very bottom of shifting sand and fluttering green garlands. Aquamarine crystalline.

But things I was told moved through it.

My brothers made sure I knew what those moving things were, small alarming monsters that would give me grievous bodily harm—sharks, barracuda, Portuguese Men of War, octopus, sting rays, lion fish. Whatever their smart boy brains could fathom up to make it for me a nightmare.

To make it real they would sneak upon me and grab my ankles in order to flip me forward. Or they pinched the back of my legs, yelling "Quick Johnny it's Men of War." Sometimes I remembered them holding me down in the ocean waves. Or they'd pick me up and carry me out to sea bellowing for mother who evidently was not around.

Then I'd have to be pulled weeping from that beautiful water. During the following summer my father took us to Lake Bemidji in Minnesota. There I don't recall my brothers, but have another searing souvenir.

I stand on a dock, the cool northern water black, basaltic, another kind of beauty. An outboard approaches carrying a load of burly adults. Now, I know they were drunk. They throw me a rope and cheer me on to pull them in, When I try they backup and into the lake I go. Too little to swim, but they pull me out with great hilarity.

That was my first experience of drowning. So distant in mind but so vivid ever after.

I came out with dozens of black leeches on my skin. Another convulsion. As keenly I see my father in a murder rage marching hysterical me and the campground manager back to the dock. He gave the merry boaters a roaring tongue lashing and had the manager order them off the lake.

No. Water has not been my friend. Even though I've since been drawn to it— putting my toes at least into more than the Bemidji lake and the Atlantic. I've been into the Great Lakes, the Great Salt Lake, the Lake of the Ozarks, into Colorado mountain streams, into the Mississippi and Arkansas rivers. I've been baptized by the Pacific, the Indian Oceans, in the North, Baltic and Mediterranean seas.

Despite my brothers and drunken boaters, or maybe because of them, I did learn to swim if poorly. I preferred floating on my back to any particular stroke. My favorite movement was the dog paddle at which I became adept.

The most sophistication I can claim is my own style of the forward crawl. Because I refused to turn my head down, face submerged in water, it was a ponderous thrashing of arms and legs chin held up and head locked. Nevertheless it worked.

Lone Star Lake. Something sluggish, behemoth, I know, lies dreadful somewhere below its treacherous surface. Lay waiting for me deceitful, silent, motionless, eyes closed. Only its peanut butter skin saved me and those others from disappearing inside the midnight coil of its deepest digestive tract.

I lay there my skin burning, prone on my stomach, a naked young man drifting sluggishly through a timeless reverie of phobic complexities, looking with half hearted interest at boobs, snatches, buttocks, comparing balls and cocks in competition to my own. Now and then even brains.

Bedazzled by one hundred and one, or so, other bodies, mostly stoned or mildly sedated by warm beer. It was a time before obesity. The bodies were idealized, they've become paintings from arcadia in memory.

Sunlight shimmered about, glints of tiny nova lights, before Lone Star trapped it, caught it helpless on the surface, then took it sinking and hissing in a gulp, extinguished it in a snap of steaming sighs, swallowed it greedily, the water subsuming it.

To me floating on my inflatable raft it was utterly repellent.

Lone Star had no docks, no boat ramps, no life guards, it offered nothing to eat or drink, and no public facilities—the lake one imagined served for that— it was a bowl of solid looking runoff on maybe 20 acres of land. It was a secret held in ratio to being hard to find.

Not a farmhouse in sight. No sounds other than the fly like drone of human voices stifled by pleasure. But the lake was popular. On the weekends it packed in a throng which is why I went on weekdays to ogle and dream with a book for sun screen riding on my bare butt, or after very very carefully managing to turn over, open onto my erogenous zone where it bobbed on my off and on 50% erection. Hard-ons were not cool at Lone Star.

With cocky bravado I would have, did have that troubling afternoon, a joint behind my ear to remind me of how all this was no more than a passing pipe dream.

That afternoon my cherished raft and I stand becalmed perhaps 70 feet from one shore, about midway across the lake. To there, where my attention is drawn away from the pages of what, perhaps Moby Dick? That would be appropriate even if implausible.

Whatever, I'd just flipped awkwardly to my stomach, barely saving some masterpiece from the turgid drink. Most of us would agree, I think, that we humans know things when we actually don't. That we see in a flash what we don't want to. Believe in a fleeting second without cerebral certainty. That just happened to me.

I've gone into auto drive a robot rolling off the raft. Moby Dick or whatever floats away somewhere behind me. I can imagine its paper growing leaden with water, then disappearing without a single fluttering page. The raft too is lost. My joint has gone bye-bye.

There in the past I see myself plunging ahead with my best pitiful effort, straining in a rage of 25-year-old testosterone, driven by a needle injection of adrenaline. We beings are so trapped in ourselves but also so linked by animal knee-jerks.

I come to a spot on the lake. How do I know this spot? Don't ask, I can't tell. The question in this incident is clear to me, has been for 45 year so. Frightened me, cowardly me. It's the answer that puzzles.

I remember sinking my arms to my shoulders, treading lake water with my legs. I am spreading out my arms with hands open, fingers clutching. Catching whatever they can I pull.

My hands are full of hair, both of them. Feels like I've grabbed seaweed. Plucked it up from the deepest darkest pit of Lone Star. Up from the lake they bring two heads to the surface.

In each I have the hair of a child's head. I somehow manage to kick and struggle with their weights. My nemesis the terror of drowning fills me, of going down into that horrible mindless lake water.

But I do get them to the shore. I haul them up and roll them over, pounding their backs. They sputter and vomit.

Such an evil water to be regurgitated from. Beautiful creatures beached, so fearfully and wonderfully made.

They are tow headed little fellows, surely no more than six, twins too. To this day I'm sure of that implausible fact. How did I become lost in another mythology?

I don't recall much more. A small crowd gathers to chatter excitement, oohing and aahing. They kneel as one, a comforting tribe around the little ones. They slap me on the back as if I had been drowning myself.

That was insufferable. I ran away from them. I hid from it all on the other side of the lake with people who hadn't witnessed the little drama.

No matter, in about an hour a stranger appeared. He crouched worshipfully at my side sobbing. He could have been praying to me, laying at my altar his undying paternal gratitude, begging forgiveness for his father's malfeasance. I didn't say anything, although I wanted to, "Where were you, dumb shit, when they needed you!"

That slobbering nude man, was yet more excruciating business to flee from. Nothing for it but to run for my clothes, get dressed in my car, and bid adieu to Lone Star Lake.

Did the incident make me proud? No. Did it make me have a better opinion of human nature, my own included? Not at all. Did it make me take more swimming lessons. Hardly. I was even more leery of water than before. I even became afraid of the wet floor of a shower stall.

What did come to me was a frightened veneration for the laws of probability that rule us one and all, the improbable made probable. Would that it had made me a better father when my turn came.

Any belief in God? Get serious. But how I did yearn then for what Lone Star waters, that glass jar of mud had confiscated, my joint. My loose jay gone lost. Guess some payment was demanded in return for giving back the little ones.

Its magic had gone into them. It turned the boys into smoke in a layering of deep obscurity and ganja dream clarity.

MY BIG FAT KANSAS WEDDING

I got married in Kansas. To a really fine lady from France. We were already living together in New York so this was just to assure that US Immigration would let me keep her there in my bed. Truth, far more so to insure she kept me in her heart.

The path to marriage was made more difficult than necessary by me, although she foolishly agreed to it all. To get married we first needed a cab ordered to our door, an exceptionally rare treat. The driver warily eyeballed our destitute street.

He drove us to La Guardia for an early morning flight to Kansas City. This was on the Friday before Memorial Day Weekend 1979. We had minimal luggage since we lived with very few things then. Necessity in a poor tenement apartment in Manhattan's East Village that had barely enough space for our bodies.

In Kansas City we borrowed one of my aunt and uncle's cars, a 1971 Chrysler Imperial—great luxury for us who like most New Yorkers then had no car at all.

I drove us, radio on loud, for 300 miles. West west west for six and a half hours nonstop as we could make it, across more than three quarters of Kansas.

I went breaking the speed limits wherever they were. Speed ran in me, so I sped in glee. I had grown up with 80 mph.

Hurtling on I reveled in the scenery of home. My love held my hand.

I'd been born, reared a Jayhawker, anarchic, happiest with 'no mountains in the way.' I had been back East for almost three years yearning even in the stink and electric high of New York in the 70s for returns to the tabula rasa of my homeland, the unique American place where the prairie rises into the high plains before both are eaten alive by those ugly rockies.

The two of us sat in the big front seat ingenuous to what we were starting.

My bride to be I'm sure tolerated the pilgrimage mainly for my sake. And too because for her from her French point of view what the region lacked, much I'm sure to her, it still likely held some exotic appeal. She suffered the trip to be entertained by

Americana. I think in that beginning she suffered me for the same reason.

We drove into the edge of Western Kansas, to Dodge City. It was not our destination for marrying. But close enough in that Zen land of fullness in emptiness. Mostly, it did have a motel where for far and wide around there were none at all.

Actually we were to be married in the small declining town of Kinsley 40 miles away from Dodge with too much in nothing between.

The reason we married in Kinsley, that I brought her there halfway across the continent, impelled by a homing instinct, was that my grandparents lived there. My parents had been married there back in the early 1930s. My mother was buried there. After I reached my prime as a true High Plains drifter I could claim any home it was Kinsley, Kansas. It still is in my old man's self.

Late afternoon sun blinded our eyes heavy with long- travel fatigue until click they opened wide when the world went wild with color, turning into one of those psychedelic Kansas sunsets.

Our pain in the ass trip was necessary to me, selfish me, because I felt it imperative to give my father and my grandfather the pleasure they seemed to covet of marrying us. They were both Methodist clergymen. Most un-New York City kind of men.

I was already an angry atheist. So too my lover in her enlightened French way. All befell us inscrutably.

Being back for me gave a Babinski reflex. Myself at peace. To my true French woman alone in the wilderness it was not so easy, soon as she said a word everyone asked 'where ya from honey.' And then when told, "I never met anybody from France before. I just love French, it's such a pretty language."

Since Kansas City we'd done nothing but follow the old Santa Fe Trail. In my head a thousand ox or mule drawn wagons proceeded us all along to Dodge. Behind us came those who walked to lighten the wagons, all together like pilgrims on a path to Campostella.

Now and then an historical market would disturb the scene, 'Wagon Ruts.' So many had come through that the sign of their passage remained. Years before I'd seen a pioneer tombstone on a Kansas back road, "She floundered by the wayside and The Angels Took her home." Madonna of the Trail, cornball sentiment that nevertheless always gave me a lump in my throat.

Me and my headful of wagon tongues thwacking, the jingling of harness. Me part of that great passage onwards of ghost wagon trains. Going simply to be going.

Only five miles out of Dodge, towards dusk, I drove off the highway where I'd seen a sign announcing a Scenic Over. I thought to please my sweetheart who I assumed was bored. She claims she wasn't.

That took us onto a dirt road. Suddenly ours became the only car in sight. Reaching the crest of a ridge we were truly amazed by the panorama. It spread below us, around us, enormous, the sun going down hooked on an edge of it. This was wide screen drive-in movie style viewing.

The sign read "World's Largest Feedlot." Doubtless it was. About a hundred thousand cattle milled below aimlessly looking about just like us, befuddled and searching for something to do.

That tourist attraction absorbed we went in search of something I knew we'd find, the motel. Where we had some fun.

Afterwards we drove through town looking for what New York in its glory didn't have at the time. Tex Mex. It was real grease-dripping family cooking on the wrong side of the tracks. So good, so many beans that we were to be farting it out all through the next day, our wedding day.

Next morning, at long last, we drove on for Kinsley. I noted they hadn't added a single curve since my last visit. Barb wire fencing ran along both sides of the highway, protecting us from mind-bending expanses of grazing land. A house too, now and then. A string of wind tossed telephone lines hugged to one side. On the other the tracks of the Atchison Topeka and Santa Fe railroad. No towns at all.

There I couldn't speed because all the way we were stuck behind an empty but slow cattle truck—we knew where it had been.

One momentous event. A freight train charged past us. More than a mile long. In Kinsley we bought out marriage license at the Edwards County Courthouse. The county-clerk lady said, "Dear, you have such a nice accent, I see on the papers you're from France. It's such a lovely language would you mind speaking some to me?"

From there we went in mounting excitement like children off to a fair. Off to visit grandfather's house a very few blocks away. To where the little town abruptly ended.

We'd made it at last of our own westward trek. We were to be married in his living room.

The sign over the small front door of his small house read 'Little Haven.' He was Rev. W. F. Little, and maybe 5'5" so of course to me this was sensible.

My grandfather was 91 years old but hadn't even lost a hair yet let alone his teeth or wits. He was a beaming, loving, virile man. Recently he had given one of my brothers a pack of rubbers saying he didn't need them anymore. To me he gave cause to not despair, he does so now. I never heard him raise his voice, never utter a word in criticism or anger.

He had been an ordained Methodist pastor since 1908, preaching 7,800 sermons, baptizing 1655 infants, marrying 430 couples (we would be his 431st), burying 635 emptied out bodies,. These carefully kept statistics I found in his desk drawer after his death.

He pastored at 25 churches, mostly tiny, during his time across central and western Kansas. I was very proud of him even knowing that he would have stroked out if informed what my own life was like. He was not a successful parson, although he was a much beloved one.

Alma Lippoldt was his second wife. 'Wee Willy' married her within six months from when his most refined first wife, my grandmother Verna, went to her grave from a life of modest gentility. That was a period of mourning too short for gossips. My mother just laughed at her father's haste. "He deserves it." was her comment. Remembering Verna I understood what she meant.

Grandpa was second generation American, his father born in Ulster, northern Ireland. Scottish people originally.

Alma was second generation German. She still read her Bible in German. She was embarrassingly blunt to one and all. Expected to give out orders and have them followed. In everything great and small her way was the only way. But what a warm and caring woman, a distracting change from Verna for sure. She had been my grandmother for 25 years.

I called her Grandma Alma. German for soul. A funny name for a woman so nonsense. Alma was 91 too, still sturdy as her kitchen table.

Their home was locked into time. My time. I knew everything in it. Nothing ever moved there except for them in their precise, unhurried and unvarying ways.

Things I recall from their house: Grandfather's wonderful roll top desk and his shillelagh acquired on his trip back to the old country in 1933; Grandma Alma's curious throne-like black Chinese chair carved with foliage and dragons that some German ancestor had had sailed back to Prussia from the Orient; the large Victorian lithograph scene of Christ with a flock of lambs that I could recall always seeing and which my mother too had always seen; and the plaster bust, which had fascinated me since childhood, of a child reading a book wearing an oddly shaped green cap.

As always in the bathroom I found the small vase on the back of the toilet kept filled with kitchen matches to be struck for sulfur to cloak the stink of bowels. Or perhaps to frighten off the Devil?

My honey and I both needed to light our matches votive in memory to Tex Mex.

Alma wore her best dress. Grandpa stood straight in his brown preacher's suit. I was in my one suit, also brown. My inamorata looked so elegant in her beige and red floral dress.

Alma had pushed aside the furniture in her seven dwarves-size living room and dining room to make room for the gathering such as it was—bride and groom, two pastors, herself, my two brothers and one of their ex-wives, my aunt and uncle from Kansas City. A sum of ten in the house. It was a squeeze.

For an altar she had set up her ironing board in their living room draped in a white cloth. A Bible open on it pointedly to where Ephesians 5:33 can be found—“Nevertheless in particular let every one of you so love his wife even as himself.” Obviously that bit of desert folklore from our vagabond, tribal saga was meant for me.

Grandma Alma had a corsage for the bride, a boutonniere for the groom. She'd even walked to the Kinsley Carnegie library to fetch a recording of love songs by Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy.

Alma loved only a very few of the living, but those she did she would do anything for. She'd come to us as a living figure of the Old Testament barren but preferred above others.

There was growing tension in the Little Haven as we waited for my dad to arrive, the last of the expected. He was being driven in from where my bother Steve and he had spent the night, in Great Bend. We waited and at least for me with growing alarm.

My father was blind from occult hydrocephalus. He had had brain surgery in

Kansas City to implant a pump in his head to circulate spinal fluid.

As for my brother Steve, his driver, he was a mess. An alcoholic. His wife, my dearly beloved Georgia, she with the one leg (see “Battle of the Haysville VFW”), also an alcoholic, had recently left him. Up until the wedding trip I had kept daily contact with him fearing he’d commit suicide. For weeks he’d cried to me on the phone while I tried in vain to cheer him on.

There was just reason to be concerned while we waited to get married.

But they did arrive. Steve with red crying eyes, my Dad like a Zombie. My guess is that Steve had bought himself some vodka in Great Bend and in booze addled sleep had failed at his watch. In the night when my dad tried to get up he’d taken a hard fall. I knew at a glance that the pump had stopped working.

Nevertheless the wedding proceeded, and despite a long epithalamion excursion, the scenic overview and Dad’s fall from his guardian angel, the ring at last slipped onto my wife’s finger.

A cheap ring, costing no more than a few dollars, very simple, she’d bought for herself alone at a Manhattan Woolworth’s. The sales lady saying “Oh honey, I’m so sorry.”

The one sideshow was Alma scolding Steve in sotto voce —she’d unwisely assigned him responsibility for her program of Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddy songs for our wedding soundtrack. Mainly we heard loud scratches of the needle across vinyl as Steve’s trembling fingers fumbled to do their best.

Married we got my Dad and us into a car. Steve had followed, he’d driven up nonstop from Alabama in an old car. Alan came in with diesel commotion in his new Mercedes. All ten of us were directed by Alma to Kinsley’s Dine Quick Cafe.

The Dine Quick was a metal prefab. Metal shell. In truth a double wide mobile home. To me it felt like dining in a submarine. Beside it stood a tall sign proclaiming Midway USA, Kinsley Kansas, with at top an arrow pointing east—New York 1561 mi—and at bottom an arrow pointing west—San Francisco 1561 mi.

The Dine Quick was already full when we came in, with ranchers and farmers in town for their Saturday shopping. Everyone stopped chewing to stare at our entrance. Everyone knowing who we were, why we there. Small towns. Small talk.

Alma had reserved the back room for our nuptial feast. She'd also ordered a set menu for all: fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans (tasting strongly of fresh can) and a square each of lime Jell-O imbedded with carrot strips and a few baby marshmallows.

Then to our surprise came a rather nice wedding cake. And that was all that mattered in thought and deed. Alma took the crown for our wedding, one which she keeps in our memory of her.

I knew we needed to get my dad back to Kansas City as fast as possible so after a lot of kissing and hugging we rushed off in the Imperial.

Hurrying along a few miles east of Kinsley, maybe by then "New York 1551 miles," my wife turned to me in her calm way, "Jonathan do you know there's a policeman after us?"

In my rearview mirror I saw him. A Kansas Highway patrol cruiser riding my bumper. No mercy from the law, not for newly weds, not for ailing blind preacher.

My big fat Kansas wedding ended when the towering mean trooper handed me a big fat speeding ticket.

Bewitched By St.Paul Cap de Joux

Wife and I arrived at her home village in far southern France, our first visit after our marriage, in July of 1979. I had visited France several times. But this for the first time was with her, this was one of love. And of discovering an alien world I had thought impossible. A sunny French world made sinister by dark corners.

We returned the rental car in Toulouse and proceeded by country bus up and down winding rural lanes into a magnificent mosaic of rich farm land and ancient small towns. The heat, the hard sunshine, the strange land of Occitanie—it took me by surprise. I had never met her parents. Held no notion of where my beloved had come from, this strange woman who had found me in Kansas.

With her by my side I was bound for St. Paul Cap de Joux. A quite small village, of something more than a thousand souls. The village ways spread in a small tangle about a large church with a high tower.

Her family home had been built on the church square. It was a two story massive home, the largest it came to pass in St. Paul. Beside this was her father's farm supply and implement store. To the other side rose a huge warehouse, also her father's. In sum what my wife's family owned add up to a significant percentage of village surface area.

Her father in particular, was a village personality known afar in the surrounding farmland because he was also most importantly the all important grain merchant.

Her mother was a quiet lady, impeccable, unique. Like my wife the product of upscale and 19th century-strict Catholic Girls boarding schools. Although distantly kind she possessed a uniquely caustic disposition. Rural French bourgeois keeping herself to herself. Raised to do nothing, for ornament only. A woman of lovely eyes that looked deeply and with an uncomfortable scrutiny.

It was in Madame were the local mysteries were locked. Her house was handsome, and large, the largest in the village. Proud plaster ceilings rose 15 feet high, every room held a marble fireplace. The house had the first heating, running water and indoor plumbing in St. Paul Cap de Joux.

It had been designed and built by Madame's first husband who I then learned

had been shot on a hunting party by a man he was cuckolding. The 'accidental' wound turned to gangrene and the fellow died in agony in his bed, in the very house he had conjured up for the admiration of the village.

Behind the house was a large garden and orchard. My mother in law's roses decorated the front, ornately gated-off but with the heavy front door left open for the occasional visitor.

I was welcomed politely if with cool reserve. My wife's mother and father had never imagined an American, let alone a Protestant, as the husband of their marriage's only child.

After a welcoming glass of wine with her parents my wife grabbed me in her excitement at being home and forced marched me off to tour the village. It was a walk through the past, made stranger to me with the smell, the visions, the cacophony of New York only hours gone.

It was a world it seemed of timeless innocence. Of a deep and soulful peace.

Even with stops to introduce me to old friends, and including obligatory glasses of aperitif, this took us no more than an hour.

We returned merrily a house that had changed. My wife's mood told me so. Even I could sense a difference. Madame seemed even more brittle than before. She whispered discretely to my wife who in turn told me, breaking the poetry of the day that in my head had been the cooing of a white dove.

While we were out for a Yeatsian Epithalamion some one of ill intent silently, covertly entered my wife's childhood home and left a turtle dove, neck wrung, eyes Read in many tongues that was a curse be upon you. The rest of that first day passed subdued with me groping for substance.

Next morning I awoke naked in the room, the bed, where my wife was born. I found a short old man in a shabby brown suit staring accusingly at my hardon. He went around to each wall, stopping in each corner, sprinkling holy water, beads in hand, mumbling prayers to the ceiling. He was exorcising the room to the order of Madame. "He's not a priest" explained my wife. "He is the witch doctor." So this was ancient ritual, part pagan, part Christian. Some of it surely too ancient to know.

Since then I've seen more of the same here. Prayers, beads, whispered secret words. The village is a group of neighborhoods and when my wife was young each had a nearby good wife to run to with a cut or burn for healing. Same for a muscle pull or

tooth ache.

Just now 40 years after my first visit here I've learned that the old way thrives. A month ago I came down with shingles and was advised by more than a dozen people to contact the old woman in St. Paul who would drive it away with one mumbled whisper into my ear.

I refused to do so. I told myself to believe in science instead. But after a month of pain I have a doubt. What lingers here in the villages, fields, copses, so close to the Upper Paleolithic where early dwellers left their masterpieces on the cave walls?

An enlightened man I find myself living bemused in an eerie sunshine world. The good life of the Midi in France got me by the dick, where the witches and the witch doctors roam, and has not since let go.

WHEN DARKNESS CAME

My father, the Reverend Doctor S. Mancil Bell, wrote several hundred sermons. They were written Saturday evenings, a time when silence was commanded in the parsonage.

Father was tense. We were tense. Probably even our dog of the moment was anxious. One and all waited for an explosion in his study of outrage and a cutting defamation of which ever one, or all, of us had raised his ire.

This period of high anxiety ended after church on Sunday. Then our father returned to us at least for a while, jocular, charming and fully engaged with us.

But one Sunday morning was different. In June, 1972, my father went blind. His vision eclipsed suddenly directly in the middle of his sermon, when standing in the pulpit of his church, Grinter Chapel in Kansas City, Kansas.

He paused in his sermon only to say to the congregation, "You can see me but I can't see you." Then he calmly finished the sermon.

My mother, who sat in the congregation every Sunday giving him her calm slight smile, always took a pew front and center. She would sit proudly erect, chin up, in a vague ephemera of French perfume. Later she remarked that father knew the sermon by heart. It was one he'd dusted off for that morning's service written years gone by.

Sermon finished he asked the ushers to come forward and help him down from the pulpit. An ambulance had already arrived and so away went father, mother beside him, still in his pastor's robe and stole. Leaving from the last church her would serve, from the last sermon he would ever preach.

I was in Florida at the time working for my older brother Steve on a Greyhound farm near Live Oak. I had been working there for several months and liked it even though it was hard labor. I was 23 but still a boy, although just then beginning to age.

Mother's voice on the phone when she called, so typical of her so unwavering and composed, was as difficult for us to handle as the news she had to tell. I tried imaging the mental confusion and fright at going blind. I couldn't fathom it at all.

My brothers and I often discussed what we termed the 'Bell' temperament over a beer and/or a joint. This involved emotion first and then explosive anger and a violent acting out. That afternoon something trivial brought out the Bell temperament in us both, even knowing it was sparked by the news about our father.

We almost but didn't come to blows. Actually for all the hot and high words, not once did these dramas lead to actual violence. However I did quit on the spot. Neither my brother's asking me to stay—a major concession for him— or more important my sister-in-law Georgia's tearful pleading could move me. Georgia drove me into the sleepy, dreamy town of Madison, Florida where I caught the bus toward home. I knew like a bitch in heat what I needed most to do.

This factual part of my life speaks to me also of the imagination, of how the act of something experienced powerfully, remembered acutely becomes the art or the essence of story telling.

My father going blind marked one turning point in my life, not the first or last, just one of many. I used it in writing the short story "Homeland," included in Dr. Pepper Tales on this website, and which was also anthologized in a collection of stories by various writers entitled Volunteer Periwinkles.

These memories of my father blind are mythic to me. They connect him to Prometheus, Samson, Milton. I had always known him as a grand personality and a great character. But blindness has now tilted him towards the truly heroic.



Now and then I worked for my brother Steve on Greyhound farms in Florida, Alabama and Kansas. One most memorable of the hundreds of greyhounds I had contact with was a sweet brindle bitch named Little.

THE MAKING OF LITTLE

A High Plains farm at midnight. The images are easy enough--clapboard farmhouse, weathered barn behind it. The windmill's rusted to a stop. One yard light fixes on a monotonous patch of tractor-rutted mud. Beyond tree windbreaks, clear and level ground surrounds on all sides.

But this October night, this farm scene, calm and cool, breaks in a sudden, is literally torn apart. 360 greyhounds are barking--360 greyhounds on the move.

In the long dog runs, the adolescent litters bound along the fences their barking rising and falling with the intensity of 30 speeding freight trains rushing in different directions. From the kennel, the older dogs, locked in their cubicles, sound to be

barking into tin cans--60 tin cans at 60 tempos. The brood bitches scream from the doors of their whelping houses. Their puppies tumble in confusion in the hay.

All of this is in welcome. The rabbit man cometh.

In the farthest long run, Little, the young brown and brindle bitch, stands apart from the exuberant litter she does not belong to. She is new to this gang having been introduced only the week before--carefully, very carefully watched, so that the litter does not tear her apart.

Little stands back, but she too barks, legs slightly spread, head up, ears sharply pointed, large eyes brightly larger, unfocussed, truly mad.

And it is madness. 360 raving greyhounds.

At this moment, the greyhounds are a single, articulate need. They are a rowdy urge, a libido at fever pitch.

Their deadly feuds are ignored, no playing, no digging, no standing in the water troughs, no mock sexual gaming. Even Little, passive and shy from too much human handling, has forgotten her fear, her uniqueness. For the time she too is all greyhound, part of one murderous, ancient essence.

The rabbit man has arrived.

Under the bedroom light in the farmhouse, Steve and Georgia are moving too. They clamber with aching bones into their clothes--work clothes infused to the fabric core with the sweet perfume of greyhounds.

Husband and wife might have something to mumble to each other, 12:45 of a Tuesday morning.

This couple isn't given the chance.

The greyhounds have gone berserk. The rabbit man waits.

Coffee pot has been left on for this occasion. Steve is already shambling from it to the back door, cup in hand, his hair uncombed and down to his shoulders, long beard falling to the middle of his chest. A tired, big man. His dog man shuffle is more pronounced than ever.

He calls it that, sly smile. "Wanna see my dog man walk," he'll ask. And

truthfully, because the dog men do walk stooped from communing with so many thigh-high creatures, from years of lifting 70-pound males. They go head forward and eyes averted, from looking always where they step; taking short, light and close steps--from so much wading through mobs of greyhounds.

Georgia is taking a minute to dress, to push her hair up under a stocking cap, to rouse Jonathan, Steve's younger brother, ten years younger, the hired hand for the time being with a shout at the bottom of the stairs. She wears the same kind of clothes Steve does--worn out jeans, a faded sweatshirt, a bulky sweater with a hundred holes snagged by a hundred greyhound teeth left from their roughhouse adoration for any human. The boots are rubber. Maine lobster boots. The only things tough enough to abide a dog farm, soft enough not to break greyhound toes.

This is a greyhound's world, fitted, tailored, bespoke in every detail.

Georgia juggles her own coffee cup, grabbing up the checkbook, searching in a rush through the loose pile of broken muzzles, leads, used worm caps and syringes that covers the kitchen counter. "There was a pen here yesterday," she's saying to no one. Hurried speech, distracted, a woman who has 360 greyhounds begging in her ear.

The greyhounds never miss a beat. They've gotten inside of you. Their chorus of pain, sometimes joy, pumps right along with your heart. Georgia claims she doesn't hear it anymore, never pays it any mind. But she's moving fast, like it was part of her, some haunting call she alone must answer.

Unperturbed, the rabbit man sits in his pickup, tilted in deep ruts. He keeps the motor running. The headlights beam out onto the distant wall of the kennel, sweep along the run fences. The light catches a constellation of dog eyes. Dogs watching, waiting, barking.

This rabbit man has a name, but it's never used. As with so much in the greyhound business, the man and his function have been simplified to the basics. He is the rabbit man.

Once a month he comes like this, bringing the live jacks in the middle of the night, jacks fresh off the prairie. He drives the old pickup from his place near Muleshoe, Texas, cross the Oklahoma panhandle and into Kansas. Along the way he stops at dog farms here and there, leaving off the orders. When he drives south again, his truck bed is quiet.

The rabbit man is an idol of an old timer. He never moves from the cab, never turns off the engine, never lingers on the farm for longer than it takes to drop off the

jacks. It's also a self-service operation.

Steve and Georgia have an order for 20 jacks, at \$10 a hare that comes to \$200. Jack rabbits, greyhounds, you bet this is a rough no sentiment business. "Hey, how ya doin'," Steve is setting his coffee cup on the truck hood to jitter along with old pistons, he's making his dog man walk to the back. Pick up so old it's disfigured, all dents and scratches. A worn out FORD stretches across the tail gate.

"Count for dead 'uns," twangs the rabbit man.

The rabbits are in narrow, foot-high, wooden crates, with lattice tops and bottoms, as long as the truck bed itself. The bottom crates are empty, those stacked on top pulse furtively, smell savage. In the quarter moonlight, jack rabbit ears can be seen poking through the lattices, long ears waving in the shadows like exotic plumes.

When Steve pulls on the top crates, sliding it forward, the wood trembles with hidden life.

Georgia comes nudging Jonathan out of the house. Jonathan half dressed, shoelaces dragging, face sleepwalking.

Jonathan has been living on the farm eight months now, helped with the jacks eight times. He still must be told, step by step, what to do. Told and watched constantly. He dreams awake, in another reality. His head's stuffed with poetry.

Steve and Jonathan pull a crate from the truck and lay it on the ground. With a flashlight fixed, Steve begins to count, looking for dead jacks as he goes, The bodies are jammed up indistinguishable one from another, a quivering congestion of ears, eyes, hind legs, a frantic scratching, a helpless cowering.

When the process of counting is complete the Windhound Kennel order is carried to the cab window for the rabbit man's inspection.

"Hold her up so's I can see," says the rabbit man, squinting. "Dead?" "One didn't make it," says Steve.

The rabbit man has the cab light on. It shows him old and skinny, a hide like West Texas earth. He jabs a pencil stub. Has it working on a scrap of notebook paper taped to the dashboard. He's got one finger pointing crooked as barbed wire, the nail like barn wood.

In the seat beside him an ancient greyhound bitch stirs. She shows an old battle

scarp livid as raw liver, half way down her flank. "She come from the meanest litter I ever did raise," he'll tell you. "They half-way skinned her alive 'for I could pull her loose."

These Jacks have hypnotized Jonathan, who tends to romanticize it all. Fresh college diploma with no job for it. Steve pushes him on to get with it with the crates. The brothers lug the rabbit chutes off into the darkness. The jacks stop still as death as if a snake were among them.

The greyhounds haven't wearied of barking. They've made the farm night steamy with the lustiness of flesh for flesh. Their expectation is taut, as if the kill were imminent. Three hundred sixty coils are steel tight and ready to spring.

Georgia writes out the check on the pickup hood, knowing full well that this old rabbit man is giving her the eye.

It isn't cheap anymore, not like days gone when the jacks came in from western Kansas, healthy jacks, as many as you wanted, and at a buck each.

Handing over the check, Steve asks the rabbit man the usual, "Any jacks left down your way?"

As ever, the rabbit man gives a coy chuckle. "Yep, there's jacks. But not as many as there was before."

The rabbit man puts the check in his cashbox--a Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible. Money and checks are kept in Revelations.

Another solemn chew on his Red Man and the old man seals the deal with a spit into the Folger's coffee can that's wired to the dashboard.

"Gotta move these rabbits. See ya next month. If we're still kicking."

Rabbit man is going, pickup in gear, rolling slowly on the dirt road that cuts through empty country far as the night will let you see. Nary a farm light to be seen, only the rabbit man's lonesome tail lights. FORD vanishes in Kansas dust, into the late night.

Soon Steve, Georgia, Jonathan, they're gone quick as they can back to bed. In another minute the house lights are out. Tomorrow begins at 5:30, too soon to bear.

In the kennel, dogs and bitches alike settle back for their own night time. They

lie in their cubicles, on rugs and cut newspaper, black button noses pointed towards the door, sleek heads on paws, sometimes sleeping, sometimes just lying there, sighing softly, eyes open, large-almond greyhound eyes, sane now, focused on a less violent world.

Heat lamps make the whelping houses bright and warm. The brood bitches sneeze from the dust in the hay. Good mamas lie down for their puppies. The neurotic, from some high strung bloodline thousands of years old, prance like ballerinas, paps sagging full, ignoring their little ones.

Puppy pens and long runs are also at peace. The litters curl up together in their run houses, heads on each other's stomachs just like wee puppies, doing as they have done since birth.

In her run, the standard pen 10 feet wide and 300 feet long,

Little sleeps outside the run house. The five brothers and sisters in the litter have cast her out, a stranger. They growl when she moves.

She is well named, small and too quiet-- little in everything at 11 months. She barely survived the disease that swept the farm when she was a puppy, killing 50 dogs including her dame and litter mates. Originally at board on the farm, her owner ordered her destroyed; meaning Steve and Georgia have no business keeping her alive on the sly, hiding her, giving her a chance. One final chance to show promise for the race track.

Little stays safely clear of the run house, alert much of the night. Lifting her head now she nudges the darkness with her long snout, whimpering softly, looking about as if watching for the man to come.

On how many nights like this have the greyhounds stirred, waiting for the hunt to begin?

It's a familiar union--greyhounds, hares and man. The Queens of Egypt had the scene painted on the walls of their tombs. Something that old seems like a dream in itself. Greyhounds, hares and Queens, it should be. That's why their coursing is called, the sport of Queens. This ancient breed has always been noble, elegant.

The allure of coursing expresses what the racetracks conceal with glitz--greyhound racing is something primitive and bloodthirsty. Greyhounds in the last stage of their training for the racetracks are trained to run their fastest with live jacks.

And the sport of coursing remains the dog man's ideal, even for the overworked and hard pressed, for Steve and Georgia. Their farm takes on a special urgency on the morning when the coursing park is to be used. As if a ceremony to come was meant to elevate the commonplace drudgery of all other mornings.

The dogs are already high. Fights are more likely than ever. The kennel is shrill. The brood bitches step on their puppies. In the long runs the litters roam anxiously, their pack instinct up.

Within half an hour of first light Little has been cornered twice, nipped by the big fawn dog that rules her run. While the litter paces the fences she takes refuge under the run house.

Steve and Jonathan are out at dawn to keep peace. An orange sun turns this river bottom land red.

The men begin rounding up the jacks, standing stooped over and awkward in the rabbit pen. Sometimes this means running and falling, cursing as a jack slips from your hands. It looks like a game but it's hard work. Jacks aren't Bugs Bunny. Their hind legs are as powerful as pistons. Their strength is incredible. Their claws are long.

The jacks jerk and fling themselves with the gusto of home-run hits against the rabbit pen fence.

All around this scene, the greyhound frenzy rises to its peak. 360 greyhounds convinced that the hunt has commenced, the killing underway, and they're being left out.

The sun's hanging ghostly by the time the last jack is cornered and carried kicking to the crates and then at last to the coursing park. There isn't time to go back to the house for breakfast. There's morning turnout and feeding to attend to. Steve wants the coursing started by 9:00.

"When you're done there, start picking up the turnout yard," Steve tells Jonathan.

"Keep moving, 'cause you'll need to take a shovel along and fill up any hole you find. Don't want a single hole this morning. They'll all be running soon as the coursing starts. Look sharp as you go for the gates and fences. Put Annie, Jeb, Cream and those Venerated pups in that North run so they can't jump the fences. Be sure to lock Jessie's gate. You know how he can open it himself when the rabbits are running."

Steve gives these orders standing at the stove in the kennel kitchen. Steve will have to check everything his brother does, holding back his impatience while Jonathan plods through.

The orders are simple, but the execution takes a strong arm and a level head. Each task means something, something essential to a dog man.

A dog man has to be thinking at all times of his temperamental and child-like charges, each of which is worth thousands of dollars. These are spirited, sensitive animals that can, and will, kill each other in seconds.

Working his way along Steve keeps a constant crooning going. “Yes, yes, that’s right, you a big girl now, that’s right. Hello boy, that’s the boy, yes, you’re OK.”

He’s come to the pen with the ‘Carrie Nations’ where Little is kept. They’re a handsome litter--litters are identified in a clump by their dame’s track name until they go into the kennel and receive an individual “farm” name, such as Nick or Sally. The fancy track names are to please the betting crowd.

The Carrie Nations are a month younger than Little, but ready for their first rabbit. They include two red fawn dogs and three fawn bitches.

Little stands out clearly as-a type of her own. She’s a Lord Orwell brindle, completely different from the Carrie Nations. Her coat is marble-like with a deep brown snout and paws.

When Steve enters the run Little crawls halfway out from her hiding place. She gives Steve her greyhound grin, ears floppy and looped over, eyes attentively fixed on him.

The litter has already divided into its usual pecking order for feeding. In order for her to eat Steve has a separate dish just for Little. She trots at his heels to a secluded spot behind the run house. He doesn’t need to look to know she’s following. Once to her feeding spot she wedges herself between his legs and leans to one side hugging him tight with a flank. Long nose pokes up at him, obviously she’s for him him to touch her.

Steve stands guard until Little finishes her meal. Then he talks. “Little’s gonna take that rabbit? Is she?” To the sound of his baby talk voice she stares at him sideways, showing the whites of her eyes, flirting, making the soft puffing of the lips that are the greyhound’s ultimate sign of affection.

He bends to slide his hands over her, checking her out. Dog men have no time for idle petting, every time they handle a greyhound it counts for something.

Little takes the checking stoically. Most greyhounds can't contain themselves long enough to stand still. They have motion in their blood. Their God is man.

Undoubtedly, everything about this young bitch is unusual.

Steve acknowledges that it's a gamble keeping her. If she doesn't show interest in the jacks, if she doesn't come up with some speed, if she isn't aggressive in the coursing park, then Steve and Georgia will have to sit down and make a decision. They'll have to decide whether it's worth hiding her for another month, another chance, or time to say farewell with a shot of pentobarbital.

With feed bills alone at more than \$40 a month per greyhound a dog man can't afford to let sentiment rule his head.

For Little this morning is make-it or break-it. This may be her first and last rabbit.

In the adjoining run Jonathan is prodding earth with a shovel, picking up dog shit and plopping it into a bucket. Behind him the dogs are busily digging up the holes he's already filled.

"I'll start turnout. You pick up the pans." Steve tells him. He knows his brother. When Jonathan arrived he'd told him. "Remember, this isn't Steinbeck."

In turnout every greyhound wears a muzzle. Even then a dog will work tirelessly to tear the muzzle off. Some do. That's when the fights can start. During turnout Steve is a prison guard.

First batch comes out, fired up, charging around the yard, sniffing, squatting, lifting their legs. The yard sharpens with the ringing clatter of muzzles being dragged along the fence. Greyhound music.

The change from the younger dogs in the long runs to these sleek, muscular adults is awesome. They've become a different creature entirely--these calmer, surer dogs with their massive haunch muscles, tiny abdomens. A yard full of professionally raised racers is a field of muscle.

Georgia has brought Steve's breakfast down from the house. In the morning light, she's a slight, pretty woman, a blonde with a fiery temper. She'll tell with pride

how she's run this kennel all by herself when Steve's been sick. That's something for a woman who weighs 90 pounds. A stud on its hind legs is as tall as she is.

With her at the fence, the greyhounds crowd close, boxing each other with their muzzles, darting her wide glances.

"Anybody would be crazy to get caught in this business," she'll say. "Nothin' goes right for you. The dogs get sick, the dogs die. The dogs won't run worth a damn, the customers cheat on their board bills, the tracks keep you begging. All a bunch of God damn gamblers and outlaws. We haven't had a vacation in 15 years."

Face impassive, a sometimes-bitter twist to her mouth, such trifles doesn't fool the greyhounds. They could be invisible to Georgia as if she didn't actually see them crowding to be near her. They pick something up from her, you can see that clearly. Perhaps they know in their dog way that it's she who keeps the all-night vigil with the whelping mother, bottle feeds the sick puppies, mourns secretly when a dog dies.

For his part Steve emanates in his every action, in his every tone, a deep and fundamental rapport with the greyhound. It's a gut understanding, clinical and yet oddly intimate. It's reminiscent of basic training under a hard sergeant with a soft heart.

He's got a passion for this work. Part from his genuine love of the greyhounds. Some because it puts him on stage in a Tennessee Williams kind of scene. Tragi-comic Act III.

Steve whistles from the kennel doorway. The dogs trot obediently in. It's the last of the turnout.

Jonathan stands lost in thought, shit bucket at his feet.

"OK then," announces Steve. "Let's get those rabbits." The farm pulse quickens. It's time for the coursing.

The coursing park is a short way from the kennel, situated across the open field from its counterpoint in the schooling program, the training track. The park is enclosed by a shoulder high corrugated fence. From a distance it looks utterly anonymous.

Inside is a large open space of turned earth, perhaps three acres. The ground has been freshly worked--Steve ran the disk-harrow over it the previous afternoon. The field smells of virgin soil. The area is 1,000 feet long and spreads in a wedge shape widening 100 to 300 feet in width.

On a Fall morning like this the sunlight cuts down gold-white and tangible. Wind raises dust devils in the field. It's an old fashioned harvest morning.

To the coursing park it gives an aura of loneliness--no crowd, no human chatter. This is an isolated time and place, the nearest farm house more than a mile away. Reinforces that what's about to happen here isn't meant for ordinary folk.

Like everything else on the farm the dog trailer is part of the program. Steve uses it to haul the dogs to and from the coursing park and training track, short as those distances are. Greyhounds move in such trailers from farm to farm, track to track. Getting accustomed to the roll and pitch of such travel is just another part of a pup's education.

This morning Steve is coursing separate trailer loads of kennel dogs and of older pups from the runs. He begins with the kennel. He's already grouped the dogs into several coursing trials, figuring out a rather complex scheme based on age and condition, on compatibility, trying to keep the experienced separated from the inexperienced. He's organized this first trailer full of 30 dogs into eight trials, one per hold.

A brindle stud is first out, a hunk athlete beautiful but dumb. He's kept tightly muzzled, bounding for where Jonathan waits with lead in hand.

"First hole," calls Steve. Jonathan nods, grappling with the fiery stud. Steve turns out another dog, a big blue bitch, snorting deliriously at the gate. "Keep movin' there, no beatin' off!" shouts Steve, tension in his face.

Jonathan gives a sarcastic laughs, knowing his brother. Georgia shoots Steve the finger, screaming "Don't you yell at me mister! I'll go back to the house and let you do this all by yourself! There's a month of billing to do on the kitchen table!"

Passions, human and canine, ride high on a coursing morning.

Last of the dogs out of the trailer and Steve brings up the two relief dogs, Ellie and Maynard.

Relief dogs are indispensable. A good relief is highly prized. They're seasoned, quick turning, older dogs. If the pack can't catch the jack after hard coursing the reliefs are turned loose to finish the job. Uncurbed, Greyhounds can run the muscles off their backs.

Steve lets the uproar rip, calmly taking time to carefully check out the starting

box. It's the same type used at the tracks. The box has sliding rear doors for loading and a hair trigger front gate with a deadly kick when it springs up. It takes his entire weight to press the gate down and catch it closed.

Stepping safely clear he tests the lever. The gate pops open like a switch blade, tingling the air. A sharp, crisp, racetrack sound it makes.

The pups don't take well to the box. First time in and they think they're being murdered, they howl and turn upside down, kicking against that small dark enclosure. Clearly, a dog is a dud that can't learn to take the starting box--betting crowds don't take well to a greyhound coming out of the box at Flagler rear first and on its back.

Steve has the muzzles in hand--on the training track and in the coursing park, those are the only times an adult greyhound can be left unmuzzled with his fellows.

Georgia stands at the fence, stop-watch in hand. She does the timing for each trial. Notes down which dog gets the kill. Which shows poorly.

With a rough gesture, like a last rite, Steve slips open the rabbit crates and prods the first jack down the chute with a stick.

The world speeds up, fast forward and lifting off.

Jack staggers a few wobbly paces, stops, rears on its hind quarters, ears perked, paws up, chattering to itself.

"Hi hi hi," Steve does his hunched-up run, long hair and beard flying, an Old Testament prophet in Maine lobster boots.

Jack scoots off in a zig zag.

The pacing for the coursing is all in Steve's head. He wants to give the rabbit time to limber up and get in stride. He's wasted his time and money if the jack is snatched too soon. He endangers the dogs if the rabbit gets too strong a start.

Older dogs have more endurance, know what to do; pups are apt to go silly, run too hard too soon. The variables are complex, split-second.

Dogs in the box plead for release, High C begging. Jonathan is looking in wonder at the rabbit, enthralled by its ears. Georgia is hooked to the watch face, gritty with wind blown hair.

Already the jack is about 1/3 way down the park. Steve drops the lever. The box pops.

On first seeing greyhounds course a jack, a bystander might feel two things; that it's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, those magnificent dogs at full speed; also that it's a forbidden pleasure, an ugly one.

Greyhounds hunt by eye and speed. Experienced greyhounds will immediately sight the jack. Pups often need to be directed by the dog man. They leap from the box in a random push, as quick and mechanized as the starting box gate itself.

In this first trial of the morning, the dogs sight at once, swinging in a pack, their hind legs spraying up dirt in a shower.

A greyhound at blast off--that's breaking the laws of gravity. Acceleration to 45 mph in two seconds flat.

They go aero-dynamic, sleeker than any hood ornament. Spirit of Speed. Those heads shoot forward like arrows, hind legs coming full throttle, haunches bulging, long tails tight under their bellies, ears plastered back. An invisible force pulls them upward and on in a frantic, pall mall, heart bursting effort. Seems you've never seen any creature try so hard before. Seems they'll explode like rockets at any moment.

Jack has 30 yards. He's got 20 yards. Jack turns on a dime, gains. The pack swings left, breaks fast to the right, closes.

The chase swings down the far side of the park, circles to the end, careens back mid-field. These are the last few seconds before Steve must turn loose the reliefs. He's standing on his toes, straining to see through the dust.

Georgia's voice rises in warning, "Steve, Steve . . ."

But bang. In an explosion, the pack cuts in razor sharp and the jack is suddenly lost in a whirlwind of thrashing greyhounds.

The park rings with the screaming of the agonized jack. Its cry catches at you. It holds you still and horrified. Death at your own throat. The cry runs out ragged, in hard braying notes, syncopated to the rending of the rabbit's body.

Slowly, the merry-go-round of dogs de-accelerates, although the four continue pulling on the carcass.

“Run, God damn it!” Steve waves Jonathan on as he charges for the fray.

In the passion of this moment the pack can easily turn on one of its own members usually the smallest, the weakest.. It’s essential for Steve to regain control as soon as possible. He and Jonathan lope forward, leads and muzzles in hand.

The four at last tethered, Steve and Jonathan walk them for a moment, letting them cool down. The dogs are lathered, coats slick with sweat and spittle. Tongues loll to the side, foam flecked. Jack fur, skin, flesh, dangles from their mouths. Their eyes are glazed and unrecognizable, savage beast eyes.

They stalk stiffly beside the men, like sleep walkers.

“They’re too hot to put back in the trailer,” Steve tells Jonathan. “Walk ’em back to the kennel. Leave ’em in the turnout. Make sure they’ve got water. Don’t forget their muzzles!”

This first trial of the morning was a good one. While Steve and Georgia wait for Jonathan to return, they bend heads at the fence reviewing the details--the trial time, who seemed to get the rabbit, how all four gave speed and interest, not one of them checking or backing off. Yes, it went well.

When the last of the kennel dogs are coursed the run pups are up. With them the coursing is another story.

Just loading the pups into the trailer is exhausting. They think they’re going to the slaughter, drop limp and as absurd as Raggedy Ann. At 11 months, a greyhound can already weigh more than 70 pounds--stuffing that weight into a trailer hold is not easy.

The short ride to the park over with--and the pups howl all the way--they scramble to get out. Open a trailer door and five wet noses are battling you to be free of that strange, gloomy, closed-in place.

You have to drag them into the park. The bitches are so scared they’re trying to squat and pee. The brawny young males stubbornly dig their hindquarters in, telling you with all their might that wherever they don’t want to go.

But suddenly they see the open ground inside the park. They catch the rabbit smell, the lingering stink of blood. Then their eyes flash like light bulbs. They get the deadly greyhound glint. They’re panting and squirming like devils in heat.

Little is in this first group, the Carrie Nations.

For Little, Steve and Georgia don't need to say a word. For her this day comes round to her lady fortune. Georgia has on her Oklahoma-bar look. Steve is all business-as-usual, only gruffer. Jonathan stares oblivious.

Pups are hand schooled. The starting box would scare them witless. To hold a greyhound steady while a jack scampers down a coursing park is a man's exercise in stamina.

Steve's taken the two dogs and the largest bitch, leaving Jonathan to cope with the two smaller bitches and Little.

Hand schooling means gathering the pups between your legs, half crouching, quarterback style, behind them. Flip one arm in a wrestling hold around the three slim loins. Brace the chests up front with a wrap-around hug. Lift the hindquarters a couple of inches off the ground. This is the only way to hold two eels still, knee deep in a storming ocean.

The pups have lost their minds. They're trying to turn somersaults. Steve doesn't have a chance to even glance over at Little, to check how she's reacting.

With pups you can't give the rabbit too much head start. 100 feet into the park and Steve shouts "Go!"

The pups are off in a floundering, clumsy rout, falling over each other, blinded by their own commotion. They know there's something out there for them, some tantalizing goodie they're desperate to sight and chase. They haven't learned to focus yet. So they're looking in all the wrong directions.

Steve makes a dash ahead of them. "Hey hey hey pups, over here!" He waves his arms, a windmill in the wake of the fast departing Jack.

With a yelp of recognition, one dog catches sight of it, bears off at top speed.

"Oh my God," shouts Georgia. "It's Little!"

Steve doesn't stop to look. He's already hobbling back to the truck to fetch the relief. Without a second's pause he turns Ellie loose.

She's 100% professional at this. Already, she's a gray streak hurtling down the field, going straight for the action. That's Grade-A, top form racing she's showing.

Even before Ellie can close in, the jack turns back, a suicide into the pups.

Georgia is breathless, as if she too had been running. “Oh my God. I think Little nailed it,” she gasps. “I think it was her.”

Steve is charging off, leads in hand. “Hey pups, hey pup-pup-pup . . .” His dog-man yodel, his dog-man run.

The jack’s wail rises. In counter point to the jack, a greyhound is yelping, another kind of terrified scream.

“Oh shit!” shouts Georgia. “Run for it . . . they’re nailing a pup!”

Ellie, Little, the pups from the litter, the jack--the drama is hidden in a mystery of dust cloud. Steve disappears into it as well.

A second goes. Steve’s cursing roars up over the screeching. Another second and the greyhound crying has stopped.

Emerging from the cloud, Steve runs forward with a greyhound in his arms, carrying it like a lamb.

“Don’t worry about Ellie, she’s got the rabbit,” he shouts back to Jonathan. “Get that big red dog. He’s the trouble maker.”

“It’s the big bitch,” he calls back to Georgia. “It’s Wanda. He took about a dollar’s worth out of her.”

Steve leaves the whimpering bitch in Georgia’s care--she’s already got the ointment and gauze out of the truck. He looks up and down the coursing park. All accounted for except Little.

Jonathan stands apart from it all face expressing his perplexity. Torn between reverence and revulsion.

“Look Steve. Turn around. Quick, you got to see this.” Georgia’s voice has suddenly turned to butter. A tear sparkles on this tough woman’s cheek.

Little comes sashaying in looking even smaller than she is against the empty expanse of the coursing park. She’s coming straight for Steve, who is waiting for her.

Little struts along with a jack ear between her teeth.

She stops at his feet. She drops the jack ear there, between his boots. Little does that and then stands panting, grinning.

Even dog men melt. In a rough jerk the big man bends down to embrace the small brindle bitch.

She has rabbit on the breath.

TWINKLE TWINKLE

I went to New York, young man of age 25. I went from Kansas to New York to be a star. I knew this meant struggle. It called for pride and ambition. Arrogance upon demand. I had an abundance of all.

The stardom I craved was for my writing. I wanted to be a great writer and knew I could become one. By Bell...By Jonathan Wesley Bell; I wished those words upon a star as my bus got eaten alive by the Lincoln Tunnel maw.

As soon as I had my derelict one room apartment in an half-abandoned tenement in the East Village, the first moment I found in that bare room--mattress on floor and nothing more--I had my typewriter out, on bare floor boards between my knees.

Soon as that I was off to find my fortune in words, in the grand poetry that was bursting out of me. By "Jonathan Bell," "J.W. Bell," "Jonathan Wesley Bell"?

It was a lonely, frightening time for me. The city walled me in half ruined, indifferent, forbidding. At night I heard the street howls below, screams, an occasional gun shot. I heard the creatures of the night roaming near my one light as real as any ever imagined.

They could be heard now having gotten in through the tenement front door, doubled locked and barred as it was, heard mounting the stairs, heard trying the doors of the apartments, rummaging madly as an army of evil rats in those that were gaping open, empty and already thrice trashed.

Days I looked for work; night I wrote on my typewriter. I had no friends. When I at last could afford a phone it never rang. The only times my bell rang from down below, it was an intruder hoping for a buzz to unlock the gates, to let their hunger in.

In New York, Manhattan that is, I finished my novel The Prairie Dancers. I wrote Love On The Lower East Side there too, then after moving to Queens I did Beware Of The Dog.

It was necessary to learn much quickly. I was a lean, well muscled young man, a face and a body that garnered attention on the streets of the city. People stared, some whistled. My freshness showed. An older fellow actually kept me for a while. I was desperate for any help.

ON THE BANKS OF THE EUPHRATES

Standing at the corner of 45th street and Fifth Avenue, Midtown Manhattan, is 551 Fifth Avenue. It is a remarkable building even for New York City. In fact it is one of a kind in the world.

This is the 38 story Fred F. French building, named for its builder the real estate tycoon Frederick Fillmore French. It is known to New Yorkers simply as The French Building although very few know it has zilch to do with France.

When completed in 1927 it was the tallest structure on Fifth Avenue.

Although overshadowed now for decades by taller neighborhood skyscrapers The French Building has not changed since then. For good reason it is on the National Register of Historic Places.

The French Building is a wildly imaginative art deco masterpiece. On first inspecting it the general feeling is awe.

That was my feeling when I was hired there for my first job in New York on April Fool's Day 1997, 50 years after it topped out. This makes us both, me and the building, relics of two totally opposite but equally ebullient eras in American history.

The first known for its unimaginable wealth and arrogance. Then later in my time of violent protest, the second defined specifically in New York by a spate of FLAN bombings, the work of the Puerto Rican Independence Movement.

Just two years before I arrived the FLAN had bombed the enshrined Fraunces Tavern in lower Manhattan, the pub where Washington bade his officers farewell. It killed four, injured more than 50. During my time in the French building I would be evacuated three times for bombing threats.

Probably it was targeted because along Fifth Avenue the French building is a standout for its construction in soft orange tinted, buff brick. Also for its eclectic ornamentation in faience and bronze. These meld elements of Mesopotamian, Assyrian, Babylonia and Chaldean motifs. The sort of crazy mix, meaningless and sometimes comical that Americans have taken to heart not just in architecture, also in attire and politics.

This jumble of the ancient near east rests on a solid, formidable, nine story slab-like form. On this the building rises into a series of striking cut backs that are blunt and cubic, an obvious reference to the gardens of Babylon.

At its 15th floor the building suddenly takes off into its soaring tower, in pure lines, a rectilinear shape that mirrors the simplicity of the base.

The building tops out in an orgy of glazed terracotta depicting on the longer sides of the slender tower a vivid rising sun flanked by winged horses.

The building details are a lurid but delightful statement of Capitalist excess, flamboyance and in-your-face bravado that marked the period directly before the Wall Street collapse in 1929. What is astonishing is that in its exuberance rather than comic kitsch the building rises to this day in stately and elegant discord a surprising pleasure to the eye, a triumph of New-York art deco. It is quite fetching in its own perplexing way.

Probably it is this plus the building's auspicious and mystical crowning floor that has caused the French Building to be popular with jumpers from the day it opened.

During the five years I worked in the building there were three suicides, one which I witnessed close-up. The man's body plummeted three feet from me, arms and legs in flailing jerks, suit coat and tie flapping across the outside of the ninth story windows of the Lockwood Trade Journal Co. Inc. He went down clawing upwards.

For sure that interrupted my idle chat that afternoon with the company's bookkeeper, Mrs. Estelle Levine. We both struck a pose of horror, then leaned to the windows to see below where his body sprawled in a broken Mr. Gumby pose. He had crumpled the roof of a van on 45th Street.

"May God give his soul peace," remarked Estelle, tears in here eyes, she who was one of the great Jewish mothers in town and yet could never forgive, never listening to Bach, never buying anything made in Germany.

The French Building lobby is a jewel. It has a barreled, painted ceiling and whoever the painter he did his work with trained precision. It is a celestial panoply of bearded bulls, exotic flowers and stately hunting scenes.

Huge fantasy chandeliers hang above the travertine marble floor glittering like the earrings of an Assyrian king. They are in glass and bronze designs harkening back to the flora of an ancient river bed where civilization began.

If for nothing else the lobby is rare to us now because of an extravagant use of bronze. Bronze in burnished gold. All street and elevator doors are cast in monumental bronze with each panel depicting a different scene from the dictionary of Mesopotamian themes. All done with such artistry that here is the real signature of the French Building.

Walking into this building for my interview I recall loving it at first sight. I remember urging my household gods to please, please let me work there.

When hired I walked out of Lockwood's in bipolar rapture so enthralled that I leapt straight into the air and upon landing twisted my ankle. That so that I limped in pain throughout my first day of work.

Then Jonathan Bell officially disappeared into New York. Henceforth I was at home on the banks of the Euphrates. On the banks of the Euphrates, Jonathan from Kansas ceased.

BEST LITTLE TRADE JOURNAL IN NEW YORK CITY

Twist the doorknob. Pushing open that door. Dizzy with excitement. Gut seething in fear of the unknown. My first job in New York. Boldly stepping where no one from Kansas had gone before. Among the great turning points in my life.

It was the way into my surreal future with the Lockwood Trade Journal Company, Inc. Ninth floor of the French building. In Manhattan. At the corner of 45th Street and Fifth Avenue.

That was a portal for me into another dimension, a parallel universe. I was entering into a relationship that would last in widely varying ways– for the good, the bad and the ugly– for more than 30 years.

It was to be a fractious union ending at last in ruins among lawyers and lawsuits. From a most humble beginning it would become a golden cage that I'd ultimately escape from only with tribulation.

Yet it also would be a weirdly, wildly creative one for me, invested with my fulsome obsession, the ultimate concern of my bipolar euphorias, my undoing in manic rage.

And too, lucrative beyond anything I could have ever imagined to be my fortune.

I'd been hired as the Lockwood production manager. My excitement in that beginning was in equal measure to dread at having stepped into what I'd connived for in desperation, in fact what I knew nothing about, magazine production.

Two inebriated scions of the eponymous owning family had hired me late one afternoon. Coy alcoholics, they hired me over their habitual after hours glasses of scotch on April Fools Day, 1977.

A day without irony to me until many years later.

Receiving my entrance that first day was Susan, the receptionist. She was a pitiful quite-slight girl of 18 from Staten Island. Each time the front door opened, I

learned, she would be profoundly startled and stare at whomever in abject wonder. For the rest she'd sit reading true life romances.

Susan remains the most unusual receptionist in my experience. Her swimming eyes set back deep in a squeezed skull. An attenuated young person. A captivating homeliness.

Her one duty, answering the phone, she did proudly with "L-o-c-k-w-o-o-d". A memorable laconic drawl, sonorous and all through a closed nose. It was rendered so amply it could be heard by everyone in the company.

Also she stank and filled the reception area with her noxious effervescence. It was a nauseating welcome to the Lockwood Company.

Estelle Levine, Lockwood bookkeeper and kind heart, tried talking to Susan about hygiene. Nothing changed.

Estelle bought two self adhesive deodorizers and had me come in early to stick them under her desk. That was not a success either.

Then Susan fell in love with the postman and he with her. At the end of day his mail truck parked at the corner of Lex and 45th, directly on my way to Grand Central and home.

Passing, I'd hear "Good night J-o-n-a-t-h-a-n" coming from the pile of mailbags inside the darkened tuck where the lovers nested. When they married we lost Susan and the mailman. We pitched in to buy her a gift.

We were all invited over to Staten Island for the nuptials but only Estelle went. The rest of us could not face the stench of love. Estelle thought it a lovely wedding.

Lockwood Trade Journal had shrunk drastically from what it once was. It occupied a suit of six offices plus a conference room. A small space for small people, a work force of nine. This including three Lockwoods themselves.

A father, George Lockwood and those two mewling sons chafing at his rule.

None except newcomer me, at six feet, were more than 5'5". Some were not even five feet. For my first few days I walked those offices feeling like Gulliver among the Lilliputians until 'snap' they shrunk me to their own measure.

Six men, three women. No blacks, no Hispanics. Four Wasps, three Jews, one Italian, one Irish.

By the time I arrived the Lockwood company entailed only one magazine, Tobacco International. Then a bi-monthly TI was the leading business journal for the wealthy and booming worldwide tobacco industry, covering everything from leaf crop to the cigarette and cigar factory, cigarette and cigar products.

This panoply was then a rich cult where its members worshipped themselves. Soon I felt like a member too, steeping myself in the arcanery of Virginia, burley, Oriental blends, wrapper and filler, hogsheads, paper and filters, casings, making and packaging machinery.

In addition to TI the company published an annual Tobacco Industry Buyers Guide & Directory of several hundred pages, encyclopedic of everything needed to produce a pack of cigarettes or a box of cigars. Also something called The Dixie Directory—an extensive yearbook, for their eyes only—of the US tobacco leaf empire, wealthy itself as Texas oil.

These Lockwood products were put together in-house in a cottage industry in tandem with a Pennsylvania, Water Gap printing company. There was also an independent commercial artist for design work and front covers.

In sum I'd been indentured in my poverty to managing the annual production of 26 publications with almost 1,000 pages of editorial and more than 1,500 pages of advertising. This meant an company income in excess of \$1.5 million during the 70s. Against sum expenses of perhaps \$350,000 not including their own salaries and expenses extending to cars, clothes and 'entertaining ' on The Indian. After their salaries and expenses I learned the company never showed a profit. All the rest of the money disappeared into their accounts.

For the Lockwoods it was a vrai tabac as the French would say, a true tobacco shop.

And they carefully kept it so by clutching down the lid on overhead. Their rule was to scrimp on everything, keeping cash moving into their hands according to their set expectations by paying everything, everyone, everyone else that is, as late as possible. It was not infrequent for Mr. Lockwood to disappear into a bathroom stall to avoid the manager of the French Building because rent had not been paid. It had gone instead up to Sutton Manor in New Rochelle.

Achieving this meant they maintained overhead to a strict bare minimum. Although no Lockwood deigned to go to Business School they survived by adhering to this one simple business model.

Their signal success was in the near poverty-level salaries they offered their non-Lockwood workers. To me most of all along with the young girl from Staten Island, the lowly receptionist.

While the Lockwood clan lived in some comfort, I came to learn they were notorious for their parsimony with the outside world. It never occurred to me then to figure what insignificant percentage of company income my paycheck might represent.

All I could think then was that if I were a Christian I'd have exclaimed "praise the lord" at receiving even such a below-subsistence-New York remuneration. I survived it only because my slum rent was an astonishing \$150 per month.

The Lockwood's soothed this over with a strategy of being charming and nice. Rarities in small Manhattan companies where a culture of bullying reigned.

Conversely, the Lockwood philosophy was to kill their sins of slave labor with kindness. It worked. Helped too by hiring the desperate, the young and struggling like me, or older workers with the eyes of starving children.

While the employees complained in hushes to one another all rowed the Lockwood galley in servile gratitude for a seat at the oars. The family therefore only very occasionally allowed their corporate veil to be breached. But when it was what an ugly hint showed forth of their arrogance and hauteur, their contempt for those who kept them rich.

The Lockwood's sprang from a sprawling Miss Havisham house in the elite enclave of Sutton Manor in New Rochelle. Directly on Long Island Sound. Tidal water lapped literally at its foundation.

They were all characters. They were all diminutive but with a ruling class presence to hide it, as if they'd been born in platform shoes. They were also sea faring and might even entertain one once a year or so, noblesse oblige, at the New York Yacht Club where they were members, for a bad seafood meal.

George Lockwood Sr. led the company. His nickname, behind his back, was 'Smokey'. This due to his resemblance to Smokey Bear, the emblem of the US Forestry Service. Round face, puffed up shoulders and no neck.

Smokey and his sons were so parsimonious they brown bagged their lunch everyday from home. If George Sr. found that his wife, Catherine or 'Kitty', had provided something he didn't care for he would try to sell it to the lowly receptionist. Otherwise he and his sons would buy a hotdog from the handiest Sabrett vendor on Fifth Avenue.

Smokey owned the Indian, among the largest wooden yachts left sailing in the US. I ran across a fellow once in Chicago who still recalled the wild parties thrown on the yacht. The old man kept a framed photo of it in his office.

Every summer they sailed the Indian to Bar Harbor. They sailed to Havana too where until the Revolution Lockwood kept an office to report on Cuban leaf and cigars.

Smokey had gone to Cornell, as had Kitty, herself the daughter of a Cornell professor, and too the majority of his five children. All went to prep schools.

When I began working for him he'd just sold the company's reference business publications for the US paper industry, Paper Trade Journal and the Lockwood Directory, which it had owned since 1872. The company's core business had in fact been paper, not tobacco, as it had also owned a German paper industry magazine and still owned the French magazine La Papeterie.

According to my friend Estelle the old man had disposed of three-quarters of his company because he didn't believe his sons capable of continuing on after him.

Once a week Estelle would sit a morning long with him going over the offers she'd found for promotions for opening bank accounts hither and thither. This was his hobby. Estelle was a loyal soul and only once burst out in mirth, "I wonder how many toasters he has!"

Smokey, however, had but one mistress. She was a Miss Tomas, a handsome Greek lady of his own age who he kept in an apartment in the Bronx. She'd worked for the company for decades. She came to the office fairly regularly to sit side by side with Smokey in his office. Once I walked in on them inadvertently finding them silently holding hands.

Smokey paid little attention, none actually, to me. Our longest conversation was when he asked me what subway train I took home, and then to tell me how many his own steps were precisely from his Metro North train in Grand Central to the office door. He'd counted them.

My invisibility ended when I foolishly taped a photo from Screw Magazine to the

cabinet above my desk: woman with cigar in snatch. This was long before Clinton and Monica.

One morning I could feel his rotund short dignity in my office. Looking up I saw him simply standing and staring at the photo. A steady unsmiling stare. It was clear enough. I took the photo down and put it in the trash. Throughout he said not a word.

Our last encounter was the day when Estelle came into my office and whispered that she feared Mr. Lockwood had had a stroke in his office. Indeed so, I found, when I looked in at him.

He refused to permit a call to 911. The only help he asked for in slurred speech was to be taken to the mens room. I rolled him there in his big leather baronial armchair, a New York boss chair. Propped him up at the urinal. Turned on the tap to help him release.

Finally Kitty arrived by car from Sutton Manor. It was pouring when I rolled him out, still enthroned in his chair. He died two days later.

We took bets on whether Mrs. Lockwood would allow Miss Tomas to come to the funeral. We heard that she did.

I did not attend.

Getting from lower Manhattan up to New Rochelle and back was something I just couldn't afford.

MY FIRST SICILIAN

Where I grew up in the western half of Kansas there were no Italians. At the time I joined the Lockwood company I had visited Italy a couple of times but not enough to prepare me for Peter Sangenito.

Both of Pete's parents had been born in Sicily, coming to America when very young. In temperament and in face he was dark and dramatic. He obviously contained multitudes and knew it. Sangenito swaggered about Manhattan showing himself off, enjoying himself immensely

Dressed impeccably in tasteful, expensive clothes, wherever he went he drew glances. In his 50s he was still a quite handsome man. Olive shaped eyes that were naturally outlined in eyeliner. Long lashes exaggerated from birth by Sicilian mascara. Raven hair.

In York no one ever messed with Peter Sangenito. He'd stepped down directly from The Godfather screen. Certainly he knew so.

"What a guinea you are Sangenito, what a star!" he'd exclaim to himself when feeling prime, out loud for the benefit of anyone near. Then he would kiss all his fingertips, both hands.

Hands that were fascinating but terrible. Two slabs, short thick digits. Finger nails gnawed back to quicks, some beyond. Glistening with his saliva, a bloody red aspect.

He was, unusual for an Italian, an only child. His father was dead. He lived adoringly with his mother, Josephine, in Kips Bay Towers, the elegant housing block by L.M. Pei on 33rd Street. They each had their own apartments. This of course indicated money about which Pete was mysteriously silent.

Peter careened between kindness and bullying. He had a mean tongue. His wit was cruel. When aroused he would glower. He hid his shortness by sitting beside me, too close and thrusting his powerful upper body at me with studied intimidation.

Soon enough he caught on to my having conned the Lockwoods into hiring me. He accepted this without browbeating me although using the unspoken to cow me.

He'd sit crowding me close in my small office, filling it with threat. Patiently he'd walk me through the upcoming issue of TI teaching me basics in folios and magazine structure. One can bet I learned quickly.

But if I thought this would end these weekly sessions that I came to fear, I soon saw it not to be the case. His patience turned to abrasive fault finding.

"If I make you nervous," he'd thunder, "Go jack off in the toilet!" So typically Sangenito.

Soon I began to understand that beneath the Mafioso pretension, his bluster and swagger, Pete was a closet queen.

As bad as he made it for me, never knowing what mood he'd be in from moment to moment, he made work a nightmare for his assistant editor, Tom Cogan. He, the company's requisite quintessential New York Irishman.

In him Pete had a sunny eccentric soul who had wandered through the offices of a legion of trade magazines never finding one tolerant enough to keep him. New York then was the capital of 'trades' and they were inexhaustible. They employed thousands.

Of this, Tom cheerfully proclaim, "I've yet to work for Fatty Acid Journal. I probably will."

Tom, the broken Pierrot, was a perfect victim for Pete's Capitano.

Each work day Tom would get up early to bake muffins for the people of Lockwood Trade Journal. Often they were barely edible. Salt instead of sugar. Burnt black.

Pete was a noisy critic of these. "What'd you put in this? Your floor sweepings?" And so forth.

Tom was in his mind a snappy dresser. He wore three-piece suits, mostly good tweeds, but with mismatched ties and shirts. Some days he was a hypnotic crisscross of patterns and jarring hues.

"You know, you are really color blind. Didn't anyone ever tell you?" Pete would say. Or "You know, you should really look in the mirror before you come here."

Pete's most rancorous running battle was with Lottie. The Lockwood circulation manager, a woman of 70 some. When they had a cat fight, spitting and clawing, his favored line was delivered in a screeching soprano, "If I were Hitler, Lottie, you'd be the first in the oven!"

Pete had rules for his 'staff' – me and Tom that is. We were his 'guests' every day for lunch and a digestive stroll down Fifth Avenue, I understood he was showing us off to New York. See what I have. Don't touch.

Along with this he insisted we have drinks with him after work, down in the Cattleman's Restaurant and Bar at the street level of the French Building. Drinks he'd pay for so neither Tom nor I could plead poverty and avoid playing his retainers. We indeed look like his kept boys.

It was in the Cattlemans that Pete made his one pass at me. Discretely sliding his hand, that hand, up my thigh. He was tipsy. I declined.

"You know, Jonathan, you're a good looking fellow." In my head his eloquent baritone still renders in a sophisticated New Yorker accent his own pearl of wisdom, given to me on my first day at work. "You'll be OK as long as you never sleep with the hired help.

A Little Tour With Dante

I've been old for a long time. Needn't go to hell, already been there. It's overrated. I am too old for any religion, have been so, grizzled in mind and toothless in spirit, feeble and infirm, since I was 14. When I gave up Jesus for jackin' off. Good trade.

When I think to maybe lament before it's too late I recall a peculiar visit to an old age hell I made when I was 25.

Before my mother died she firmly stipulated that my blind father was never to go live with my brother Alan and his wife Barbara. Alan was the sweetest of men, Barbara was evil. Real evil. I had not believed in evil until I met her. I have believed in it ever since. The rationale for Barbara's blatant and nuanced subtleties of cruelty where that she was schizophrenic, had been in at least one psychiatric ward, and that she purportedly had the IQ of a genius. I have never accepted excuses.

She could charm, beguile and then in a moment flash a viper's tongue of thoughts that should never have been spoken. Barbara had power and she gloried in it. She could and did reduce people either to tears or into her fearing slaves.

She hated my parents. This perhaps because of their intelligence, good manners and high degree of what can be called culture. All the books and music in our house were a Rome to be sacked. My father was a special target. After all he wore a suit and tie every day and unlike any preacher she'd met in Oklahoma never proselytized. This in particular aroused her wrath, I suppose because it didn't fit any of her various zeitgeist scenarios.

When her nasty behavior awoke she would quickly turn off her cackling blue jay laugh, her attempts at what I now term crowd hypnosis, and assume command. Then she turned turned our parsonage into a battle field. When her canine toothed exegesis of our family and home broke his resolve, made on behalf of Alan, the poor man showed he knew her game and trained his own extremely sharp wit on her. He'd march about the house quoting Hamlet repetitively, loud enough to drown her out, "Mad as the sea and the wind."

That he saw through her from their first ever meeting and knew her for what

she was made them enemies for life.

My mother disturbed her in equal measure because no matter what mischief Barbara sowed and what satanic utterances flew from her mouth like Hieronymus Bosch beasts from the rectums of the damned, Barbara couldn't break Mother's placid half smile and imperturbable moon face mask. Despite all her eccentricities, mother after all was still the daughter of Verna Cane Little—a lady true blessed without airs.

Mother had no doubt of what Father's life would be like with Barbara after her impending death. Slowly but surely she was dying of cancer. So she made Steve and me promise to keep father away from her. To make sure of this mother herself called The Kansas Methodist Home in Topeka to register him for a single room, to be ready for him as soon as her funeral had passed. In quick order that came and went leaving her three sons dumbstruck, and her husband roaming the dark house at night looking for her.

We sought alternatives for him but then immediately as if mother were nodding at us knowingly Barbara began to wheedle at Alan for father to come and live with them. Straight away we moved him from Abilene to Topeka with a writ of legal guardianship in hand.

The 'Home' –what a wicked misnomer–was a very badly managed dump, a reality that slowly became clear as the months passed.

One stormy May when I was visiting for a few days with Steve and Georgia, home from New York where I lived then, Steve and I decided to drive the 100 miles over to Topeka to talk with father. Talks with him were unlike talks with anyone else we knew. The only dread in it was leaving him alone when it came time to leave. That was a terrific hurt that I recall too well all these years on.

The closer we moved to Topeka the more it looked like a tornado afternoon in Kansas, tumultuous clouds from horizon to horizon, the telltale ghoulish green light and the change in pressure that made the human heart heavy with anxiety. Steve drove faster and faster. In the flint Hills we could see spikes of black clouds moving up towards us from the southwest any of them a likely nascent tornado.

We entered Topeka in the aftermath of a twister. Humidity like walls about us. We were experienced enough with tornados to know that this one had just swept through town. Trees and tree limbs cluttered like burned skeleton bones on roofs, across lawns, in the streets. Power lines sizzled like burning steaks on the ground. Residents were out standing still in place as if afraid to move, bewildered by the Twilight Zone landscape.

We went zigzagging through the semi blocked streets, exasperatingly slow, both knowing the other feared what might be waiting for us. Topeka was no stranger to the wrath of tornadoes, a big bad one had hit in 1966, 20 years back, killing 57 and leveling whole neighborhoods. Wind then so strong it knocked out an entire panel of the so grand capitol building dome that stands 16 feet taller than the one in Washington.

We found the Methodist Home, an old brick structure, intact, but the large park around it had lost some 50 old trees that had given it one lonely and only touch of grace. Without them there was no description for the place except institutional. A naked grimness that the green storm light made ghastly.

Inside there was no one in the lobby. Power out it was a glowing expanse of dirty white walls, nothing but a prison-like discipline to the long unadorned halls. Alone on the walls, behind the unattended information counter and beside the gaping doorway to the deserted Director's office, was a large Victorian etching. One of a too handsome young Jesus, a jail-bait shepherd carrying a lamb under his arm the spitting image of a stuffed animal won at the Kansas State Fair in Hutchinson.

Both elevators were dead, doors open. They were dark as tombs. From one came a low voice, an old lady backed up into a corner in a bath robe supported by a walker talking to an invisible audience about Pearl Harbor. On a gurney in the other elevator, Steve shined in his flashlight for us to see, lay an unattended stiff, a corpse under a sheet. We knew the staff had fled their charges for the safety of the basement and were now probably down there having an illicit smoke break.

Father's room was on the third floor. The higher they put you the worse off you were. People called to us for help from their blitz-dark rooms of doom. We flinched but could do nothing but pass along our way leaving those wretches entombed in tombs before their time. The corridor reminded me of one I'd once walked in the catacombs in Rome.

Trays had been dropped the floor, bedpans were scattered. The place stank of excrement and leeks.

An elderly gentleman had managed to crawl out into the hall where he lay in a heap. As we went by he stretched a naked Dachau arm to beg us for assistance. We went on assuring him we'd be back. We never saw him again.

At last we found father sitting in his room with Eunice, his girl friend, in her very late 70s. They were holding hands in the gloom. The staff of the home, those now hiding in the maze of pipes far below had already intimated their disapproval of this to

us with self righteous innuendo. Father was playing a Charles Wesley hymn, one of the 6,500 he wrote, "O for a thousand tongues to sing," on his harmonica. Eunice at fifth-grade level Alzheimer's was a bit too happy in his company.

At the age of 65 father was by far the youngest resident of the hopeless Third Floor. This because he had occult hydro cephalous, the cause of his blindness. Every so often the signs of confusion began to show and another brain operation was required to return him to his old self, which it did with the lightning flash of a burning bush. Fatty tissue had again begun clogging the cerebral fluid pump they had implanted inside his skull. And that would slowly reduce this brilliant man to an idiot.

That tornado evening in the Kansas Methodist Home he was slip sliding fast. Before we left he said in a matter of fact voice, "That bullfrog is back under my bed would you mind looking for him and shoo him away. He's quite loud." I was too emotional with father, but Steve could handle him fairly well. Steve faithfully kneeled to train his flashlight scrutinized into the dark nether world under the bed.

"You know father there's nary a sign of him now. He's gone away."

At this father bellowed angrily, just as the lights came back on and Eunice's hand leapt away from his lap. Her face cracked some more and more of it peeled. Her skin condition was not appealing.

"You see!" proclaimed Father in anger. "Exactly as I've been telling you, my youngest son. He was there before! Damn it to hell! You confounded idjit. What in the name of plus perfect hell did you imagine I was talking about!" This rendered in the gulf breeze of a Mobile accent.

THE WEE FOLK

They were not bad tempered people. Like those to be found in too many New York offices. The Lockwoods had trust funds to keep them pleasant. And too their family home was that jewel box on The Sound. They sailed to Kennebunkport, Newport, Sag Harbor and closer to home to Oyster Bay. Pretentious places for indifferent people.

They also took their wooden sailing yacht, The Indian, down to Havana, where they had one of their company offices. They'd fly to Germany where they had another office, to France as well, Paris, where they had yet another and then be off to cruise the belle canals.

No, they were not pretentious. Not at all East Coast sophisticates. Instead they were a family of bores. Narrow minded to extreme and certainly never sensitive or empathetic of anyone. They found others for creativity, for imagination. They had none. How they could have been given so much with so little to show for it amazed me.

Mostly, the Lockwoods were blandly polite. With that as policy they ruled their employees with good will, noblesse oblige, feigning benevolence for unimportant lives.

Effortless superiority carried silently, such was their birth right. They commanded with affability while staying ruthlessly strict on overhead, preeminently salaries, and any piddling expense even to paperclips.

Although they kept their bigotry carefully to themselves, in my 35 years of association with them the Lockwoods never hired a Black employee, although when in time it became unavoidable in New York they did at last hire one Hispanic. The Lockwoods by policy hired only the needy young and the broken old. They who were pathetically grateful not to be yelled at—no yelling in the Lockwood office—and melted in love because they could leave at 5pm sharp and straggle back next morning whenever.

Lockwood workers except for editors and salesmen were women. Meaning even lower salaries. They went for Jews and Chinese applicants. Big tits for sure would get the job.

Lockwood Trade Journal was more than threadbare it was empty. When in time I sued the company for breach of contract it came to light that its records had never

ever shown a profit, only loss, that on a monthly basis it was kept picked to the bone for the family's welfare.

Their houses were in Sutton Manor —the private enclave where they'd clustered. Sutton Manor is on the Metro North line, they could train there from Grand Central in 40 minutes.

They were five, three sons and two daughters, all short. Diminutive, actually, little folk, all wee ones without magic or more than a modicum of intellect. Carbon copies of their father George Lockwood Sr., who we secretly called 'Smokey' because he looked like the bear. The five strongly resembling Smokey except without his dignity.

The grown children were ill intended, delusional, selfish, the boys more so. Here I add that although I reached to over six feet, I had grown up among smudges for hands and feet, those of my mother and grandfather. Grandfather 'Wee' Willy was of similar body smallness, yet a giant in goodness and of that old fashioned concept, of soul. Perhaps the Lockwoods took me in partly because they intuited my lack of height snobbery.

I knew also that they saw me for a hick naive, the John Steuart Curry 'Baptism in Kansas' sort of thing that so amused New Yorkers. They saw me as someone to manipulate. They couldn't see from their vantage point how my eyes glittered over the riches of the land of Lockwood. They did want my intelligence, my creativity and imagination.

I should have been smart enough to know it would end badly, in a Manhattan court. I forgot the old truism that grandfather wee willy liked to say: if you lie down with dogs you get up with fleas.

Carbon Copies

Old man Lockwood was a heavy shouldered ponderous fellow, no neck, big head, short legs. A rotund fellow who one never saw as short, carrying himself in self awareness like a Pasadena float.

The children were carbons of Smokey except without the grandeur. By body they were short of arm and leg. The males were barrel chested. Born without necks they moved about puffed up like toy soldiers on Christmas parade.

Looking at them I had to smother my mirth in recalling the Tennessee

Williams' line in *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof*, 'No neck little monsters.'

The sisters were Bobby (Marguerite) and Catherine. Catherine by repute was an authentic bag lady in Boston. The story bore out when an apple of a woman, shabby and confused, unlike her siblings who were as alert as parakeets, arrived in the office one day bags in hand.

Bobby was the sharpest of the lot, the oldest too. She taught in a girl's school in Boston. I had the impression she ran the family, with an aloof disdain for them and too for anyone outside the clan.

Sisters Lockwood didn't rise to five feet. Among the brothers Cris was the tallest, straight to attention and at a stretch maybe 5'4". Fit, handsome, sociable yet also contemptuous of everything, he had a derogatory remark for all things great and small. Not a bright bulb. He was mostly a drunk. Yet in turns charming. Lockwood siblings did carry themselves in private-school propriety. They were a marvel to slouching me. Of most importance they stood oblivious to stature, theirs or others. Seemingly. One can't always fathom the lurking resentment of short men any more than the pathetic embarrassment of very tall ones.

When I was first introduced to the family the youngest brother Fred was in the Merchant Marines, on a ship somewhere in the Sumatra Straits. They had to airlift him off when Smokey passed. He was the vaguest one who eventually died himself on a Peloton bike in the NYC Cornell club.

In time Robert's adult son and daughter joined the company. To their credit neither liked it. Sunk in boredom the son could sometimes be glimpsed masturbating at his desk.

Smokey and Co. Inc.

It was strange to me when I made the discovery that none of the Lockwoods ever read a magazine they produced. Not a single copy. They'd open an issue only to count the ads therein. I think they saw them as their penny shoppers, except the pages were sold for thousands.

The older brothers-Lockwood hired me. Cris, his actual name being George Lockwood Jr., but born on Columbus Day hence his nickname became Cris, and Robert his younger brother. Cris was six years my senior, Robert three.

I was hired as their publishing company's production manager the lowliest member of the editorial staff of Tobacco International their one remaining magazine, then the oldest and most venerable tobacco industry magazine.

I had no experience. The position came with a yearly salary of \$4,800. Even in 1980 that was basically a poverty line wage. It amounted to the same as holding a stop sign, with a masters, on a highway construction site. I could only afford to live in one of the city's worst slums.

Tobacco International was what was left in New York of the family's one-time small empire of trade magazines concentrated on paper and tobacco. A decade before his death Smokey had decided to sell off his major publications, including his mighty Paper Trade Journal the leader in its field with a circulation of 40,000 and too the German tobacco and paper magazines. Estelle the business manager whispered to me that it was because the old man didn't think any of his sons capable of running the business after him.

The Havana office had closed abruptly with the arrival of revolutionaries, bearded pirates, scary and tall. Decades later I myself would stand next to Castro up close at a cigar gala in Havana, no longer scary, just old and tired. That left the family with Tobacco International in New York and the French magazine La Papeterie in Paris.

According to Estelle old Mr. Lockwood had pocketed a fortune in the divestment. She would know. He and Estelle spent most mornings going over his investments, buying or selling as required. I heard their activity because my office was next to Smokey's. Old Mr. Lockwood also delighted in opening banking accounts wherever gifts or cash awards pertained. Estelle remarked that he must have at least 50 toasters.

So it had become a small company, tailored down to its owners' size. No matter, by itself Tobacco International was a King Solomon's mine of advertising riches. At the time it was perhaps the most lucrative of all trade journals, or so someone once told me. Its 27 issues a year carried 1800 pages of paid advertising keeping the entire Lockwood family in comfort.

Where American Dinosaurs Once roamed

The company dwelled at three Manhattan addresses in the years I was associated with it. First in the French building at 45th Street and Fifth. Then the Bush Tower on 42nd Street near Times Square. Later in the Standard Oil Building, home to Rockefellers, at 26 Broadway across from the 'Raging Bull' statue. Each building a

monument to ages of bloated American capitalists. All three buildings are landmark designated, for architecture, not for Lockwoods.

Landmark status was of no interest to Robert. Cheapness was all. He merely scouted the market for long term leases whenever the Manhattan real estate market went bust, as was its want.

Each office by family tradition could at utmost be on a 9th floor. This said to be because a pyro phobic grandfather had learned that FDNY extension ladders went no higher.

Offices were always cramped, trending toward shabby, frayed carpet, ill-used office chairs for worn out or soon-to-be worn out workers. The Lockwoods simpered with pride on how little they paid in salaries, how rarely and tiny the raises they gave, and yet how they 'managed' to keep most of their employees with them for years.

Nothing except windows interrupted their walls other than a large framed photo of The Indian, in pride of place, dashing through spray. They showed it for all to see like a renaissance altarpiece. In the succession of rentals it was hung in what they called 'the library', designated a conference room with an antique mahogany table that generations of Lockwoods had carted over and about Manhattan Island.

Wherever, the 'libraries' were the same, lined with shelves for holding all the issues of the various magazines that the company had published back to 1872. The volumes made for a genteel look in leather and gilt binding. Dumpy as they were the Lockwoods liked a show.

COLD NIGHT MURDER

One very cold night in New York, in January, in Manhattan, in the East Village, a young man was murdered. There were many murders that night, as on every night back in 1979 so his would likely have gone unremarked, not newsworthy, not even worthy of a paragraph in the New York Post.

I can't recall his name although I knew him. He was a neighbor living like me in one of the few recently rehabilitated small apartments of a still half burnt out tenement at 608 East 9th Street. Rents were so low that lower rung trade magazine staff member like me, or a would-be dancer passing time as a waiter like him, could burrow there to live on furniture much of which was poached in from where it had been dumped on a nearby sidewalk.

Before getting the landlord, a youngish Serb named Frank, to let me take his most recently fixed up apartment on the top floor, the sixth, I had lived previously for a year on the 3rd floor directly above the murdered young man, younger than I was. Rarely do people simply meet in New York, people can live a lifetime in an apartment there without knowing the neighbors.

We met because my bathtub leaked. I was soaking when someone, him, came banging on my door, rattling its chain and two locks, the police bar too that was always in place.

I peered at him through peep hole of the reinforced metal door. He looked mousy enough to make me indignant. To stress the point that he has bothering me I opened the door naked to the bone. He gaped. Stare hard. I'd lived just long enough in the East Village to know he was gay. I then took refuge in my towel.

We actually had a pleasant exchange. He readily understood it wasn't me flooding the bathroom, and him, but rather Frank's plumbing DIY plumbing work. From then on we'd gesture hello, or even say so when crossing on the stairs.

Later I learned he was from somewhere in New Jersey. Frank told me he was a Russian Jew, and from the way Frank said 'Jew' I guessed Serbs weren't to keen on them.

I knew exactly where he lived because when I moved up to the sixth floor he in turn took my apartment on the third.

By the time he was killed I was living with a young woman. We had a queen sized mattress I had bought from an airline hostess, flat on the floor. It basically filled the larger of the two rooms, the other being a very small kitchenette.

Our so called bedroom had two narrow windows looking out onto 9th Street, one with a locked gate of bars that opened onto the tiny landing of the fire escape. It being the top floor the fire escape ended just outside this window.

It was three weeks after Christmas. I was sick. Very much so. As sick as I've ever been. It was a bad case of adult mono. My girlfriend went to work during the days, so I just slept and slept too ill to even read. I spent nights sweating. Even though the apartment was lukewarm. I sweated so much that my girl friend had to get up a couple of times to change the sopping sheets. She took good care of me, which is probably why I later thought to marry her.

We slept naked. The apartment was dark while we slept except for a weak piss yellow halo from the night lite in the bathroom, door left a bit ajar just for that.

Apartment was so small it took only three steps to to get from the bed across the kitchen area to the police lock on the door to the hallway. Hallway was always lighted. Kept at night bright as a hospital corridor.

The tenement had been built like most with two dinky apartments up front over the street, then the stairwell and banister separating ours from two more identical apartments at the rear. Those were still fire gutted along with the rest of the neighborhood, torched by owners desperate for the insurance payout.

No one yet lived next to me either. We two were the only occupants of the 6th floor. The roof was directly above with an access. Frank had it kept locked.

The rest of the tenement, below us, the floors were mainly occupied as Frank labored to bring each derelict apartment one by one back to life.

My girl friend woke me about two. I was half delirious but immediately heard it too. Somewhere a woman was screaming. To avoid whatever I told her it was the neighbors in the next tenement over, across the ventilation shaft. That building was filled with dopers, who often fought, loud and long with a few screams as well. I told her to let it be I'd heard them often enough.

“No, listen, it’s more than that.” I listened and knew she was right. We didn’t have a phone, I couldn’t afford one.

I cursed, pulled on pants and went out on the landing, blinking in the sudden glare, shaking with fever, dripping sweat. I grabbed the bannister, which was perhaps a century old, my bare feet freezing on the floor tiles.

Bending to look the stairwell spiraled down to street level, the gray slate steps looked frozen in time like an archeology dig, frozen in place from the 1970s down to early Sumerian. The scene looked brittle in its eternal emptiness. On acid I’d have called it surreal.

“Who in hell’s screaming! Someone hurt down there?” I wasn’t convinced how effective I could yell with 103 F. Silence of the tomb except for my own voice echoing back.

Something like a weakening yelp rose up from the pit. Rising and then waning into nothing.

“I’m calling the cops, you hear me! Better tell me what’s going on.”

Counting down three flights I saw movement. A hand sliding slowly along the bannister.

“I see that. Who is it?”

The hand, a black hand, progressed slowly on to where the stairs began descending down, turning out of sight.

No more screaming, no hand. All quiet and still. I waited long enough to hear far below the heavy front door make its tomb-like slam.

Back in the apartment I slid shivering into the damp sheets. I told my girlfriend what I’d seen. She just slid closer. “Go to sleep. Maybe you were seeing things.” I knew she didn’t believe it so. I was too exhausted to figure anything. We were awakened shortly after dawn by a boulder fist on the metal of the door. So commanding it rattled the police lock.

We had visitors. NYPD Homicide Detectives, two of them, in rumpled suits, either groggy or very tired, both men nine months pregnant. They flashed badges, red Irish jowls and insipient alcoholic noses at us like genitalia on 42nd Street.

My girlfriend made a whole pot of coffee which didn't last long. They guzzled it. I drank my usual breakfast beverage, Dr. Pepper on ice. They left her half a cup of coffee to get to the office on.

With them inside, the place was obscenely crowded. And ominous.

After the usual explanation, which made my girlfriend cry, they began their inquisition, questions to ascertain our income and pedigree. Then they started on the murder. Three or four questions repeated again and again in different guises.

What woke us? What time? Why did we think it was a woman screaming?

Why did I go out on the landing—no one else in the building even cracked a door on its chain? Why hadn't I called 911 (a simple answer to that which really seemed to make them suspicious).

What was I wearing? Where were those clothes now. When I went out why didn't I go down the stairs? Was it really a hand I saw sliding along the bannister? Not a foot? Why do I say it was black? Couldn't it have been a glove?

Of the questions this one along brought me up. Of course it could have been a glove. I had just made the assumption all whites in America would make. Of that I felt shame and quilt, our national frames of mind that show us so naturally racist we fool ourselves time and again into solemnly protesting that we aren't at all.

One cop left then. The one that stayed relaxed. He asked for more coffee. Told me in a nice way that he knew right away I was from somewhere "out there." Because I'd gone to look.

"What's a nice young fellow like you doing living down in this crap. Listen to me and move out. Go to Queens."

He also revealed that the perp had somehow been wounded while he was killing the vic. "Guy fought hard, got to say that."

Whoever the murderer they'd left a trail of red spots down the stairs. Trail showed whoever then went next door, got in to that tenement, climbed to the top, got out on that roof and then came over to ours. They'd made two attempts to break into this tenement, detective said it looked like they'd worked hard at it too.

“Probably wanted to get back to you. Maybe he thought you saw what he, whoever, looked like. I’d call that a close call. Thinking this was one of several murders we been having down here. Young gay guys picking up the wrong guy at the bars. Call me if you think of anything else.” He gave me his card, grubby, spotted in ketchup not blood. “Take my advice, Mr. Bell, move to Astoria. ”

To give company and comfort I walked my girlfriend down beyond the third floor, weak as I was. The body was still there. We had to step over him. Blood had virtually covered the landing. The young dancer I had known was covered in a sheet. Sheet clung to him. It was slightly disarrayed. At the very top of the body a few fine black curls were visible.

Months later we were married and living in Queens.

OUTCAST OF ST. FELIX

Les Izards the house faces due south placed carefully, exactly, like an ancient holy site for receiving the maximum available sunlight. Or a very big solar panel for collecting warmth for its arthritic walls.

Across a narrow valley to the west runs an almost identical ridge crested as well with a thicket of live oak trees. Atop the ridge at the point closest to this house is the convent of the Daughters of Jesus.

From north to south along the ridge is what the locals call the Voie Romaine, or Roman Road. There is ongoing debate as to whether this trail is actually 'Roman' or rather Romanesque. Either way it's a trek that's been there beyond memory, its stone roadbed made bare by use.

Where the Convent meets the road there is a small clearing hemmed in on all sides by live oaks and the skeletons of towering dead elms. Inside it are a couple of stone benches and a statue of Mary the Queen of Heaven her blue robe splotched in crow shit.

This is where the cats are. For my children's delight I named it the Sanctuary of St Felix of Nola, for the patron saint of lost animals.

Whenever we went over to walk the Voie Romaine we'd visit the sanctuary just to marvel at what were about 50 or more stray cats who lived there at any given time. This explained the name I'd given to such an eerie mystical place.

The nuns fed the cats daily with their scraps. As a result these strays were a hearty band of outlaw cats, cats never touched by human hand, wild as sin and each with a straw up its ass. They were of all sorts from kittens to those stiff with age. They were a fantasy of mixes and colors, all cat types and configurations considered.

Given the proximity to Les Izards of St. Felix we necessarily saw here now and then one or more of these cats. Wanderers who crossed the valley to lurk hidden well away from the house, hugging shadows in the day. Breeding like loud banshees of the night. Fighting like demons. Driving house cats away, off limping into hiding leaving a bloody trail behind them. An eye torn out. A tail broken in twain. The barbarians took over the valley.

Their eyes glinted in the dark from out of the shrubbery. Sometimes so many shone they seemed a minor constellation.

Our kitchen is the nearest room to the sanctuary and with French doors, high and wide, it was our best post for observing any wild cat who came our way.

Also in the kitchen above the table is a massive window, in two halves, cut through the stone. It was there on the ledge of this window in the last purple shade of evening that I first had a glimpse of Princess Terrified.

As we had our meal together, a young family rapt up in its own circle, I sensed a flicker in my peripheral vision. Sidereal pinpoints.

She had come to hunker small as she could get on the outside window ledge. Observing us intently. Cat's eyes on high alert and in perpetual motion. I've wondered why she did so and through how many other evening meals she'd watched us.

As I explained to the children I gave her the name of Princess Terrified because I'd never seen a cat so frightened of man. I said she was one of the 'Fied' family sisters, including Horri, Petri and Stupi.

After that I'd feel her gaze on us often as we ate supper. Pressed down against the glass. Tensed to run away but also clearly hugging close to us. Out of curiosity, a need for companionship, protection, hunger?

At a glance, taking in her deranged eyes, I knew she came from St. Felix. When I saw her clearly she was good size, a full grown queen, near to four or five years. She was close to a full bred Siamese. A seal point, glacial blue eyes and all.

I'd come to know this kind of cat and had a special fondness for them. I was intrigued by what story she must have. A true princess in the wild. Had she been sleeping on a pea? This is why I began to court Princess Terrified, who then became simply Terri.

It took time. First, when I saw her at the window I'd go outside and stand still. True to her name she'd dash madly off in a terrific fear.

Next phase was to talk to her. Baby talk her. This at least seemed to calm her some. I knew Siamese liked to be addressed and with deference. Then I moved to offering her milk. Then tuna. Of all poems the tuna worked best.

Did the Daughters of Jesus share their feast of canned tuna with the cats of St. Felix?

Eventually she'd hear me coming out and wait, about 10 yards off, until I put down whatever I had for her.

Sometimes she'd be absent for days. Sometimes I was off on business. It was a fraught romance.

Taming of The Terrified

One remarkable day I put out my hand towards her and she let me touch her briefly with a finger tip. Before starting off hysterically as if awakened from a zombie nightmare.

I admit I grew weary of all this and was ready to give up when one evening she came up to rub her side against my leg. Perhaps in heat?

Ultimately it happened that I could pick her up, momentarily holding a wild animal in my arms. I held her in awe. Psychosis aside Terri lived as a beautiful cat and kept herself groomed with a prima donna's vanity.

So it was that Princess Terrified became a member of our household. Member? Hardly. I was the only one permitted to stroke her, hold her. My wife was somewhat acceptable, my children not at all. Inside she stayed in the kitchen, sometimes even for as long as a couple of hours. Terri spent the night out hunting.

Terri rarely ate our food. She took care of that herself. Once I saw Terri jump up straight in the air high as 8 feet to catch a bird in mid flight.

She fed herself on birds, mice and such, an amazing huntress. Whatever she caught she quickly devoured. No cruel play.

In time when I was home from a trip she'd find her way to my study and would jump up into my lap. She was a pleasant unobtrusive companion.

Every afternoon when I was around to observe she did her Siamese thing, going mad for a few minutes, racing about the yard and up, down, around trees, rolling, leaping, charging at nothing Then her ears were laid back tight to her skull.

Then her eyes went bulging and strange.

Rikki Tikki Terri

If you've never read Kipling's story about a valorous mongoose, please do. It's a masterpiece. Terri's story reminds me of his tale. That's because one summer afternoon I walked to the kitchen doorway to the porch and watched stunned into inaction as she battled on the porch with an Aspic Viper.

Asps are to my knowledge the only snake to beware of in this region. Its poison is sometimes fatal to dogs, dangerous to cats, sickening to man. I knew they live here, when warmed in the summer the old stones of the house seem to give birth to them.

To see one on the porch where the children played was alarming. For a child their venom could be threatening. I'd never seen one so close to us.

The fight between cat and snake was dramatic. Terri repeatedly pounced then sprang high in the air with the snake between her paws. From up high she'd drop the snake. She shook it, lashed it hard like a whip. She danced around it in a blur. As quick as the asp was Terri was quicker.

I had at hand nothing to help her. If I intervened I feared distracting her. It was watching killer antagonists in a mute dueling pair of Kansas tornados.

In the end the snake lost and lay still. I checked and found it almost bitten through. Terri was quickly gone, limping off into the bushes.

Then she was gone for a few days. I feared she'd died. In my human way I felt she'd protected my family, given her life for them. Of course it was a work of nature, not Disney.

When again I heard her unpleasant Siamese screech sobbing for me at the door I brought her the finest delicacies. I scratched her ears, chucked her under the chin. Made her purr.

I so admired her, feeling stricken by her. In the flesh my 'Made', the Egyptian cat goddess who slew serpents.

Good cat that she was she then ignored me in self satisfaction to instead lick

her paws in a
sensuous, closed-eyed ablution.

Terri's Last Terror

Terri began to sicken one spring. I saw her moving more slowly, no longer catching a bird in mid flight.

I had a meeting of the Spanish Coffee Congress to attend in Barcelona. My wife came too. I was the keynote speaker. I had no choice but to go with my guilt trip riding my back as I left.

To attend we needed a sitter for the children, selecting a young woman, a Buddhist, who had been a house cleaner for us at one time. She was an inactive lesbian.

Just before driving off for Barcelona I went again to check on Terri. She was clearly dying. I gave her water, tried unsuccessfully to get her to eat. I left her where she'd chosen to die, on the front lawn near the house.

At my touch she meowed wanly at me. She licked my hand once. It was a one of a kind sensation, that abrasive true grit of her cat affection.

On our return three days later I knew she'd died, just felt it in the emptiness left behind. The kid-sitter confirmed. Good Buddhist that she was she'd taken it upon herself to get Terri to the vet. Opening her up he found her riddled with cancer. He closed and had her die.

He told the young woman he couldn't believe in all his experience how an animal could have lived on for some time with such a mass of end stage cancer. He'd disposed of her body so I had nothing to bury.

Instead I mourned for her remarkable spirit at the tomb I built for her in my mind. If any cat had soul, it would be the Princess Terrifi

ONLY THE DEAD KNOW NEW YORK

I don't have any meaningful jot to jot down about death. It's been pretty well covered. One thing I've learned is that you can know how strong people were when they're even stronger in death. Watching my mother die was my first death experience. Yes, I'd been to open casket funerals and seen people dead, most memorably my grandmother lying sunken and gone, her refined beauty wasted.

But mother's death with the wrenching sorrow it occasioned was and remains unique in my life story. Final bubble at the lips a stertorous rasp then nothing left but skin on bones already turned stale.

Mother was 58, I was 26. Her death took place in Kansas, in Abilene, at the small town's hospital. I was at her bedside. My sister in law hung back. My brothers were at work. Father had gone crazy of a furious grief the week before in her long dying, attacking people who came near him with a heavy metal flashlight.

We kept him back at the house swinging away at nothing, battling the angel of death to stay away from her.

The doctor asked me permission to do a tracheotomy on her. I said not to.

It was past time for her to go. She was beyond hearing, seeing, speaking. Fate gave me the decision. I made it and she died within 30 minutes.

The same repeated 15 years later. My mother adjunct, my aunt Elizabeth, father's one sister, a woman who partly raised me, loved me, always deep in my being, had appointed me her legal guardian. She'd instructed me to allow her to die if the situation arose.

We were at our apartment in New York when the call came from the hospital in Topeka. The time had come for her too. But that was surreal because she spoke to me by telephone, to reassure me. Her voice was like my father's an accent of far southern Alabama, same as in Mobile, sweet and languid.

"It's OK, Jonie, don't cry." And so, obediently, again I gave approval for ending the life of someone I cared for with all my heart and soul.

A month after mother's death I was off for a weekend doing my job for the University of Kansas which was drumming up support for a long distance cultural program called the Prairie Chautauqua. Just one among my numerous string of eccentric occupations. To do so I'd gone to Neodesha a small town in the southeast corner of the State, no motel so I was put up two nights by the president of the county arts council, her husband was the one doctor left in town.

That Saturday night she and her husband took me to a dance in the even smaller place of Elk Falls. The band played nothing but golden oldies from the 50s and 60s. I danced with my hostess, both of us loosened up by a few beers. Next to us a n older fellow danced with a young woman, his daughter I learned. The band played a frenzied wound up version of Dancin' To The Jail House Rock.

Then that man clutched his chest, grimaced, roared out 'AAARGH' and fell dead. Among the prancing cowboy boots it was some send off. In the tumult that followed on the dance floor, women lowing and men suddenly turned properly grim, I had a moment to look at the man with the curiosity we who are left alive have for the dead.

He lay face crumpled against the floor with one open staring eye showing,. A pool of urine spread slowly from his best polyester western-style pants. His daughter kneeling in hysterics had one knee in it. In the silence of the hall, music stopped short, I heard a band member saying to another "How many does that make this year?" AAARGH, I hope I can remember my line when the moment comes.

Should I be looking for one now?

Close of my workday at the Lockwood Trade Journal Co. I raced through the mob to my preferred subway stairway, to catch the Lex at Grand Central, not in the terminal but via the street stairs at the southeast corner of 42nd. There with luck I'd catch right on the express to Union Square, hopping over the platform for the local to Astor Place. It was all calculated to get me home the fastest time possible.

One night it didn't work because there was a dead lady at the bottom of the subway stairs. I recall the irritation that she should come to be there, disrupting my flight from the workaday.

Her flight had also been disrupted. No need to stop to feel her throat. She was as clear a goner as any could be. Legs spread wide, dress up above her stockings, coat gaping as did her mouth. Her eyes stared. She'd clenched her purse tight.

Whoever, this lady sat bolt upright against the white tiles of the stairwell. I

knew she'd gone down in her own homeward rush.

She was a middle aged black woman, from her clothes probably a secretary, typist, file clerk. I knew she was a mother, wife, daughter—someone to grieve for.

“I called the cops. She’s dead. Went down in front of me. Stay with her.

I gotta go. . . And watch her purse.”

With that the living woman who'd stopped for the dead one, probably another secretary, ran off toward her own conclusion.

I stood over the dead lady, and her purse. Tried not to look at her as that seemed invasive, like staring at someone picking their nose.

The crowd jostled me about roughly, yakking angrily at my obdurate placement on the stairs. Some would look down and then move to avoid us.

First sight of a cop I turned and ran myself for those train doors that were always about to close. I yelled back for the cops to hear, “Watch her purse.”

This death I've already written about in an effort to exorcise it. This was a murder and the most complete death, the most vivid, for me.

I heard it. Then I witnessed part of it. Then I saw the body. I smelled his blood and saw it pooled on the slate of the stairwell. My neighbor two floors down in the half burned out tenement where I lived had brought home the wrong fellow from a gay bar. Whoever he had stabbed the young fellow, who had fought hard for his life, in a battle that ended on the landing outside my neighbor's door at about 2 am.

That tenement like many had six floors, mine was on the sixth, no elevator.

Only the front half of the building had been restored, two apartments per floor.

The young man had screamed with all his might, long withering screams that woke me up and at last sent me, me alone in the building, to go out on my freezing landing to peer over the bannister looking all the floors down. I'd yelled out “what's going on down there!” Stupid question as I knew like any human would exactly what was taking place below. We know when we hear it.

The agonized screaming stopped. Then, what I later heard was the killer's hand appeared on the rail to slide in slow motion and disappear far below. Gloved hand or

black hand?

I pacified myself with the phony reassurance that all was over, all again OK. How easily we come to believe that bad things haven't and won't happen.

Next morning to get to work I needed to step over the body, covered in a sheet. The young man was a couple of years younger than me. He had become a lump of mashed potatoes under the sheet. It all seemed like I was moving, talking, thinking under fathoms of deep ice water.

Now I see that I was in some kind of shock, like a survivor of an accident. And too instead of breakfast I just been grilled over too much coffee by a NYPD detective.

My Germany born landlord in Long Island City was Gottfried Pilz. At time he'd been a baker in Dresden, a soldier for the Wehrmacht, a prisoner of war in Russia and an immigrant in New York City, Queens, Long Island City.

I also knew he was a Nazi, a lunatic in his prejudices, if not during the war, maybe not a party member, but afterwards a true believer. His lunacy seemed completely understandable from what he told me about life, if that word can be used about a German prisoner in a Russian gulag, where he'd been captive for seven years.

My wife and I lived on the floor above the Pilz's. Theirs was one of the many thousands of two story flats lining the streets of Queens.

Mr. Pilz kept the building in perfect order. Mrs. Pilz did the same for their apartment, which was exactly like ours. She had survived the Dresden firebombing, but not intact at least mentally.

Gottfried died during the night in his bed with Mrs. Pilz asleep beside him. I knew something had gone wrong when she came heaving up the stairs to pound on our door, early on a Sunday morning.

He was in his pajamas. An iron cross of grizzled white chest hair curled at his throat. I remember the white bristles on his cheeks, in his nostrils and ears. Since I was home during the days writing he'd often come up to talk. He'd told me so many amazing stories, me a lover of stories.

Without thinking I closed his bugged out sightless eyes, jaundiced and filmed over, two big hawkers on a cold cement sidewalk.

He was too damaged a soul to morn for. Too hateful an old bigot. I did feel pity

for all the horror of his life, all the killing, his comrades freezing to death beside him. The vengeful cruelty of the Russians, his immigrant struggle and striving to get just a little of something for himself.

Mostly I was in awe at finding myself standing bedside him, witness to an ending of so much 20th century history, in that bed in Long Island City. All the nightmare in our communal mind reduced to the shaggy gray visage of an old dead man.

The man on the couch is naked except for his saggy baggy underwear which I'm refusing to look at. Two New York City cops in full gear, black guns metastatic to their hips, stand with nothing to do in the spare and shabby living room.

They're chatting so bored they can barely slouch. It's a threesome between them and the paramedic who rests on the arm of the sofa. He's in another kind of uniform, all white. The three men talk about the Mets and the Yankees. A neighbor's dog, small uninteresting, typical New York apartment dog, laps blood from the floor.

TV is still on, whatever channel rolling. Maybe George's last glimpse had been of a Hee Haw rerun.

My friend Tom erupts in a castrato scream, "Get that god damn dog out of here or I'll throw it out the window!"

One of the cops stirs, enough to aim a shoe at the dog kicking it away.

Indignant owner in the hallway yelps and retrieves the animal into sheltering arms.

Since I got here my friend Tom has been bordering on a total breakdown. His expensive toupee shows more than usual what it actually is. Tom is bigger than me, taller and broader, a good deal so. He's my senior by about 15 years, the biggest fellow in the living room.

After a few vodkas he'll tell how he worked for the CIA in Central America, might have. I knew he'd brokered bananas for United Fruit.

The dead man is George. Until a few years ago George was Tom's long time lover. I'm guessing they were together, when they were together, for almost 20 years.

Since arriving in the city I've met George a few times. I didn't like him much because he was too arch, too critical and superior in an indisputable way. Worse,

serenely at home in New York which made me feel lacking.

According to Tom, George comes from a rich family. He's a trust fund baby. I'm left feeling disappointed by his apartment, first time I'm seeing it. It's in a posh building on the Upper East Side but has only about four pieces of furniture.

No Warhol.

Other than the money I only knew that George was an alcoholic, like my friend Tom. Like so many people I've known.

From what the paramedic was saying it was the drinking that killed George. He'd had a massive hemorrhage and bleed out as he sat watching TV, one final drink in hand. Looking out in a sneering disdain.

That's what makes him the most picturesque dead person I've seen. He's belched out his stomach and guts onto his bare chest, an incredibly copious lava like in a Cinecitta movie about the end of Pompeii.

It had stained his underwear a memorable red. From chin down he'd been baptized by a barrel full of repugnant wine.

He's doing the dead man stare at me, or is at Tom? He's gazing at me in holy terror. Mona Lisa's terrible eyes follow you like that even in her meat packed gallery in the Louvre.

Tom is crying. The police are trying to wrap it up. Paramedic brings in a gurney. I myself want to get home at this ungodly hour. I'm wondering if I have the balls to ask Tom for the money for a cab.

Little dog is back hungry for more blood.

Georgia was a rodeo queen somewhere in Oklahoma where and when that was a big deal. The woman was also a biker queen, riding Harleys solo, even though she was a slim and slight thing. That until a drunk came round the road on the wrong side, knocked down the biker club she rode in like bowling pins.

That's how she lost her leg when hardly into her 20s. Spent about a year at the Mayo in Rochester. She always said she'd broken every bone in her body, no exaggeration, for some reason she was accident prone.

Georgia was also the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in the flesh. A finely

boned face, sweeping forehead like a cat's, blue eyes and blonde hair. Men couldn't help stare at her. Most women couldn't abide her.

It was what went into her that mattered most. Despite all she was a kind and loving woman and through suffering had found a striking empathy for us others on the same highway with a killer car fast approaching.

No saint she. She relished honky-tonkin, reveled in what passed for sin in prairie towns of the 1950s.

She flipped the bird at the world, but those she loved she held passionately close.

Georgia was also a Queen of Hearts. I know so well because the first time she walked into the living room of my Brother's rental in Haysville, Kansas, when I was 16, I fell in love with her. Still am.

We were already living in France when my brother called to tell me she had died. It flattened me more than other death I've known. I flew out the next day— Paris, New York, then to Kansas City where I could drive across northern Kansas, across Nebraska, up to where they were living just off the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. That was an empty place, desolate, made even more so by my own desolation.

My brother Steve had the details. To cool down from a hot July day she'd gone out to run the greyhounds just as dark came down. It was a Honda three wheeler. Georgia must have been born with speed in her heart. Apparently she'd lost control somewhere out in that Dakota country, flipped, came down breaking her neck.

Steve found her. Absolutely his defining moment. For the remainder of his own life he mourned for her, as have I.

In the end Steve also made his Georgia a Viking Queen. He took everything loose he could find and piled into a bonfire that was a raging broken heart roared in the darkness.

After he reported her death to the nearest authority, nothing at all 'near' in that land, ranchers about, none closer probably than 30 miles, drove in to park their pickups around the crest of land sheltering the mobile home where Georgia had lived. Those ranchers didn't intrude, they just turned on their headlights and waited mutely keeping my brother and his pitiful bonfire company until the flashing lights arrived.

My Bell family cemetery is located south a few miles from Geneva, Alabama,

just over the State line in Florida. Truly its name, Hard Labor. Grim enough I think, magisterially eloquent. Recently I've come to realize the name could mean more than a judge's sentence. It's also a harsh often deadly birth.

My brothers met quite opposite ends. I know what happened even though by then I'd stopped any communication with them, willfully, for my own miserable reasons. I wish I'd not done that, yet have no guilt or shame from it.

They weren't kind to me. They mistreated and used me in equal parts while I adored them. At least they enjoyed the adoring part.

My contribution to our divorce was in not confronting them, never once fighting them, to allowing it all to fester.

Alan David Bell. He's the middle brother, seven years my senior. I've got assumptions of what went wrong for him.

Alan was both smart and beautiful, truly a striking boy, handsome young man. But various vicissitudes led him to eating. For most of his adult life he was obese, this even before the States became home of the fat, land of the futile fat free.

He was a great striver, an inventor whose dream child never took shape. Mostly he hammered away at becoming wealthy. That was his ultimate concern. He became a man of many madnesses, food, money, symbols of achievement, religion. Religion wrapped it all up in a package, a gift from born again capitalism. Between that and a crazed psychotic wife he didn't have a chance,

It was his wife who first taught me that evil exists. A demonic presence that deserved no pity.

Poor Alan. He'd climb the mountain of success and then find it crumbling beneath him, a few times at least. Then he'd try again. "Why do we Bells have so much going for use. But then when we almost succeed we always self destruct?" Despite what he pondered Alan was a cheerful optimist.

That's why he did make it to his never never land of riches and Jesus.

Almost 20 years ago he died a multi millionaire. He must have at last felt 'blessed' by his lord and savior, living at last in the largest house in Tula with four cars in the garage.

He had a private jet fly him to a fat clinic in California where they operated to

give him a gastric bypass. He never woke up. He filled with water and went comatose.

Alan loved classical music. After his death to give the respect I felt for him I 'bought' in his name a pipe in the great organ of St. John's The Divine in New York. That's a bit too-high church for people in Oklahoma but it pleases me.

Stephen Mancil Bell. Steve was ten years older. Apparently he was always difficult, and not just for me.

He's the most unusual character I've known. Also the smartest, much more so than I am. He got me started thinking, moved me on from just reading. His mind was an American original. Steve didn't have a college degree, he didn't want or need one. His mature years were spent training greyhounds for race tracks in Florida, Massachusetts, Alabama, and Juarez Mexico.

He kept a patriarchal beard, hanging long down his chest. Long hair to match. In France they'd thought him a 'bebe cool.' Ah but much more than that. Too bad he was so self involved, such an asshole at times.

The eccentric man crossed the color line after Georgia died, something I didn't see coming. He ended up living as the only white man in a small black village in east central Alabama.

It was OK he had no possessions to steal except a radio which disappeared a few times. I'd replace it because it was important, giving him his one joy, listening to NPR. Another woman did come into his life. This was Annie. One night she walked into his place, he never locked it up, curling up naked beside him. He had no idea who she was.

Annie hung around him for a few years, on and off. She was his black whore, sometime lesbian. For sure a crack queen—Steve managed to find another queen. She took all his money. Once or twice she had him beaten up.

I was always after him to come to France. Talking about that to her Steve said she commented "France? Shit, take me to LA to see the Lakers."

Steve was also an alky. That got worse until he was placed in a old folks home. It got him over the booze, the cigarettes, Annie too. It also took his spirit, what had thrilled me most about him since I was little.

Steve decided on his own to die, and how, not waiting for fortune. He stopped eating, Starved himself away. The very opposite end from his brother.

Reverend Doctor Samuel Mancil Bell. My father died badly. At least I credit it worse than some. The nursing home where he was in Topeka claimed to have lost him. They were liars, of course.

My aunt at last found him on a hospital bed in a basement corridor of the Veteran's hospital in Kansas City, Missouri. It wasn't clear how or why that happened. He'd just been left there alive, unidentified.

Damn the fool souls how could they do more.

Dad died the day after she found him, after days alone in that basement, blind and semi conscious. At least she was with him at the end moment.

The first news of all this came when she called to tell me he had just died. It hit on the night of my birthday, full wine glasses poised in mid air.

William Fletcher Little. My grandfather died singing. That was in the small community hospital in Kinsley, Kansas. My mother called her father 'wee Willy,' he was hardly more than 5'5". A short Ulster man, where his father had come from. No grander man have I known.

Grandfather himself had a bit of Northern Irish brogue when he spoke. All his life he'd been a pastor. He married us.

My mother called him a fool but no kinder, no humbler, no gentler man have I met.

And that's a fact, which is why I took his middle name for the middle name of my first born.

He died age 93. The call about him came to us two weeks to the day after that for my dad, almost at the same time. It happened to be the very day of my wife's birthday so in that year neither of us had candles.

MEETING IN TRIESTE

I sit in wonder this afternoon in sweetly sad grandiose Trieste. Here with the Commendatore Dr. Alberto Hesse. Others have told me that his title, which everyone here seems to use, is authentic from a knighthood bestowed on him by the Italian Republic. During WW2 he was a renowned ace in the Italian air force. He plays this part well.

We are in his office, in his coffee trading company, his kingdom, in his building on a corner of Trieste's imperial Piazza Unita d' Italia—a joke name or is it a cruel irony? Trieste is hardly unified to Italy. Not yet in 1986 where I see myself sitting there. Not yet even today.

Hung on this building is a polished brass plate, Via San Nicolo 22, Hesse Alberto Trieste SnC di A. Hesse & P. Brusoni. Signor Brusoni does not seem to exist. He might be the ghost polishing the brass.

The huge square expresses Trieste in quintessence. It's a bowl usually full of sunshine directly facing a wide glittering expanse of the Adriatic. Sunshine glances back into your eyes giving you a deceptive stark clarity of vision. Not real, not unreal, another kind of joke.

Everything, the grand piazza, the august buildings imagined around it on three sides, the sea, this office of Alberto's- the two inseparable- are a Hapsburg illusion, a big dreamy antique shop, a pomposity that might make some beholders smile.

A large part of Alberto's face is hidden. He wears with aplomb an elaborate Emperor Franz Joseph beard, sideburns connecting to voluminous and untamed 'fat chops' on his checks connecting to the flaring wonder of a thick handle-bar moustache that is twirled out into upcurving twin wildebeest horns.

The old man expects my respect, and deserves it.

Alberto is also the consul for the Cameroun in Trieste. A small Cameroun flag hangs still in dead air on one end of his desk, the Italian on the opposite. I've already learned enough about coffee to be impressed by the designation, implying as it does a lot of hijinks-or corruption- to varying significance in different places.

Cameroun is an important coffee exporting nation. The year when I'm sitting in its Trieste consulate the country ranks 12th in global coffee production among the 51 major exporting origins. To me this place oozes money, as does Alberto himself.

"I ask to meet you because of the European Coffee Federation, you know it I believe. I am its president. The congress this spring is to be held here in Trieste. This is a very important meeting with the leaders of the coffee industry coming from everywhere."

His sky blue eyes sparkle like the light of the Adriatic that plays on the massive dark walls surrounding us in heavy book case towers, rearing row upon row of leather bindings looking as they must smell of musty coffee bean history, of maritime law in German, Italian and French, along with pile upon pile of business dossiers. Cartons bloated, bulging with stories of riches and good fortune, ruination too in a thousand bills of lading.

Here about me every scrap of paper relating to 40 years passed trading coffee from 50 origins, shipping it, warehousing it, selling it to any roaster among the 1300 of them in Italy.

Hesse is in his mid 70s. Gold capped teeth show when he smiles, as he is doing now to seduce me, otherwise he keeps a death mask trained on life. Gold wristband on his watch. Gold circlet around his throat. He sits waiting for me to compliment him, looking ten years younger than he is and swarthy from a life in the sun. He's like an old book himself, gilt trim on embossed leather.

Bespoke tailoring of his Milanese suit, a frilled shirt, and those shoes. Handmade in Rome, not a doubt.

He lights another Sobranie Black Russian, gold tipping paper. These he chain-smokes, taking them from a gold case, tapping them vigorously on the lid, affixing them to a long amber cigarette holder. Manicured hand lifts a "C for Cartier" pink gold lighter.

Flash of fire in his eye glass frames and he's set to go. Stand him in the midday sun of the piazza and he'd shimmer forth in a reflection of Trieste glory days.

Alberto suddenly weighs me down with all this gold. "Meester Bell, I speak directly to you. I need your help to fill my coffee boat."

This confuses me, what boat. Is he taking a schedule of advertising in Tea & Coffee Trade Journal? He should, Trieste warehouses 1.5 million bags of coffee (each

60 kilo Weight). The port is receiving 2.5 million bags a year. It is the Mediterranean's coffee bank.

This city belonged to the Hapsburg family for 500 years before being awarded by the victors of WW1 to Italy. It officially became Italian only in 1920. Yet even then in name only. Identity: Austrian-Slovenian-Italian- Hungarian-Bulgarian-Albanian-Jewish-Croatian-Serbian-Romanian-, take your pick. Could be lyrics for a song by the Rolling Stones? "Send It To Me".

For more than half a millennium here was Vienna's great port, the only port of the Empire, where it warehoused the goods of the world and the base for its Imperial fleet.

Trading, constant maneuvering on the world coffee market, manic negotiating – on everything even to the color of the sky– a sly mercantilism pervades the city. I am no match.

Trieste is not at all a cookie-cutter Italian city, it has no strata's of Renaissance, Mannerist or baroque. It is an Austrian copy of these ideas. Physically not a very Italian looking place, rather its physical presence is a Viennese dreamscape of one, risible in massive buildings with flamboyant flourishes.

No catholic cathedral glorifies its skyline, rather there are the three bulks, of the Serbian Orthodox cathedral, the Greek Orthodox cathedral, and of the great synagogue of Trieste, proud statement by its wealthy and once influential Jewish community. Synagogue is triumphant built opulent and immense around 1900, with a capacity for more than 1600 worshippers.

Dislocation is a theme in this odd, old city. It connects to the rest of Italy by no more than a thin strip of land 30 km long, 10 km-wide, an umbilical cord corridor. The city dangles on this suspended precariously between the Carso Triestina high above, rough and desolate karst, and the Adriatic' where land drops into sea over high white cliffs. The road doesn't really go anywhere except out into mainland Italy away from the claustrophobia of the corridor. Is this a lifeline for the city or an Emergency EXIT in case of cataclysm. It ends at the city's airport where there are barely any flights to nowhere.

The city speaks Italian (its own dialect), but soon as one leaves it and the ephemeral corridor, Slovenian takes over. Cuisine can be Italian, while sauerkraut and strudel are common.

Trieste has been Italian territory for only a few years, thus still searching for

identity among many to choose from. It was only given to Italy as a punishment on Austria by the allied powers in 1920. It was ruled by the fascists until 1945, 'liberated' briefly by Yugoslavia. Then to prevent further slaughter the UN took over, proclaiming it a sovereign state of its own, The Free City of Trieste. UN control lasted until 1954.

In the 20th century Trieste has been kicked about like a soccer ball.

When at last it became legally Italian again Trieste was left dangling like an after thought for poor Italian souls in a sea of Slavs, a tight knot of capitalism amid a swarm of angry Yugoslavian communists.

Yugoslavia is not so angry now, in 1987. But still surrounds the city. By 1990 Yugoslavia will cease to even exist blown away into oblivion by ethnic conflict.

Trieste has uncommon interest for me because S. Mancil Bell came to be here with the 88th US Infantry, February and March 1947.

I know nothing of his time here. He hid it carefully along with all the rest of his years in Europe. Burnt to the core I surmise by horrors that he could not tell witnessed wherever the war took him.

He was sent here during a vicious ongoing civil war between Italian and Yugoslav partisans for control of the city. This culminated with the First Trieste Crisis of August 1946 when Yugoslavia forced down two US airplanes, within a space of ten days.

The passengers and crew of the first plane were secretly interned by the Yugoslav government. The second crew perished. Historians label this the first conflict of the Cold War.

I see my father a dream man being taken about the town's rubble strewn streets by his frightened native driver. He's in a standard issue army jeep. The rank of major gives him that perk. A handsome man, serious but ever ready to grin charmingly, his foxy grin that was so beguiling. A man who saw the world in layers of religion, history, art and literature. What did he see here?

Mobs of excited men throwing stones, lighting fires, smoking cigarettes obsessively except in the dark when it could kill them. Everywhere a redolence of garlic.

Multiple oddities, the headquarters for father was halfway back up the corridor toward 'real' Italy, on the coast. That's Miramar Castle a fantasy built by Archduke Maximilian for his beloved duchess, Charlotte (who is said to haunt it bellowing out his

name).

Maximilian the younger brother of Franz Josef. Maximilian and Charlotte becoming the Emperor and Empress of Mexico before Maximilian was shot there by firing squad. His statue stands looking pensively out at the port of Trieste.

The longer I sit in the heart of it the more Trieste turns into a mischievous delusion. Even the Commendatore looks devious, Italian in that but shaded darker by Austria and the Balkans. In fact his parents came here from Romania, immigrants to the riches of the Empire's great port where so many are either Balkan or Mitteleuropean.

I've been plying my wares in Italy for no more than a year but already have some tricks in hand. I use the first name of my clients, perspective clients, all male. This is not done. The first name is reserved for one's mother and mistresses to use.

My using 'Alberto' is a reminder to him that I am different, foreign, an always smiling and harmless barbarian. I am luxuriating in the power journalism gives me, mine are the words that coffee people read around the world.

Hesse makes a shooing gesture at me to show how in control he is, as if I needed help in seeing it. Alberto Hesse is shrewd in an elegant way. Alberto Hesse is a consummate coffee broker.

I'd like to tell the Commendatore about my father but don't. I'm not sure he'd have much admiration for a US army chaplain. I fear he'd give me the condescending half smile he's bestowed on me already. Then I'd hate him which I don't wish to do.

"There is the European Coffee Confederation, you know it I believe. I am its president. And its congress this spring is to be held here in Trieste. This is a very important meeting with the leaders of the coffee industry coming from everywhere.

"This is the first time the European Coffee Congress is hosted in Italy. To make it most memorable we have decided to hold it as a coffee cruise. For this we have taken a large and very beautiful ship."

So this is why I've been summoned. He wants me to climb aboard. First thing, I note the price of a passage and then feel like puking.

"The ship is to pick up delegates in Genoa and sail down the Tyrrhenian all around Italy and up the Adriatico, to stop just outside the window, here in Trieste. It will be a cruise of four days. We will sail past Elba and Stromboli, we sail through the Straights of Messina. The ship passes Brindisi, Bari, Ancona. Rimini!"

Alberto is truly enthusiastic about this litany unifying Italy as he speaks. “When we arrive here the congress itself will be held on this very piazza of our most beautiful city. There will be a gala evening with orchestra and entertainment. After we are to sail on to Venice for a momentous entrance into the Grand Canal. Water spray from tug boats. Marches by the Carabinieri band.”

Commendatore twirls one of his handlebars and pierces me to the back of a splendid leather armchair.

“She is the Eugenio Costa. Beautiful, is she not. This ship sadly is that ship’s sister ship. She carries 1600 passengers in luxury. She has a movie theater. Only the best Italian chefs. She has two swimming pools and better another one for children.

“Unfortunately there is a small problem, Meester Bell. “ Alberto smooths down his volume of sweeping dyed locks blow-dried into a puff ball like Engelbert Humperdinck in the 1970s. “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You.”

“You have heard of the Achilles Laura. A tragedy.” I nod, for who has not heard of the Achilles Laura. Three months before the Italian ship had been hijacked by terrorist from the Palestinian Liberation Front who murdered a handicapped passenger, an American Jew, when their ransom demands were not met. It was a crime at the time when Italy was already living in dread.

But then again, just a month ago from now in this meeting, came the attack at the El Al counter in Rome’s Fiumicino airport leaving 16 dead and 99 wounded. No, it wasn’t a good time to be selling a cruise around Italy to American and European coffee moguls.

“Help me with marketing and I offer you the cruise. Are you married? Bring madame too.” I explain we have a three year old, then feeling that I’ve erred in implying I’m not in the class to have a servant for my toddler. “Bring your bambino too! Bring the nanny. Bring the dog!” By the time of this conversation I’d learned that getting these upperclass Italians to understand such simple lower order facts of life as ‘we have no nanny’ was like putting a cat in a dress.

Outside I hear the clatter of a school of scooters darting into the expanse of the Piazza Unita d’ Italia. Beep beep. Egg beaters from the sound of them on parade going gang busters below Alberto’s windows. Seagulls scream appreciation. A ship horn blasts out on the Adriatic. Another replies. The sound of coffee on the move. Italy.

Cacophony is welcome. It eases the miasma of this office, intrigue in stale air

plucking on my nerve strings. Generations of profit and loss spilt into binders. Mildew threatening all.

This is the moment when Alberto and I come to terms and I've just earned berths for three on the Eugenio Costa. I am trading marketing, a load of it, apparently more valuable than coffee from Brazil.

"Meester Bell, I want you to write this in your magazine. Our magnificent coffee cruise from Genoa to Trieste and to Venice will be escorted by the Italian navy. Safety is guaranteed 100%."

I know enough not to laugh out loud at this. He's merely working me. What a clever old salesman.

His pricey perfection nettles me. Although I am enthralled by the Commendatore's charm I find myself wanting childishly to give him a little prod, perhaps shaking loose a hair or two.

I ask sweetly, "Alberto, how do you manage to stay so young looking." He accepts this with a gracious nod. Is that how he greeted a squadron of enemy fighters in the skies over Belgrade?

"Ah you see, I am married to a beautiful young woman, a Brazilian." Alberto just brought the weight and dignity of his presence to gild that lily 'young.'

I shall be meeting her on the Eugenio Costa, a beauty for sure and an original like many upper class Brazilians, actually a Portuguese explorer held captive by an exotic land. Did he barter her for coffee?

Do I hear the Commendatore purring to the room?

My father is before me. In his own perfection of army uniform. He's got the same look of full enjoyment. He showed it to us often over a good meal or a memorable character he's met somewhere and about whom he's getting ready to tell a story.

"Also, I go hunting every weekend on my estates in Slovenia."

THE DUMBWAITER DID IT

Roberto took us coursing up the coast road from Trieste. I knew that road well. It rode high on the cliffs above the Adriatic. Earlier in the day I'd driven it to make my sales call to the managing director of La San Marco, earning enough in one visit to term my affairs for the entire trip a success. I came away with my commission, about \$5,000, and a mysterious invitation to spend the evening with them.

The mystery was to be the Countess.

In honor of the event the company had bestowed Roberto with a new black Mercedes station wagon, the La San Marco winged lion logo decaled on each front door.

Without those winged lions it would have been a hearse.

Roberto's a La San Marco espresso machine salesman and I was his assignment.

Roberto Cacciola, pleasantly homely with deep set eyes and a hook nose. Women probably liked him. He wasn't shy of grinning like a satyr. He drove the Merc with dash and pride. In his hands it was moving like a small yacht.

The station wagon carried the three hulking espresso machines that rode in the back. They're lever style, ersatz since they actually ran on electricity. They were earnest mimes of the Arte Nuova styled La San Marco espresso machines of the 1920s. Popular in fascist bars.

This dressing up looked good, if self-consciously cheesy. Italians have a knack for getting away with such antics as well as with their pricing, \$12,000 per machine.

Each has a fake boiler protruding on top. There's even more above this, a large and elaborate fake-bronze molding of the winged lion. Lions rode atop like abandoned Hapsburg doodads.

Roberto and I sat up front. The grumpy technician complained behind me, ignored. He's sulking, like a little kid said Roberto, adding with a hint of contempt that anyway he didn't speak English.

"He's pissed off because he's missing the match on the telly," Explained

Roberto.

He gave the self contained laugh that in Italian means “this is very very funny.”

I surmised that we were going to a party of some importance, somewhere out in the bush. We like the espresso machines are dressed up. Roberto is there beside me in a tux. My orders had been simply to wear a suit.

I knew the reason for my invitation. The wily managing director expected me to write up the event for Tea & Coffee.

No choice for me but to wear the same business suit as every day on a business trip, a rumpled Cartier that I'd hang each night in the hotel bathroom, hot water left on, door closed. The suit going limp in the steam. Cheap salesman's trick. Going with my cheap and sordid hotel room.

For identity I've got on the Lucchese cowboy boots that cost me more than the suit. I wore the boots, mid calf, for luck in my selling, also for taking the courage of Kansas.

I think the Italians I've met weren't too impressed with the suit, but they loved the boots. When you met an Italian man first thing he'd do was look at your crotch, sizing up the competition, and then your shoes, sizing up your quality. No joke, Italians really do like shoes. And for them the cloth and tailoring of a fine suit were Shroud-of-Turin stuff.

Roberto was young, maybe 25. This allowed him some playfulness with me. With the tux he's got on orange socks and wore a small lapel pin. I scrutinize the pin but find it inscrutable. I tease him, are you a Rotarian?

“Not at all,” he said face playing poker, “it's a pig.” I don't inquire further. “Mr. Bell,” Roberto gave me a sidewise to get my attention. “You know how my name is spelled, I see it on all the sales offers you are always sending in. Then why do you call me ‘Cacasolo?’ In Italian that's “Lonely Shit.”

So we rode along while the sunset behind us became an exploding star in the rear view mirror. We're passing the fantasy in stone of the Miramar castle the sky melting behind it into the Adriatic.

Good enough romance for making a casual passerby horny. Gave me a sense of something silly and joyous. As it goes by I imagine a cry, a siren calling to Ulysses? No, it's that mad Carlota calling out to ‘Max!’

This strange place. It's made me strange too.

All of this land was Hapsburg domain, for several centuries. It's only been nominally Italian for less than one. The gentry landowners who were Austrians lost the legal use of their titles in 1919, the Italians in 1948. Never mind, they are still in place whenever possible.

This land is a stage production of the old Austro- Hungarian Empire where at its fullest Vienna ruled over 250,000 sq. miles of Europe covering Austria, Hungary, Italy, Czechoslovakia, the Balkans, part of Poland and Ukraine with 55 million citizens from 11 ethnic groups, 14 official languages.

We've come to the bitter end of the Trieste Corridor. The funereal Mercedes plowed at last into 'real' Italy as the world went dark.

Communism no longer squeezed in here belligerently from where Yugoslavia once was. Close as walking distance. Communism too has become an antique. Its enemies those even truer antiques, the Austrian and Italian nobility, have survived even if stranded on the beach like tanks.

My destination came near, 40 miles west and somewhat north of Trieste, this to the thoroughly slaughtered town of Aquileia. During the Roman empire Aquileia grew to be a great city of more than 100,000. That until Attila the Hun leveled it down to bare earth. It survives hardly a village.

The Aquileia area was a landscape of such phantasms, powerful medieval Catholicism, shades of a lingering feudalism. In our heads it's potent thanks to Hollywood. A living sentiment, a faux nostalgia for the Church in drag, for the Austrian Hungarian empire in scenes of waltzing girls with bare shoulders swirling about the lithe forms of effete young officers. All that. Beloved far and wide. Retch.

We've arrived at the villa, not huge, a gentleman's country house. Neo- classy and clad in its 18th century quietude. It's lit like a baseball field. We parked among the other Mercedes, the BMWs and Audis plus a Porsche or two. Even more than suits and shoes, Italians adore the purr and run of a car built for elite fascisti.

La San Marco bought the right to serve espresso to this event via its espresso machines crowned by those odd winged lions. I'm awed at life dropping me here standing in my Kansas boots from the Harry Shepler store on Kellog Avenue in Wichita.

I've been delivered to this event and I'm feeling like a debutante in the wrong

dress at The Hofburg Palace. Or like I'm naked in shit up to my neck. It's a ceremonial presentation of the season's Aquileian wine to the Contessa Margherita Paola Grafin von Cassis-Faraone.

She's to be presented with the wine from 30 vintners, their reds, whites and roses: Friuli Sauvignon, Pinot Grigio, Malvasia Istria, Refosco (an ancient wine beloved by the Empress Livia, wife of the Emperor Augustus). A mob of a few-hundred people sacked the villa, trailing smears of the hors d'oeuvres on the old oak floorboards along with pools of spilled wine.

Roberto and the technician have the La San Marco espresso machines up and running. That's good because since wine tasting was the point a few visitors were already showing an ataxic gate.

It's a battle between sobriety and the potential for a Dionysian revel. The ballroom scene's more than strange, it was antique, antiquated, superannuated, antediluvian. Most of all, it was obsolete.

Somehow I've been put into the line of peasants waiting to be received. I'd not intended this. When they told me to wear a suit they'd never mentioned bringing along Emily Post.

The rent-a-chamber quartet played Haydn to the ballroom, pulsating and crowded. Men seethed inconspicuously in the deadly serious business of buying and selling.

I'd wagered this first ever countess of mine would be standing in nice shoes. She does. They're ruby red too. Maybe the scene would go 'pop' like a bubble if she clicked them three times?

She's at the center of this grand room and looks well accustomed to being so. She's a beguiling personality. I tried imagining her farting and couldn't.

First glance and my appraisal goes lyric, secretly we're all schmucks for nobility. She's in her early 60s. Steel rod runs down her back bestowing that ineffable posture of aristocracy.

Countess possessed Mona Lisa allure. She doled out half smiles like Amadei chocolates to one and all and everything —what nicely capped teeth. Does a countess run for her office?

Her skin was most curious of all, even at a distance it's powdery snow and

strictly forbidden.

She's got this event by the balls, exerting maximum charm, moderately haloed too. Something like Our lady of Guadeloupe in cobalt perylene red organza.

Beetles sang:

"Here come old flat-top, she come groovin' slowly
She got ju-ju eyeball, she one holy roller She got hair down to her knee
Got to be a joker, she just do what she please."

The men in front one by one have been bowing their heads to kiss her hand. Lots of bald spots paraded forward. The women curtsied. Oh lord, I've never kissed a hand in my life. I'd rather curtsy.

My turn. Before I can make a move stricken in dumb-fuck stasis the Countess thrusts her hand out in handshake mode. In perfect English and giving me her bonbon smile she said, "You are the American. I've been expecting you. I have American cousins in New York."

When the greeting line trickled out, the countess came to find me, "I'm going to hide in the kitchen, follow me if you wish, we can talk. I need a cigarette and a whisky."

And we did just that for those few hours in the hard working realism of the sweaty kitchen, getting a bit wasted. It steamed too, a better kind of steam. At least my suit might look better.

We hid there among the pots and pans from an evening she probably found hard work. Beefy local women gossiped indifferent to us, rolling out the gnocchi di prugne.

Later I researched her. Margherita von Cassis Faraone came from an Ottoman-Syrian family, Christian Syrians and hence her exotic eyes. Her great great grandfather amassed a legendary fortune in Egypt. 'Faraone,' was literally for Pharaoh.

One forefather translated there for Napoleon, maybe while his troops shot the nose off the Sphinx.

The family fled from Egypt to Trieste to escape upheaval. They built the largest villa in the city, also Trieste's monumental opera house. They became widely known not only for wealth and philanthropy but also as noted collectors of curiosities, ancient relics, loot of inestimable value. Upon Egypt they'd been another plague of locusts.

Here in Aquileia they gave another villa to become the Imperial Archeological Museum of the ancient Aquileia. A Habsburg Emperor made the family noble perhaps because he owed them so much money.

Countess Margherita's title arrived to her at birth. To this by marriage she'd added Count Manfred II Mautner von Markhof, one of the prominent business men and politicians in post-war Austria. With whom she had four children. After Manfred II passed she married Count Hans Ulrich von Goess-Enzenberg.

Thus she managed to marry into two booze-mogul families, one for beer and the other for wine. Acquiring more bizarre names as she went along.

She was one of three sisters, all beauties, each marrying upwards into high-strata princely families. She was either aunt or grandmother to royalty in Austria, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Hapsburgs and Hohenzollerns, Kings and queens became kith without crowns but sitting pretty on company boards.

This kind of European nobility is exclusive, inclusive, born nigh to the point of hemophilia and prognathic jaws. They had their own museum of life, living in dioramas among stuffed dodos. Admission restricted.

So much so that they don't know, don't accept, don't care that they are all past tense. Margherita, she said to call her Gita, I did, feeling the warmth of noblesse oblige. The countess knew all about music, current affairs, history, art, literature, cooking, wine of course, perhaps beer and, obviously, men. In all Gita was the most cultured lady I'd met, the most seductive old woman by far.

Charming as she was, as the evening ended after a few hours spent in camaraderie, our conspiracy of two, she did not invite me back for cheese and crackers.

Merely shook my hand, looking me straight, gave me her half smile enigmatic as Nefertiti, and ended my passing through in a sea-wave hush of organza.

When Roberto came to fetch me he posted me an evil leer.

One day since then it came that as I checked on a detail for an article I was writing the headline of an on-line newspaper for the Trieste region made me pause.

Omicidio Contessa von Cassis Faraone.

That was tantamount to 'Santa Dead' on the front page of the New York Times.

My wonderful countess (perhaps the last one ever) had been murdered in one of the family castles in Austria. Gita had gone up there from her villa in Italy for a family meeting. There to argue about a dumbwaiter.

The dumbwaiter had been installed in the old castle a few years earlier. According to the regional Austrian government it did not meet the criteria for a historic monument.

Considerable cost would be involved in bringing the dumbwaiter up to standard. The adult sons of count von Goess, both counts themselves, were strongly opposed to picking up the check.

Their father and Gita, however, thought it best to quietly accede. The argument over the money for the dumbwaiter became heated.

At one point the younger son stormed out in a rage, probably an expensive one in rare Italian shoes, racing over frigid travertine to fetch a rifle from his bedroom. Then he murdered the others at point blank, father-brother-stepmother.

Obituary gave the countess's age as 86! I counted. Yes, she might have been 71 that evening in the villa. Guess she'd had some good help making time stand still.

The funeral of Countess Margherita von Cassis Faraone was held in the immense rococo church of San Biagio in Terzo d'Aquileia. A few hundred came to pack it tight. They gave her a state funeral production. Also an occasion for nobility to crawl out of hiding throughout a large part of Mitteleuropa, from Geneva to Sarajevo or wherever Habsburgs and such might find discount flights.

Her funeral was a major fashion event of that January. Haut couture in black with hats competing for expense.

From the video I've seen of it everyone came looking photogenic and tragic.

No higher mass was possible, droned off interminably by a self important monsignor from Trieste and a self important monsignor from Vienna, an ac/dc burial in equally self important Italian and German.

An orchestra came from Vienna, a choir from Trieste, entertainment was one of Schubert's funeral masses. It must have made the rococo gilt tremble.

More believable were the photos I saw of the mob of villagers who truly mourned her as they walked behind her coffin to the cemetery.

I wondered if they were thanking her for presiding there for a life time in a style to make them proud. In tolerance and kindness too.

Did Roberto, that lonely shit, providend the espresso there too? Attending at the funeral along with the La San Marco black Mercedes station wagon? Those three espresso machines? The winged-lion boiler ornaments?

I did see one photo among those taken at her funeral of the La San Marco logo. Made me wonder if the company had underwritten the entire event, including the murders.

Nights On Broadway

In leaving at the stroke of 5pm, by never staying late, the staff made their one timid gesture towards mutiny. Standard Manhattan office routine demanded long hours.

Cris and Robert were not unhappy with this. They could begin their happy hours, plural, when the hired help left for their long subway trek home to small apartment living. At 5pm out came their bottles and tumblers. They each kept their own stash stocked and hidden in their desks. They drank Johnnie Walker Black exclusively, always neat.

Once a week on Fridays tradition was to leave work and repair as a Lockwood squadron down to the Cattleman's, a restaurant and popular bar on the ground floor of the French Building. Serious drinking there. That's how I can bear witness to the remarkable amounts of booze the two consumed.

We workers couldn't afford the Cattleman's so Chris bought us rounds. Classic Beers and Balls. I figure he spent on account at Cattleman's per annum the same as for one of his employee's salaries.

There I'd hear stories of parties in the office, orgies across Manhattan in the night, wild times on their yacht, revelry in the Lockwood mansion on The Sound. Lottie Greenbaum the circulation manager and longest serving employee recounted with relish how Smokey would chase the women into the powder room bellowing "come out, come out wherever you are."

If you ever told these things about the Lockwoods to the people they did business with the reaction was knowing laughter. They hadn't fooled many if any. The children were so full of their little selves they assumed they were fool proof.

Of the Lockwood drinkers Cris was the most profound. Cris's drinking grew ever more problematic. Daily consumption of a bottle and more altered Cris's short term memory, then long term too.

Drunkenly he visited us many times at my home in France. He made hapless passes at my wife. The final visit he rolled away at end of the weekend semi-

conscious. I had to help get on his flight at the Toulouse airport off for a week of work in Athens. The office in New York heard nothing from him for several days. Lost weekend became a lost stretch of Scotch and gyros.

That was when Robert took charge. He flew to Greece to fetch Cris home, cram him onto a flight as a carry on. Then he had the Board strip him of authority, his crown as a haughty first son was taken away. Off he went with the DTs to a posh sanitarium in the Wisconsin woods.

The Lockwood brothers travelled manically. Even when they didn't need to, they migrated as blindly as birds. Winging off to points around the globe. More than 50% of the time they were somewhere other than in New York. Visiting clients, exploring for new ones, lost in industrial estates on four continents, trudging the floors of trade shows throughout the US, Europe and Asia.

They like me lied their way into advertising budgets. They'd taught me how to although I readily embellished my own outlandish tales of circulation, pass-along readership, market influence with far more imaginative pitches.

The heaviest part of their luggage were bottles of Johnnie Walker. Never leave home without it.

Platform Shoes

Things turned around for them in those 1990s. Robert was cunning and plotting, with nary a shred of the vision thing although shrewd enough to know he lacked it and to find people to work with him who didn't, and whose advice he deferred to. In time he bought Smokeshop a publication for the tobacco store sector and also, more importantly, Tea & Coffee Trade Journal, the magazine of reference for the global coffee and tea industries. The Company opened an office in Bangkok for its Tobacco Asia and Tea & Coffee Asia magazines.

Most important, someone convinced Robert to be really brave and fund the creation of Smoke, Cigars and Life's Burning Desires. It was a pretentious success. A big one.

Smoke immediately became the company's pride, a new consumer magazine for the American cigar craze of the 1990s and early 2000s. It carried a bounty of advertising, a glittering kingdom in luxury goods. It was a classic jerk off magazine for

young guys with Rolex watches (or for those craving one). It showcased lots of big tits. On the covers were folks like Alex Baldwin, Mel Gibson and Elle Macpherson.

Smoke as the company's first ever consumer magazine made Robert a few inches taller. It was his pair of platform shoes.

For my part I gave the Lockwoods two tradeshows, Tea & Coffee World Cup Exhibition and Symposium for those industries' global businesses and Eurotab for tobacco. I created them from nothing and put them both on the Lockwood plate. I turned the tea and coffee magazine and trade show into the showcase for the suddenly fashionable espresso coffees and espresso brewing machines.

My advertising sales came to more than 250 pages a year in those golden times. The Lockwood magazines were also publishing almost 150 pages of my articles. For a while I was perhaps the leading business journalist for the tobacco, tea and coffee industries.

While I didn't get rich I was making more than any boy from Kansas could want. I was also earning on commissions more than anyone in the company, even the Lockwoods. That proved a dangerous visibility.

I prided myself on my independence of Robert, that I was not his employee but rather a virtual partner protected by a fancy Manhattan contract. In fact, I was a Lockwood vassal State.

Robert Sacks Rome

Then there were the febrile and pathetic Roman aristocrats who had rented their swank place on a hill above Rome for a World Cup Tea & Coffee exhibition party. Robert stiffed them completely, left them holding the receipts with disbelieving looks for an entire evening of class entertainment, jazz piano, Italian crostini with spumante- and the view. The lights of the ancient city spread like jewels before Robert's penny loafers.

Or again in Rome, where he skipped without paying for the rental of the main hall of the Fiera di Roma, including the all important utilities, for a large three day international fair which the company had organized and from which it profited by a few million dollars.

Those were the hottest days on record in Rome and to protect itself from

further loss the Fair turned off the air conditioning. Nigh to 10,000 visitors dripped sweat through the hall. About 200 exhibitors looked to be taking showers. Their cumulative rage made the fair even hotter.

I pleaded with Robert to at least buy bottles of water to take along the aisles for the exhibitors. Robert didn't yield. Threats from all sides, and most especially from the Fiera, turned what would have been a great exhibition into a rout. Last day at closing the fair sent some Italian muscle after Robert to collect in full. Mean looking dark skinned fellows in shiny blue suits. Noble Roman head cooked, Robert pip-pipped in his 'don't hurt me' cartoon voice—'Help me get of here!'

To counter I gathered the tallest men around and had them surround Robert and hustle him out back to safety through the loading docks.

He would get me too in the end. I figure that during the many years I sold advertising for them I myself brought into their tight small fists, their gaping high rider pant pockets, about 20 million after commission and the small overhead I cost them. I think I brought the Lockwoods, to their own account, from my sales for their five magazines and two international trade show, up towards 100 million in time.

Being the company's agent in Italy I had the most to gain, and to lose in Rome. The debacle did cost me dearly. My Tea & Coffee World Cup exhibition was never the same. Tea & Coffee Magazine was never the same.

Rome marked our apex, the beginning of our decline and fall.

Trump World Trump World

I am in the Lockwood office, August evening after 9pm, their office windows are great black slabs of Manhattan ill omen. Not particularly for me or them, or for any of us, just remarkable as emblems of nighttime in New York, everything on edge, canyon dark coming early through the old windows of skyscrapers. Saying to me that the jittery frenzy was ebbing only as it darkened, turning sexy and jazzy.

This summer evening the office door opens wide for a self important entourage to bristle through. There's a fussing of orange, Queens-hick hair. It's Donald Trump with lawyers come like a German general to discuss terms of surrender.

Lockwood is going into business with Donald! To publish Trump World Magazine!! A magazine from shining cover to shining cover about Donald Trump himself!!! Oh how exciting it all is!!!!

Trump World is a twin to 'Smoke', aimed at the same fringe complexes of high rollers, golf bums, wannabes with serious self esteem issues. Tits again, show girls on steroids, gambling, cigars, flashes in the pan in everything. It's the simulacra on glossy paper of the vulgar, sycophantic world of Donald and Melania.

I'm involved peripherally, in selling ads for the new magazine, to the Cubans—Montecristo and Cohiba—to the Dutch—Balmoral, Schimmelpenninck –and even to the Italians for their own 'macho macho man', for Garibaldi's beloved Toscana cigars. From this my pants become stuffed with cash, enough to make me sound like a big bag of fall leaves when I move. I'm more than seduced I became complicit to what I abhorred ('the vulgar, sycophantic world of Trump). Hot glitz on toast.

A coke head by the name of Michael Jacobson, an aging adolescent, has been an ad salesman for Smoke and mysteriously is named publisher of Trump World. Robert will eventually need to bundle Michael off for a coke cure, probably to the same place in the Wisconsin woods where his brother detoxed.

You Don't Get My Vote

When the Lockwoods throw a launch party for Trump World at Trump offices in the Trump Tower, for sure Trump came with his Trump girl friend, gold digger of the moment, Melania Kraus, on his arm.

Trump was in his glory as a TV host then, top rating for "The Apprentice". Since Lockwood was involved it was of course a tight fisted miserly affair, people had to buy tickets for their drinks, grub though was free, discount hors oeuvres still cold from the freezer.

Waiters recruited from the Lockwood office (including my 16 year old son in the cloak room he was spending the summer with us in New York as a summer intern.). Lockwood staff who worked the launch were promised payment but never saw it, my son included.

Asked what Melania looked like my perspicacious youngest son replied, "kind of like an expensive whore, dad." I demurred in asking him what an expensive prostitute might look like.

Trump World failed at an enormous loss after two issues. But Robert landed on both little feet. Even though he did get stuck with whopping printing bills, which he never paid.

This escapade was not discussed much, but I understand it had soured Robert on Trump. And where one Lockwood went the others were sure to follow. Ardent Republicans in due course I wondered who they could have voted for? Voting was serious business for them.

When a presidential election was in sway they'd put up posters in the office for their cherished Republican candidate. At a point near to the election they'd come round to all their employees with a face to face nudge, "And who are you voting for?" Heavy breathing down one's back. Wrong answer and you'd be in for a long sales pitch of dubious integrity.

How does one argue politics with one's boss?

Douglas, Alive, Alive, Oh

I buried Douglas by the old vine in Les Izard's lower garden. A vine still producing, feebly, a handful of grapes. One so old it had a short trunk gnarled like an old farmer's hands.

Memory livid as I shoveled that dirt onto him of when he arrived a puppy charming and lovely. Douglas was rare, a pure bred Labrit, after gentrification called a 'Pyrenees Berger' (sheepdog from the Pyrenees mountains which are quite nearby).

As an adult he stood to just above my knee and had a medium-length off-white coat, thick and tending toward curls. Douglas himself resembled a sheep.

Ears were quite distinctive crowning above his head and then crooking down. Eyes quick and lively. A black button nose. His tongue was short, wide and candy cane punk. The tip of it was usually exposed between the white curls that draped his muzzle. Curls were thick too on his upper snout so to be partially hiding his eyes in dirty tangles. We of course never groomed him. We weren't that sort mind you.

He was something of a Benji look-alike. Even his teeth were cute. People admired him until they got too close, heard his low Russian choir growl and felt those teeth sharpening on their achilles heel.

It was the same vine that a couple of years before I'd pointed out to Isabel Hart de Bouvoir when I showed her around, the last vine left from a century gone when Les Izards had been terraced for a large vineyard.

Isabel. Lovely and charming, and a lady always, she had stooped to pluck a grape. She'd just popped it into her mouth when he, Douglas, who followed us commanding the terrain in his male dog way, lifted his leg to reclaim it with a golden shower.

"Yummy" had pronounced Isabel, enunciating the word with a steak knife to let me know in her kind and impeccably upper class British way that it was acceptable as a good joke on her.

Douglas was probably afraid to bite Isabel. If so it paid her a real tribute.

A Jezebel Called Ava

Life began turning to Greek tragedy when Douglas was about one year old. The Gods frowned on Douglas in the winsome form, blithe spirit of Ava, a collie bitch only slightly older who arrived one day to lead him into temptation.

Ava lived in a farmhouse across two large fields from us. Even to me she was delightful, tender to the touch and flirtatious.

Douglas and Ava roamed free. There were only three houses in the valley, ours included sitting above the other two on the steep hillside of Les Izards. Our view meant we could see the white hurtling body of Douglas whenever he crossed over to find her.

They'd harry the fields, disappear into the woods, then hangout at our place together flopped down like teens on ganja.

One phone call ended this. From farmer Martin ("Mar-tan" French pronunciation) the valley's resident hat-in-hand French peasant hiding his riches and his cleverness. He said he'd been suspicious that Ava was harassing his ducks. Not just any ducks. The prized fattened ducks of southwest France.

This morning he'd seen the couple scampering away leaving three ducks dead behind them. Ava's owners were not forthcoming with damages so it fell to us to make restitution. A fattened duck is a luxury, about \$50 per head, something of a quacking Lamborghini.

Not knowing what else to do we chained Douglas. Ava stopped coming around, her fate unclear. When we were at home he'd keep close, so no chain, but at night and when we were absent, then the links he'd forged one by one would clink dolefully along with him.

Farmer Martin came to visit, for gossip and a few glasses of wine. I think he felt sorry for Douglas. Strange because he mistreated his own cow herder with such abandon I wanted to call the gendarmes.

M. Martin poked the chain with a worn out espadrille ankle bare above it. Both blackened by earth and duck shit. Remarking, "But Monsieur Bell, this is surely big enough for a bull!"

Humbled, I went to town to get the lightest one available. No good. Damage done. From then on Douglas terrorized our property as a confirmed neo-fascist nipper.

He'd turned mean on the world, on a chain fit for a cow.

Only me and my family seemed safe from his ill temper. He also now barked with crazed ardor especially when a visitor arrived. I saw that Douglas performed such evil mainly for me, to protect me perhaps although I think more to show me his value as a shepherd of people who hid in sheep's clothing –and as my own dedicated bio doorbell.

Douglas The Hun

Along with Isabel Hart de Bouvoir Douglas bit the equally genteel ankles of Richard and Rita Sanders, high brow old time New Yorkers who owned the last tea packing company in Manhattan, Grace Tea. Pickled in martinis they'd arrive to wobble across our lawn a sure invitation to Douglas.

He bit Ivan Rombouts a famed coffee trader from Antwerp who had driven his Porsche down to see us, stayed to give the boys their first ride in such a car.

Douglas would take ahold of Farmer Martin when he'd come by drunk after his French lunch, too smoothed out to feel anything. He latched his teeth onto the nursery man who came to plant trees.

Others I only learned of afterwards: my brother Alan, my sister in law Phyllis, Joy Singer who had gotten my first novel published. Douglas was not particular.

I'm sure most of those bitten never told on him. I don't know why. Perhaps he was too pretty.

But I did catch more than one visitor discretely rubbing an ankle during lunch.

Ribald Race

Douglas as a star in a horror movie? His most dramatic role came at the time I sat enjoying our small inflatable pool on the front lawn. Twas the very sweet afternoon of a hot day. I sat buck naked, all cares forgotten, wife and kids away, cold beer in hand.

It was when that 20 year old fellow came to pick up my packet of photos going to my editor in New York. I used the service for my articles almost every week. Same fellow had been coming for a while, in a white Renault van.

By then I'd a 'Attention Chien Mechant' (mean dog) sign at the driveway entrance. Most people were dubious of this when they first saw Douglass radiant in his fleece. But that disbelief rarely lasted long. I had a fantasy that Douglas was quite proud of the sign.

Either the pleasant young man, an Arab, trophy of the empire, didn't see it or ignored it. Maybe he'd come so often without incident that he was lulled. When he appeared grinning, waving a friendly hello, I started straight up in alarm to warn him back. I knew Douglas was loose.

The sight of me naked was apparently more surprising than that of Douglas rushing for him, hackled and growling, doing his wolf imitation, the I'm gonna - chomp-your fuckin' head off thing.

Short canines gleamed whiter than white. Eyes slivered blacker than black. First nip and the young fellow forgot me. Me, him and Douglas went chasing and bellowing, all of us barking, through the tall weeds of my rarely mowed lawn. The can of Kronenborg phizzed-off.

At one point we three were a splashing parade hopping through the pool on tender feet.

The lawn, shaded then as now by tall lindens, is hidden from the valley countryside by an old and high expanse of boxwood. There were no neighbors for an audience for which I was glad.

Each nip sent the noise level higher.

Close enough at last I could lunge and tackle Douglas. He went down with the grunt of an emotionally disturbed line backer. I hauled him off, shut him up in the car, the nearest place at hand.

He gave what I'd call a wistful look, head cocked, steaming up the windows of my Citroen BX with a whole lot of panting. In a sudden he'd turned from a sociopath back into the unassuming Dr.

Jekyll, or in Douglas's case a winning dog of modest size.

I ran to get the first aid kit. The delivery man had sunk panting into the weeds. After I sterilized and bandaged his heels I tried to make amends with promise of a 10 Euro note.

He countered with an anguished and dolorous “Monsieur!”

A word he drew out into about five syllables while he studied my penis. Perhaps he'd not seen one before? For that looking he'd probably drink a lake of boiling piss come judgment day. Briefly I wondered if he'd have a Fatwa declared upon me. Or would he bargain for a larger reparation?

I continued regularly to use the same pick up service. But my anguished muslim youth never returned.

Offerings

Behind the house the hillside abruptly rises almost vertically. It's a wilderness, although now and then through the years I've cut back the area of acerbate tangles, of gorse and thorny brambles up to the line where the live oak thicket begins. The task is needed to shelter the house from threat of a grass fire.

So one spring afternoon when I labored over that virile weed-eater labor, Douglas came trotting by to show me the eviscerated entrails of a dead hare. I was unimpressed. I already knew all about hares, inside and out. I'd once worked on a greyhound racing farm where jack rabbits were used to train greyhounds for the Florida race tracks.

Douglas paraded it about to make sure I admired him, just beyond my reach and flashing me the half-moons of his eyes telling me this was his prize not mine. I gave him a “good boy” to send him on his way. The carcass dripped.

That afternoon I found four baby hares at the door between kitchen and porch. They were unharmed. Douglas had brought them to me, surely toting them one at a time from their nest, clamped gently in his teeth. Same fangs that had ripped their mother apart a couple of hours before.

My wife brought them in, feed them day and night from one of those plastic toy baby bottles that come filled with candy for children. The only room of the house where Douglas knew he was welcome was also the kitchen. Sometimes he slept there. Ate there. Watched TV with us.

For the two weeks the babies where in the room Douglas oddly ignored them as if they invisible. It seemed he wanted his gift to me to be a matter of honor.

The babies became young hares, all four of them. Then time dictated that I

move them up the hill into that impassable fastness.

What happened next I've no idea. Nor it seemed did Douglas.

Say Goodby To All That

My head is full of the sounds of dancing boys. Such a weird score bears witness to the funny-tragic bent of my life with dogs, from Kansas to the Tarn, Handy and the scouts to Douglas.

Merry and silly, the boys romp on the porch. I'm listening to a birthday party of many years ago, for my just-turned eight year old. There are five little boys.

Same age as my son, his classmates at the one-room country school he attends.

Cake and presents are on the table. Such things ratchet up the joyful expectations.

I stand in the kitchen door open to the porch so that I can hear everything. Including coming now the sudden erupting crash of frightened screams.

Douglas has attacked the birthday party. He nips. He pinches. He 's barking malevolently when there is nothing better to do with his mouth. There are tears of fright and pain on the checks of the boys.

I rush on stage to grab up the boys and hustle them to the safety of the kitchen. My wife runs for alcohol and gauze. I haul Douglas by his collar to the chain kept nearby, on the base of a brick column. Chain strong enough for a bull they say.

Party over. In more than one meaning. It had never occurred to me that Douglas would go after children. How can a smart man be so stupid. The kids soon quieted. No blood drawn although scrapes and teeth dents showed how serious it had all been.

OH HAVE YOU SEEN MY DEAR COMPANION

Next day we had the vet come to Les Izards with his needle. You can't have a dog that attacks little children.

So it was that I crouched beside Douglas consoling him in the last goodbye, stroking him despite everything as he died. I cried a little, for a moment or so. Out of loss, and shame.

The last from Douglas was a lone long regretful whimper. Then came the terrible quiet. A heavy silence, it has lasted in the place where he once was. His end sad for me, but how much easier to lose a dog to death.

BODIES UNDER THE COFFEE TREES

Into Africa

River runs fast and tumultuous. Before my eyes it breaks up in a white water, dashed against, over, around great slabs of rock. At a safe distance you feel its threat. You know the grandeur.

This is the savage Nile. Far lower Nile. The Nile without flocks of egret-like feluccas. No tourists come to see this in their thousands to clamber over ruins of what we don't understand.

To my mind the river might be trying to wash away the sins abounding here, in Uganda— from the country's six-year Bush War, its war with neighboring Tanzania, the decade of Caligula-like madness during the reign of Idi Amin. Plagues descended upon it of a mythic, biblical, Cecil B. DeMille extravaganza that killed perhaps one in 10 of the population in the decades after independence from Britain, in violence, disease and hunger.

Now in 1994, the mad Lord's Army roams and burns the north in feral abandon, an ongoing war of years that is hell on earth. So far in addition to their rampage of murder and rape these fanatic Christian crusaders have abducted 15,000 children from villages, taken their minds, armed them with Kalashnikovs, forced them innocence-lost into their "Army of God." I am kept safely away from that.

Uganda's beauty, many regard it as the most beautiful country in Africa, has been disfigured by such atrocities and suffering. I suppose that at the moment this is why Apollo is telling me when asked about it all, "Hee-hee. Oh yes I have seen many many bodies under the coffee trees. They say blood is good for our coffee."

The rapids spit in my face even here on the stone shelf I share with Apollo.

Apollo Kamagishu is not a god. Better, he's a jovial middle manager for the Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA). I am his assignment.

Apollo has brought me to the headwaters of the Nile. To where a mother of civilization is birthed. Nile. The thought of where I'm standing is humbling. A moment of awe for me. I'm silenced in the roar of its ancient sacred water.

The Nile is speaking incessantly, writhed here close to its emergence from Lake Victoria. We are near to the town of Jinja once the center of the country's industry until Idi expelled all the Indians. The place is called the Bijagali falls. All my life I've read of this headwater, seen it in films. David Livingstone, John Hanning Speke, Richard Burton, Henry Morton Stanley, my one-time heroes—standing above the Nile's white water I can understand those fanatic 19th century explorers devil driven to be its 'discoverer'.

This is the first of a few business tours I am to make to Uganda. At the beginning I know nothing of this exotic, perfumed place. I too am here to discover an Africa both mythic and visceral. Isn't this the headwaters of humanity? One of my own headwaters.

Apollo is a thorough guide. He is also a field specialist for the UCDA and too my very own body guard. He is short, average build, probably about ten years my junior. His face is a full moon black as a black hole, with a button nose. He's impassive and ever pleasant. He looks sedated.

Hair's cut too short to comb, skin scrubbed to a shine, spectacles too large for his skull. He could easily be one the horde of school boys I've seen in their blazers and short pants frolicking home from class in the shade of palms, banana, acacia trees. Apollo has a jaunty soccer ball of a tummy that makes his dress shirt gap.

He either begins or ends his commentaries with a brisk giggle—tee hee—or an abrupt laugh—ho ho.

To further punish these gentle, decent people, AIDS descends upon them. Uganda in my time there endures one of the world's highest HIV positive rates, a whimpering 30% of the population. The great majority of this is among heterosexuals, striking young and old. Can it be that AIDS also makes the coffee thrive?

People call it the slimming disease. Its affects are seen everywhere in bright equatorial sunshine, in darkest jungle night. Stick people stalk the streets of Kampala, the walking dead. They also stumble by in villages, they fall in the coffee orchards and lie there to die.

After a day driving the country dirt roads Apollo takes me to dinner at a food stand for a Rolex, not a watch, a chapatti rolled around egg, tomatoes and cabbage. Then he'll take me to various bars to drink Nile brand beer. Tonight after a few beers he says 'come'.

We drive out of Kampala. I feel an inexplicable anxiety as the night turns a deeper black as he takes me away between narrow steep banks of impenetrable cane. I am feeling the beer and the wonder of the countryside. This alien equator sky shows me clearly how alone I am. The Southern Cross is tilting above me.

Apollo stops in a dim clearing before a shack. He goes in alone. After a wait I see him wave for me to follow.

Inside white ghosts greet me repellent in their emaciation. They are sad in the shadows, a tragic man and woman, maybe young although that's uncertain. Their faces are craniums bulbing on chicken necks. They live in destitution. What they wear is what they have. Except for a radio, and that's too loud. They tell me we hear the Ugandan singer Paul Kekeero, his lament on death, it goes on for a bouncy 15 minutes.

Clearly the couple like Apollo. He tells me as if they aren't in the room, "These two are Dutch." I see they are dying Dutch soon to be dead Dutch.

We smoke 'bangi', raw and hard on the throat in huge reefers. They give me more Nile beer to drink. I'm wasted. Also feeling paranoid. The condition brings out like pus a white man's dread of the dark, the dark jungle, of dark people in a heart of darkness.

Apollo didn't explain why we'd gone there, or who they were, how he knew them, why he decided to smoke bangi with me. Most of all to explain what was wrong there with those two. Maybe he thought any explanation would insult his friends.

Europeans warned me before my trip that in Uganda the subject of tribal identity is best left alone. I never learned Apollo's.

On a drink addled evening at a casino in Kampala he introduces me to his chief or king, not sure which. The chief or king pokes his finger into Apollo's chest at one point saying, "This one is mine."

There are four ancient kingdoms of import in Uganda, that of Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga and Toro each with a king. The most revered of these is the Kabaka of Buganda who rules from his palace compound on one of Kampala's seven hills. That ruler now is Muwenda Mutebi II the 36thking, with his queen Sylvia.

Apollo also drives me across the Equator, several times on our voyages to see Uganda's coffee. When it happens he always alerts me to the event with shy pride. He also takes me to the shrine of the martyrs in Namugongo. That's where a century ago 45 youths were killed for their Christian faith. The story goes they were also

dispatched for refusing their favors to Mwanga II the gay Kabaka. Uganda is full of stories, mostly gruesome, some dubious, many magical.

As Apollo shepherds me along on a careful coffee agenda I begin to be uncomfortable with my importance here as an international coffee journalist and marketing consultant. It's almost making me blush, although not quite. I am a charlatan salesman.

Shaming to come with the power they imagine in me. It's such a strange fortune for someone from Kansas. But a fortune indeed and so I persevere with exhausting travels, thousands of sales calls, constant phoning, the devil drives me too.

Apollo is driving me as well, often we stop and chat to farmers, we see washing stations, hulling, drying. I'm seeing coffee trees everywhere. Vast swathes of postage stamp farms. In Uganda 500,000 farms rely on coffee. The peasants work a hectare of it at most. Their families brimming with children cling to it for survival.

Uganda, the "Pearl of Africa", the "Garden of the World", produces an above average Robusta cherry and an excellent Arabica. In good years it's smallholding farmers can produce an astonishing 220,000 metric tons of coffee. It is the most prolific coffee exporter in Africa.

More than half of the country's workforce engages with coffee. Coffee makes for 45% of Uganda's total foreign exchange income. A struggling country's one and only 'natural' resource, not counting its children.

Coffee is Uganda although the people themselves drink tea.

Under a tin roof I'm looking out over a sanctuary, standing room only, watching the preacher perform cool in the heat as if his black suit were air conditioned. The congregation before me, below me, is all black, faces upturned in a much needed rapture. But they are melting, in sweat and tears. It occurs to me there's not a white face any direction in a hundred miles.

Except for the Australian fellow on the dais with me who the preacher positioned in easy reach to grab hold of. That's surely because it's clear enough the Australian bloke with the oversized cross on his shirt front has kept his straw hat on ready to run.

Apollo stands at the back, looking at me proudly, beaming encouragement. I hadn't considered that to Apollo I might be a shining prize. Maybe he's brought me here as his contribution to the offering plate. I'm angry thinking him too insouciant. It

occurs to me he's enjoying my discomfort.

The preacher has already introduced me as a most honored guest, a world famous journalist and the son of a pastor—damn you Apollo I should never have confided that gem to you. I'm precarious on the edge of my chair the same as when in deepest Tanzania I'd been introduced one scary evening to speak to an even larger crowd of coffee farmers as the African representative of the French government. Mais Oui!

It pleased Apollo greatly to bring me here to this charming protestant church in a clearing of banana without any warning on a blindingly clear Sunday morning. Into a rural painfully lovely world of a great number of tiny African holdings. It's a plain white little church. There isn't an empty seat in a pew.

We came to visit the head man of a village, an influential coffee grower. At his door we were told to call instead at this church.

It's some kind of extremely reformed Presbyterian congregation. Built likely during British rule. Almost everyone in Uganda is Christian save for a handful of Muslims who keep their heads down. As I wish with all my heart I could do here.

A strikingly strong premonition assures me I am soon to be speaking. About what I'm incapable of imagining. My bipolar inappropriate, suicidal urge is to flip the congregation the bird, although they might not understand the gesture. Anyway, I haven't a doubt but that the ladies have machetes near at hand in the folds of their Kanzu dresses.

I am also here because of Robert Lockwood the plump 5'4" president of the Lockwood Trade Journal Co of New York. He proposed to me at a dinner over a lavish table, in his home—a prize 1920 bungalow— in Sutton Manor, an enclave of New Rochelle, republican and protestant, right snug to the Sound where his sailing yacht rode at anchor.

He easily seduced me. I accepted him and thereby became born again as his salesman, and journalist, contracted laborer on a 20% commission throughout western Europe, in Cuba and East Africa, a 'territory' of one-time colonial empires that I soon learn are not so one-time. A verbiage to explain why I am here. Et voila! How I love to use scraps of French to make me feel like I can speak the language. Making me feel European and sophisticated.

The Australian also has a story. He's traveled from a twinned congregation in Sydney to Black Africa to offer solidarity with his brethren in a Presbyterian white

Christ. Poor fellow seems to be stifling bleats as he clutches his bible between blanched knuckles.

Preacher introduces me. I wade through the Nile to reach the lectern. I manage a few polite comments on their country before motioning to Apollo. "May I introduce the Director of the Uganda Coffee Development Authority." A glance at Apollo to follow the sweep of my hand tells me I've scored.

After Apollo's agony on the cross it's the Australian's turn. But first the preacher offers a prayer, in summary, "Please oh lord reveal to this dear visitor how great is our need for a new Range Rover. That would be the model P38A . It is the 2.5 Turbo diesel. With leather interior please."

When Apollo led me out into the high noon blaze of a tropical paradise I tried to smile at the man from Sydney. He actually raised a hand toward me in supplication.

I am to fly out tomorrow from Entebbe airport. Something sad and glad for me. Driving back to Kampala we stop near the shore of Lake Victoria. The road is a fish market. We pull up beside a group of naked little boys, maybe eight years old. The lake glistens on their faces.

They are each holding a Nile perch of goodly size it seems to me. "Mere babies," scoffs Apollo. "They can grow to 200 pounds. Tee Hee." The boys each hold one fish across their joined palms, head and tail drape over.

"Hee hee. They are brave boys. There are many crocodiles here. Last year they ate 4 people."

The little boys are euphoric when Apollo buys four of the perch. One still shudders. The boy holding it spansk himself with it on the bare butt. Grins. A dead perch.

These are to be our supper. For my last supper in Uganda I am invited to Apollo's home.

Uganda's people are said to be the most diverse in Africa. Its history of violence relates in part to this extreme. The people speak 43 living languages. Most but not all are of the Bantu language family. English and Swahili are official languages.

Such disparity in what is relatively a small country, Uganda is the size of Oregon, is hard for the foreigner to fathom. No single tribe and language is strongly dominant. The Buganda people ostensibly foremost are but 16% of the population. So

much divergence is reflected for example in Idi Amin—he was of the Kakwa tribe, he was Muslim while more than 85% of Ugandans are Christian, he spoke Kiswahili.

We arrive. “Hujambo” goes round. How are you.

Two of the three children, age seven and nine, the lords of creation in Uganda, are treated with great respect. I see how they are deeply loved. Pleasant little ones but very reserved in what they say and do. These two are Apollo’s. These younger ones smile shyly. They give me side ways glances. Apollo speaks to them in what I think is Swahili.

Here I am dreading the engulfing silence of embarrassment. I inadvertently cause it by word and deed. In this place I am watched so closely. A white man guest, the first one without a doubt.

I see how I both frighten the children and cause them great mirth. Apollo says “They’ve never seen a white person except on the TV. Let them touch you.” At his urging they do this, coming up to where I sit forced onto the only chair in the room. Hesitantly, politely they put their hands between mine. Their palms are small, delicately soft, moist.

“May I kiss them?” I ask.

“Hee hee, no no, they would be so scared they’d jump off the balcony.”

They have been told to call me Babu, which I learn with a jolt means grandfather. Apollo’s wife calls me Babu too with a little bow. She surprises me, a beauty dressed in a bird of paradise wrapping neck to toe and a matching turban on top. As the evening progresses I learn this is her own dress, her own handmade and designed creation.

Her English is quite good. After a few Nile beers she’s loquacious when it is her turn to talk.. My esteem for Apollo rises in the presence of this charming lady. The couple never kiss or touch. They don’t even address one another in conversation.

Eventually she casually advises that she has her own business, making cosmetics. “Investment is welcome,” she offers regally. Apollo nods his jack-o- lantern face at me. Big mouth in a weird grin. Large white teeth flash on/off.

During the meal the third and oldest child quietly comes and goes, serving the dishes, including the perch. She’s perhaps 12 with tiny buds showing under her smock. I’ve not been told her name and ask. Apollo says “No name for you. She is our servant

living here and of no importance.”

Land of great kindness. Indifference too. And monstrous cruelty.

Apollo lives in an apartment block on the edge of Kampala. It's three stories. Half of the apartment is balcony. The children sleep there under mosquito nets. For the rest it's the room where we talk and eat. I see it is the kitchen too. I walk through a small bedroom for Apollo and Mrs. Apollo, on my way to a tiny Turkish toilet.

Carpets on the floors. Cushions for sitting. The TV. No table. They have me in what seems to be their one straight back chair. Nothing on the walls except for a sun drained reproduction of what I believe to be one of Rafael's Madonnas.

It is growing late, the young children are on their pallets on the balcony. Light wanes and what I've learned to love holds sway, the soft East African night. The apartment itself is now a large child's gentle breath. I want it to transform into a frisky tiger. The beer makes me so happy.

We adults have a single bare bulb hung above our heads and that to me is forming a yellow halo around Apollo's head.

The servant child is sweeping the room like a robot on dying batteries. She's falling asleep as she sweeps.

I know it's time for me to ask Apollo to drive me back to the Sheraton hotel. It's the one hotel for foreigners in Kampala, with hundreds of look alike rooms and too many bars, in which the rich white people passing through Uganda for whatever strange reason can speak in raw horrible shouts and belch crude laughter.

When I fly away tomorrow I'll be leaving something most rare and fine, here in this almost darkened hot room animated by the buzz of insects and the gentle breaths of young children, also my own discovery too even if rock hewn by tragedy and grief, by the Nile water coursing nearby its racking cough, violent water dashed against stones too far away to be distinct but somehow crystal clear in my imagination.

That makes me want to be selfish, to linger longer here on my straight back throne, to savor with Apollo another Nile of dear children.

But so we are now going away. I'm quite pleased for Apollo to drive me through these dark lanes of ramshackle Kampala. The Rolling Stones everywhere through our open windows. No other car on the road.

He's saying, "Hee-hee, my friend. When you are gone so very far away don't forget me. Tee-hee."



UP POMPEII

A Dancing Faun, Pompeii, I am just another creature under the volcano. With me here are three million more of my fellows in a dense struggle with time and one another. This broken cone of a mountain in my line of sight sends up smoke, a pale wreath, to form the outline of a Mediterranean pine willowing up into disappearance. I'm thinking it's a smoke signal from us all, send help.

Together with the sea the city goes in waves. It's tumbles up hills, comes tumbling down them. Sea town volcano — rhythms, interstices, palpitations— there's too much meaning in this landscape. It brings to my lazy mind a thought for life insurance. I don't have any.

The sea is the Tyrrhenian. The city is Naples. The volcano is called Vesuvius. I am named Jonathan and I'm ultimately all that really matters, the only real meaning, my body, my beating heart, my working mind. Thoughts too of should I ever die

without annuity, perish the thought, of my dear wife left to clean toilets, my children to wither without their Ivy League degrees.

The city spreads dense and low across the view from the hotel terrace. The view catches me and holds, lulls me into an even deeper reverie. I'm in its indolent sway, passive victim I, like so many countless travelers before me. Nothing new here. Nothing that hasn't been seen, written about- nailed down in Christ's palms leaving him helpless to save us- in merry song and dolorous poetry.

Even up here high on this veranda the city is a bubbling crater of activity, of noisy pursuits, somewhat irritating in its hectic going-ons that exclude me. To me the joy and fear in Naples is like that of New York's. At least they feel familiar, seem similar. But Naples's dread is more palpable than New York's. Doom is in the inescapable volcano which all here live below.

Vesuvius is coming to take the city by sulfur and lava, by earthquake, by tsunami. The end arrives this afternoon or tomorrow. If not sometime soon at least in the time of inescapable-for-sure. It will catch and kill. Perhaps even me.

The sea, city, volcano are agonizing to me in their beauty. A sunshine morning on the Bay of Naples. Beauty made all the more striking by alarm.

I've finished my breakfast on the terrace of the hotel Il Paradiso, up high on the precipitous slope of Posillipo. This is an affluent quarter of Naples ennobled by villas. Resplendent in the morning, it's a steep garden of the senses sizzling in full bloom. It also goes plummeting onto the rooftop tiles far below. This hotel is not for the acrophobic.

A slight breeze ruffles the pages of my guidebook. I've been making a mental note of which villas and places to visit in Pompeii, for the frescoes, for the plaster of Paris dead in their agonies, for the porn-then no different than porn-now, for the shit houses and the uneaten loaves of bread, for bathhouses and whore houses whose graffiti live on between our legs. These pressing matters of human experience.

My list in mind:

House of Neptune and Amphitrite

House of the Faun

Villa of Diomedes House

of the Vettii Villa Of

Mysteries

All my life it seems I've wanted to go stepping there, my feet shuffling soft and reverent. To focus my attention on every detail, sucking it up deep in my brain and gut, keep it safe for me alone, a long running video in my soul. For me today is a sacred day. At long last I'm going to Pompeii!

My trip today is not so simple, although only 15 miles. By memory I know I must walk from Il Paradiso for a few minutes to find the Funicular Station Manzoni. There to descend almost vertically between the tight cluster of villas.

At bottom of Posillipo I'm to change again at the Mergellina train station for the subway line to Piazza Garibaldi. There I must change once more, to the Circumvesuviana train line from which I am to alight at Pompeii.

This routing is an etching in my head. When travelling short or long haul by foot I've learned not to make myself conspicuous by frequent recourse to maps and other guidance. Once the course is set in my head I follow it with the dedication of a greyhound.

One treacherous pride in me is for my innate sense of direction. I'm rarely lost. I can drive across New York, Rome, Paris without a map and rarely a wrong turn. It comes from being born on the high plains. No mountains in the way it is said. Everything there is a direction, west- south and so forth. Ask for something in a Wal-Mart in Hays, Kansas you can be told 'it's on the north wall, so go east then turn...'

My failsafe is the guidebook I'll carry close as a bible or koran. Trustworthy to keep me in the right direction.

The Circumvesuviana is crowded this Saturday morning with locals heading out to somewhere or other for their weekly shopping. I marvel at how indifferent they are to the vision of a smoking, alive volcano hanging over their heads.

Vesuvius last erupted on 17 March, 1944 killing 27 and leaving 12,000 homeless. Tracking its periodic revivals through the ages it seems evident it is overdue to come bursting at any moment.

Already I've been fearing I've gotten onto the wrong train. We stop every minute. I've watched and it's taken 45 minutes to go the 4 miles from Naples to its contiguous suburb of Portici.

Ah Portici. My ghost so often with me, that freaked out father of mine came through here himself. Dad again! He came to visit the Casa Materna an

orphanage for children many of them maimed during the Allied bombings of Naples. There were close to 200 raids on the city leaving 25,000 civilians dead, and thousands more injured and crippled.

Casa Materna remained important to father. Back home in 1956 when I was seven he helped organize a tour in the States for the orphanage choir, bringing them to Wichita. Vivid in my mind because two teenage boys both disfigured by the bombings stayed in our home. At seven I was stunned on seeing that one boy had lost a hand. His arm ended in a purple gnarl. He growled when I stared.

When they discovered we had no recordings of Italian opera the boys in street English insisted on us visiting the best record store Wichita had to offer. They picked out three for us, which I still have, *Il Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, *Rigoletto*.

We comrades in travel pass on after Portici—stops are Erculano, Torre del Greco, Torre d'Anunziata—fuck, there are no *anunziatas* to help me on this milk train to nowhere. I'm giving up and fish for my guidebook in my Euro Marché grocery bag.

No Guidebook! Calamitous. I'd been refusing to resort to it since leaving the *Il Paradiso*, placing pride in my famous internal compass above uncommon good sense. By now it's been swiped by a hotel maid probably humming the Anvil chorus from *Il Trovatore*.

Something claps its hands in my face. Oh no! What stop is this anyway? Have I missed Pompeii!. Was it the last one. No no the next one.

It's right now I cry to myself, this is the *sacre coeur*. I spring up as the train comes to a languorous stop. I rush to make my exit. The Anvil chorus hi-de-hos in my head.

My life comes along held tightly by the cutout finger holds of my Euro Marché plastic sack. It's a relic of Lavour and home, of shopping for groceries our staff of life, kids clamoring for cookies, wife poking over everything. We have many of these bags at home. I always take a couple along on my business trips. Most precious.

The contents of my bag are my all, cored in the black leather passport-size wallet. Where photos of my cute boys live, my drivers license, all my credit cards, a hundred euros in bills and –and my American passport.

This is my fourth passport in five years. I'm keenly aware of it especially after the consulate in Milan informed me after the last one was stolen that if I 'lost' this latest replacement I would be subject to a Federal

investigation. Interrogation? Waterboarding? Guantanamo?

First passport was lifted at the Fiera de Milano. By well dressed young ladies from Brazil. I was visiting a client's booth, sitting safe in a business meeting. The ladies stepped in to say one had an emergency and needed the bathroom. I stood to direct her, good gentleman that mother taught me to be. The two women disappeared and when I looked round so had my briefcase. The Fiera de Milano police said they were gypsy prostitutes who worked the fair for their pimps taking wallets and such in their idle hours.

The second passport was taken in the Milan train station. When I rented a car. Not thinking I lay my wallet on the car hire counter. It went in a flash.

Third passport was also stolen in Milan. Again I was there for the fair. Town was packed. I found my reserved hotel had been given away, to a high bidder I'm sure and Italian. I tried maybe 100 hotels, all full. No where to lay my weary head. Nothing else but to go to the fair and plead my clients to help me, I knew they had inside tracks to hotels. One had one room left for desperate cases, but also advised that it was a bit dicey.

I took it. I understood what was meant by 'dicey' when I checked in at the rag tag place in a clammy quarter of Milano. I was given a towel and a bar of soap. The room had a bed and straight back chair. A sink. Toilet and shower down the hall. Men groaned loudly through the walls.

When I checked out it was a repetition, I lay my wallet on the front desk to pay. Gone in a sorrowful blink, fast as any trucker's orgasm upstairs.

"Gypsies!" commented the Madame.

Through these thefts I've become well accustomed to dumb and evil Carabinieri, block headed and bad as any culprit.

I'm registering a mild worry that no one else comes with me from the train. Am I the one and only visitor today to this one in seven wonders of the ancient world? Apparently yes, because I am the one and only earthling on the ferro concrete and crumbling platform telltale of Italian corruption in the the 1990s.

That when the train swishes off I'm left alone on a very short and sinister platform. No genuine platform at all. No normal train station kiosk. No turnstile. No

parking. No one in sight at all to ask for directions.

No stairs either at the end of the platform. I must jump down onto a rough path. Drop is no big deal, no more than two feet. But landing is onto a wild path that is swallowed up by buzzing jungle banks of reeds that are taller and more oblique than I.

This did not seem to be an entrance ever imagined by anyone to one of the greatest archeological sites ever, a most superior theme park. I feel paranoia striking deep.

Why isn't there at least a kiosk selling postcards and maps? Surely Pompeii merits it, a collection of tourist paraphernalia pointing me to where rich Romans met their their terrible deaths.

Instead I wander for a few minutes among the reeds, along the path that dwindles into nothing before me. Junk, detritus from another lost city, lies strewn among the reeds from an age of steel and motors. Mainly there are refrigerators and stoves although I do pass to my surprise an old stripped Fiat rusting on its rims.

Such as it is the path is all I have, so follow it I must. Even as I feel like bleating.

It takes me to a clearing. Four caravans are parked at angles. Such a forlorn gathering. An open fire burns. Children run in mud. No men here only women humped over chores their heads wrapped in scarves. They're scolding whatever they see as distraught women do the world over. When I sidle in they vanish. Except one who takes cautious steps my way.

"You are lost." she states in English, not a question. Accent thick as the towering reeds choking in on our multicultural scene.

"Si signora." Say I.

"English?"

"No, American." An unwise reply I fear.

"Good for you." A sneer? "Keep going and don't stop. Go fast. There will be a tall fence. Find the tear and go through."

She glares me down hard as an obvious Gadjo. Then turns on her children, dogs, the world. Mondo Cane.

A business acquaintance of mine in Rome would take me to posh dinners whenever I was in town. He drove a Citroen XM, black, smoked glass, luxury on wheels. He drove it in sunglasses, even at night. I thought of him as the aging tobacco leaf king of Italy.

“Every few months it’s stolen and the company buys me a new one. Gypsies!” He remarks.

Once he invited me to his home, a luxury apartment to go with the car and in one of Rome’s primo residential quarters. It was he who’d given me advice on the Gypsies.

“The worst place is the Central Station. Avoid if possible. The gypsies teach their little girls to lift wallets. The Gypsies use them because they know a respectable man will hesitate to hit them. Take a rubber band and wrap it twice tightly around your wallet. That way they can’t take it.”

I tried the trick and it worked. When wrapped in elastic I myself had difficulty getting my wallet out of my breast pocket. He also warned me about the gangs of little girls snatching briefcases

Once, not long later, in daylight, in Piazza Cinquecento, Roma Termini, I was suddenly encircled by gypsy girls, perhaps five or six, aged about 10, tits just starting. They went at me like a school of piranha, darting for me from every direction to pinch and push, small fingers like sharp teeth going for my wallet.

As my tobacco king advised I began to swing my brief case in a circle around me, knocking them away hard in the head. I’d ignored their child screams, fought the sense that I was abusing them. They broke away in a torrent of what I’m sure was the worst profanity their Roma tongue knew.

Dr. Emilio Lavazza talks to me in the heat of a September evening, from across our table for two in a prized restaurant in Turin. CEO and president of the Lavazza Coffee company Italy’s largest by far, one of the five largest roasting firms in Europe, among the top ten such companies in the world. He’s a man of great wealth and authority. Emilio’s regaling me with stories of his business dealings in Africa, particularly in Angola. On the last plane out of Luanda the rebels who’d taken the airport strafed the jet he rode with machine gun fire.

I like this man. He’s built like a peasant’s shit house, has a peasant moon face to suit.

It was an early driving trip for me all 500 miles from Lavour to Turin. I took my new Peugeot sedan. Trunk was packed with my business supplies, mainly boxes of magazines and rate cards to leave at visits, my suitcase.

That night for my dinner with Emilio I'd been able to park on the well lit street in front of the restaurant, Corso Vittorio Emmanuelle II. As usual in Italy a shady fellow appeared, the essential car-watching dude, his hand out for a few lire.

But when Dr. Lavazza and I come out, glowing in wine, Italian cuisine and stories, we see my car with the doors pried open, the trunk lid straight up in an erection. No car watcher in sight. I saw the car first and gave a tragic groan, besting Verdi. Dr. Lavazza, oblivious, was busy sweeping his arm across the scene, "Torino is spendido!" That perhaps a chamber of commerce cheer?

It was an eerie scene with the stunted man's name in starburst neon letters fifty feet above us—LAVAZZA—from atop a neighboring building.

Nothing left in the trunk except the boxes of my magazine samples. Discriminating readers, those thieves. Aha, but that time they didn't get me as I had prudently taken my wallet into the restaurant with me in case Emilio didn't offer to pay.

"Gypsies!" opined the great coffee man. I pondered what would it be like to be so short and have one's name screamed out loud in such a way above a great city?

Perplexing to foreigner me, such fuss made about the Roma in a land despoiled by Cosa Nostra, 'Ndangheta, Camorra, Stidda, Sacra Corona Unita, the Foggiana.

I'm arrived where I want to be at last and from the beginning (world without end). Here, where Pompeii's city wall has been exchanged by a weird magus for a chain link fence that stretches either way far beyond seeing, rising a couple of heads above mine meaning magically lifted higher than human thought.

The sons of my gypsy woman have been active. Up to my knee cap a three feet width of chain link is rolled back.

Someone, something, or both, I imagine is coming up the path behind me. I get down hastily on my stomach. I'm crawling forward, dirt in my mouth, jubilant in having ultimately outdistanced the Gods those tyrants who placed so many obstacles in my way of getting here.

Scrambling inside a steel tooth of fencing hooks my left pant leg. Rip. It slices an 'L' in the denim, L for leg or lost? That stings.

Never mind I'm in. Arrival is almost as sweet as departing. I look back at my progress. The garbage strewn expanse of fence undulates at me. Was it mockery? No just the wind fluttering the tatters of a hundred white plastic grocery bags snared on sharp mesh teeth. So many all just like the one in my grip, which I grip the tighter.

For sure this other side feels different, looks different, smells different Pompeii at last. Reminiscences on Gypsies fade, father and his mutilated orphans go too. La Traviata plays in my head with a skip on 'Addio del Passato- farewell happy dreams of the past', my golden boy infancy in Wichita, my pristine jeans, my guidebook as and big dick. The page corner folded is down where 'Naples' begins. Pompeii has me in its evil sway.

Images collide and pop away like grapes between thumb and forefinger. This sunny Vulcan land dissipates them even as it brings to mind others. What we want to see: bodies in plaster, jacking off or not (we all want them to be doing it), the shit houses, fucking raw brothels and all the wretched pornography, the brilliant frescoes over which I can coo 'oh what genius' along with all the others who're chorusing 'oh shit it's just like us.' And then the slaves. Those miseries owned like hog souls ripped from the steaming bodies. Another prurience for the mind of man to revel in.

The city spreads around in skeleton walls, fake Hollywood doorways and windows, rubble strewn and ashen. Reminds me of where I once lived in the ancient of days of my own life. A far away Lower East Side, Ninth Street between B and C, off Tompkins Square, where the landlords burned their own buildings, entire blocks, for the insurance money. Insurance? Blessed insurance, Jesus is mine.

I walk amid a lot of nothing, nothing is rubble I guess. I'm wondering as I go along if life insurance premiums might be higher just on the other side of Vesuvius in the city of Naples so crowded and noisy, where you can't take a loud shit without the neighbors smiling.

This place is striking mostly because it has no smells, not a whiff of human stink, no rich aroma of urine and shit, no unwashed hair, armpits, butt holes. The air is bereft of bacon and eggs. The tourists aimlessly stumbling about bring no life with them except to click their photos of nothing and chatter like idiots on parade.

I spot a fragment, one small cut stone. Fragment of Steve Reeves posing his muscles through The Last Day of Pompeii. I drop it without shame into my Euro Marche bag.

I'm a spy imbedded into this group of visitors. Already I've trudged a fair amount of the dead city with them. I'm captivated by their teir leader, a dusty rotund priest. I think he's fabulous. Such jolly sincerity coming wrapped in a pompous venom. He could as well lead a mega church in Houston.

I'll guess he's a village priest from somewhere in the countryside only a country bus ride from Naples although perhaps the farthest these parishioners have dared. It's a group of 20 or so, all women I note. All in black, black scarves on their heads, all holding rosaries. All are apparently lost in their fingering of beads, of their mutterings. It's an endless rosary going through the four mysteries of Christ and interrupted by exactly 53 Hail Mary's'.

Sometimes like at the moment, they erupt into song, a dirge from someplace impossible to find, probably a lullaby for the dead. The women range from emaciated to rosy, from middle age to old. This priest, their leader, is also in black, a neck to toes cassock bundling his portly figure into a burnt ham roast. He's streaked in white to the knee from brushing through, over and kneeling onto the dusty rubble of pagans.

Now he's again taking a knee while leading the women in a prayer. He's done so several times as we wander the streets. Hands clasped he stares into the dusty photo-op sky with Vesuvius in the backdrop. For this he throes back his head so I see him often looking up from under his black flying saucer hat with its wide round brim. He's got serious razor burn on an effeminate toadyish throat.

I think the prayer he gives is the same at each of our stops. I've come to believe it's the prayer to Our Lady Of The Rosary of Pompeii.

From the depths of my bitterness I have lifted up my voice to thee, O Queen of the Rosary of Pompeii, and I have felt the power of that title so dear to thee. Hail, I shall ever cry, hail to thee, thou Mother of pity, fathomless ocean of grace, sea of goodness and compassion!

The supplication includes singing by the women, a bone-rattling harangue at the heavens. For such a civilized nation Italy still knows the incredible primitive. Each woman fingers her rosary for tactile aid. Can there be something erotic there?

I'd joined this group after realizing what a standout illegal alien I am here having no ticket, which occasionally is demanded. This group, including unbeliever me, goes past that without a 'Halt!'.

We are now standing in awed silence before a display of the twisted dead.

Priest prays ardently. Women sing with more enthusiasm. This is the high point of their visit. I wish to laugh because it seems obscene.

The group has ditched me. On purpose I think. My identity is gone with them, I am again a nemo, a wanderer without a guidebook. Suggestive status for an outcaste. I see myself discovered, disguise ripped away. I'm going to get caught!

Afternoon slides into longer shadows. No matter I still have time for the Villa of Mysteries one of my ultimate concerns. Wandering wandering. That gypsy woman could so easily direct me if she were here by my side.

Then in a mini miracle I see a sign for it. In English no less. Shit does happen. The villa, what's left of it, is right in front of me veiled in the mystery of its own dust.

Someone to my side is asking for my ticket. It's a man in a uniform, a cap even. I think he's a Sicilian impersonating a Neapolitan. He looks like the man who gives the weather report on Italian TV to an audience of one, alone me masturbating in any one of my one thousand and one hotel rooms.

I understand nothing he says, Italian gaining in excitement sentence by sentence. He glowers at me a hand gripping my upper arm. I'm pulled off to stand in judgment before a young woman who seems in charge.

"But you must have a ticket." She is saying. "Everyone has a ticket!" She looks in my bag, confiscates my rock, casts me a look of contempt.

My desperate mouth is saying, "Strip me! You'll see I don't have one!" "But everyone has one."

"I don't even know where I would get a ticket?"

"At the gate! No one comes in except by the gate." I sure wish there was a knob for turning her off .

Young woman with a fat bottom, she is so excited. "Show me how you came in." I bet she has a poster for the Titanic movie on her bedroom wall. DiCaprio and Winslet in a kiss as disaster looms for them in an iceberg rather than fire and brimstone.

So I lead them, our clutch of first responders, with only a few wrong turns to the tear in the fence. They stare at it. I think dumbfounded. Then they break into

spiccato, turns into stoccato Italian, in Neapolitan by the guard, in Florentine by the young woman who's surely an archeology student sent here to recoup looted rocks. Is she regretting she didn't strip-search me?

Only a dolt could have missed this train.

In the end they've let me go, after having me buy a guidebook and a ticket. I've been marched to the train, so simple a way. I've been put on the train with my bag which thanks be to Madre di Dios is still in my hand.

This train will stop at Mergellina the strident young woman assures me. First I must buy lots of bottled water. Tourism's left me miserably parched. Trip back, guzzling industrial water, I can't escape a feeling of disappointment about my day. Pompeii now at end of my trip is just as vague as it was when I started out. Nothing learned, nothing gained. Something's gone wrong.

By the time I'm arriving in the end at Mergellina I sit pumping leg in urgent prayer, please don't let me piss on the linoleum of this train car.

And that requisite brings me here now to stand in the station's men's room at a urinal, dick in hand head lowered to study it in reverence.

I know indubitably that this large basement toilet room is crowded to beyond its capacity with the bodies of adolescents and young men. I'm the oldest fellow in here. They now start acting up in the recesses of the toilet stalls. Practicing their parts for the evening's performance I see them.

Shame on them I think and I begin to hallucinate that I am come to life from Pompeii a breathing fresco man with hot ashes in my mouth. And these young men dance for the faun, and for me, stinging sweat flying off of their naked torsos.

I'm taking my sweet time washing my hands, bent over the faucet so that looking up I can sneak peaks in the mirror of the room behind me. Most curious scene there, one to cause a Southern Baptist from Tennessee to shit himself. The men-slash-boys are taking off their clothes.

They go fast so that soon the throng are down to underpants. White briefs in varying stages of raggedness. They are lean, all of them, not a plump breast or thigh among them, lean verging on scrawny. Every belly button in sight protrudes. Skin ranges from pale to the natural tan of the mezzogiorno.

I'm wondering vaguely if they are a poor circus troupe, maybe jugglers and

acrobats preparing to do street acts on a Saturday night in Naples.

They ignore me, if it weren't for myself in the mirror along with them I could think I'd become invisible on my train ride back into the city.

If I catch an eye in the mirror there's nothing furtive. Those eyes behind me are not even seeing me, locked on their own pursuits. Ancient Mediterranean eyes. I feel no threat here, none. The boys frolic while I age by the second. That's a clip running in the mirror of a fresco come to life of young revelers in jubilant motion. Maybe I managed to successfully steal it back from Pompeii, a memory unconfiscated.

They seem for the most part to be good humored, some cavorting, others in loud banter their voices competing with Wilson Pickett, what's now playing at full volume on a cassette tape deck. Some dance along.

I'm gonna wait 'til the midnight hour
That's when my love come tumbling down
I'm gonna wait 'til the midnight hour When
there's no one else around . . .

Now they come crowding in on me, half a dozen shoving to get a glimpse of themselves in any spare few inches of the mirror. Grins, naked shoulders, nipples, even one of the protruding belly buttons somehow gets into the frame to urge me to take up less space, to hurry along.

They need the mirror I'm seeing for putting on their makeup. Lots of it. Too poor, too exiled to have anywhere else with mirrors. I understand. They are boys of the night.

Someone's rewound 'In The Midnight Hour', it's playing again. Life lives thick and heavy, sour and sweet, guided and unguided.

Quick check. Oh please. Yes, I still have my passport.



Wroxton Abbey in the snow, near Banbury, England. A true Jacobean masterpiece. My bedroom was on second floor third window from left.

WROXTON OPON JEWISH CRACKERS

“Pass me the crackers, please.” Silence cool and abrasive from those nearest me at the table. We are seated for a formal dinner in long rows with the life-size carvings of two Old Testament prophets behind us. Chatter is sluggish. No musicians in the gallery above to cheer us toward an evening getting wasted at the North Arms.

A row of immense chandeliers 20 feet overhead cast this enormous room in bronze age un-enlightenment. And Judy Levine across from me already at age 20 moves inexorably toward death from anorexia. It won't be long I see, the shadows of her face are lengthening into end stage starvation.

“Those aren't crackers, Jonathan, you shlemiel!” she's laughing at me, skull face opening and closing like a trick skeleton's on a horrible stalk neck, deep sunken eyes glinting—Judy is the one fellow student she approves, probably because I look like her daddy who she is compulsively referencing and have his name. “Jonathan, these are matzah. This is our Seder meal. Don't you know anything!” My brain is disfigured by the acid so I can only growl at this mystery. “You don't know this is Passover Seder! What rock did you crawl out from under!”

Student body here at Wroxton College is roughly 50% American Italian, 50% American Jewish. There are three American Irish. I make it the 53 of us. I am the one phenomenon. I am not from New Jersey. I am a WASP. I wear real cowboy boots too with long johns, yellow piss stain included.

This school is called Wroxton Abbey, a grand county house from 1618 which shows off its owners greatness even if they were dumb as Cheddar cheese.

Never mind me I'm in a trembling, stumbling frame of mind. It's the acid. I took a tab about an hour ago although existential time by now is as flippy floppy as Dali's pancake clock life in electric glow bold only the second hand moving. Acid seems so far to be going well with the 17th century surroundings.

I bought the acid from one bartender at the North Arms. A strapping 'lad' at least 10 years older than me. Everyone here is a 'lad' unless they didn't pay for the use of the word. He sold it for a pound. Such an outlaw price screwed me well. Here it's strictly a seller's market in this village of Wroxton where we don't have cars, where we've got no bus service, where to source the essentials—cigarettes, sex, beer, drugs—one must walk up the winding road to the pub.

Go up through the high stout gates separating us, we Americans from them, the musty black mold locals who look upon us as aliens from some distant daily-soap 'n shower place who answer ads to come here (I did this myself) not only to be screwed but also to pay a lot to be fucked, boys and girls alike in a gender indifferent riot of pasty bodies, unzipped corduroys and greasy hair. Or be tripping like me still sexless through the daisies.

One stands at the bar trying not to show one would rather be dead than look like this is home. I'm blending in well to the furtive here, pub-dim hick wickedness, a

nearly naked cripple gone cum sticky from pools of beer, trying without success to hide my pubic bugles, dressed in nothing but matching fashion braces. In an uncheery unwholesomeness of air cooled and dank racial, class, cultural resentments. Carcinogens. I love it all except for being here. Dank. All here is dank. Merry Old Dankness.

That's where I was this afternoon, loading up on dankness at the North Arms. Smoking Rothmans, drinking . Wroxton is a place of not much more than 500 souls. It's an antiquated village of no shops, no businesses, no doctor or dentist. No nothing except for for three meandering rows of squat seven-dwarfs structures, thatch roofs, mullioned windows, a thicket of chimneys sprouting like weeds from the thatch, like stubby dicks in pubic hair. All that in my teeming head jarring with too many tv antennas.

The current version of the 'the House' is 1618, a Jacobean beauty in mellow ancient stone. Cotswold stones. It has a truly great great hall, where I am floating at the moment, also a rare extant late Elizabethan Minstrels Gallery, which if I throw back my long hair I can see almost in its elegant entirety although now long locked up in saddening silence.

On floors above me are 45 bedrooms. That's where we students sleep, two to a room. Me, I'm stuck with a totally nonsexual non interesting non verbal rock of a roommate with a sneer for all and everyone. He tells all often he's from Shaker Heights. Once he spake thus, "MMMM, Kansas City Kansas (where I was temporarily from) some cool place". Sneer. Double sneer. I am proud that I no longer know his name.

A 'Stately Homo' this to be sure. In keeping I am surrounded by a few young homos. I learned so the first time I took a shower in boys shower room where once naked I caused a brief silence part enmity, part lust. This has been my cross, so-shy and timid me, since the first public showering and showing of my well hung boyhood.

The house sits in aloneness stark in the midst of 56 acres of parkland. A house with a renowned library larger than all but 12 public libraries in Kansas. where I have never been, with a 400 year old chapel, where I have never been. With a large minstrel's gallery where I have never been even though it stretches in splendor across one entire side of the Great Hall.

A country house with 45 bedrooms and not-a-one into which I've been invited, or lured. With a Ha-Ha where I shall soon be, with no companion there to laugh at my pain in the night but myself at myself.

Taking a backwards glance I suppose it's evident that my time at Wroxton was too ejaculated with the spillage of beer and cannabis, acid, stifled lust. Such killed much of my curiosity. Sank the surviving in the despair of a frigid clamminess.

I'm hardly famous so my residence at Wroxton is not even a footnote anywhere but others of fame have taken a shit there. Its house guests include kings James I, Charles I, George IV, William IV, Horace Walpole and Henry James. I insist that my room had been Henry James' it had a maximum quaint view of the road winding off toward the front gates. Roof tiles were mottled by green and golden lichen. Odd but I never saw a pigeon on the roof of Wroxton Abby so assumed that when our backs were turned they were marshaled out and shot leaving to grieve their plump wives and fat greasy squabs.

That is how at age 20 I slept vicariously with the great bore of American letters and felt his sticky fingers on my bare hunky dories.

Nothing can be more scenic than the small English village of Wroxton in the county of Oxford, in miles about a fiver or so from Banbury (surely every one knows about that place if not then they had a miserable excuse for a mother). Bonanza of overly ripe Cotswold stone and comical thatched roofs that keep the tourist coaches coming, buses that is for Americans, packed tight and spewing exhaust fumes as they parade bumper to bumper across an area 1-10th the size of Rhode Island.

About Banbury we imps matriculating at Wroxton College, such as myself, even sang of it of yore, 'ride a hard cock to Banbury Cross to fuck a fine lady upon a saw horse.' Such learned delirium.

I saw it first in a snow fall looking like a forever quaint village trapped in a snow globe in a small glass ball just turned upside down so that a mini blizzard is bringing silence to its lanes.

Fairleigh Dickinson was known then to many as the school that flirted constantly with bankruptcy. One that had a dubious academic and social reputation to the point where it was known I was told as Fairly Ridiculous. I knew this up close because my father had a friend from his years at Boston University in the 1930s, Fairleigh Dickinson jr. and who then became Col. Fairleigh Dickinson. This man had given the money to create the school. Or was it vice versa?

Ad Nauseum.

"Jonathan! You are so meshuggeneh." Maybe, whatever that means, but you Judy Levine are so totally insanely fucked up. She actually says things like "I have to weigh myself every day, my daddy insists on that. My daddy cares for me. My daddy's

so good. Daddy calls every day to ask me what my weight is.” I bet he does, the asshole. I assume his guilt without a trial. Since I am guilty of fomenting much trouble and grief. Don’t I have the right to judge others?

Ad Nauseum. Tragic ad nauseum. Oh how the Stones play on in my head.

War, children
 It's just a shot away
 It's just a shot away
 War, children
 It's just a shot away
 It's just a shot away

Judy Levine—By summer you’ll be dead and in a New Jersey cold cold grave. I regret that. Hope someone brings you flowers. You better not tarry, you don’t want to go on and on in weightless spaceman anorexia? She got toothpick arms and legs. She got dead person neck. She skull head most terrible to consider.

There are many ‘kids’ here with problems. New Jersey must be full of problems. Too much licence, too much money, not enough lovin’. I don’t know the root of their sicknesses. Nor mine. My own best friend here is an obese girl with hair down to the floor.

Now at my elbow I have the wonderful crotch of the waiter at my eye level, delightfully plump. Temptation is to slyly reach for him and grab those haunting bulges. If only I had the courage to gently roll them between thumb and forefinger. Listening for a gasp of surprise. No, as usual I sit perplexed and miserable hiding my lust too well even from myself.

I sit dumb as Stilton. “Sir, will it be fish or meat tonight?” He’s dolled up in a tight white coat, gold tinted buttons, in white gloves. He’s wearing blue jeans. Round sweet pudding face, blond straw hair. Serving knife and fork grimped professionally, he’s likely a fresh graduating spotted dick of a restaurant school in Birmingham.

He patiently repeats the question. His head lower, his pouty lips brushing my ear. He’s a good looking, maybe two years my junior. From the village of course.

“I don’t know, “ I blurt out to him with a nervous titter. “I’m on acid.” This leaves me stunned. Could I have been so loose as to let that slip from my lips?

Waiter’s head droops even lower, conspirator’s voice from him catching my

attention: "That's OK sir, I am too."

Later on in that spring term I fell into the ha-ha.

It happened one night after smoking some great weed. Encouraged by drinking an outstanding quantity of bitter and then walking at a trot through the fast darknes behind the great house, alone in the dark, in the expanse of being stoned, walking too fast trying to catch up to myself to catch a girl, or was it a boy? I strode in pursuit of whichever pleasure, through a most dark night, across the most great lawn, past midnight and the field mists were arising.

Suddenly I heard myself scream, sad admonishing scream. True ejaculation.

My fall quite a literal one and not at all a fall from Grace or such figurative nonsense came so precipitously so suddenly that I had no chance to brace myself, to break my fall into hell spectacular what with wings afire the Christian judaic god ot theirs playing drama queen in a role fit only for Milton.

For those in ignorance, a ha-ha is a road built on a lawn for gardeners to hide their tools of work from the delicate eyes of the gentry. A ha-ha is so to preserve a noble lawn, its millionaire's vistas without any reference to the toil by local yoemen to keep it beguiling. Often, as at Wroxton, a ha-ha is treacherously concealed by some clever craft of landscaping art. It can be quite deep, mine fell to more than six feet. At Wroxton it was so well concealed that most students didn't even know it was there. Including me.

Upon falling into it I lay crumpled at its bottom for some time. I made a few hopeless agonized pips. That was all. Reviving I realized I couldn't walk a step without bellowing for mother. I'd again hurt my Kansas City Structural Steel knee and ankle.

Nothing for it but to start bawling, a stirk that's bumbled into a nasty surprise and now thinks it's his in extremis.

After a while some other wandering doper or drunk heeded my distress call. I finished the term in another leg cast. Most fellow students gave me a great deal of attention where I was propped up in a rented wheelchair in the great room, beside the immense carved fireplace looking appropriately comely, somewhat of a wounded warrior with long hair and reddish brown beard.

It was said by someone I remember that the resemblance between us, Jonathan and the ancient carvings was such that it was if I'd turned to wood. Become a craven

carved image to match those pillars sustaining the massive mantel, one of those two Old Testament prophets, the stouter one I think with a tremendous wooden sorrowing face, florid locks and beard and worm holes like freckles around the sightless Miltonic eyes.

Wroxton had two resident tutors –namely Ms. Hilsden, Mr. Reefer. They didn't and still do not seem to have had given names at least for this writing I can't find any any that would fit better than Hortensia Hilsden and Arbutus Reefer. Perhaps these names are what they had? Sue and Jim just would work. Needles to mention, I at the time thought them genuinely eccentric.

They were both sexless, wraith thin figures, long frail arms, veins protruding, no more than stick legs, nonexistent buttocks-- empty bra on Hilsden, crotch on Reefer with a for rent sign on it. Together they were a pair of haughty skeletons especially Reefer. Since half the student body were Jewish no reference about them was made to death camp survivors although they looked it.

Both were caricatures of the British upper middle class (how should I know? But I did then), both extremely patriotic when that like class was out of fashion.

Hilsden was so I think because she was most likely an only child of elderly eccentric parents. She had the mind and posture, the clothes, of one. Reefer was even odder. He was the American passing for a Brit, aping accent and sniffy attitude , wit and knowledge.

He'd gone to Trinity at Oxford. She, a step down in rank, to Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford. Grand stuff, that to us gaping Americans who mistake archness for brilliance.. But from the looks of him must have contracted some horrible ailment, hence his Skeletor look and that he seemed to be hiding out at in so inconspicuous a nonentity of a place as Wroxton.

During the course of my time at Wroxton and to everyone's mystification he fell in love with a student, the most statuesque and lovely of the women there, with an abundance of flowing red hair. A beauty for sure. They became engage. What happened to them is a secret closed to the ages.

Hilsden last I knew was still teaching at Wroxton. How she'd endured is beyond me, or rather how they became resigned to her. One big bullock of a fellow raised some hell with her by wearing his exceedingly tight jeans of the time with the crotch cut open, he without underwear, so that his balls rolled about on display, cock squeezed out

like toothpaste, and realized from the angle at which he lounged for her it was all even more lurid. She was the most boring professor I'd even had and that's in an ocean of bloody tedium. Even his ample manhood couldn't arouse her from her droning tediousness.

That room was actually the library of the great house. The Wroxton library was built on two levels and took up three walls, It held several hundred volumes. A memorial to 'culture' something that by 1970 had already come to seem antediluvian.

It would serve well as a set for a long and tedious biopic of Henry James.

Much about Wroxton Abbey seemed pompous to me. One to my shame I snuck into the ballroom where our class was held and wrote on the blackboard "Reefer is a Pompous Ass." How callow. When Reefer saw it he looked round at me saying "only one of you knows the word."

Sitting there I could hear the pompous voice of James. "I am afraid there are moments in life when even Beethoven has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst moments." I think not.

Queen Juenne

The ill fate of Troy, of the Lockwood Journal Company, started with booze. Those thousands of bottles of Scotch, mixed with Cris, arrogant and stupid, Robert, recreant and mendacious. But Juenne pinned the tail on the donkey.

Robert hired her as a saleswomen, the first woman ever as such. Then after a few months he suddenly to the surprise of all named her company vice president, telling the staff to report to her and her alone. This was an office coup unheard in Lockwood history, no one without the name had ever held such authority.

It caused indignation among the others, uproar, barricades were thrown up in the bullpen. Cobblestones flew threw the decaying air of the library.

Even I off alone and thriving in France became a person of interest since by then after Robert I was the key person in the company. But Juenne demanded for herself the place between me and Robert.

I informed Robert this wouldn't work for anyone. He whined, "Can't you try, Jonathan, please." I told him the truth, she wouldn't understand the matters I needed to bring to his attention and there was no time to educate her. Obviously, I myself had acquired a touch of arrogance.

It became apparent I needed to spend a week in New York to seek a solution. I arrived to find far more of a mess than I could have guessed. Robert had become seriously smitten with Juenne.

By association with Cris I knew what kind of women the Lockwood boys favored. Dish-water blondes, flirts flying blimps in front like Hindenburgs.

A short woman, of course, at the end of her 30s. Spoke in a gushing Carolina drawl. Dressed younger than she was. Wore too much makeup. Spoke to you too close and with a hand on your forearm. TikTak breath. But Oh those breasts. Robert must have been straddling an Oscar Meyer Weiner when he found the courage to hire her.

That visit to New York was fraught with suspense as Robert took me for long walks around Midtown while he babbled in a hyperventilating way about Juenne. Walking through Bryant Park I feared he'd have a heart attack relating how he'd fallen

for her immediately. At first sight he became so besotted with her that in the 14th century he'd have been judged bewitched.

Late nights in the office there'd been blow jobs. Ultimately they'd fucked quickly, manically, in the library, on the table top below that worshipful photo of the family boat.

Robert's first infidelity or so he blubbered to me. I think it so, he was too frightened of everything to have committed more.

Not Your Average Lockwood

Virginia, Robert's wife, I'd known well for years. When people met her they were in disbelief. Virginia was a true beauty, very much an Ava Gardner type, slightly taller than him, a captivating face with emerald eyes. She came with rough edges, from a working class family, louche grammar and chewing gum. Virginia had married Robert when quite young, probably pregnant.

Her mother, famous in office gossip for finding Robert disgusting and saying so, publicly admonished her beautiful daughter, "Keep yourself nice, Jenny, you never know who might come along."

He asked me to come for Sunday dinner at his home in Sutton Manor on the same street where his mother still lived. That afternoon was a scene from a play by Clarence. Good laughs what with Virginia sweetly in the dark, Robert almost incoherent, his knees going gang busters, and me for the conniving servant.

"Don't tell Virginia whatever you do," I counseled. This as Robert returned again and again to his compulsion to confess. He was in such a sweaty dither that I insisted that afternoon he should talk to his friend who was a shrink. The only friend he apparently had. He did it whimpering on the phone. Shrink told him what I had. Do not tell Virginia!

No good. Robert leapt with his lemmings. An hour after I left to drive back into the City he told Virginia.

I had witnessed Virginia taking sad mute walks in the gardens of the Greenbrier Hotel. I'd seen her turn herself off like a radio. One beautiful and troubled lady.

All Fall Down

That spring evening after Virginia heard all about Juene she bugged out.

Screaming obscenities into the Republican, upper middle class, Sutton Manor night she threw all of Robert's possessions onto their front lawn. The neighbors gathered to gawk standing safely back from the incredible morass of clean Fruit of the Loom, on the safe side of their manicured and madness free property lines.

Robert, horrified, tried to reason with her. At the commotion his mother, Kitty (nee Catherine, living only a few yards away) had arrived in a rush, also trying unsuccessfully to calm her screeching daughter in law.

Raving on and on, Virginia dashed about with a kitchen knife ripping up his clothes. That was when Kitty phoned emergency. Virginia was taken off in restraints. It took months for her to recover and when she did she stripped Robert bare of money and possessions. Only the company and the yacht could be protected, those she never got near.

I was asked if she could really have loved Robert that much. No, I think madness was in her nature plus the chagrin for having put up with him for so long only to see him get shaken down by a hussy.

Juene sued for sexual harassment. The Lockwood Trade Journal Company board of directors, all the Lockwoods, settled with her for a quarter million.

Nevertheless Robert remained president and the Lockwood ship sailed on through the storm. I sailed along trapped in the rigging. Robert never once alluded to that afternoon, not to me. For years after I watched him in his life's progress amazed as he shouldered on as if nothing had happened, proceeding on in his cloud of unknowing.

MA!

Catherine Lockwood, Kitty, was of similar height to her sons yet so much bigger. Among them she made a beam of light. For that they clamored at her in their need like hungry baby birds. "Ma!"

After moving to France I visited the company often in New York, spending time in the office to schmooze. I'd stay with old Mrs. Lockwood. Since the death of Smokey she wandered alone in her big house. Kitty their mother. In her late 70s.

Early of a morning I'd watch Kitty from the guest room windows stepping out of the house and down her front lawn to the Sutton Manor dock and boathouse. Catch her making a lady like progress toward her morning dip.

She did the same every morning going down for her swim in a demur black bathing suit indifferent to her sagging buttocks and breasts. Her skin was burnt parchment ruined from far too much sun incautiously taken on various waters, on an assortment of yacht decks.

Kitty's father had been a professor at Cornell where Smokey met her. Everyone in the family went to Cornell, just as all were boarded at private schools. Everyone sailed. All were oddly subdued, even tedious.

The children were ashamed of her. I saw so in their eyes, part in resentment for her being 'a tad eccentric', inimical they thought to themselves? Also because Kitty held to a deep Catholic faith while the rest of the family were terminally lapsed Methodist. Her children resented that catholic taint in their blood. Blacks, Hispanics, Democrats, Catholics, all those threats. Their petit Weltanschauung shrank at each passing generation.

Also, as she aged she became a bit batty. She'd scrutinize you up close, pushing her wizened face at yours, tickling strands of gray hair and her crackling voice asking a question about Pascal. Yet a loving, gracious, brightly smart creature. I more than liked her, I was smitten with her.

Kitty and I we drank sherry. It was very good sherry. Fino, Manzanilla from around Cadiz. Kitty got titterish, I got loaded.

Kitty excited, hops from topic to topic an old budgie. She'll ask me in her bird-bright way about the Cathars, the poetry of W.B. Yeats, the masters of the Italian renaissance. It's a groggy uncertain voice. Many diverse subjects she skips about in as I refill her glass.

When she died I saw in her obituary that she'd been known as the 'matriarch of Sutton Manor.' She did deserve a title, something more honorable than 'Mother of Lockwoods.'

Almost To The End

Credit for listing the Lockwood Company to starboard is mine. I took Robert on when I first caught him poaching in my preserve of advertising clients.

I knew he'd grown envious of my success and greedy enough to covet my clients. To protect myself from him years before I'd had a smart Manhattan lawyer draw up a contract that was as strong as could be made.

But then on a business trip to Italy someone whispered to me that Robert had taken a stray from me when I wasn't looking and claimed the commission for himself for years. The steal amounted to about \$40,000 that ought to have been mine by contract.

Confronting Robert with this was informative. He blithered off into a script of lies, handling it by refusing to admit it existed. I called in my lawyer to brandish my club, that if he didn't pay me my due I'd take him to court and worse, I'd leave him. It worked. He paid.

But I'd made the mistake of making the unthinkable real, that we could somehow divorce. When I'd joined the company 35 years earlier, a wise old editor had told me, 'never think you're indispensable. You never are'.

Me, I Did Prove Dispensable

Tradeshows were sensitive matters to me. The two I'd created for the company from nothing, World Cup and Eurotab, together had grown to mean several million dollars of profit for them. World Cup was held every two years. For the Vienna edition I billed 1.5 million in exhibition space to the Lockwood account. My commission on space came to \$200,000.

Robert would not pay.

I argued, then threatened. I thought he'd back away. He didn't. Then I felt the fury of the righteous and had my lawyer cite Lockwood Trade Journal for breach of contract. Robert fled from New York and me on The Indian. Sailing incommunicado. A Viking funeral that burned us alive at our respective funerals.

In the end the court gave me no more than the amount I was owed. That was a pyrrhic victory, I'd asked for a million. Small satisfaction that Lockwood & Co almost immediately began to slip into decline without my sales. They lasted less than another decade.

The Indian being one of the largest wooden yachts on the East Coast was given to a museum. The insurance on it I heard was too much for Robert to bear post divorce.

That splendid dainty mansion on The Sound? The family kept it for a few years after Kitty's death. Then it fell from their sausage fingers due to Robert's clutching at money, his refusal to pay for a new roof allowed the next hurricane to enter and wash down all its insides. It was bought for a pittance by a venture Capitalist.

Suddenly Last Summer

The company ended its days in arrears to all and abiding in a couple of rooms in a walk up over a motor scooter parts shop in Long Island City, NY. Not far from the very neighborhoods where the Lockwoods had consigned so many employees to live.

On 20 June last year the Lockwood Trade Journal Company closed down. It earned no obituary for its 150 years of life, only a terse notice on LinkedIn — OUT OF BUSINESS JUNE 2020. To my knowledge no one was sad. Not One Tear Fell.

¡HOLA! MEANS HELLO

I dye my hair. I've done so since my 30s going back to when I started turning white, a family thing. Hair is long so it takes a while. The roots are bitches. Whatever the labor it's better than looking like bleached road kill. For me, Death of a Salesman all over again.

My flight from El Paso to France begins tomorrow, Sunday. Two transfers to make reality flip. Friday, yesterday, I went to buy the dye product I use and trust from Walgreens.

First thing back in France I'm off on a business trip to Bologna. For that I want to look my salesman's best, younger and cooler than I am. Dyeing is a subtle dusting of the same color as my eyebrows. In a friendly light that takes off a good few unfriendly years.

Drugstore offers about 50 choices but at last I find the right box. All the boxes look the same so one needs to look sharp. Back at the house I apply it as usual.

Taking off the towel I gave the first audible gasp of my life. There in the bathroom mirror to my shock and awe instead of a light walnut brown my white hair has transubstantiated into a shocking jet black. It is a glossy midnight black. Hair blacker than an evil alley in Juarez.

In panic I shampoo three times. Rubbing it hard, harder still, till my scalp turns a blister red. It burns too, a head on fire. Most likely hotter than hell fire.

Seems to be getting blacker if that's possible. Frankly the color against my Celtic skin turns me into a washed up Italian gigolo or worse an aging catamite.

I have to do something. Saw no alternative other than shaving my head even though I've never done it before and have no one here to help.

It's gone as horribly wrong as the dyeing. I've ended up with a skull of hairy ridges, blotches of black stubble mixing with patches of the now raw scalp, also a couple of bloody scrapes.

A few month's back I'd read in 'The Times' about teenagers rampaging down the aisles of hair dye and wantonly mixing up the bottles and boxes. Why did I laugh

then? It must have been a warning from God which since I don't believe in one I'd ignored. Samson Agonistes.

Then in frightened despair I simply gave up. Took three aspirins. Guzzled a six pack of Tecate beer I had in the fridge and passed out with the TV on to a rerun of "Baywatch."

Today, to hide my head I wear a white knit ski hat found in my younger son's bedroom. It has a bright red 'Coors' label on the forehead and is crowned by a scarlet pompom. But at least I can go outside to fetch the mail.

I should explain that I've been in a wheelchair on and off for years. But I've been better this summer of 2004 using the chair only for going out on more demanding errands, like for wheeling down the aisle to find hair dye at Walgreens. Otherwise I'm in leg braces.

My braces are black fashion accessories on my hairless legs. They're made of some kind of nylon indestructible fabric probably invented by NASA. They are cinched tight above and below the knee by Velcro straps with pliable metal strips running on both sides of the leg from lower thigh down to mid calf.

I've worn them every day from waking to beddy bye for so many years that they've blended into me, become my own flesh.

By braces and by wheelchair I've been putting family onto planes for a few days . My oldest son back to New York where he works. Then in another day I saw my wife and younger son off home to France. My French wife relieved to return to civilization. My teenager to start Lycee in Toulouse.

For such the wheelchair rides in back on its side. Along with the wagon it slides about sending the top wheel spinning, my wheel of fortune. It's an always losing roulette.

Our El Paso house is a hacienda figment in a suburban development, in the city's Upper Valley neighborhood not far from the Rio Grande and easy walking distance out of Texas into either New Mexico or old Mexico.

House looks adobe, but isn't. Has an interior courtyard, flat roof, rows of clerestory windows above a sunken living room. Has three sets of double glass doors, five skylights, three full baths, 3 bedrooms, a study for me and a towering flagstone fireplace. Swamp cooler thrown in.

Has a couple of palm trees and half a dozen oleanders, otherwise a ruthless xeriscaping. Has a living room view of the Franklin Mountains.

I think the place is a scherezade, a one-off by a seriously repressed architect.

When not in residence we let the house out furnished. It's full of furniture from our apartment in New York, none of it quite right but good enough. It's started up with lots of Japanese prints, paperback murder mysteries of the 1930s, and CDs such as Ornette Coleman and the operas of Henry Purcell, which people never take away.

Free of charge, from the house you hear up close the freight trains going by at night, 100 cars moving slow through El Paso. Burlington Northern Santa Fe trundling grain from Kansas into Mexico. The engines give that lorn long wailing that people of the west hold dear.

In all this is one of my all-time most loved homes.

We've put an impressive monthly rent on the place that more than covers the mortgage. When we leave that also means getting it back into a commiserate state.

Switching the house to rental mode calls for boxing up, hiding away and most of all throwing out the accumulated detritus of our residence. All must be discretely bagged. None of it can be left for the El Paso sanitation department.

In El Paso there are strict rules on putting trash out, even for how many inches the bin must stand from the curb. More than a bin full and you have to take it to the land fill, along with your water bill as proof of residency. The Fill is about an hour away. There's always a long line of cars. The staff are assholes.

Amazing how much shit an affluent family can amass in one summer. For me it's a lot of fucking hassle. Especially in leg braces. But it's my number one to-do of today.

I'm dressed for the labor of cleanup. Or not. I'd rather not look but know without doing so that in fact I'm virtually naked. Actually naked except for something smaller than that loin cloth Tarzan wears.

It's nothing more than a small boxer style swimsuit that I've had for maybe 30 years, rotten and getting tight in the wrong places. The liner of these trunks is long gone, torn out to make a pair of ventilated short shorts. Forbidden to wear this even in the house unless I've been heavily drinking, or for working around the house on 100' days, like this one when even the swamp cooler is flummoxed.

Otherwise I'm wearing no more than an old pair of L.L.Bean 'Wicked Good' –as the company calls them– slip ons, the kind where a fuzzy lining spills out from the top. The pale fleece against the blonde leather, below the pallor of my shins and ankles, gives me an albino beastie aspect.

Even in my eyes I've become an ignominious figure, shattered fool in Christ, a smelly desert prophet to be shunned, arrested, sacrificed for sure.

The counter culture part of me, a leftover from university days, is pleased by the overall effect of my haphazard attire—showing me as I am, a victim of circumstance and a rebel.

Brave thoughts but I don't really expect to be seen by anyone, except by the girl in the Whataburger drive thru window. For that I'm bringing along a towel to cover my lap when stretching out to take my order. Shorts are too short I've discovered.

By now station wagon's full with a dozen stretch –to- bursting plastic bags, jumbo size, along with a few boxes of magazines, including some porn the older boy bought. There's only enough room left for me and a horde of flies that will soon sleep when the desert cools.

It's a 1984 Buick Century Station Wagon Woodie. That's 20 years old. It's pristine. I bought it on EBay for \$200. I needed the wagon for carrying around the wheelchair. Buick comes from Florida, a snowbird car, one for old folks who'd drive it from Saratoga to Sarasota and back each year. Buick has less than 30,000 miles on it.

Buick's already leaking oil on my driveway, also smelling of burgers and fries. With my wife absent I live on Whataburgers, a double with bacon and cheese, mayo, pickles and onions. Two of them real greasy, dripping fat monsters of desire on buns gone soggy. And a large order of fries, large chocolate malt. I glutton on this with abandon.

Tonight's repast is important because it's my last pig out for sometime. My flight home starts tomorrow, 15 hour trip with me in my wheelchair carted about helpless and insentient. After that no Whataburger for 9 months, not a one on the horizon for 5,000 miles.

11:30 pm, I back the laden wagon out of the driveway. House is less than 10 minutes from Whataburger. Whataburger closes at midnight so it's tight but I'll be OK.

I'm heading for the ¡Hola! Shopping Center. The ¡Hola! is across the tracks, good

location for it. It straggles directly along the Camino Real which here is not a scenic byway.

¡Hola! is a sorry place. The greeting card exuberance of the name, in a sunburst on its sign, is for a single row of one story shops, perhaps 10 of them. You know things are bad when a shopping center is anchored by a Dollar General.

Load of bags jostles as I drive. Constant reminder from my upbringing that this theft of garbage space is wrong. It's a sin. I've decided to dump the lot of it first. Lighten my conscience. Then load up on the fast food in penance.

Also, while it's unethical in Topeka doing this is strictly illegal in El Paso. Especially so when you think about the critical mass of offal and refuse I'm hauling to leave for someone else, an innocent bystander, to struggle with on their own. Get caught and the fine is about the cost of the station wagon.

But first I must find a suitable dumping ground. There are three free standing establishments in the vast and empty ¡Hola! parking lot.

Whataburger and the dinky kiosk for Water Supreme with a lit windmill on top. It's a self service dispenser of drinking water in bulk. This is indeed a desert town of the dust choked needy, the thirsty without mains. The third building is a bar.

For me the bar defines 'ill repute', no windows, unlit, a blockhouse with a straggling of Mexican tiles in salute to El Paso. Kind of place that makes an average middle class American run away.

This bar is the spot. Must be. No one goes in or comes out, not a soul lounging about to catch me. It has a row of dumpsters in the shadows, none spilling over-yet.

I park the Buick close to them and leave it running in case I must make a quick getaway. Door opens and I take the full stench of the dumpsters. Whatever is in them cooked in the desert sun all day.

Wagon front door closes behind me. I hear that firm General Motors door-closing from the back-when when they used real steel. I'm standing shakily on asphalt, will my legs hold up?

They can go out, even in braces. Then I'm left clinging to anything nearby or else I go down to gravel on the ground.

I stalk in the braces around the wagon. Cane taps out my measured steps.

Already my damn legs start to quake.

My only sound is this fucking cane. Nothing more existential than the hearing of a cane tapping alone off into a foul and midnight place. Fleece lined 'Wicked Good' go sucking on gum and the bar's rancid bilge.

Without a thought for it I try the tailgate door. Nothing gives? What gives? How can there be a nothing. Can't be! I try again with force. Nope. Now I'm jerking the tailgate handle angrily. I try each of the four doors in turn. Nada.

Twenty year old engine runs warm beside me. Soft tremble of a vibrating bed.

With my nose against the window on the driver's side there's enough dashboard light for me to make out my cell phone. It's turned on, lying on the front seat beside my wallet and the towel. After a couple of minutes of 'why me' lamentation, with a few more desperate attempts at opening the door, I face the truth. Somehow the automatic lock was on.

I can't stand here staring stupidly at the station wagon. My legs tell me to find a place for my ass fast. They're turning soft while I think. Soon they'll start running down onto the asphalt where I'll be too soon enough.

No alternative but going into this bar for help. My only hope is for there to be at least one real Christian inside, even born again would do just as long as they've read their Bible. I've got to find an in-the-flesh English speaking Good Samaritan. Most likely the one they had has been murdered.

To get to the front door I'm threading through a dozen or so bikes. I see they're mainly Harleys with an odd Triumph. This is none other than a genuine bikers bar.

It's called The Long Horns. Of course it is.

Inside The Long Horns I drop fast to a seat on the end bar stool near to the front door as possible, in case I need to scream for help or try to escape. I'm doing my best to be invisible. Hard to do so with bare chest and legs, 'Coors' hat on my head, and braces.

Don't have much of a body, hairless as a Chihuahua. My exterior is mushroom belly pale. Too Scottish to go out in the sun unless I want to do an auto de fey.

I cross my legs to hide their nakedness. Not so easy in braces. Come too close

to falling off this stool in an indecent exposure. I'm having to be self conscious about where my dick is. Without the lining it feels apt to squeeze out of these trunks like toothpaste.

Budweiser clock says it's midnight! Oh no, Whataburger just closed. So long to all that for nine months. No more sweet grease on my cheeks. Stomach gives a booming sorrowing gurgle.

Bartender won't come. I've been sitting on this slippery red plastic for five minutes. Unease mounts.

"I stuck that lovin' .44 beneath my head. Got up next mornin' and I grabbed that gun. Took a shot of cocaine and away I run. Made a good run, but I run too slow. They overtook me down in Juarez, Mexico."

You feel the buzz of the crowd's appreciation for the juke box. They like Johnny Cash singing "Cocaine Blues." Also he's singing about home. About 15 minutes of El Paso blocks from where I'm sitting the town ends and Juarez begins.

If the fat guy tending bar in chaps ever comes he'll likely look at me and refuse service. There's a sign in here, 'No Shirt No Service.' Guess they think it impossible for a patron to be in my category 'no clothes, no body hair, no Spanish.

Elbow's stuck to the surface of the bar. Smacks when I free it. Elbow flecked in peanut husks. From an Unhappy Hour.

Again I'm crooking my free arm up at the elbow to wave a couple of fingers wanly for service. Even though I don't have a cent on me, money being locked up tight inside the Buick.

I begin to suspect that this bartender is ignoring me. If I were him I would. But I'm so urgently in need of emotional rescue. My Anglo face shines under a martyr's halo. Here it stands forth blanched like an almond and frosting over in the air conditioning.

Everyone here is very hairy. Everyone is swarthy. Everywhere muscle arms engorge, protruding from leather vests and covered with a carpet bombing of tattoos. Heavy thighs bulge like zeppelins in Levis. Not a word of English to be heard.

All are in leather with gang emblems indecipherable in the murk. Faces are hidden in hair, hiding beneath mustaches and pirate beards. It's the Stones' concert at Altamont.

Men and women, so many incredible fantastical big butts. They'd be the envy of Jennifer Lopez. Reminds that El Paso is the 3rd most obese city in the States. That's an impressive placing in a tight contest.

Fizzlings and sparklings emanate from the crowd. They come from the ear, eyebrow, nose and lip jewelry everyone wears.

In agitation I move on the bar stool. My cane clatters to the floor. I'm down trying to retrieve it. My dick I fear is playing peek a boo with the crowd.

"What can I do you for?" It's the bartender at last.

He shoots me one mean evil-eye once-over, the cane, my Coors hat, my short shorts, probably my dick too if its on open house again. Dark suspicious eyes roam, mix of American Indian and Rome. They've ended up riveted to a place above my eye brows. I think he's discovered my hair.

"I need some help," I'm saying to the bartender whilst tightening my fig-leaf grip over my unmentionables.

"You bet you do," says he. "Guess you having a very bad hair day?"

El Paso has 800,000 in its city limits. It's the largest Spanish speaking city in the US. Spanish is in fact the rule although most also speak some English. City's 85% Hispanic. 85 % Mexican Indian. 15 % stray whatever. Bartender's of the same hybrid.

In another location the town's population would quadruple in sprawl. Here it can't, confined by water issues, hemmed in by desert and mountains. Split up between USA and Mexico, Texas and New Mexico.

Used hub cap capital of the world!

The city isn't actually poor although the Barrio neighborhood at its center is so. The rich Anglos, cotton, mining and cattle wealth, live in mansions in the Country Club district or up on the mountain side above Central.

Here in a newer subdivision of McMansions those watching us from their haciendas above are mostly the 'peseta millionaires' the rich of Juarez who come to build second homes up there so that their kids can attend El Paso schools.

The owner of the house behind mine is a gringo Federal agent, a federali in the flesh. He's told me the tales are true about suitcases of cash, gold fixtures glittering in

the bathrooms, cocaine stacked up in bricks.

I'm frigid in The Long Horns, close to frost bite. It's the fucking air conditioning blasting out like El Paso people like. My legs are numb with the cold.

"No money, I've got none," Meaning I can't even order a beer.

"Yeah I see you don't got no pockets," a most observing bartender. "And watch yourself? Flash your little la polla again, someone's gonna cut it off."

Like the others in here he's in leather mode with chains, boots too, belt thick like a barber's strop. I wonder if the outfit comes in a gift set. Maybe from Milwaukee along with the Harley? He's hovering near me on the other side of the beer soaked counter. That is as best as an obese man can hover.

He's got on a black leather sleeveless jacket, Bandidos pin on one label, death head pin on the other. Good accessories to go with the jumble of lurid tattoos running down his arms from nightmare thicket of armpit hair to sledge hammer wrists. He bends close so that the bill of his black leather Muir cap nicks my nose.

"Lot's of people got no money. So what hombre." He about spits 'hombre' into my sorrowful Anglo face. "Get your broken down ass out of here, pronto. Comprend."

"I'm not broken down. My cars out there running. It's locked. It's getting hot, might explode. Please, I don't have the keys. Don't make me leave." Trying my best to whine like a gringo renouncing his ethnicity. "I need a beer bad. I need help. "

"Can guess that much," he says. Looks like he's ready to bust a gut. "OK, since you got a cane guess I gotta see what I can do. Here, one beer is all you gonna get."

Bartender's now in close confabulation with a couple of the bikers at far end of bar counter. They step away. After a minute they're back again giggling. I think I know at what.

More talk. Now Jose is laughing too, at me.

"They say it so. You did leave a running, locked Buick Century wagon out by my dumpsters. They say it full of trash, garbola, worthless shit, even kiddy porn. You were trying to steal shit space in my dumpsters, weren't ya. Shame on you. What kind of American are you?

"OK amigo, you go with these two gentlemen they gonna set you right."

We three are standing by the wagon. One says, "Hola mun, you wanna sell this? It'd make a great low rider." The other has a tool in hand of some kind. He moves to hide it. I think he slides it down between the car window and door. He's on tiptoe doing a hike up in his jeans.

Soft click and all the door locks go up. He leans inside, turns engine off. Looks pleased with himself. I'm guessing they have a gone-in 60-seconds business.

Unbidden the two start hauling the boxes and bags to the dumpsters. Another couple of minutes wagon is empty. I'm reduced to sitting in back watching them, turned sidewise on the edge of the seat. Guess my slip ons are sinking away into this La Brea Tar Pit.

One of the men says, "I can smell in there you like a double Whataburger with bacon and cheese, mayo, pickles and onions." He has it down pat. The other saying he do too.

One holds up the wheelchair pretending to be ready to throw it on the refuse. A bit of a joke.

So I've made it back with them into the bar where Mexican love songs are playing. I've tried giving the fellas all my thanks. Also what money I retrieved from the car. They gruff it off to vanish in the sparkling of a silver nose ring.

My throat goes tight.

They've left me propped up like a stiff on this stool. No matter, love and beauty are come to surround me. Bartender motions. Vulgar beyond rude.

"Now roll your ass the fuck out of here! Worthless gimp."



Firetruck going to Trade center bearing my fireman to his tragedy.

DOWN IN THE HOLE

For the millions taking the New York City subway every day it is a humdrum part of their lives, no mystery or poetry to it, no humor or tragedy. But work could not be possible without it. And work is the religion of this city.

Impossible to exist here without the subway no matter how boring it can be during rush hours. You need it to grow a romance or get to a wedding on time, make it to the hospital for a birth, attend a funeral or the Frick. Especially for me living only three months a year with the NYC subway system— the rest of my time in far less savage France—I'm dazzled by its fast flux of stations, subway cars, subway rides, the up and down on escalators and elevators, the crush of subway strangers.

I get spit out of it and a taste of grit. It keeps me on a knife-sharp edge of allusion to something sinister— and something great.

Clark Street Station is less than a 10 minute walk from where I am at in Brooklyn Heights, an apartment on Poplar at the end of the Brooklyn Bridge. Less far for other folk, unsteadily more so for unsteady me.

I do a Charlie Chaplin routine down the sidewalk in an ataxic gate swagger and with a pants-load of shit. My legs are slowly becoming like jam Climbing and descending stairs will soon require a prayer to St. Jude.

To find the nearest subway station you go down Henry Street to the corner with Clark. The station is the navel of the neighborhood.

Coordinates: from the station the Brooklyn Borough Hall is less than a 10 minute walk west. Montague Street, the main drag of the Heights is three blocks south. It's the same walk to the Promenade where they have on display the Manhattan skyline in a MoMA panorama.

I'm ambling along looking sharply at this and that, enjoying myself immensely on my way to Clark Street Station. Walk and look, a spy on the loose, a secret agent watcher, the CIA anal compulsive operative. This is my favorite pastime in New York.

This great city is a paradise for an introvert. I can hide here in plain sight.

Here I can lay low like Bre'er Rabbit, hide in the throng in the full sunshine morning of an August day. I'm the observing stranger happy that I don't know anyone around me.

This walk is from the apartment I own—the mortgage company owns— in Brooklyn Heights. It follows down Henry to the IRT where I'll catch the number 2 train

for a 10 minute ride, life in this miniature world is in 10 minute increments.

Subway ride will go roller coasting under the East River. There's ancient terror in that for someone from Kansas, scene in my head every time of Cecil B. DeMille dashing the towering Red Sea down to drown pharaoh's men.

I'll be going one stop only, to Wall Street, my destination. There nearby I'm to have a lunch of a hamburger-helper burger so greasy that blobs of slaughter house runoff trickle down my forearms when I try to push it into my mouth.

Such is ever my occasional lunch with my only friend in town. I do revel in my solitary self confinement. I've sentenced myself to it for life.

This is my itinerary should all go well which sometimes it doesn't. 'Sometimes' is a cause for anxiety. Taking the NYC subway is accepting fate like the one seen in a dog's eyes when being put to sleep. The throwing of dice, the waiting to know.

It gives the decrepit system, crummy and unpleasant, a bit of flair. Using it is like taking one's savings down to Atlantic City for a night of madcap roulette on a Trump Plaza jimmied wheel.

A person can get mugged down below in the deep, pushed onto the tracks, get a goose or grope from unknown fingers, or simply stand toe-close to the edge of the platform witnessing rats stirring up plague from the third rail. Otherwise you can wait hapless for a train that never comes and when it does find it so full you can't squeeze in.

No announcement will come to explain the inexplicable. The New York Subway is a form of limbo minus the Catholic Church for explication.

Then too you may be stuck between stations. On hold for so long that you're facing eternity alone underground even without committing one grievous sin.

One time returning from Chinatown I rode with an old Chinese man who had a large brown bag at his feet. It moved about of its own propelled by an interior life form of indiscriminate nature. The riders stared at it in frightened rapture. The old lady across the aisle prudently pulled her feet up to hook her heels on the edge of her seat.

There's sex too. The tight banging, swaying, humping of buttocks and loins together, the cars slipping in and out, hither and thither fumbling the riders like beginners in the backseat.

One morning commuting with a mob bunched up obscenely close, an imitation cattle car direction Ohrdruf (but with a return), I was held in a tight embrace between two women, strangers sharing the same metal strap. We three melded into a single form. We three heads forced to bend together over the seat below unable to turn.

A young man sprawled there deep in slumber. He rode sitting below us his legs akimbo showing a hard on sculpted by the crotch of his mailroom issue cloth trousers.

His dick stirred alive in the crotch of those pants just like that crab in a sack. It bobbed to the motion of the train, pulsed to whatever the lad dreamed of. The woman to my side caught my eye and smiled kindly.

Also there's danger. A mad man or woman appears stalking the aisle shouting bad breath into every cowering face. Then there will be a troop of Hispanic or black gang members, lawless teenagers high on hormones and whatever coming through the open doors in a scene from 'The Taking of Pelham One Two Three.' For certain that sends frostbite through the car, everyone grows ice cycles in place.

But then sometimes there is one person on board emanating evil. A figure with a malignant presence strong as flies on a child's ashen corpse. It's furtive, sweaty, stinking, hands and face constricting in tics. You know a knife attack is one slashing moment away.

On this bright and happy August morning my walk down Henry Street offers little for clandestine study. I'm not even abiding by the New York City rule of ever-careful discretion.

First of August, year 2000. I'm 51, a thought that's bewildering because I know for a fact I'm actually just seven.

My regret this walk-about is that I left my cane in the apartment. As well I'm neither wearing my panama hat nor smoking one of my dearly beloved Montecristo Coronas which I buy on business trips to Havana and smuggle back. There's elation for me in being different.

Going by the video rental store I spot the owner on his stool bearded and morose a Beat-poet simulacra who stubbornly famously allows smoking inside and is ticketed for that with ever-higher fines. I pass Noodle Pudding, craziest name in the world for an Italian restaurant. Also a hassle because its stevedore chef from Naples won't take cards.

Here's Cranberries, a hole in the wall deli thronged like a Hindu temple for the

worship of muffins and tuna sandwiches. The Heights Cinema shows a double bill, 'My Dog Skip' and 'American Psycho.'

My knowledge of my neighborhood is ending, except when I walk here I always cast a glance down Middagh street. Second building from Henry is the FDNY firehouse.

Like many people of my age I grew up when policemen and firemen were heroes. Especially in the allure of fire stations. A pole to slide down! A white doggie with black spots! The immaculate red fire truck is a giant Tonka toy.

And those uniforms too. Exotically shaped helmets like the heads of aliens, like none other, bulky coats and pants, hoses coiled into smiling snakes not at all scary ones. Promises instead of jumping with joy through a silky jet of cold water on a hot day your wet underwear plastered fast to your ass.

For me a quaint firehouse like this one on Middagh is out of a Golden Book, an illustration of one enduring fastness of yesterday where friendly firemen give guided tours to idolizing elementary school kids.

Clark Street Subway Station is very deep.

That's because its tunnel was dug to go far down under the East River making it among the deepest platforms in the system of New York's 472 subway stations.

It's one of the three that can only be reached by elevator, no stairs and no escalator. Clark Street Station is 75 feet below street level. Ten stories down.

Three elevators serve to get people down and up. Two are original from when the station was built in 1919. The third elevator was added in the one serious makeover the station's had, in 1931, although some cosmetic work has been done to it over the years.

This includes the most recent job which has closed it for four long months during which commuters including me needed to find other options.

But just for me it has miraculously reopened this very morning.

One of my French sons works this summer in a Manhattan office as a summer intern. Arriving at the office that morning he heard word that the Clark Street elevators were up and running again. Knowing I had something planned across the river, too rare just like the bloody burger that awaits me, he called the apartment with the news.

Using Clark Street would save about half an hour in travel time and be kind to my uncertain legs.

Subway fear I think is elemental: the subway lies below us, it's laced together by tunnels that are midnight-dark passages to the unknown. We pretend to be OK with this but really aren't. We are born with the knowledge there are happenings down below— huge spiders, devils, saber toothed tigers— that we really don't want to know about.

Twelve blocks deep and five blocks wide at its widest dinky dowdy Brooklyn Heights sleeps sweetly off on its own. Inside a New York too busy to notice it or care. Most of the neighborhood is in stately rows of federal and Italianate buildings, plush private schools, historic churches.

Emblematic of the last is Plymouth Church of The Pilgrims in severely devout red brick on Orange Street. A church from 1847 where Abraham Lincoln, Mark Twain, Dickens and Thackeray spoke. It was also a principal stop on the Underground Railroad.

There's quiet dignity to this old neighborhood which goes back to original Dutch land owners. Essentially an enclave survivor against most of Brooklyn, much of New York. Out of all the City's 260 neighborhoods Brooklyn Heights is the 6th wealthiest, median household income is \$170,000.

It shows. Street after street lined by old trees, clean stoops and sidewalks, clean people too in quietly clean good clothes.

Definitely this is a BCBG sort of place, 'bon corps, bon gout'—good body, good taste as the French say. Population count of the Heights is only 23,000 and not rising.

Clark Street Station reflects this. It has but 1.8 million a year turns of the turnstiles. That compares to more than 20.3 million users per year for the Times Square station.

Clark Street's platform is far far subterranean under the former old Hotel St. George.

Once upon a time the St. George was promoted as the largest in the States, even in the world, with 2,632 guest rooms. Also one of New York's grandest, decorated in high style, Egyptian art deco.

The St. George had a 120 feet long salt water pool. The St. George could host 3,000 for dances, feed seven thousand at a time. The St. George's central guest tower

rose 30 stories, for a little while the tallest building in Brooklyn.

The St. George knew popularity with high society and as a renowned queer cruising realm. It served everyone as long as you were affluent, powerful, or at minimum well put together—a few black people too if you were famous.

Guests included F. Scott Fitzgerald and Tennessee Williams (who lived in the hotel for a year). Ernest Hemingway, Frank Sinatra, Duke Ellington, Presidents FDR, Truman, JFK.

Hotel opened in 1888. The subway station began service first thing after the great war and had a direct entrance up to the lobby.

Time is 11:45 and I've arrived at last ready to go down into the hole. My index finger points to the elevator call button. So new it's barely been pressed, fresh and sweet as this morning hour. Still shiny, maybe relatively germ free.

The doors open onto an empty elevator. Because the station can't be reached by stairs or escalator the elevators cabins here are big, very big, they can carry 50 people at a go. I've been told the ride down from street to platform takes 30 seconds. Dubious.

I stare into a rectangular steel box, no more than a coffin. The cabin floor is large enough for half a dozen couples to dance on cheek to cheek. Only the control panel breaks the monotony of shining surfaces. Doors stay open, inviting, tempting, entrapping.

Emergency call box glistens prominently as our communal fears. Alarm button is of course a throbbing red.

Two young women follow me in. We wait together same ethos as in an oncologist's waiting room. The two ignore me. I ignore them. For a few programmed minutes, time lost from our life expectancies. We wait.

We ought to believe in every nuance of trustworthy mechanics. I however, do not. I believe in the Quantum. If I could understand it.

Now the doors close upon us.

I have elevator fear, mild perhaps although enough to make my asshole pucker, my pecker getting a good squeeze prostate to tip. It goes with being something of a freak of nature.

For example there's the trouble I have with demagnetizing hotel door key swipes. This so common I expect it to happen and when checking into a hotel tell the desk clerk to give me two keys. Often even this serves for no protection and I end forced to return to the irritated desk clerk for yet another key.

But hotel room doors are not elevators. In them is the part of my malediction I find threatening. It comes from being stuck in elevators. I have been, several times, more I presume than most.

I've been stuck in elevators in New York City multiple times, also once in Kansas City, Great Bend, Kansas, in Italy, France and the Canary Islands. The best I can do when elevator doors close is to cry silently for 'mama' like any soldier at the front.

I've asked people about my stigma, electromagnetism some wisely propose, defective karma opine others, while some give me the shifty eye of they who wonder if I am of feeble mind.

These two women, girls to me, ought I to warn them? Leave this cabin now!

Too late.

Elevator begins its descent into the hole of doom, referencing a fall into a well, or to my not having a United Mine Workers of America membership, to be heading deep toward a bunker of unspeakable Nazi evil, or just to sexual intercourse. I drift off to blither thoughts, push neurosis away.

The young ladies avoid my glances, mount Rushmore faces turned against me, slight women with negligible breasts.

Can't help wondering if they are lesbians, since they are wearing no makeup, haven't combed their hair, avoid me with tight lipped determination, two young women together against everything. They don't look very healthy to me, shallow.

Perhaps too ardent in a shared vegetarianism.

Yes I do sense they might be lovers. They have that encapsulated aspect, alone in a time capsule to be opened only at their deaths. Intimation that they are bitter about my intimate presence in the elevator, ready at any male move to knee my balls or squirt me with mace. I eavesdrop and hear whispered exchanges in French. France! My home away from home.

Therefore I ask in French, speaking it like I do in village-idiot argot, the good

American bursting with folksy curiosity, “What part of France are you from?” One of the two, the one who appears more engaged with the world pauses pointedly wanting me to know I speak piss-poor French, answering “Paris” saying it like Harris to grind me down.

I wonder why they are here in this elevator.

Not many tourists cross the East River. There must be a warning about that in the Michelin Green Guide book to New York. I hold mute, smiling in a fatherly way. I know for sure they hate theirs.

Part of the allure for me of Brooklyn Heights is the legion of poets, writers, composers that have lived and worked here. Writers have been attracted to the place for well more than a century. This, along with Greenwich Village, is the city’s preeminent literary neighborhood.

Walt Whitman wrote here his first version of *Leaves of Grass*. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Miller, Arthur Miller, Hart Crane, Truman Capote, Thomas Wolfe, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, Norman Mailer, H.P. Lovecraft, Norman Rosten, Paul Bowles, Carson McCullers, Paul Auster, W.H. Auden– all lived in Brooklyn Heights.

Composers too, Aaron Copland, Benjamin Britten and Leonard Bernstein. Surrealist painter Salvador Dali stayed here as well as Pavel Tchelitchew, who one evening painted the walls of his drab Heights drawing room in a surrealist mural of hallucinatory colors and shapes.

Is elevator stopped? Difficult to ascertain, what would Dante tell me about this going down in the hole? Does he place me in the Seventh Circle, along with Sodomites and Attila the Hun?

From the moment we began our descent the elevator’s motion has been equivocal, to match the faces of these young women. My own expectations are not jolly.

I am forever curious about people. I feel an urge leaning against my steel wall to acquire the life stories of these two, slumping opposite against theirs. Perhaps they’re lost in the shrouded wilds of Brooklyn. I could help them, play the hero for them, help them to be found.

Most likely they’ve just been to the Promenade to snap photos of the Manhattan skyline, maybe asking another woman to take a photo of them embracing with the Twin Towers for backdrop (the two mightiest phalluses on earth).

Likely they're just starting their return to the security of their Times Square hotel, to lie together on a standard-issue, scratchy, embroidered coverlet, one matching the curtains and to be found in a 1000-and-one hotel rooms, to whisper on it, make love, to make each other whimper. I must stop because a hard-on here would be inappropriate.

Another moment gone and the spokeswoman for the French side of the elevator cabin tells me to pull the alarm. "Don't you see. We have stopped!"

I'm so hot for her, I'm so hot for her I'm so hot for her and she's so cold
I'm so hot for her, I'm on fire for her I'm so hot for her and she's so cold
Rolling Stones/ Emotional Rescue

Yes we have indeed stopped, the kind of stopping I've known before, a feeling in it of finality and that makes me stifle a groan. To be certain I place a palm knowingly on the doors. No detection there of any trembling, no buzz of a distant motor in working condition, nothing except the lifeless feel of the steel's slimy menace.

I press the emergency call button, upon release my finger tip is warm and sticky, cum in a belly button sensation. A long wait ensues. I keep my finger on the red spot. At last a bored voice crackles at us in disbelief.

"WHAT!"

"Sir, elevator isn't moving."

"No way. It went into service this morning... And take your finger off the button, jerk!"

"Well it's not done anything for the past five minutes. Jerk yourself off." "Are you trying to be funny! It's a criminal offense to make a joke about this. Better not get nasty either."

"No, we, myself and two women, we're . . ."

"Wait a sec, I'll check you out. Yep, OK. Correct, you are not moving." Interest flicker in the voice. Devoid of sympathy, all comparison spent. Pause.

Crackle. Pop. Breakfast cereal sounds snapping at we sufferers. I see we three are so pathetic, we'll take any comfort, we lean together closer to the noise from the speaker. Noises belched from the box, intestinal gasses firing off in the inner sanctum

of gut and bile.

In a wrench of high ocean storm heaving to get in at us from the East River the elevator car swiftly drops a whole foot. Motors or something goes thud. Dead end thud. Last rites thud. No more grace for 'yous' thud. Actuarial Tables computation sort of thud.

French girls scream in Early French. I yelp in standard American English.

Quickly another voice comes to join our existential . "Sir?" it goes in far too late late Swabian.

"You there? Is everything OK in there? . . ." I suppose this will end with us learning a deeply primitive Sicilian folk dance.

From then on in a frequency ordained by the New York Transit manual, the one on how to cope with hysteria, this second voice comes back, repeating smoothness, oozing peace like pepsodent. So unnaturally s-m-o-o-t-h and reassuring, like a psychiatrist's as his hour comes to an end.

I say to it, "My legs are going." "That would be good, sir. Do that. Take a rest. Everyone there should take a rest. And breath deep. In. Out. Relax. We'll get you moving very soon. All will be well."

Are they trying to rescue us or hypnotize us?

The more reticent of my companions starts having a panic attack. Hand on her chest, hot tears spewing from her eyes her cheeks, visibly trembling. Girl's rasping in French, and I've never heard that before.

She and her friend watch me in wonder as I sink slowly down my wall a snail in it's snot on a hot elevator surface. The two follow me.

We three share the cabin floor which today is much cleaner than any other cabin floor in the New York subway system, no chewing gum, cigarette butts, expectorated oyster phlegm, and I'm told sometimes splotches of semen.

I say to the French woman in control, "Maybe you should hold her."

Time. So far it's two and a half hours of servitude inside this prison. I'm wondering how much that will squander out of my entire life time.

Intercom is entertainment. Not very good. There isn't even any elevator Musak.

I'd take 'Love Me Tender' by Mantovani and his orchestra or 'Born Free' on a ukulele over this stasis, the sensation if imaginable of dangling underneath a black frozen East River suspended by a quivering thread. Anger, fear, and silence are a nasty concoction.

We three avoid staring at each other. I don't know their names. Good thing is that no one has yet screamed. We just sit on heels or buttocks, whatever, repositioning our bodies in that uncomfortable hopeless way of wretched doomed animals.

Waiting, waiting not uttering a word in our dislike of one another. Even the lesbians seem to know at one another In desperate whispers.

We three now stink of sweat. And urine.

Piss stink has soured into the seriously malodorous. Just as I started fearing the young women would faint they both to go to the far corner to urinate together backs turned into a wall of feminine solidarity heels in close rank.

Now I take my turn standing dick in hand legs spread bracing for a plummet dick only half hidden in my end-of-game losers defiance. We must be dangling half a mile in the air, obviously at an angle. Held tenuously by a single fraying strand?

Proof, our urine runs to pool at a far corner of the cab floor.

One of the French girls is nigh to hysterics I no longer know which. She blurts out wildly "I think it's swaying! Get me out of here. Oh God oh God." In French no longer even making a stab at frog English.

I wonder if the oxygen level isn't dwindling in here.

Perhaps but also In the distance muffled by the tunnel I detect what is surely the telltale rat-a-tat-tat of a jack hammer.

Someone is killing concrete inch by inch!

Soon I hear a consequential weight land on the roof of the cabin. Boot steps! The roof trapdoor pops up.

The grinning face of the FDNY, a New York City Fireman fills the space. A poster boy for salvation. I clap, can't help myself. Man in the helmet says, "Thank you," and laughs. The young women look like they'll soon be complaining to someone who I feel sorry for in advance.

The women go up the ladder first. I'm saying to the fireman, "Sorry, don't think I can climb that."

"Not to worry, sir, I'll get you up. We're down at level three so there's seven to go. We'll do just fine."

And the fellow did do fine too. First coming in to fit me with a harness, next hauling me up through the trap door, then guiding my dead weight up, worthless carcass. He gets me hoisted some 45 feet up and back to the station entrance in a swaying tour of subterranean engineering and Freudian fears.

All the way my fireman jokes, talks baby talk to me, succors me through. He keeps a big consoling paw on me.

"Almost there my friend, you're doin' great."

I was, with a 50% erection as that kind fellow held me tight. Nothing like getting saved to give a man a hard on. Going up by motorized cable synched tightly between my legs I clung dearly without shame to this taut muscular stranger come replete in FDNY gear and Sesame Street helmet to save me. I was with a 75% stiffy when my head at last cleared into the bowels of the St. George.

Once out and outside into the sunshine of Henry Street there's no glimpse of my companions in plight. They vanish from sight forever.

I can see only one TV news lady loitering about, she's good- ratings pretty, horny cameraman sniffing at her rear. This is not big news. No big deal at all. It's already been left steaming on the sidewalk.

Where oh where is my saving grace? I search for him in the crowd. No where to be seen.

All I want to do is catch a cab back home to Poplar Street. That's rarely possible in Brooklyn where no Yellow cabs are allowed to roam. We must use a Russian-mob limo service owned out of a store front in Brighton Beach. Yellow Cabs are however entitled to let off fare's picked up in Manhattan and there's one doing so now, close enough for me to stagger for it with an arm up. Fascist salute or what?

Grudging as hell the cabbie does let me in when I explain I'm just going back to where he himself wants to go, fast tracking back to the Brooklyn Bridge and the snow route to Manhattan.

My fireman. I can't blubber on him about what a wonderful guy he is. Being the kind of man I take him to be, from having been up close to him on that labored climb from out of the hole, I'm sure the guy is chronically thanks-and- praise shy.

His fire ruck is parked at an angle in front of the cab. Small crowd of the curious point to it, seem to be addressing it. Maybe the truck does come from a Golden Book. No, fire truck I see is from my familiar neighborhood landmark, Engine House 205, Hook and Ladder 118, Middagh Street station. If not from the pages of a Golden Beek, this Hook and Ladder is as imagined by Mr. Rodgers.

A year and a month later, September 11, 2001, this same cute red truck will answer to a call from the World Trade Center. Eight of the fireman on it die when at 9:59 am the South Tower collapses onto the Marriott Hotel. Terror takes out fantasies.

They include my smiling, joking, hunk of a rescuer. Among the photos of these eight fireman who disappear that day I recognize one. He is Scott Davidson, 33, my Brooklyn Heights rescuer. Saints may not exist but heroes do.

There are 85,000 elevators in the naked city. This has been the story of one.

So this stops. Are you glad? Probably, I think. Or did you give up on me long ago, round about page two. Why do I pick on you, my one and only, my beloved, my dead reader? I wish I could fuck you. Whatever sex you be. Make you come.

So to be true at the end here. I've had passing infatuations, flutterings of the heart, but my great loves are but only two. Not worry you aren't included.

Gregory was somewhat of a handsome fellow, slim, a head full of lovely luxuriant dark curls. He had a rugged face, nice features in a face badly ravined, moonscaped in acne scars. It seemed a visible wounded soul. A face made truly beautiful to me by suffering. He pretended a charming fawn like scampering.

Constant witty blather.

He seemingly deferred to me as the senior in our play. But I wasn't fooled.

He had an older more sophisticated mind. He introduced me to Yeats, to Shostakovich, to Kiwi fruit, anal sex. My love for him was filtered through a daze of an absurd deluding superiority while all the while for him it was simply because he loved my dick.

Strange perhaps or not that he married a former girlfriend of mine who once sucked me off while I drove my old Chevy Impala convertible through the flint hills and cumming just as the wind whipped up into a frenzy to burst and rip the canvas top in twain. One of my most remarkable orgasms.

He'd spent some months in Russia, learning the language. He became a middle school math teacher, and the Kansas City Missouri board of Ed made him delighted by giving him the worst assignment they had in the inner city, so damaged a place that the kids thought The Rolling Stones were black. Gregg always wanted to be a heroic victim.

One time he'd be atheist. The next Episcopalian. Then he'd have serious bouts off and on of being Russian Orthodox. Once been been Muslim for a year. As-salamu alaikum. His recurring nightmare was Catholicism. In which Faith his father had been raised. His father I liked, as human as I was. Now and again I'd catch him come silently into Gregg's room in the morning hour unannounced to catch us naked limbs entwined suffering from desire, in poor imitation of the Laocoon. He was a sweet man who collected arrowheads, Indian pots and Roman coins and I knew he was no more than harmlessly adding us to his collection.

Gregg intermittently confessed or prayed to the virgin. I think these times depended on whether he found a cute priest. Then he'd go on weekend retreats leaving me caught in abject jealousy back in Lawrence. Those retreats were held at a monastery in Yankton, South Dakota. Safely distant. I told myself he has too mousy to find another man for the weekend. Knowing full well that he could seduce anyone he wanted.

After religion came the greyhounds. He worked with serious dedication on about 25 racing programs he's found at my brother's (he raised racing greyhounds for the tracks). With these he built a betting scheme based on a number of parameters.

Professionals I knew in the dog racing business were impressed. Gregg's enthusiasm was such that he once went off to Jacksonville by himself for a couple of weeks to test the method. Over the period he actually made his expenses and earned 100 bucks or so. Enough to make him feel vindicated. And then he'd off in his Charlie Chaplin walk looking for the next enthusiasm to be an oblate for.

Incredible charm. Irritating self hatred. He was the young man for all seasons. I loved him to distraction. He loved me but not to the same, different. More occasional, less crazy.

What I fell for when I was 19 was his joy in everything, even when ranting in

fury at capitalists, he was performing. His brilliant mind strutting the stage. By his performing art he could charm a room. As he did me repeatedly.

He was the first person I'd met who was smarter than me. The first poetic spirit that was far more genuine and talented than mine. Neither cute nor given a body to remember he conquered by way of himself alone, jumping like a butterfly from flower to flower, thought to thought, belief to belief, but faithful for the most part to me.

Mathematics was his God number five: white mens God, poetry, high school boys (but never touching one), math which he taught for more than 20 years, my cock. Not included, my brain. His was more intricate, mathematic, and indeed more poetic than mine. He tolerated me like an unimportant saint. I loved him and wished I was his equal.

We were lovers from 19 without a gap until his death from cancer when we were 64. 45 years my friend is more than a love affair. It's life itself...

YOU BETTER STOP

Look around

Here it comes, here it comes, here it comes, here it comes Here comes your nineteenth nervous breakdown

Morning of June 1 2000 The Rolling Stones got my feeling down inside exactly right. That was when I lay here weeping, helplessly bugs. Best in the insect like repetition—Here It Comes.

Afterwards for many years I regularly had appointments with a psychiatrist, a very good one I think. He tried putting humpty- dumpty-me back together again.

Considering the wreck I was when I first went to him he had a lot to do—I came to him unable to think, work, to be part of my family, I sobbed uncontrollable, rocked obsessively in my rocking chair, listened again and again in a crazy fit to Chopin's Nocturnes.

This I linked to the abuse I could only partially remember, and the abuse onward to my brothers. In a daze I now barely can sort through I cut them off. I sent them insane emails. Instructed my wife that when they called for me, and they did repeatedly poor confused fellows, she wasn't to let them speak to me.

They languished in the purgatory into which I thrown them until they died.

My shrink uses a lot of hypnosis on me, in an effort to get me back up and going. In those sessions he'd also would also ask about my brothers and so forth. From these he gleaned enough to acquit them, to advise me that my brothers were not involved. Too late, they were already finished. I feel no remorse over any of this. Where I ought to have a pang I am numb.

I don't write here directly about the love of my life. She who is my constant dear companion. My friend, my wife, mother of my sons. She is too sacred to be here.

Of finally knowing I am dying I take as I have so often some lines from Yeats to cheer me along as I inch forward to the finish line.

When I was but a child I dreamed a dream that became real. I was a child living in the great city of Constantinople, capital of Byzantium. The Turks were raging mercilessly nearby. Lusting to break in to some vast domed place, a soaring place smudged with fires in pots where a thousand and more terrified people huddled close on a thousand year old marble floor pleading to a still, silent icon of the Virgin and Child, Mother Help Me."

Priests sing, their voices crack in terror. The faithful beg for mercy. But then the great doors splinter. A rampaging host comes upon us. No Holy Mother of God. No Christ Pantokrator. No No No.



Les Izards, Massac Seran France. More than a house, a stone haven for me and my family.

HERE

Les Izards is where I live, the name of the land and of a house. In this countryside every place has its own name, an identity often ancient. To help my very few visitors especially those from afar pronounce Les Izards I tell them to say ‘Lazy Czar.’ It’s close enough.

Start coming here from the very center of Lavour, my nearest town. Once upon a time I took my children to their school in the mornings and to reinforce their English made ditties for them one of which one went “Lavour has only one whore and she’s got a sore.”

It’s small, the town, and down a stretch of only a few blocks one sees the open country rising into green hills. In the central Place there’s Café Americain most often full of local idlers, also the Three Graces Fountain, those alluring daughters of Zeus in bronze. Straight ahead is an old brick townhouse, hick Renaissance, with its surprisingly fine proportions transgendered into the town’s BNP bank (where once to my delight when meeting with a pretentious banker a group of militant farmers turned loose a herd of pigs into the lobby).

Here's where Lavour's Grande Rue begins, it's the Dark Ages revived. To your left and right a wide swath of ordered trees show where the town's walls once stood.

Follow direction Route De Castres. 'Castres' is the time transfigured Roman 'Castrum', once a military post. Soon there is a traffic light, the only one in town. Close after that Lavour ends.

This old national road has been denigrated to a departmental way fare. It's picturesque, going between the march of Napoleon's plantains, parallel rows of pale trunks knobbed 200 years after their planting by what look like malignant cysts.

About two miles on turn to the right onto a country road going no where except to the rural community where I abide, to Massac Seran. The sign post is in French and Occitan- Maçac Seranh -known also as Langue d'Oc. Or simply 'Oc' in the faded language militancy of a few decades ago, painted in a drunken cultural rage on hundreds of stop signs.

Oc is the old language of here, older than French, passing away in a death rattle 800-years long. It's been a sentimental funeral.

Oc makes me think of Oz.

We are entering a land of the most recent ice age, formed on limestone shelvings, glacial till scooping it into valleys and ridges, rivers beveling broad avenues into the earth's face.

Proceed between rich farms on either side. After a couple more miles if the road disappears before you replaced by a statue of the Virgin Mary, and the rich farms become the convent of the Poor Daughters of Jesus, then you need to back up. You've missed Les Izards.

Retrace a few yards, turn right after an open field onto a winding country lane barely wide enough for your wheel base. Caution, there are dire ditches on either side and twice as you descend into our valley there's no visibility of what might be coming round the bend.

This rural route, in phases of ruination by the farmer's John Deere tractors, is an infinitesimal strand of France's web of lanes lacing the countryside together. All paved as are all roads here. A dull homogeneity reflected in the formal manners everyone shares and in the fact that all cattle, sheep and goats are taken into the barn at night. Or that all farmhouses are shuttered tight then so that in the dark nothing

human shines.

Then it seems no one at all is about, no biped mammals, no cars and nothing stirs except for what rustles in the bushes— hares, foxes, badgers, wild boar and deer. Then there are only the planets for guidance.

In three minutes the route takes one down to the bottom of a winsome little valley. It's an oblong bowl formed by tall slopes of a uniform height crowned around by a continuous band of green oaks.

To know if you're here look up. Black kites should soar on thermals rising from the valley floor. They glide on high in marvelous circles up on wing spans of almost six feet.

This is a miniature landscape overwhelming to me in meaning and content. It has incongruously been formed by what is now our tiny creek below, our ruisseau d'en tournie, toward which the lane proceeds.

Turn there again and drive up the slope of a tall ridge covered in broom and old green oaks.

Halfway up is my house, at long last. Two stories and a high roof yet one can't see it obscured by linden, almond and fig trees, also by towering spruce and cypress, some oaks and the wild uncircumcised boxwood hedge.

Stay alert because the first hidden drive is the one you want.

We, you and I, have arrived, somewhat at least. I think no one ever fully arrives here. Les Izards is where I too am searching for. It's where I am lost.

Isolated among fields and woods, the little valley to the front like a wide defensive moat, a high ridge directly to my back like a wall against an evil empire. From lowest to highest point it's a vertical property rising more than 100 feet from road to crest.

My place feels like it's being swallowed alive by time, deranged by a minor geologic melodrama, slowly transubstantiating in an imperceptible and boring metamorphosis.

All is quiet here. Silence that is more than silent. This is the same as being hidden in silence, another kind of swallowing act. A defining elemental attribute.

Friends from Bologna, vividly and compulsively Italian once visited, briefly, saying they couldn't live here because it was too silent. Perhaps part of the reason the place is not easily found is that so few beside occasional Amazon parcel delivery contractors want its location.

I'm simultaneously in several quite distinct place identities. The Tarn departement, Haut Garonne, Languedoc, Aquitaine, the Cevennes, Occitanie. This is the Midi, France's version of Italy's Mezzogiorno. 'Here' is the northern edge of the rich Lauregais farming area. Most of all this immediate region is the Pays de Cocagne or to the medieval mind a troubadour's never-never land of plenty.

When speaking to a French person and explaining I am from Lavaur in the Tarn they look puzzled until I add "due east 32 kilometers from Toulouse." That's a whopping distance of about 20 miles (although a meander of 45 minutes by car across a universe of mental distances). Then most often they give a knowing nod, " Ah oui, la belle France."

Maps are deceptive in finding me, misleading even to me in my search for where I am. My location is not a simple statement of fact. GPS won't help much as this place while earthly real is an abstraction of different histories, cultures, people layered in an archeological dig into the foundation of what we came from.

Back many thousands of years it was a site for the pathetic fires of a prehistory people, the remains of their Paleolithic living room are shown on the French government's ordinance map, platted on a spot only fifty yards from where I do the dishes, making us neighbors.

I'll try to better explain my location. Here is 450 miles south west of Paris. By car that's eight hours. Most French people would say that is truly to be lost.

By car Lourdes is two and a half hours distant. Close enough to feel miracles at the back of one's neck.

I'm 90 miles from the Mediterranean. That cesspool of western civilization, the Phoenician, Greek and Roman pond is where our cultural memory is stuck like Zeus's cum smeared feathers on Leda's bare thigh. It's sad there, an alzheimeric muddle of sun barbequed ruins.

The Pyrenees mountains for their part rise up like a wall only 80 miles distant, snow capped and effortlessly serene. I call them the shy mountains because they rarely show themselves, even this close up. They hide in a haze of dope smoke.

When seen they are suddenly remembered, so surprisingly near and bold, a miracle far better than what Lourdes sells.

Locals say when the Pyrenees appear it portends bad weather. I've observed that to be true, Pyrenean wind is on its way blasting in a frenzy of clay roof tiles and severed limbs.

Incredibly, I sleep and dream just an hour separate over more drowsy back roads from the La Madeleine des Albis. That's a cave near the hamlet of Penne in the north of the Tarn.

There are the wondrous finds of cave sculptures, two nude women each with an arm flung over their head, odalisques that Matisse could not have done better, yet carved 13,000-15,000 years backwards—or forwards? True stuff of which sweet wet dreams are made.

It's 40 miles to Albi, capital of the Tarn. Known for lots of postcards. And a gigantic cathedral that looks like a Kansas Grain elevator.

I'm 33 miles due east from Toulouse. That city, that historical, cultural epicenter of this land, of the human experience on it almost ever since it crawled up out of caves. A city lost too, filled with secrets and splendors. A couple of scholars of the abstruse claim it among the oldest places of all with the same name unchanged (Tolosa-Toulouse) from the start of our kind's losing struggle with spelling.

Built on the banks of the Garonne, Toulouse is between the Pyrenees and the alluvial plain of the Lauregais. It is positioned roughly midway between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. A real estate to die for and many have. The city has held sway over this region in one or another for eons.

Toulouse was the center of the Volcae and Tectosages, the place where those fierce Gallic tribes joined into a powerful confederation.

Toulouse has almost always been a city of riches. As a center of Gallic might its temples held treasures that became legends.

This became a written account when the Volcae Tectosages swept again across southern Europe in 279 BC, the ancient commentators write that they plundered the greatest gold and silver horde of the time, from the temple of Apollo in Delphi. Stole it, hauled it back to Tolosa. The point in recorded history when the place began to glitter in men's eyes.

Aurum Tolosanum. Two centuries later in turn the Romans seized the loot from Toulouse, a deed recorded in Senate archives, ordering it sent to Rome.

It never arrived. Again It was stolen. Most likely by Consul Quintus Servilius Caepio, Roman commander of Toulouse. The trove was never found but was credited as the source of Caepio's vast wealth, passed down in turn to his grandson Brutus he who was et tu.

Local legend has it that the gold of Toulouse actually still lies in a lake near the city, having been tossed there, cursed as it was, by the terrified soldiers charged with taking it back to Rome.

In yet another tale it was hidden underground near where the city's Basilica of St. Sernin now stands. That building, the true treasure, is a sleek solemnity 1,000 years old and the largest remaining Romanesque building in Europe.

During the second world war a plane with a swastika on it was held ready to go on the tarmac of the Toulouse airport. It was there as part of Heinrich Himmler's looney-tunes scouting for the Holy Grail, for what might lend powerful magic to the lost cause of the Third Reich.

You see, The Grail came into the hands of the Cathars. And then when the very last of those crazies fled into their one remaining high castle of Montsegur, their final citadel where they were all to die, that's where Christendom's Holiest relic disappeared too. Poof.

Was it brought here to Les Izards? Is it out back buried deep beside our septic tank? 'Here' has made me as crazy as all the others passing through.

Les Izards is but 85 miles from Montsegur. Many still hallucinate the Grail lying hidden somewhere in the region- anywhere, somewhere nearby, even over the rainbow. Please let there be a Pays de Cocagne.

From Gallic temple riches to Delphic Gold to Legionnaire billionaires, and even Nazi wet dreams, Toulouse and its region has endured in the heart of histories and fables. In the middle ages under the Counts of Toulouse its wealth became its downfall, prey to the avarice of the French in the north.

Later, its Renaissance merchants built palaces on the trade of blue dye, from the pastel plant, the woad grown in the Lauregais.

Les Izards is only 4.5 miles distant from my small cathedral town of Lavaur

where your trip began, population 11,000. Its distance by foot from the house is perhaps a mile: peasants easily managed that. Lavour is our one and only town. Country folk have journeyed its market for at least a thousand years.

We ourselves do the same. Our weekly trip to the market connects us to the life's blood of this nook, we who are strangers here always, forever, we and them keeping socially distanced.

Lavour is of great importance to this place. There again stories abound.

During the Albigensian Crusade Lavour was besieged twice. In 1181 it saved itself by opening its gates without a fight to a force led by Henri de Marcy. But then 30 years later, in March 1211 the might of Simon de Montfort fell full upon Lavour.

Protected by its walls and staunchly defended the town defied capture for two months. Impatient, at last de Montfort called for backup to come to his aid. A large army, thousands of German crusaders encamped in Carcassonne, moved north.

This army was ambushed in the greatest battle of the campaign against the Cathars, played out 12 miles from Les Izards. Virtually the entire army of up to 6,000 German crusaders was slaughtered. Commentators of the time report that to seal the deal the few survivors had their noses and tongues cut off.

No matter, Simon de Montfort vanquished without the relief. He breached Lavour's walls on 3 May, 1211.

Eighty defending knights were hung by de Montfort, something obscene in the Middle ages, and then he had 400 lowly Cathars who'd sheltered in the town burnt at the stake, in one mass firestorm from hell. It's been described as the greatest single slaughter by public conflagration in the entire middle ages.

The butcher of France's southwest is this Simon de Montfort of nightmare.

The too smart leader of the invading northerners, those French bloodthirsty in rampant piety and rapacity. De Montfort, such a cruel strategist, was felled at last during his final siege of Toulouse by a stone taken from the ramparts of the city's great basilica of St Sernin. Flung at him from on high by women defenders of the city who'd been made widows by his very own stratagems.

Les Izards rides a slope of high ridge, the top of which affords a close view of the Cathedral of Lavour, that dominates in the Agout river valley below. After the destruction dealt the town when it was taken the current cathedral was started in

1255.

In style it is a fortress cathedral. It stands high on the bank of the Agout river formidable like a warship riding into battle.

The most famous of Lavour's bishops was George de Selve. You can see him in 'The Ambassadors' painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533. George is the sleepy fellow on the right. The painting has been made popular by LSD reveries on the anamorphic skull Holbein added into the work's center.

So much desiccated mystery in the soil here. When I step on it I hear a moist 'crunch' like this area's jeering peasant laugh. A crunch like stepping over a field of snail shells. When new here at night I'd see the glimmer of lights covertly fanning about below my bedroom window. Ghosts of long gone Neanderthals thought I. No, snail poachers I learned. Such is life in rural France.

Here I am a citizen of the rural community, or commune, of Massac Seran. I go in circles as does the place itself. Massac is the name of that convent where you've already been, less than a mile away perched on a hill. Seran is the Chateau, a mile off in a different direction, an 18th century hulk deteriorating like Miss Havisham's wedding cake into what was once its park.

Church and castle, the two be-alls end-alls of the dark ages.

Massac derives from the Roman name Maccius, Seran from the Roman name Serranius.

Those two for so long still linked. Maybe they were scarred and roughed up legionnaires retiring here from their northern battles far away on the cold black Rhine. I imagine them warming up here by marrying plump local women, fathering their own tribes.

Slaves made the vineyards and the wine for them, tilled the valley for wheat, allowed them to grow well off, fat and old.

I like to fantasize that Maccius and Serranius had neighboring farms here, lying side by side as they did on campaigns, casual lovers in the Roman way. Is that why their names remain united after 2,000 years?

If they did I wonder if these battle degraded queers ever kissed—did Legionnaire lovers kiss full on the lips with zeal? Did they fumble on the sly down low where their frontal armor ended for a fistful of cock? So many trivial questions, so little time to

ask, so hard to hear any possible answers above the great and tumultuous din of our times.

The woman of my life lives here with me. Our sons play in memory through the rooms of Les Izards and I can hear them still in a living happiness outside running through tall weeds.

Perhaps it's not that I'm lost here as it is that I've been found by Les Izards.

SMOKE

(Last poem by a lover left on the bed we shared)

Porch steps, garden stops, garage steps,
By the broken springs, chrysanthemums,
Shelves, pansies, oil stains and cigar ash
The color of concrete--
This is where men go to heaven.
Or maybe in the alley by the dumpster On
the red plastic milk crates
In a light drizzle, in short sleeves
between classes, swaying from foot to foot. or
even on the last old couch
After the wives and children have left,
Through a dirty window, in a ball of flame
Ascending through the bardos,
with or without friends, over
The rows of bottles and stacks of TV dinners,
Tracheotomies and oxygen,
Anonymous flowers, calling cards,
Empty hospital beds
And a misplaced city”

By Gregory Francis Stock (signed 'For Jonathan')

END